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Tredinnick, Mark
The little black book of
business writing

For Lesley, Marce and Pip, three muses
— Mark

For Margaret
— Geoff

A UNSW Press book

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PROLOGUE: GOOD WRITING HABITS AND HOW TO GET THEM

Writing at work—there's just no escaping it

Far more of us write than ever wrote before, and too few of us know what we're doing

The larger part of most people's work is writing: emails, letters, reports, contracts, tenders, proposals, responses to tenders, minutes, newsletters, media releases, marketing copy, presentations, applications, sales pitches, resignation letters. The works. At any given moment at work, you're more likely to be doing what we're doing now—trying to make sense with your fingers on a keyboard—than just about anything else. Writing is most of our work.

But in the same era when we've sat everyone in front of a computer and asked them to write for their keep, we've stopped teaching them anything much about composition, grammar and style. That equation comes out about the way you'd expect, and what it adds up to is not especially pretty writing. You get this, for example:

For each parcel of land existing and future needs in regards to local open space, specifically assessing population projections, demographics and proximity to other public spaces is considered.

Refugee and humanitarian clients bring their own challenges ... Many do not possess any proof-of-identity documentation and the majority are displaced to outside their country of origin.

On the question as to whether the research 'will be of any practical use' by respondent DE 123 the case with real frozen corn supply is a clear example of practical use which was a real world problem raised by a frozen good firm.

The organisational change programme will address the people, process and technology aspects required to support the department's communication vision.

It is unlikely that any progress will emerge from the Major Economics Forum (MEF) by way of detailed programmatic specificity.

The government is committed to supplying extra resource in support of this function.

On top of the fact that they've stopped teaching the young how to write, there's this: most people don't have much feeling for it, much love for it or, let's face it, much actual talent. Some people, hard though this is to believe, didn't pay much attention in English. Some people, apparently, looked out the window. Some found more magic in Pythagoras than Shakespeare. Most of us—we business executives, sales representatives, safety officers, engineers, lawyers, accountants, financial advisers, researchers, regulators, scientists, scholars and public servants—would rather do any number of other things than write. Many of us got into the line of work we pursue in part to avoid sentences and all the rest of it. But here we all are, nonetheless, writing our business lives away.

There's no escaping it: writing is a sentence we all have to serve. So we may as well serve it well. And the good news is it's never too late to learn.

If no one tells you how to write at work, you'll probably copy some-

one else. Which will be fine if they know what they're doing; if they know more about it than you do. Which they probably don't. They probably copied enough to stay alive from someone else, who probably copied ... And so it goes. You get the picture. Copying will work fine for a busy writer at work, if you can tell what's worth copying from what's not, and most of us probably can't. But this book should help you.

This is a book of good habits to get, bad habits to lose and good copy to copy. It's *The Joy of Sex* for functional writers. We're writing it to make life easier for everyone who has to write at work; we're writing it to improve the quality of life of everyone, including ourselves, who has to read the stuff that passes for writing that comes their way from businesses and governments, schools, hospitals and just about everywhere else, by every conceivable medium, these days.

This book follows Mark Tredinnick's books *The Little Red Writing Book* and *The Little Green Grammar Book*, and it draws on them. *The Little Red Writing Book* is for everyone who wants to write—people for whom writing is an end in itself, as well as those with a purpose beyond writing in mind when they sit to write. But, in particular, it's for the poets, memoirists, essayists, novelists, professional writers and student writers among us. *The Little Green Grammar Book* is about the inner life of sentences; it looks at the nuts and bolts of writing: it's a grammar for everyone. Now, *The Little Black Book of Business Writing* targets the special needs of writers for whom the point is the point—people writing at work; people for whom writing is a core business function. We don't want to repeat too much of what Mark said in those books, so we'll cross-reference them quite often. This book can be as short as it is because those books precede it and deal with many points of style (abstraction and passivity, for instance) and syntax we would otherwise have to elaborate on here.

This book shows you how to write anything at work.

Every business document—every piece of every document, except

the numbers, the illustrations and the graphs—is a piece of writing, and no matter how different each one feels, the same writing principles apply. So we begin, in the first three chapters, with a crash course in the aesthetics and methods of business writing.

Chapter 1 introduces the principles that apply to all functional prose, whatever the medium, message and market: write like you talk, only better; say nothing other than what you mean; spend words like scarce and pricey resources; use your writing to get your business done (not just to sound businesslike); manage writing like a project (whose purpose is to make sense and make the sale); take the time and trouble to save your reader time and trouble; above all, be clear. The chapter acknowledges the realities of business life that make functional writing hard to perform with grace—in particular, widespread institutional dedication to polysyllables and false elegance; the unforgiving pace of commerce; and the fact that most documents are written by many hands and need to pass through many levels of oversight. But, by means of examples of limp financial, political, academic, scientific, bureaucratic and commercial prose, the chapter shows you how clarity, grace and economy are still possible at work.

Chapter 2 offers up twelve big—and enormously useful—ideas to help you improve your business writing; if you can count to twelve, you'll find most of your answers here.

Chapter 3 names the seven deadly sins that corrupt much business writing and make reading of it such a purgatory; then it lists the seven virtues, practising which you can redeem your writing and spare all of us who read you the particular torments of dysfunctional prose.

These three chapters lay down the law; they are the Vedas, the Dhammapada, the Beatitudes, the Commandments. We write them with love and care, because nothing in the book is more important or practical. They are also flush with examples of writing that cuts it and writing that doesn't—and the reasons why, and why not. Jump to the working

chapters, if you like; but a fair bit of what we hope this book will teach, it teaches in these first three chapters.

In chapter 4, we look clinically at twelve varieties of document most commonly used in work environments. We don't cover every species of functional prose: there are too many variations, many of them narrowly adapted to particular business environments, and we have too little space to do them justice. In any event, most are variations of common themes, and it is those common themes we cover:

We don't lay out templates—again, we have too little space, and there are other books that do that. But this is not a book of precedents and boilerplates because we don't believe in templates. We believe in writing from scratch, most of the time, guided by robust first principles. Good writing sounds like it's been written just this once and just for the reader; and the best way to make it sound like that is to do it like that. We understand, of course, the efficiencies organisations are hoping for from templates and mandated phrasing, and they have their place. Where one uses them, they ought to be the very best writing the organisation ever does: vivid, trim, compelling and clear. But in truth the ideas that give rise to mandatory phrasing and dependence on templates—notions of conformity and control, the stifling of individual voices, the discouragement of originality and independent thought—are the chief cause of most of what is wrong with business writing in the first place.

So we won't be offering off-the-shelf documents here. Templating is the problem to which good writing is the solution.

All the same, there are documents you get to write quite often, and although writing goes best if you write those documents from scratch each time, it's helpful to develop some neat fixes to the openings, closings and transitions, for instance—elements of a letter or report you have to write each time. There are some tricks and techniques a writer can learn to help them improve their emails, letters, reports and other documents. In chapter 4, after outlining a model to help you write every business

document more neatly, we workshop a selection of the documents most commonly encountered at work:

- letters
- emails
- reports
- executive summaries
- website copy
- minutes
- media releases
- newsletters
- job applications and resumés
- proposals
- instructional writing
- speeches.

In chapter 5, we answer some frequently asked questions—and a bunch of other questions that should, frankly, be asked more frequently. This chapter dispenses tips and take-home messages on

- dot points and how to keep them in their box
- graphs, charts, tables and figures
- good headings and bad headings
- corporate clichés
- business faux pas
- starting well

- finishing well
- attaching files
- fooling yourself into writing better
- getting yourself ready to write—planning and mapping
- the deft use of the first-person personal pronoun (*I*)
- abbreviations and how to spell most of them out
- when to capitalise, and how to do it sparingly
- the magic of verbs
- writing by ear
- earning your conclusions
- avoiding apostrophe catastrophes
- the art of the good word.

We close, in chapter 6, by making the case for elegance and economy, grace and style in business writing—the business case, the aesthetic case, the moral case, the political case, but above all, perhaps, the leadership case. Good writing—its care, its empathy, its clarity, its humanity, its beauty, its gift for listening and for telling the story, its power to inspire change—is a metaphor for leadership: for what it is, and what it takes. But more than a metaphor, good writing is a large part of what leadership entails; it is an important part of what leaders do. If you want to lead, if you want to make a difference, you're going to need to write well. Writing well has a way of making you attend more closely to what counts—a trick that leaders will need to master.