

I am writing
to enquire...

Twin tones:
why don't people
always write the way
they speak?

afia we help companies sound more human

Twin tones: why don't people always write the way they speak?

In this article we take a close look at:

- the reasons people change their tone from speaking to writing
- convincing them it's fine to sound like humans when they write
- ways you can help make this happen

The great divide

We've all seen it happen. We hear people explaining their plans in a way that inspires the whole room. They're clear, they're interesting and they throw in a few jokes at just the right moment or have us holding our breath when they're talking about something serious.

We're really looking forward to reading their work. Then it turns up and it's so dull we fall asleep before we've got past the summary.

What's happened? How can some people use words so well out loud, then disappear into an impenetrable jungle of verbiage when they put it down on paper?

A different language

No writer ever set out to sound boring, pompous and incomprehensible, so why do so many people do it?

It's that old 'let's make sure I sound like all the others around here' trap. Being part of the team, not standing out for the wrong reasons or drawing too much attention to yourself.

It's the verbal tripwire that good writers skip neatly over, but catches others

around the ankles. You might think the worst culprits would be older people with a traditional approach to business writing. Not always. We've met some youngsters who've become experts at making a simple idea sound baffling just months after they've left college. They've found a good way of becoming part of the team.

But that's not the way they speak. They've built a special filter between their brains and their hands which restricts the flow of clear language. Only clichés, overworked phrases and words of more than four syllables can pass through.

Why translate?

Ask why they do it like that and they say, 'That's just the way it's done'. And they're usually right.

We copy our writing style from the tone of voice that surrounds us at work. We need to fit in. Before we know it, we're institutionalised. We start using phrases that are as old as the organisation itself, made even more bland by some extra added jargon from recent years.

What's going wrong

Three things:

1. We've picked up bad habits from our working world.
2. We're happy to fit in.
3. We're forgetting about our real readers and what they need from us.

Sometimes even the MD and the CEO write like that. They're important; they've worked their way to the top, so they must be doing something right. This is why it's essential that top management shouldn't just approve a new tone of voice – they should lead from the front and start using it, straight away. When directors do our tone of voice workshops, they're practically guaranteeing that their investment will pay off in weeks, not months.

Three steps to lifting the barrier

The barrier we're talking about is the 'I don't think we're allowed to write like that' mind-hand blockage.

Why people don't always write the way they speak

When we work with writers to help them get rid of this barrier, they often suddenly feel as if anything's possible. It's a bit like pointing out to people that they've accidentally left their sunglasses on when they've come into a dimly lit room.

1. When you introduce a new tone of voice to your organisation, you're giving people permission to write differently.
2. You help them to spot the dull, impersonal language – the kind of writing that alienates readers.
3. Next, you help them put the new tone into practice – easier said than done.

Getting the right tone.

So here are some of the ways we go about helping people use the right tone and language when they write.

Would you say that out loud?

In our writing workshops, we use the 'would you say that out loud?' test as a great way to filter out the really terrible language. You get the writer to look you in the eyes and say to you exactly what they've written down. When it's really bad, at least one person in the room will laugh so much they can't speak – usually the person who's written it.

Focus on your reader

It helps to picture a real person.

One of the best writers we met in a workshop was a modest chap from Legal & General. He rewrote a customer letter that was so wonderful, we all listened in awe as he quietly read out what he'd written. It was a masterpiece. Nothing flashy, just clear, warm language that explained a financial situation in everyday language.

'What did you do before you joined customer services?' we asked, thinking that perhaps he'd trained as a journalist.

'I was a policeman,' he said. (Not what we were expecting!)

'So how did you get to be so good at writing?'

'Oh, I just think about my girlfriend who doesn't know anything about the financial industry and I imagine how I'd explain it to her. Then I write it down,' he said.

He was doing naturally what we aim to get everyone to do at our workshops.

Rip up the original

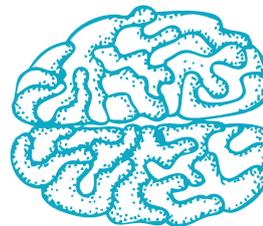
When you're writing a new version, start from scratch. If you try to rewrite a letter, a document or just a short email sentence by sentence, it'll distract you. You'll try to change the odd word, rather than write something fresh and new. So, make a list of the points that you really need to get across on a separate piece of paper, then hide the original. If you keep glancing back at it, it'll suck you back into its evil ways.

People often imagine it'll save time just to adapt the original. But they keep fiddling with it and end up with a half-baked rewrite instead of a fresh new piece of work.

Put your ears to work

If you still struggle to write down what you want to say, say it to your colleagues and get them to write it down for you. You can train voice recognition software to do that for you too. And there's nothing wrong with reading your work out loud to yourself. Just warn your colleagues first so they don't call security.

Want to pick
Ben's brain?



We help companies sound more human

When we talk to someone face-to-face, we instinctively know how to get on with them, don't we?

But when we sit down to write it somehow seems harder to be ourselves, or our brand.

We'll help your business use the right tone of voice to get and keep more customers.

And have more fun doing it.

We're always happy to get out from behind our desks. So if you'd like to chat or meet up, get in touch with Ben Afia.

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