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SEVEN TYPES OF BAD WRITING

Everyone can write. But not everyone can write well.

We all learn to write at school but then society makes a distinction between 'writers' and 'the rest of us.' A writer sits in a garret and writes the great American novel. The rest of us write

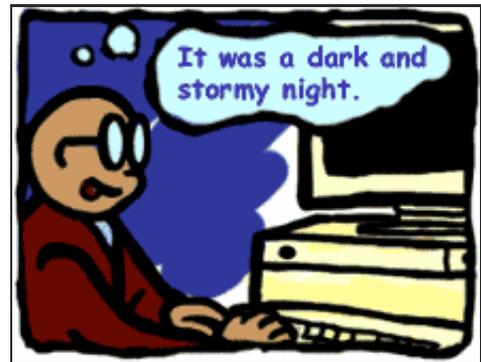
memos. It's a false division.

Because everyone can write, people underestimate its importance and overestimate their own ability. Because they think that writers are creative weirdos they rarely think about hiring a specialist when they have something important to say.

I'm not talking about advertising copywriting. This is an artform at its best – business haikus. I'm talking about brochures, websites, case studies, press releases, reports, letters and the humdrum daily word torrent.

What comes out of most companies is bad. In my experience there are seven types of bad writing:

1. **Thinks too much of itself.** The UK satirical magazine, Private Eye runs a regular column lampooning the abuse of the word 'solution.' For example, Dow Corning's "Innovative solutions for wound management," which means "bandages." This kind of word inflation devalues meaning and arouses the scepticism of readers.
2. **Is too clever by half.** For some reason, people are afraid to write how they speak. They want to sound big, grown-up and clever. So they use big words



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and long sentences. For example, I was presented with this beauty at a school board meeting once: "the Governing Body are agreeing this budget as the financial mechanism to support the education priorities of the school as identified in the School Development Plan and will adhere to the best value principles in spending its school funding allocation." It meant, "We approve the budget."

3. **Gets hyped up.** Press releases often include frankenquotes. These are made-up quotations that bear no resemblance to normal speech. For example: "Nortel has established a legacy in innovation and will continue to push the envelope..." Try saying that in a pub to your friends. See if they still listen to you afterwards. Or trust you.
4. **Tells lies.** In the UK, journalists score low in public trust. Somewhere near politicians and spin doctors. However, good journalists are obsessive about research, accuracy, good reporting, details and, yes, truth. What works for newspaper stories also works for business communication.
5. **Ignores the reader.** As a writer, the greatest skill is to think about what the reader needs to hear, not what you need to say. It takes an imaginative leap. For example, Google says "Please read this carefully, it's not the usual yada, yada." Microsoft says "This software is licensed under the agreement below." Which one is more likely to be read?
6. **Needs to go on a diet.** Most writing can be improved by liposuction. Consider the Gettysburg Address. Antoine de Saint-Exupery said it best: "A designer knows he has achieved perfection not when there is nothing left to add, but when there is nothing left to take away." This is especially true when writing for the web, when you need to cut the word count by about 50 percent.
7. **Has no direction.** My favourite tutor at Oxford told me that I had to take my essays and drive them like Ayrton Senna (a famous racing driver). Good writing has a strong purpose. Bad writing has either no direction or has too many.

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