CourseMints

GUIDE

Persuasive Writing at Work

Emails, Reports and Proposals That Get Results

SELF-PACED PDF COURSE

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Emails, Reports and Proposals That Get Results

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How to Use This Guide

Most of the persuading you do at work happens in writing. An email asks a colleague for help. A status update tells your manager whether to worry. A report shapes what leaders believe about a problem. A proposal decides whether your idea gets money, people and time. When the writing is clear, people act on it. When it is not, they skim, misread, postpone, or call a meeting to find out what you meant.

This guide teaches a practical method for workplace writing that people read and act on. It rests on a few ideas that editors, plain-language specialists and management consultants have used for decades: write for a busy reader, put the point first, structure the argument so it can be followed at a glance, and edit until nothing gets in the way.

What you will learn

- Why capable people write unclear emails, and the habit that fixes most of it.
- How to put your bottom line up front and structure an argument with the pyramid principle.
- How to make a case in writing: evidence, objections and an ask that is easy to say yes to.
- Plain-language techniques, plus templates for requests, decisions, follow-ups and meeting recaps.
- How to set the right tone and write the hard messages: no, bad news, apologies and pushback.
- How to write reports and proposals that decision makers finish, and checklists to edit them.
- How to use AI writing tools without risking accuracy, confidentiality or your credibility.

What this guide does not cover

This guide is about writing to colleagues, managers, clients and partners. Marketing copy (sales pages, ads, product descriptions) is the subject of *Copywriting Fundamentals*. Persuading people face to face is covered in *The Art of Influence*. Setting and justifying your prices as a freelancer is covered in *Freelance Pricing Playbook*. You do not need any of them to use this guide.

How to get the most from it

1. **Collect real samples.** Before Chapter 1, paste five things you wrote at work in the last month into one document: three emails, one update and one longer piece. You will rewrite them in the exercises.
2. **Read Chapters 1 to 4 in order.** They set out the method. Chapters 5 to 12 apply it to specific kinds of writing, in any order.
3. **Rewrite, do not just read.** The skill grows when you rework your own sentences, not when you agree with ours.
4. **Keep the checklists close.** Chapter 11 has editing checklists for three levels of stakes. Print them and keep them by your desk.

TIP

About the examples

The people in the example boxes are fictional composites, written to show the methods at work: Dana, an operations manager at a regional food distributor; Tomás, a finance analyst at a software company; Leila, a freelance user-experience consultant who writes client proposals; and Marcus, an IT project lead at a community hospital. Names, numbers and organizations in their stories are illustrations.

CHAPTER 1

Write for the Reader Who Is Skimming

01

Your reader is not waiting for your email. They are between meetings, often on a phone, with dozens of other messages competing for the same minute. In a few seconds they decide whether your message needs action now, later or never. Most of what makes workplace writing succeed or fail happens in those seconds.

The three questions every reader asks

Whatever you send, the reader is silently asking:

1. **What is this about?**
2. **What do you need from me?**
3. **By when, and how much effort will it take?**

If the subject line and the first two sentences answer all three, your message usually gets handled. If the reader has to dig for the answers, it gets postponed, and postponed messages are where projects quietly stall.

Why smart people write unclear messages

THE SCIENCE

The curse of knowledge

In a 1990 study at Stanford, Elizabeth Newton asked people to tap out the rhythm of a well-known song, such as “Happy Birthday”, while a listener tried to name it. Tappers predicted that listeners would guess about half the songs. Listeners named about 1 in 40. The tappers could hear the melody in their heads; the listeners heard only knocking. Psychologists call this the curse of knowledge: once you know something, it is hard to imagine not knowing it. At work it shows up as emails that skip the context, use the team’s private shorthand and assume the reader remembers last week’s meeting.

There is a second cause. Most of us write in the order we thought: first the background, then what we did, then what we found, and finally what we want. That order feels natural to the writer. It is the reverse of what the reader needs.

The writer’s order	The reader’s order
Background and history	What you need from me
What I did	Why it matters to me
What I found	The key facts behind it
What I recommend	Background, if I want it
What I need from you	

Profile your reader in 60 seconds

Before you write anything that matters, answer six questions. For a routine email this takes a minute in your head. For a report or proposal, write the answers down.

1. **Who is the primary reader?** Pick one person, even when the message goes to many, and note who it may be forwarded to.
2. **What do they already know?** Assume less than you think.
3. **What do they care about?** Their goals, pressures and the numbers they are judged on.

4. **What should they do after reading?** Decide, approve, reply, change something, or simply know.
5. **How will they read it?** On a phone between meetings, at a desk, printed in a board pack.
6. **What will they push back on?** You will answer it inside the message (Chapter 4).

EXAMPLE

Dana's overtime email

Dana's first draft to her director, Ruth, ran to six paragraphs. It began with the history of the spring delivery schedule, described three weeks of driver absences, explained the new supermarket contract, and in the final line asked: "So I was wondering whether we could approve some extra overtime for May?"

After profiling Ruth (busy, cares about budget and the supermarket contract, reads on her phone, will worry about cost), Dana rewrote it:

"Subject: Approval needed by Thu: May overtime for the supermarket contract

Ruth, could you approve up to 120 hours of driver overtime for May? It covers the new supermarket deliveries until our two new drivers start on 2 June. The cost is about $4,300, which fits within the contingency line in the Q2 budget. Details of the absences and the schedule are below if you want them."

Ruth replied with a yes from her phone eleven minutes later.

Common mistakes

- **Writing to everyone at once.** A message with no primary reader ends up useful to no one.
- **Writing to show effort.** Offer the detail of what you did; do not lead with it.
- **Assuming shared memory.** "As discussed" helps only if the reader was there and remembers. Add the one line of context they need.
- **Asking in the last line.** If the request is at the bottom, many readers never reach it.