The Secret to Business Writing: Crash Course Business - Soft Skills #3

Crash Course: Business - Soft Skills
https://youtube.com/watch?v=8E-oqahDnb8
https://nerdfighteria.info/v/8E-oqahDnb8

Back before telegraphs, telephones, or the internet, the handwritten word was where it was at. Letters took weeks to arrive, and people wrote pages and pages to one another in flowery language. They used to describe everything. Today, we have more rapid communication, but we're still flooded with writing; texts, emails, memos, we even cut out words with emojis.

With this constant flow of information, it's easy for people to get overwhelmed. So, how do you make sure that your email doesn't get lost in the morning sludge pile? That your memo gets its point across to the right people? That your report tells the story you intended?

I'm Evelyn from the Internets, and this is Crash Course Business: Soft Skills.

[Intro]

Writing plays a big part in building your professional reputation. Whether it's a quick message asking for a sick day, a letter to a client, or a report that could fast-track you for a promotion, you want to make sure that what you've written is persuasive. Before you type a single word, remember that the content and structure of your writing all depends on who you're writing for.

This goes back to influence. You can't expect to convince anyone of anything if you don't understand what their needs are. That's why it's important to conduct and audience analysis. You want to tailor your main message to who they are and how much they're going to critique your work. If your audience is more involved, they'll need more evidence and logic. If your audience is less involved, they'll respond more to emotional appeal.

Crafting a persuasive argument goes back to the foundations of rhetoric: logos, ethos, and pathos. We could do a whole episode on these, but we don't have that kind of time. So, boiled down, logos is an appeal to knowledge or facts. Ethos is an appeal to the character, authority, or reputation of the speaker. And, pathos is an appeal to emotion, or humanity. If The Doctor were trying to convince aliens not to destroy Earth, she could use logos by explaining factual reasons why Earth isn't a threat, ethos by using the power of her name to inspire awe, and pathos by talking about the human spirit and the power of kindness.

By connecting to your audience, you draw them into your message. So, it's important to figure out how involved they are to know which elements you should use. And there are three questions you can ask to figure it out. First, does you audience think you're credible? This has to do with your reputation - remember how trust is the foundation for business skills? It matters whether people think you know what you're talking about. If someone already trusts you, they'll be less involved and you won't need to justify your message as much. Say you're trying to convince a client to reassess their social media marketing strategy. If you're a fifth year associate with a killer Instagram and YouTube channel, you'll make a case much more easily than a summer intern in the accounting department.

Next, how important is the decision to them? If your message is going to directly impact someone, or if there's risk, they'll probably be more involved. A suggestion about where your company should open a second office would need way more detail than where your co-workers should go for happy hour (got to keep your enthusiasm for Tex-Mex casual and brief).

A hostile audience doesn't mean they're out to get you. It just means that they may be more involved and less receptive to your idea, because it might conflict with their current beliefs. Think about the trust you have with someone, and frame your message around it. Like, say you were trying to convince two roommates to let you get a cat. One likes cats, so you could straight-up tell her how happy a cat would make both of you. But, the other isn't an animal person. So, it might make sense to describe problems a cat could help with, like, "I know you've been worried about rats in our apartment building." And, you might need to address concerns, like "don't worry, you wouldn't have to take care of it, and I'd get on that's hypoallergenic."

Considering your audience is clearly important for the message, but it can also help you figure out the type of thing to write. Every workplace is a little different, so we can't tell you exactly what to expect. But generally, many offices use some messaging app, like Slack, to communicate quickly. An email can be used to get across day-to-day stuff or request further information. Memos are generally one page or less, and they're used to convey important or official information to internal sources, like other departments. Letters are similar to memos, but they're used with external sources, like other companies or potential investors. Reports are generally thicker and usually contain a summary page, discussion, and charts or graphs (if you want to have a really wild weekend, you can browse through hundreds of reports on pretty much any government website).

But, no matter what you're writing, you want to give your audience the essential details. To see what I mean, let's go to the Thought Bubble.

Imagine you were a freelance food blogger writing about a new restaurant in town that claims to make a mean burger. You'd start by sharing when you went- last Tuesday, on a quiet night out. You'd describe the cozy diner vibe with retro booths. You might list the most mouthwatering menu items, including the special burger of the day and creamy shake you ordered. And then, you'd wrap it up with a solid four-star rating. You're probably dealing with foodies searching for up-and-coming hotspots, or fellow millennials looking for a cheap meal and a killer 'gram. So weaving a detailed narrative gives your audience everything they might want to know.

But, let's say you were managing a small chain restaurant, and needed to let your boss know about a new competitor. Now, that's a different story. Would you write up your elaborate personal experience? No. General managers only spend anywhere from 10 to 25% of their day working alone at their desks, which means they might not have time to read all those details.

In corporate writing, the name of the game is efficiency, efficiency, efficiency. So... watch out for redundancy. You can also try to answer the 5 W's and the H: Who does this information affect, what is your main point, when does this information matter, where should you pass it on, why is it important, and how should you move forward?

So, this new burger place is pretty important news, but it's more casual than official information. So maybe not a memo. You don't need graphs of sauce ratios or delivery speeds, so a report would be overkill. But, you could write a concise email sharing that a competing burger restaurant with an extensive menu opened one week ago. They pose a threat, because your repeat sales have been declining. And, you recommend talking about sending coupons in weekly mailers to increase business. Clear, concise writing ensures that your boss has time to read it, and your effort doesn't go to waste.

Thanks, Thought Bubble.

Writing directly is often trickier than it sounds. Thankfully, there are a few easy things you can work on to limit your word count, but not your impact. First, identify your argument. Your argument is your main point; what are you trying to say or get people to do? If I wanted someone to invest in my cute cupcakery, an argument

might be that small cakes make people happy and everyone deserves a little more joy in their lives. You can try jotting down two or three of your key points before you start writing to stay on track. That can also help you make sure that what you're sending has a purpose. No one wants to read an email that really has no point. This is not a vent session, ok?

Second, don't bury your lede. If I'm trying to make some quick blueberry muffins to start my day, I want that recipe in front of me. Some of use do not have the time to read about your journey to find free-range eggs and pick blueberries on a farm, Karen. So, whether you're writing a one-page memo or a ten-page report, be sure to **emphasize your key points up front**. It will save your readers valuable time. And in the business world, time is money.

But, again, here's the tricky thing about this series: this advice isn't one-size-fits-all. Remember when we mentioned how your audience can be hostile? If what you're saying might not be taken well, you might want to share supporting facts before your main conclusion. So, if you were trying to convince zombies to stop eating brains, you wouldn't start off your letter by saying it's bad for humans. They don't care! Instead, you could start by listing the benefits of another food source, like pizza. It's quick and delicious, 95% of surveyed zombies like pepperoni, and making pizza involves less time and risk than attacking people. Then, you can end with your logical conclusion that eating humans is, in fact, not worth the effort.

Third, avoid uncertain language like "maybe," "I think," "in my opinion," "it seems like," or "it might be." Remember what we said about emotional influence: confidence is key. Confidently explaining your point will make your business writing more persuasive. You can also do this by using active voice. Put your subject before your verb and limit your use of "to be's." Instead of saying, "A new dietary choice of freshly prepared pizza will be preferred to human material," you would say "zombies prefer deliveries from Tony's, over actually eating Tony."

Fourth, what you write is always more important than how you format, but it's worth mentioning. You know in *Star Wars* movies, how they have that super long wall of text at the beginning? It's cool in theatres, not the workplace. At some point, we've all seen long, bulky paragraphs and thought, "Ugh, I got to read that?" So, use headers to divide your writing into small, manageable chunks.

And finally, check for typos. Proper spelling, grammar, and punctuation show that you're competent and can be trusted. Typos and grammatical errors don't, especially if you mess us someone's name. And, don't just rely on word processing software. It doesn't always catch common errors like they're, there, and their. Plus, it can't check for meaning. So, a sentence like "I read thorough our paste budget reports" might get through, even though it's nt coherent. So, read your work at least twice. Even better, give it to someone else to proofread.

When checking for typos, it's also important to look for **acronyms** or **initialisms**. Just because your company uses something all the time, it doesn't mean everyone else understands it. Think about the number of times The Doctor has explains the T.A.R.D.I.S. (Time and Relative Dimension in Space). Just like a deceptively small .zip file, it's bigger on the inside.

And now, W.C.E.F.T. ...That means we've covered everything for today. See what I did there? Explaining acronyms? That's why I'm the host.

We've talked about a lot of ways to make sure your writing packs a punch. So, if you remember nothing else from this episode: Number one, you audience is the key to what you write and how you write it. Number two, substance matters more than formatting. It doesn't matter how nice your work looks if it doesn't make a point. And, number three, double check your work for spelling, grammar, and miscommunications.

Writing is just a part of communication, though. Next time, we'll get into verbal communication to help you nail public speeches and morning meetings, so you're not just the person that brought doughnuts. You're the person that brought doughnuts and made their point.

[Outro]

Crash Course Business is sponsored by Google, and it's made with the help of all these nice people. And, Thought Cafe is our amazing animation team.

Crash Course is a Complexly production. If you want to keep imagining the word complexly with us, you can check out some of our other channels like The Art Assignment, where host, Sarah Urist Green, explores art and art history through the lens of things happening today.

Also, if you'd like to keep Crash Course free for everybody, forever, you can support the series at Patreon, a crowdfunding platform that allows you to support the content you love. Thank you to all of our patrons for making Crash Course possible with their continued support.