

## Think You're a Good Business Writer?

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Sometimes it's kind of like watching auditions for *Canada's Got Talent*. Does that fellow actually think his tuneless wailing qualifies him to be the next Michael Bublé? We can have a similar reaction when we hear someone proclaim, "I'm a good writer" – and then receive a report from this person that's literally indecipherable.

Both situations may be linked to the "above average effect." A [study](#) some years ago by David Dunning and Justin Kruger found that most people, regardless of their level of competence with a skill, perceive themselves to be better than average.

And it gets worse. This concept doesn't include those people who boast about their impressive writing skills but are in fact downright terrible writers. These folks may be suffering from "Dunning-Kruger effect." The same study found those who are the least skilled tend to rate their abilities higher than others. The worse they were the better they thought they were.

So essentially, few of us recognize when we can't write particularly well. If there was a reality show competition for writers, you can bet we'd be reading some pretty dreadful stuff.

Still, when it comes to building a successful career, in many fields good writing skills are essential.

Professionals, managers and executives must be able to write clearly, accurately and competently. They must be able to

prepare clear, concise e-mails. Understandable reports. Letters that make a point. Persuasive proposals. Presentations that engage audiences. So, if you want your career to progress you need to practise writing.

Let's begin from the premise that most of us are worse writers than we think we are. The good news is that when we start to improve, we generally recognize that we needed improvement, and we usually want to continue to improve. Here are some tips to get started.

**Read.** Reading gives us insights and ideas, expands our vocabulary and improves our grammar. Read the business documents produced by colleagues who are considered by others to be good writers. Read newspapers, blogs, magazines, books that interest you; think about the style of writing and how it engages you.

**Write.** The more we write, the easier it becomes. Start by finding out the writing style of the organization you work for. Ask if there's a style guide and study it. Offer to help write documents and request feedback.

**Pause before you send.** Never write quickly and then immediately submit the document you just completed. This includes e-mails. Poorly written documents lead to confusion and frustration. Instead, take a break, even if only for a few minutes. Walk away, clear your head and return with a refreshed mind and re-read what you've written.

**Re-read.** Read from your intended reader's perspective. If you received this document, would it make sense? Have you answered all of the relevant questions the reader might ask: who, what, where, when, why, how? Think about how you might make your points clearer. Then proofread. Don't rely on auto spell-check; look for spelling, punctuation and grammar errors.

Still unsure? If your writing task is important and you're not confident that it will receive the response you want, ask for feedback from a colleague whose opinion you respect.

It's also important to practise writing away from the demands of the workplace. Write what you like: articles, plays, comics, books – whatever inspires you. Any kind of writing you do will also improve your business writing skills.

Consider online or in-person workshops or courses. Or find a writing mentor who can critique your (nonconfidential) writing assignments and help you identify your writing strengths and weaknesses and help you develop your skills.

Never stop practising and you'll keep improving. I apologize if this article wasn't written as well as you expected. I may be suffering from above average or Dunning-Kruger effect. But I'm working on it.

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