

Writing Tip



Gail Tycer

Write less, say more and get results!



**Tip #2: What to Say; What Not to Say:
How Much, and When**

Here is yet another way to save time as you write less — and say more: (1) Edit before you write; and (2) understand the appropriate level, and depth of information needed before you write. Easier than it sounds, and here's how:

Tip #2:

Selecting Content – How much is enough? How much is too much?

To determine what to say; what not to say; how much to say; and when to say it, ask yourself these three questions:

- Why does my reader need this information?
- How will my reader use this information?
- How will this information support my purpose for writing?

If you can't come up with good answers, leave it out.

1. Gather your information. Gather ALL the information you may need, based on your reader's need for the information, your reader's use of the information, and your purpose for writing. And NOTHING ELSE!

Make a list (section IV if you are using my Strategic Business Writing Blueprint) — just a word or two — of all the things you might want to say, using these criteria. Then be ruthless. Cross out anything, and everything, you do not need. As you are crossing out, other information you do need will probably occur to you. Add these items to your list. Review your list of content one final time, eliminating everything you do not need, adding those things you do.

You have now defined your broad general topics (what you are going to talk about) — and edited your content — before you have written a word!

2. Consider what level, and how much detail to include. Consider your reader, and how much he or she will need to know, based on his or her need for, and use of your information. Let me tell you a story:

One day, my neighbor stopped by and asked whether she could bring me anything from the grocery store. I asked her to bring me some carrots, so she returned with a can of carrots. Had I given her sufficient information for her use of, and her need for the information? Had she done what I had asked her to do? Of course she had, based on the level of detail I had given her. I thanked her, but what I had really wanted was some raw carrots, so I could have carrot sticks for dinner! So, was my purpose served? No, because I had not given her sufficient detail to get the results I wanted.

So I then gave her more detail, and asked her to go back to the store and get me some raw carrots so I could have raw carrot sticks for dinner. Being a terrific neighbor, she made a second trip, perhaps grumbling a little, to get some raw carrots for me. But when she returned this time, she brought me raw carrots without the tops that I had wanted to feed the rabbit! Had she done what I asked her to do this time? Of course she had, based on the level of detail I had given her the second time. Was my purpose served this second time? No.

My choice at this point was either to let the rabbit do without his treat, go to the store myself, get someone else to go to the store for me, or (oh no!) ask her to go back again.

Does this sound like some of the instructions you may have read on the job? Or (ouch!) some of the results you may have gotten from your co-workers or employees at some point?

So when you think about what level of information is enough, and how much is too much, remember the story of my good neighbor. And remember that the level of detail you select is also based on those three criteria:

- *the reader's need* for the information (to know I did need something from the grocery store);
- *the reader's use* of the information (to bring me exactly what I needed – in this case, carrots with the tops still on); and
- my (the writer's) purpose (to get raw carrots for carrot sticks, with the tops so I could treat the bunny).

Now, let's take a second look at the story I just told you.

Do you need to know (for your need and use, as the story's reader) anything more about my neighbor? Probably not, if your need for the information was only to consider the point of the story, and your use of the story was to improve your business writing skills.

If, on the other hand, you were a police officer to whom I was reporting my neighbor's theft of the money I had given her to buy my groceries, you would, obviously, need a whole different set of detail to use in catching the criminal, although the broad general categories could likely be quite similar. At that point, the detailed information about the carrots becomes quite unnecessary, and my purpose (to get my money back) would be better served with detailed information about my neighbor.

Similarly, as the story's reader, would you have needed to know why the neighbor offered to buy groceries for me? (Was I ill? Was my car broken down?) Or how much money I had given her? In advance, or when she brought the carrots back? Or what kind of a rabbit I had? Of course not! Interesting, maybe, but totally useless, given your need for, and use of, the information.

That's exactly what can happen in the business writing situation. The writer may become too immersed in what he or she knows. The result? The writer can easily bury the reader in unimportant and unnecessary (to the reader) information, frequently at the expense of getting the reader the information he or she needs to get the job done!

Tailor your choice of information — what to include and what to leave out — and the level of detail to include, to the three criteria: (1) Your reader's need for the information; (2) your reader's use of the information; and (3) your purpose for writing.