2 WRITE TO ACCOMPLISH GOALS

Communication is a skill you can learn. It's like riding a bicycle or typing. If you're willing to work at it, you can rapidly improve the quality of every part of your life.

—Richard Branson, founder, Virgin Group

LEARN HOW TO...

- View writing as a strategic tool
- Communicate based on goals
- Frame messages for your audiences
- Manage differences in perspective
- Write to groups, gatekeepers and the universe

Yes, it's how to get things done, open doors and connect with people and immediate opportunities. But effective writing does far more than accomplish the goal of the moment: It's a powerful tool for achieving your long-range ambitions, a tool to use consciously.

From e-mails to proposals to blogs to résumés, every message offers a chance to build toward your future. The better your writing, the more you succeed. Writing gives you one of the best ways to showcase your strengths and demonstrate your value. In the digital age it's a key tool for building and sustaining good relationships.

This chapter gives you a framework for planning all your documents and making the right decisions about content, structure and style.

HOW AND WHY TO PLAN YOUR MESSAGES

Successful writers don't just plunge into any written communication—first, they plan. And always, they begin with two questions that guide them through every decision.

Question 1: What's my goal? What do I want?

Question 2: Who—exactly—is the audience: the person or group I'm writing to?

When you define your goal and consider your reader, it becomes much easier to figure out the content—the facts, ideas or arguments that will produce the results you want. And when you systematically determine content, organizing your message becomes a more natural process. So does choosing the right language and tone.

Whether writing an e-mail, profile, report or speech, professional writers base their approach on how the factors of goal and audience intersect. Thinking this way may mean spending more time up front than you're used to. However, you save the time that you might otherwise spend floundering around for what to say and how to say it. Moreover, if you plan first, your results are so much better—immediately—that you won't begrudge the thinking time.

But why does even a "simple" e-mail merit such thought?

Perhaps you've wished you could un-click Send after delivering one of these:

- a carelessly written message to a superior or colleague that is forwarded right up the company ladder
- an embarrassing private e-mail to a friend that was widely circulated
- a badly executed cover letter that showed up on the Internet as a laughable example
- a message meant for one person that mistakenly reached a whole group, or someone who particularly should not have seen it, like a competitor

The consequences can be dire. Remember the long run, too. E-mails never go away. As we see in scandal after scandal in the corporate and political worlds, they can usually be retrieved to disgrace or, in worst-case scenario, indict you. Social media platforms also encourage us to be careless because they too are so easy to use and value spontaneity. But the instant delivery feature of digital media does not mean you should communicate without thought. Ever.

Building a great reputation in any setting is a step-by-step, sustained process. *Every message is an opportunity to present yourself in the way you want to be seen.* In fact, because everyday channels are so important to the constant communication flow in nearly every organization, they offer a stellar chance to showcase your skills and create a good impression.

Let's look at our two basic questions in more depth.

STEP 1: IDENTIFY YOUR SHORT- AND LONG-RANGE GOALS

Before everything else, getting ready is the secret of success.

—Henry Ford

Look Past the Obvious

In our early education, most of us had the same goal for a writing assignment, whether a term paper, book review, report or essay: Please the teacher and get a good grade. But in the business world, you need to know your goal for every piece of writing. What do you want to accomplish with the document? What's the desired outcome? What do you want the person to do as a result of your message?

This can be trickier than it looks at first glance. Suppose, for example, you're coordinating a department workshop on a new software system. It will be held at lunch time, and it's a must-attend, so you might just write:

Subject: Mandatory IT workshop March 7

On Thursday, March 7, noon to 1 p.m., plan on attending IT's workshop on the new Mannerly System software, which will be rolled out company-wide May 1. All staff members are expected to attend. Please acknowledge receipt of this message.

You may have received similar notices. How did you react? Were you enthusiastic? Happy to give up your lunch time? Probably not. So when you're the writer, you can easily predict how people who receive such a message will feel. They'll show up because they must, but is that really the outcome you want? The session will be much more productive if people come in a positive frame of mind and motivated to learn. So your message might better say:

Subject: For everyone: IT Workshop, March 7

This Thursday at 2:00 p.m., IT will show us everything we need to know about the Mannerly System software we'll all use starting May 1. The experts will demonstrate how Mannerly can cut your report prep time by 20% and give you instant access to backup data on demand. In addition to giving you a general grounding, the demo will show you how to apply this cutting-edge system to your own needs. All hands on deck for this one—please confirm you'll be there.

This version presents the meeting enthusiastically—enthusiasm is contagious!—and energizes the readers: The event is framed as a good opportunity with clear benefit to them. The topic sounds relevant rather than boring. The message sets a team feeling in the first sentence instead of a dictatorial one, and it personalizes what follows by writing in terms of "you" instead of the indifferent third person language of the first version.

But if you're addressing people with whom you have different relationships, or who work on different levels, there's more to consider. Their status, stake in the subject and expected contribution to the meeting should be taken into account. Version 2 sounds like it's addressed to subordinates. If you're writing to people over whom you have no authority, an invitational tone rather than a command, no matter how team oriented, is more appropriate.

A message to the department head might begin like this:

Dear Joan: I've set up the training on the Mannerly system for Thursday at 2:00 p.m., in line with your schedule. The whole department will participate. I've put your intro first on the agenda, which is attached. OK?

On the job, you want even a simple message to reinforce your professional image with superiors, colleagues, collaborators, suppliers and everyone else you're writing to. It should

contribute to your relationships in a positive way. Well-written messages advance your organization's interests—and your own long-range goals.

In the meeting announcement example, then, the goal includes bringing people to the event in the frame of mind you want so it produces the best results. If defining "goal" appears more complex than you expected, and sounds like a lot of weight for an ordinary e-mail to carry, how much thought should go into a complex document like a proposal or report?

Often, quite a lot. But fortunately, the process you're learning applies to every kind of document, both digital and print, and can soon be applied intuitively. Practice with everyday materials pays off with the "important" documents. At heart, good writing is good thinking, so developing your writing skills helps you in many ways. You're better able to define and solve problems, understand and engage others, manage their perceptions and influence their actions. And as will emerge later in this book, skill with writing provides the best basis for successful oral and visual communication.

Define Goals to Shift Your Vision

When you closely identify a document's purpose—or the role it plays to accomplish a purpose—you gain surprisingly helpful insights. The cover letter you write for a proposal, for example, need not bear the burden of selling your product or service. It just needs to set the stage for the reader to view the proposal itself in a favorable light and demonstrate that you've read the specs carefully and understand the problem.

Similarly, cover letters for résumés needn't summarize your credentials. Aim to promote the reviewer's interest in reading the résumé by highlighting what a good match you are with the job (and by showing that you write well). The résumé's job, in turn, is to gain entree to the next step, usually an interview.

Clear goals give you clear guidelines, whatever the medium. And articulating your set of goals can save you from falling into a lot of common traps and unnecessary mistakes.

Put Your Goals Analysis to Work

Here's how to begin your new systematic writing strategy: Practice defining the goal of every message you write on as many levels that apply. Write them down. Writing sharpens our thinking and pushes us to be more specific.

Here are some examples of goals for the meeting invitation:

1. Move people to show up: This is the basic action or response you want from readers.
2. Motivate people: You want them to recognize the subject's importance and approach it enthusiastically, ready to learn. This is the below-surface response you need.
3. Produce a successful event: Preparing everyone to use a new system and work more efficiently is the organization's goal and your responsibility.
4. Create a positive impression on your superiors, peers and subordinates: Building this is your personal long-range goal.

Goal 4 is always important because when you're conscious of your personal goals, you automatically act in line with them.

You recognize opportunities you might otherwise overlook for a productive contact or an extra assignment. And you see ways to build toward your goals in almost every message you write, whether an e-mail or a report or a presentation.

Consider this example:

Bill has been elected a board member of his professional association. No one ran against him, so he doesn't take it seriously at first. He dashes off a memo to his boss:

Mark, guess what? I'm now on the WBEL board. LOL?

Then he thinks some more and realizes he has an opportunity to

- raise his profile in the department,
- strengthen his relationship with the person he reports to, and
- perhaps bring himself to the attention of higher-ups in a positive light.

He rewrites it this way:

Mark, I'm happy to report that I am now a WBEL board member. I was elected last night. As of June, I'll be involved in all the decision making about programs and venues and, of course, look forward to contributing our company perspective and making new contacts for us.

The inauguration lunch is on May 1, and I'd be honored if you would come as my personal guest. Can you attend?

This message is likely to accomplish all three of Bill's goals.

Note, of course, that the goals you make evident in a piece of writing must not be at odds with those of your employer—unless you're aiming to lose your job. Let's assume for now that your goals and those of your employer are basically aligned (though the more aware you are of your own long-term goals, the more selective you'll feel about where you want to work and what you want to work at).

Aim in all your messages to pursue both your employer's goals and your own. That doesn't suggest you should work in self-promotional statements. It means, in all your communications, take the trouble to write as you want to be perceived. Write thoughtfully, using techniques demonstrated in this book, and you own the power to build your image over time as someone who's valuable, resourceful, reliable, creative, responsive . . . whatever—you fill in the blanks.

If you plan to run your own business, either as a side gig or full-time, your degree of success depends largely on how well you communicate. Messages must be even more consistent and agile than when you work for someone else—you simply don't

win the jobs otherwise. Nor can you collaborate or lead without good communication. The principles and thinking process apply equally to every kind of enterprise and industry.

So far, it's been all about "you." Now let's move on to "the other"—the person or group you're writing to.

STEP 2: ANALYZE YOUR AUDIENCE SYSTEMATICALLY

Always try to lift yourself out of your parochial mind-set and find out how other people think and feel. It may not make you a better person in all spheres of life, but it will be a source of continuing kindness to your readers.

—Steven Pinker, professor of psychology at Harvard and chair of the *American Heritage Dictionary* Usage Panel

Why Audience Analysis Is Key

When it comes down to it, most messages ask for something. The request may be basic:

Please send me technical specs for your Model G.

A request may be implicit rather than stated:

Please read this message and absorb the information in it.

Or a request can be overt, asking for agreement or action:

Let's get together next Tuesday to plan the agenda.

or

Can we delay the project deadline so we can collect more bids?

If you're asking anyone for something—even if it's only to pay attention to the content—you want your message to be properly received and hopefully acted upon. So you must communicate in terms the reader can hear, understand and relate to. Moreover, you must usually give the reader something he wants, or considers desirable, for your request to succeed.

If, for example, you want your supervisor to move you to a better office, you need to match your message to who she is and what argument will make sense to her. Will she care that the move makes the office workflow more efficient? That it better reflects the staff hierarchy? That you'll be able to concentrate better or be closer to her office? Does she show concern for staff members' well-being and happiness? To succeed, you must take account of such factors and more.

People are different—in how they perceive, what they value, what they care about and how they make decisions. But there is one universal to count on: self-interest. We react to

things and make decisions based on "what's in it for me" (marketers call this WIIFM). This doesn't suggest that people are selfish and ungenerous; they may be motivated by a humanitarian cause, an ideal or belief, or a commitment to what's good for other people or the organization they serve or the world at large, above everything else.

In the practical world, even charities and government offices run on business thinking. They must operate efficiently, be well perceived by their stakeholders, use resources well. However, decisions are made by individuals who interpret matters differently. If your department head cares about the quarterly profit and loss statement, it isn't smart to suggest a workplace improvement because it would make people happy and expect to succeed—unless you could prove that happy people are more productive. If you want to persuade employees that a new benefit is as good as the one it replaced, telling them how much the company saves gets you nowhere. They want to know how their lives will improve—or at least not suffer—in real-world terms.

The bottom line is that in addition to defining "what do I want" for each message you write, you need to systematically analyze "who is the person I want it from"—your audience. It's the only way to determine your best content: the facts and ideas that will achieve your goal with the individual or group you're addressing; what to emphasize; and what language, structure and tone will help this message succeed.

SUCCESS TIP

How to Deliver a Message: in Person? In Writing?

This book is about writing, but remember that a written message is not always your best option. A conversation is often better, in person or by telephone or online as practical. Especially if the subject is personal, or requires some give and take—such as negotiating for a raise or opportunity—you'll achieve more if you can read and respond to the other person's questions and subtle reactions. If you have a problem with a coworker, resolving it in person is far better than a written complaint. Especially when you start a new job or role in an organization, resist over-relying on written messages. Build a person-to-person pattern of interaction. Walk down the hall, introduce yourself and look for chances to hold one-on-one conversations. You'll gain a reputation as a people person. Colleagues will react more positively to your ideas and requests. You'll collaborate with them more effectively and learn more. And you'll find it easier to write good materials and messages because knowing your readers enables you to frame your communication within their perspective.

Understanding your audience also tells you what communication channel to use. If your boss doesn't like texting, obviously don't make a request that way. But you probably will send a text if you want advice on the best new smartphone from your 16-year-old cousin.

While we instinctively make such decisions all the time, you succeed more often on the job when you approach a writing challenge methodically. Scan the list of personal characteristics in the sidebar "Some Factors That Determine Who We Are." Do you wonder how you can know so much about someone you only see in the office or connect with formally as a client or business contact?

How to Understand People

The best way to know someone is to thoughtfully interact and observe.

As a trial attorney will tell you, the clues about who someone "is" abound: in what the person says and does, his voice, what he wears and how he wears it, what he reads, how he walks, what he laughs at, how he shakes hands, what his office looks like. If you spend time with people or are familiar with their work environments, observe. And always listen. Active listening with your whole attention is the best way to understand another person. Open up your perceptions to notice what people in your life talk about, what triggers positive and negative reactions, what guides their decision making, what matters to them, how they communicate and more.

If the person is important to you—a boss or significant connection—*back your observation up with research*, so easily done for everyone in the business world. What people choose to say about themselves on a professional site like LinkedIn, and choose to show on social media sites, tells you a lot beyond the facts. You can also ask other people for context and even advice on how to get along with someone to whom they relate well, but be tactful.

And ask questions! Provided your questions are appropriate and don't exceed the relationship's boundaries, most people welcome the chance to talk about themselves, explain things and tell you what they think.

The best salespeople customarily ask open-ended questions like this: "I'm curious—how did you achieve your position here?" Then they listen carefully and interact according to their on-the-spot analysis. This approach isn't devious. It respects the premise that we have individual perspectives and patterns. A good saleswoman may conclude from such a conversation that her product or service is not what the prospect needs, and may even suggest another avenue. But if it looks like a match, she knows how to frame the pitch. In a workplace context, understanding other peoples' frameworks helps you know how to talk their language.

SOME FACTORS THAT DETERMINE WHO WE ARE

Innumerable factors influence how individuals receive and react to messages. Understanding people from this perspective is infinitely rewarding. To develop your awareness of differences, it is useful to consider factors that make us unique, such as the following:

- age and generation
- economic status
- cultural, ethnic or religious background
- gender
- educational level
- where the person grew up and now lives
- career background
- role or status in the organization
- personal values

Beyond such overt factors, when the person is important to you—like a supervisor—consider:

- What does he care about?
- What interests her?
- What are his strengths, weaknesses?
- Problems and challenges: What keeps her up at night?

- Leadership style: Top-down, collaborative or somewhere in between?
- Management style: Fair, consistent? Or plays favorites?
- Decision-making style: Slowly or quickly? Based on what?
- Open to new ideas? Willing to take risks?
- Likes confrontation or avoids it?
- General confidence level and apparent insecurities?
- Sensitive to people's concerns?
- What makes him happy? Angry? Frustrated? Bored?
- Does she have a sense of humor? (Assume not)
- Is he comfortable with emotions? (Assume not)
- Any apparent pro or con feelings toward people your age? Either gender?

Think also about factors that affect how to communicate with this individual.

- What is her relationship to you, both by position and inclination?
- How does he prefer to receive information: e-mail, in person, letter, phone, text, social media channel? PowerPoint? Formal or informal reports?
- What kind of explanations does she prefer: Big-picture? Detailed? Logical? Statistical?
- What is the best time of day to approach him? (Salespeople often aim for after lunch.)
- What are her hot buttons?

The nature of what you're communicating about may suggest that you also pay attention to factors such as these:

- What the supervisor already knows about the subject. What more might he need to know? Any prior experience with the subject?
- How she feels about the subject and her comfort level with it
- Attitude toward innovation and change
- Preference for ideas that he originates (or thinks he originates)

Communicating Across Personal Filters

If audience analysis sounds like a lot of trouble, consider that a primary purpose of every message is to maintain or establish good relationships. You can't do that without taking account of the individual you're writing to. Further, to achieve your goal, you must choose the right strategy for your document. Putting yourself in someone's mindset empowers you to answer this all-important question: What's in it for me? You can't give people what they need if you don't know who they are.

We don't see things as they are; we see them as we are.

—Anais Nin, writer and diarist

Every one of us comes to work (and to life) with a built-in filter that evolves over time through the interplay of genetic traits and everything that makes up our life experience. We interpret everything we encounter and that happens to us through this filter, which also determines our expectations, reactions, assumptions and fears.

Don't ever doubt that you see the world through your own filter. The more conscious you become of your filter's characteristics, as well as those of people with whom you

communicate, the better you'll succeed. *Treat communication as a bridge between different worldviews, and you'll be way ahead in your personal life as well as business life.*

The good news is that once you start thinking about your audience analytically, doing so becomes second nature. Of course, the higher the stakes, the more thought it's worth. An e-mail or text message asking a friend to meet for lunch won't require a review of her comfort level with new ideas. But if you want to get project approvals from your supervisor, convince a client prospect that you're worth 20 minutes of his time or close a sale, audience analysis is your friend.

Take account of different personal factors according to the nature of your request. If you want the recipient to understand and follow your instructions on how to file for reimbursement, then education level is important. If you need to know how formal to make your message to a client, then her position matters, as does personal communication and management style.

Here's another major reason why you want to know your audience: *Written communication lacks all the cues we depend on in face-to-face interaction.* When we are in the presence of other people, we unconsciously adapt what we say—and how we say it—to their reaction. If we move the conversation in the wrong direction, their facial expression or body language signals us to switch focus. Otherwise they may interrupt us or stop listening.

With written communication, we can't gauge reader response. Therefore, provided you want more than a random hit-or-miss success ratio, you need to target the message properly and *anticipate* response. In a way, you can hold the conversation in your head and write on that basis.

SUCCESS TIP

Tap Into Your Intuition

Intuition is knowing something without knowing how we know it. An interesting way to tap into it, and put together your impressions of someone and the facts you've marshalled, is to completely imagine the person mentally. If you're working on an important communication, whether through writing or face to face, relax for a few minutes and bring her alive in your mind: Picture her in detail—carriage, dress, manner, expression, gestures, body language; hear her speak, laugh. Visualize her office or other environment she created in full detail. You might hold an imaginary conversation—ask for what you want, observe her reaction, hear her questions and answer them. Then write from this awareness and see how it shapes your content choices, language and tone. If you're preparing for an important conversation, use the insights you gain this way—even if they're hard to rationally explain—to plan a productive conversation. This technique works because we always know a lot more than we think.

Profiling People You've Never Met

In many instances, you're writing to people you haven't met yet and may never meet. This is increasingly common as more enterprises operate with virtual teams in scattered locations. How do you analyze supervisors and coworkers then? Or prospective clients and partners?

Online research plays a bigger role. Scout especially for opportunities to connect visually. If you're writing, or preparing to meet with someone you've not met for an interview, or to pitch a service, look for video of the person. This gives you a good feel for being in his presence.

Phone conversations also tell you a lot. Listen for the individual's conversational pace—what provokes enthusiasm, any repeated words or phrases that indicate a focus or concern or a way of thinking. One individual may cite numbers often and another may show an interest in people. And, of course, ask direct questions if the context allows, such as "What kind of data would you like to see and at what level of detail?" or "How will we communicate to coordinate our tasks?"

VIEW FROM THE FIELD: A PSYCHOLOGIST ON COMMUNICATION

To build rapport and communicate effectively, look past your own perspective and try to understand how someone else sees things. Remember, people are more open to your viewpoint when you make the effort to understand theirs. People have genuinely different ways of looking at things and interacting, and you need to respect this right.

Read their cues. Pay attention to how they talk about things, and talk in frames of reference they will understand. This helps them make sense of what you're saying and opens up your own capacity for real rapport.

When you write, draw on what you know about the person. See her in your mind's eye and use your intuition to reverse roles with her. This will help you better understand how she sees things and, if she is not getting your point, can show you in what way you are not attuned to how she sees things and what she needs.

If you're writing to someone you haven't met, do some research: Talk to colleagues, gather information. The more you understand a person's frames of reference, language, values and priorities, the more you can develop the rapport for a working relationship. Review his written communications. Look for clues in how he responds to written messages, too. Notice whether he uses personal language, technical terms, generalizations. Consider what kind of data he needs to make decisions and whether he decides fast or slowly. Take serious account of that in deciding how to proceed next.

—Susan H. Dowell, psychotherapist and co-author, *Workplace Genie: An Unorthodox Toolkit to Help Transform Your Work Relationships and Get the Most From Your Career*

Reading Between the Lines

Are someone's written messages formal or informal? Carefully written or careless? Is the language old-fashioned, contemporary or breezy? Is the thinking clear and well organized? Moreover, it's startling how much "attitude" is often revealed in even a short, simple e-mail or post. In a large communications department I managed, at least one other person reviewed every significant piece of writing that went out of the office, even internal memos. The feedback rarely concerned technical issues like grammar. Instead, comments focused on observations such as "I gather you don't like this person" or "You're recommending this course of action but it doesn't sound like you believe in it."

It can be extremely hard to keep your own feelings out of your writing, so be aware of that challenge (and have a friend check out your message when it matters). Almost always, it's against your interests to betray negative emotions such as anger, frustration, impatience. In writing they make you look childish, self-centered and small-picture focused. The impact on others may be indelible—that's the power and risk of the written message.

Also beneficial: Practice the reverse awareness. Keep your antennae up for clues to other people's feelings when you're on the receiving end.

Reading between the lines is a particularly useful technique when you're applying for a job or responding to a request for proposals (RFP). Read the ad, posting or RFP a dozen times or more, and pick up its language, hot buttons and rhythm.

You can also pick up the subtext of a message by close attention to what is *not* said and general "atmosphere." A good way to do this is to ask questions and imagine the answers. For example, why did this job ad specify "attention to detail," "detail oriented" and "meticulous follow-through" so many times? Perhaps the last person in the job fell through in this area, so marshal your evidence of this strength.

Inventing an Audience

Another useful strategy when you're writing to someone you don't know is to invent a construct of what that person is most probably like. If it's a human resources (HR) director, for example, visualize others you've known who held that job and consider what would interest and impress them. Or just take a few minutes to see through their eyes and figure out what—if your positions were reversed—the HR director would care about and want to know. Ask yourself, what's in the other person's self-interest in this situation? Assume her role for a few minutes and you'll have helpful answers.

It's always easier to write to an individual than to an anonymous abstract person. But if you can't conjure one appropriate to the situation, then write to a Standard Modern Businessperson—SMB. You can safely assume your SMB wants your written message to be

- respectful but friendly,
- clear on your reason for writing,
- well planned and written,
- logical in its progression of facts or ideas,
- targeted to his self-interest (the what's-in-it-for-me factor),
- self-contained—doesn't require looking up other documents or doing research,
- as brief as possible to get the message across,
- objective, nonemotional and positive in spirit,
- oriented to solving a problem rather than posing one,
- good for the bottom line (you score lots of points when you can show this, even in a minor way).

You can also assume that your SMB is a human being and put the old Golden Rule to work on your behalf. All (or nearly all) of us want to feel

- liked,
- valued,
- treated with courtesy and respect,
- part of the team.

When a message doesn't convey these things implicitly, our reaction is negative, whether or not the message itself has merit. And we especially do not like anything that actively makes us feel

- overlooked or left out,
- disrespected,
- disliked,
- uncomfortable,
- depressed,
- inadequate,
- laughable or ridiculous.

Never criticize anyone in writing, whatever her relationship to you. This applies to informal situations and most formal ones, with the exception of performance reviews and documentation. A careless written remark can easily torpedo a relationship and create a permanent enemy. Similarly, irony and sarcasm are risky ingredients in business writing. When you criticize someone in person, you can establish a supportive atmosphere and listen responsively. And when you say something sarcastically or ironically, your tone of voice conveys "I don't really mean it."

But the critical or sarcastic memo is delivered without face-to-face cues and can devastate your audience and boomerang badly. This applies 110% to online media. If you don't want a viral reputation as a nasty human being, refrain from posting negative personal comments anywhere.

Here is the flip side: It is a rare individual who doesn't want to look good to colleagues and staff—and especially superiors. And we relish good news, including any about a staff member or the department. So make the most of every opportunity to bring good tidings, and craft those messages well. These are the documents most likely to ascend the corporate ladder and help pave your own way.

Always practice a generous spirit in praising other people's accomplishments and share that news. It takes confidence to honor others, and people intrinsically respect those able to do so. Not to mention how well disposed the other person will feel. In every organization,

and outside it too, connecting with allies and building a network is essential, so make the most of chances to do this.

VIEW FROM THE FIELD: PRACTICE SOCIAL SKILLS AT WORK

Everyone knows the Golden Rule—treat other people the way you want to be treated—but try the Platinum Rule: Treat others the way they want to be treated. This is harder because not everyone wants to be treated the same way. Beware the false consensus: believing that your own values and ideas are "normal" and that most people share these thoughts. Pay attention to the hints. Here are some guidelines:

1. Assess the environment and don't start out too casually. In case of doubt, begin more formally. Once you've said, "Hey Mandy, what's happening?" it's hard to go back to "How are you, Ms. Davis?"
2. Respect other people's religious, political and cultural feelings without anger or impatience. Make an effort to understand—you don't have to agree.
3. Ask questions—you can't be an interesting person unless you are interested in the thoughts of others. Ask the other person's opinion before stating your own—"What do you think about . . . ?"; or add the question after giving your own. But don't ask a question you would not want to answer.
4. Embrace diversity in all directions. This includes people older and younger than ourselves.

Practicing good manners—which communicate that we care about other people—is the heart of social skills and basic to civilization. Manners are the great equalizer. They apply to everyone and are the opposite of being elitist, arbitrary and artificial. Social skills expressed as beautiful manners are in your best interest. People who can handle any situation with grace, humor and poise will always be valued in the workplace and everywhere else.

—Margery Sinclair, CEO of Good Manners Are Good Business and author, *A Year of Good Manners*

Assessing Corporate Culture

Rather like people, every enterprise—corporate, nonprofit, government—has its own culture. It develops over time according to the industry, company history, leadership and many other factors. You do your best work, and are most valued, when you understand a company and the industry it's part of. Don't expect to comment on corporate strategy (though a growing number of organizations are consulting young people to understand them better and access their skills). But whatever your job level, a solid grasp of the big picture enables you to recognize opportunities and contribute to company priorities. You'll interact more effectively and write better messages, too.

However, you'll seldom get good answers if you ask anyone, "What's the culture here?" Most employees, even those at the top, take the daily culture they work in for granted and seem unaware of its ramifications. A huge percentage of executive hires fail because neither the organization nor the incoming leader considers that a culture clash is involved. So it's up to you to observe. Consider the obvious: how people dress, what their offices look like, how they interact. Is the atmosphere competitive or collegial? Formal

or friendly? Do people mostly work alone or is teaming important? Check out how the organization presents itself in written materials and online, and what current and past employees say about it on sharing sites.

Further, identify good sources of information right next to you and ask specific questions. As elaborated on later in this chapter, experienced colleagues are likely to welcome your interest and asking their advice actually helps you find common ground. Most supervisors are glad to encourage your interest in becoming a useful member of the team.

Here are some of the big-picture elements worth knowing:

- How does the enterprise frame its mission? Express its values?
- How are decisions made—and by whom?
- What is rewarded? Who is valued?
- What behaviors are discouraged?
- What are the organization's immediate and long-range goals?
- What challenges does it face? Who are the competitors?
- What are the company's strengths and competitive advantages?
- What is its communication style and the preferred channels?

BRIDGING GENERATIONAL DIFFERENCES

If you were born in 1995 or later, you are part of a cohort identified as Generation Z, post-Millennials. If you began your work experience after 2000, you probably identify most closely with the Millennial generation. Your supervisors are probably Baby Boomers and members of Generation X, perhaps even the older cohort of Millennials. What does this differentiation mean for how you understand people and communicate?

Marketers, advertisers, businesspeople, politicians, university leaders and many others are interested in understanding generational differences for practical purposes. Such analysis is in itself big business! But results must be taken with many grains of salt. They may be speculative in assuming how a group of people will behave and, invariably, are expressed as generalizations that don't consider people's individuality. It's foolish to assume, for example, that someone over 60 is technology averse and out of date. Or that a Millennial sees older people that way. Clearly, in many cases neither judgment is true.

Nevertheless, the research-based generalizations affect how the generations perceive each other and what they expect, so they are important to understand. They also offer useful insights if you remember those grains of salt. Scanning them might illuminate some of the experiences you've already had. When people grew up, how they were raised and what was happening at the time undeniably shape their individual perspectives. Plus, people care about different things at different times in their lives.

Every method you use to see past your own views potentially saves you pain and gives you ways to gain. Most organizations consist of a generational mix. Millennials and Generation X people may be most visible on a daily basis, but many Baby Boomers are still on the job and may run the show on the higher levels. It's an unusual board of directors that doesn't include plenty of Boomers. Understanding the perspectives of people who are older (or younger) than you enables you to interact better in authentic ways—and helps other people understand you better and value you more.

UNDERSTAND YOUR GENERATIONS

Generation is only one factor that influences us, so never characterize anyone primarily by when they were born. But the broad strokes of how the generations are commonly characterized helps clarify how other people see you and keeps you open to what makes other people tick. Keep in mind that the dates with which different generations are identified are fluid and variously interpreted.

Generation Z

Born 1995 or Later

It's too early to characterize this generation, which is just beginning to enter the workplace, but here's how career and marketing professionals describe this group. Its members are the truest digital natives and technology, a constant of their lives, plays a big role in shaping their outlook and social life. Many engage with social media platforms almost constantly and prefer quick-moving formats, especially those that disappear quickly and preserve anonymity, like Whisper and Snapchat. Gen Zs want to be active in the community and in their work. Coming of age during a recession and worldwide tensions, many feel cautious about life and their own work future. A number of them expect to create their own businesses. They appear to be relatively risk-averse, pragmatic and financially conservative. Their thinking tends toward the global and they want to create a better world. This generation is large, so members can expect opportunities to be competitive throughout their careers.

Millennial Generation (Generation Y)

Born 1981 to 1995

Brought up, generally speaking, with devoted support, Millennials are strong users of digital technologies and instant communication media: Facebook, YouTube, and online gaming are natural environments. They are culturally tolerant and liberal in views as well as civic minded. They come to the workplace with high expectations and desire to shape their jobs to fit their lives. They dislike following orders blindly and do not automatically grant respect to the more experienced. Millennials like to know *why* and want to work on their own without being micromanaged. They have short attention spans, want opportunities to learn, like challenge and change. They dislike repetitive work and want the workplace to be fun. Many are creative and optimistic but not company loyal. They like to participate rather than watch, and they desire frequent feedback and encouragement. Many prefer text messaging and social media networking to face-to-face communication or telephone. This is a large and therefore competitive generation.

Generation X

Born 1965 to 1980

This is a relatively small cohort. Many members now occupy middle-management jobs. Brought up in the first period of two-income households, rising divorce rate and latchkey environment, Gen Xers value independence, self-sufficiency, freedom, responsibility

and resourcefulness. They are comfortable with computers and technology. While ambitious and hardworking, they want work–life balance. Gen Xers possess entrepreneurial spirit, like flexible hours and in many cases a chance to work at home part of the time. They favor diversity, challenge, creative input, autonomy and independent work, though most team well. They tend to be adaptable and highly responsible. Their communication preferences bridge between old media and new, but many Gen Xers are less comfortable than the younger people with sharing personal life details in social platforms.

Baby Boomers

Born 1946 to 1964

This is a large group whose members often retain power in corporations, law firms, consultancies, nonprofits and most other organizations (except startups and dot-coms). Baby Boomers are loyal, work-centric and cynical; value office face time; and are motivated by perks, prestige, position, high levels of responsibility, praise and challenges. Boomers define themselves by professional accomplishment and are sometimes charged with being workaholics. They are very competitive, generally confident and comfortable with confrontation and hierarchical structure; they don't always like change but will challenge established practice. Though of retirement age, many continue working and believe that Generations X and Y should "pay their dues"—like they did. For example: fulfilling assignments without complaint, showing respect and writing well-structured, well-expressed, well-edited messages. Most Boomers like e-mail, often present themselves on LinkedIn and similar business sites, but may find the fast moving social landscape an unwelcome challenge.

To learn more, enter "generation gaps" or "generational differences" in your search engine. Thousands of articles, blogs and research reports will come up written from business management, HR, marketing and other angles. Check out "creating personas," too, which brings up audience analysis templates favored by online marketers. Here are a few aspects of generational analysis that affect communication.

Communicating Cross-Generation

Generally speaking, different age groups are comfortable with different ways of interacting. Note that many Boomers like face-to-face meetings and telephone contact. Sending them important messages in text format or using its shortcuts in your e-mails may boomerang. And hesitate to friend a Boomer colleague. Many prefer to keep their business lives separate from the personal. And they prefer that you do, too: If you post an unduly revealing page, comment, photo or video, prepare to face negative consequences from your company executives and those at other companies where you want to work.

VIEW FROM THE FIELD: INTERACTING SUCCESSFULLY ACROSS GENERATIONS

If you are a Generation Y/Millennial working with Boomers or Gen Xers, develop rapport by showing initiative. Convey confidence but don't let it come across as arrogance. Ask questions about how you can best contribute to serving the client better and help the organization. Recognize older people's achievements, which they tend to be proud of, and don't instantly dismiss their ideas even if you think you have a new and

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better way. You might tactfully suggest reciprocal or mutual learning so you both benefit, remembering that some Boomers may not be happy to be told they must learn from younger people.

Know that older people may find your text-influenced communication style abrupt and short and impersonal. Slow down, think about what you're saying, proof the message. Missing words, bad grammar and typos don't impress others and may hold you back from promotions. Learn good writing skills and practice them.

—Phyllis Weiss Haserot, president of Practice Development Counsel and owner-manager of the LinkedIn Cross-Generational Conversation group

An important aspect of communicating that may involve generational differences is the quality of *tone*, the voice built into a message. When business executives are asked to identify the biggest problem with employee writing, "wrong tone" is usually the first complaint, particularly when they talk about younger staff members.

We can see from our generalized characteristics why this happens. People born after 1980 or so tend to be antihierarchical and more skeptical of authority. In their view, age does not automatically make someone worthy of respect. But older people, who often feel that they worked their tails off to get where they are, want respect with a capital R.

The intergenerational writing problem is further complicated by Millennials' immersion in a digital world where communication is telegraphic. Thus, a careless 25-year-old might e-mail a client this way:

Jen—Here's the report you wanted. Still waiting for you to give me the projects specs. I'm at a standstill. When will you send???

—Mel

This would be more effective:

Dear Jen:

To follow up on our phone conversation, I'm attaching a report on the Black acquisition. I've marked the relevant areas. If this doesn't provide all the information you need, please let me know and I'll dig further.

As soon as we have the new specs, we'll move ahead on preparing the agreement. Thanks.

Best regards, Mel

If you think the second version is a bootlicking waste of time, think again. Mel's credibility and professional image are very much at stake here. Jen may not visibly react to what

she perceives as rudeness, but she's likely to register it, remember it and may even talk to Mel's higher-up about it.

VIEW FROM THE FIELD: AN "OLDER FOLKS" WARNING

One of my gripes with younger people is that with e-mail and all the other business communication tools we have today, they don't get back to you in a timely manner. That's a subliminal message and makes you think: Wasn't my message important? Aren't I important? It's so appalling that anyone who does respond within 24 hours, or a business that does so, has a real point of differentiation. And be aware of generational nuances. People who text shouldn't use that jargon in e-mail—we older folks don't understand it.

—Paul Facella, president/CEO of Inside Management Ltd. and former corporate vice president of McDonald's

Look at it as necessary business protocol to write in a respectful—no, not obsequious—tone. And do so whenever you're in doubt about the relative status of your audience or where your e-mail might end up.

The guidelines apply equally when you report to a young boss or client. He may in fact be especially sensitive to signs of respect and disrespect. And so are clients and customers, by definition. They do not want to be addressed as a peer or feel ordered around by a junior associate.

HOW UNDERSTANDING OTHER PEOPLE HELPS YOU

Taking a minute to think through other people's perspective helps you handle a host of difficult situations. One example: when you feel you are not treated as you'd like to be. Older people at times react based on their expectations of younger people. And if you're a Millennial or Gen Z, they may have had experience with other members of your cohort that led them to believe that everyone in this group feels entitled to privileges and opportunities, for example, rather than expecting to work for them. This idea is bolstered by the generalizations circulated in every kind of media. The remedy is simple: Take all opportunities to say thank you. It's a good idea anyway.

In other situations, older people may react or act in the framework of their own perspective. If a Gen X supervisor doesn't give you the encouragement you'd like, for example, remember that the broad-strokes generational description suggests that Gen X members prize an independent workstyle and a resourceful, problem-solving spirit. So it's smart to adapt your expectations and demonstrate your talents in ways she values. Do you feel you're being given insufficient time and guidance? Instead of demanding more attention, ask for brief check-in meetings to help you prioritize or make good decisions on your own.

If a Boomer supervisor appears to resist according you value or doesn't acknowledge your contributions—or potential—consider that his own advancement required years of proving himself at each career step. Here, demonstrating your sincere interest in performing every task well goes a long way.

In many cases, extending yourself to understand viewpoints different from your own enables you to field problems creatively. Remember too that perspective depends on role: At each step up an organization's ladder, responsibilities require bigger-picture thinking. A manager charged with running a department or unit always feels pressured to get the work done efficiently by a group of different personalities with different priorities and perspectives. Often not so easy! So what if instead of complaining that you want better opportunities to learn—or just leaving the job without explanation—you asked a question such as "How can I contribute more to the team?" Now you're talking the boss's language!

It's important to represent your own interests well and speak up or write as appropriate. More often than you suspect, it's within your power to create a more satisfying situation for yourself by communicating well. When you practice empathy and strategic thinking, solutions to difficult problems magically materialize. And you give yourself a special gift: Knowing that you were able to handle a challenge well builds your confidence like nothing else.

If you are a Millennial or Gen Z, take comfort in knowing that adapting to intergenerational differences isn't a one-way street. Those who run professional service firms, nonprofits, corporations and all the rest try ever harder to understand the younger generations, because they know that the future (and maybe their retirement income) depends on it. They want to attract the best talent and retain it, and they realize that most younger people do not feel the long-term loyalty that was once common. But few companies have been structured to meet Millennial priorities. Perks like flexible hours, the chance to work at home and a fun workplace are hard to graft onto an old organizational stalk.

Marketing people spend endless time analyzing generational characteristics to calculate how to sell to each group, especially Millennials and younger, recognizing their enormous buying power. And nonprofits from orchestras to museums to charitable causes stress about appealing to younger donors for both time and money. If they fail, their revenue streams will literally age out. So they want to know what makes you happy both as an employee and as a buyer—how people your age think, what they want, how to appeal to them, what communication channels to use and how to use them.

Therefore, if you're just entering the career place, you have a lot to offer. But other people have a lot to give you too, like insight into the organization's culture, the way things work, how to get things done. One of the best strategies to practice everywhere you go is to seek informal partnerships with people of different ages and specializations. Stay alert to people you can learn from. Does one person run great meetings? Does someone else give magnetic presentations? Or know how to get her decisions approved? Or talk to the big boss?

Ask for advice. Most people will be flattered. And where you see ways you can be helpful, take the initiative. Reach out and offer, cheerfully and respectfully. You'll like the people better and your job, too.

WRITING TO GROUPS

Writing to groups is usually harder and more complicated than writing to individuals. Professionals who design communications for big groups, like mass markets, customarily segment the audience and tailor different messages to each because the same one will not succeed with all. Similarly, a large company sends different information to employee groups about subjects like a change in benefits, because their concerns are different.

There are times when you should do this, too. If you're sending a résumé or inquiry to prospective employers, for example, you'll need to take a different tack for consulting firms and marketing departments.

Often, however, one message must be effective for a wide range of people with different educational levels and interests. Good presenters often pick one person at a time to focus on while speaking. Similarly, many good writers think about one individual, or imagine one, and write to that person.

VIEW FROM THE FIELD: THE WORD FROM SUPER PRO WARREN BUFFETT

Here's how the financier, known for his remarkably clear writing on complex financial subjects, pulls it off:

Write with a specific person in mind. When writing Berkshire Hathaway's annual report, I pretend that I'm talking to my sisters. I have no trouble picturing them: Though highly intelligent, they are not experts in accounting or finance. They will understand plain English, but jargon may puzzle them. My goal is simply to give them the information I would wish them to supply me if our positions were reversed. To succeed, I don't need to be Shakespeare; I must, though, have a sincere desire to inform.

No siblings to write to? Borrow mine: Just begin with "Dear Doris and Bertie."

—Warren Buffett, from *A Plain English Handbook: How to Create Clear SEC Disclosure Documents*

Rather than writing to a faceless group, then, try picking a typical representative of the audience to think about, and assemble a list of characteristics from the audience analysis outlined earlier in this chapter. Different factors count depending on your subject and goal. If you're presenting a new companywide data entry program, for example, it's important to consider education, probable degree of knowledge, possible resistance and the audience's view of what's in it for them (which encompasses "how much trouble will this cause me"). Search "developing a persona" in your web browser for useful guidelines as mentioned earlier, but interpret them to your needs.

Gatekeepers and "Serial Audiences"

Often a document needs to be read by different people or groups in succession. There may be a gatekeeper—for example, a manager's assistant—who vets incoming messages and may choose not to pass some of them on to the boss. And with nearly every job

application you send, there's probably an entire spectrum of people with the power to short-circuit you.

In other situations, you can anticipate that a message is likely to ascend the company ladder. You deliver a project report to your boss, for example, and see a good possibility that she'll send it to her boss, and the chain might continue to some unknown point. Or you submit your consulting proposal to the executive who invited it, and you count on his passing it on to the relevant department head.

Here are ways to handle this:

- Be very conscious that you're writing to a serial audience when preparing the message.
- Avoid anything that could annoy the immediate recipient and anything not suitable to the audience that may lie beyond.
- Use all the principles of good writing, and proof carefully.
- Err on the side of formality when unsure of the tone to take.
- Keep your eye on the ultimate target—the primary audience—the person or group that will ultimately make the decision to hire you or deliver whatever you're asking for.
- Befriend gatekeepers. It's best to have your supervisor's personal assistant regard you favorably, for example. Public relations people and politicians court editors and reporters for the same reason: They are gatekeepers, or mediators, whose approval is essential for reaching their target audiences.

Remember that today gatekeepers also include machines. A résumé that lacks industry keywords has a good chance of being screened out. A blog or website that doesn't incorporate the right search terms may be ignored by search engines and won't bring them to your audience's attention. Don't write for algorithms—always write for people—but don't ignore their gatekeeper function.

Messages to the Universe: Digital Media

Digital media give us something that never existed before: a way for just about anyone to reach millions, even billions, of people across the country and around the world, with a click, every day, any hour. All the rules of marketing and advertising are morphing into new "truths" as a result.

Anyone can now get her message out via a website, blog, or social media post, for example. But when an audience is so vast and indefinable, how can you understand it to shape a better message?

The premise of goal and audience now works this way: Instead of knowing to whom you're writing and tailoring the message, create a message that your ideal audience will want to find. Through search engine optimization and global networking, this potential audience has the means to find you, rather than the other way around. And if you give it

something it wants or needs, leverage that interest intelligently and stay persistent, your audience will come.

So it's even more important to think about your goals and intended recipients in depth and figure out their age range, education, interests, values, worries, hot buttons and all the rest. This will be covered in depth in Chapter 10, "Craft Your Writing for the Interactive World."

Here's the takeaway right now: Don't throw out the basics of good communication because the technology is new and the media channels behave differently. The principles remain as important as ever, and I promise they won't change. But they may need reinterpretation.

In the next chapter, we'll explore how the groundwork of understanding goals and audience pays off by showing you what to say, how to say it, what *not* to say and options for organizing your message or document.

PRACTICE OPPORTUNITIES

I. Chart Your Own Goals

If you're now a student, based on this chapter's discussion of goals and your personal agenda, write down your essential goals for

- this year of study,
- the entire degree program you'll be completing,
- the first year of the job you hope to get after completing your program.

Write in as much detail as you can. Consider whether this effort gives you a different perspective on what you want to achieve—and what difference that might make in what you do, how you spend your time and how you prioritize.

If you're already engaged with your career, think about what you want to accomplish this year and longer term, the opportunities that will help and ways you can envision gaining those opportunities on the job and outside. Write it all down. Writing is a terrific tool for helping yourself—the best way to reason out big life questions as well as small ones. It challenges you to figure out what you want and how to get it by revealing gaps of logic and alerting you to opportunities you'd otherwise overlook.

II. Strategize a Challenging Message

In a way similar to how the Standard Modern Businessperson is outlined earlier in the chapter, construct a Standard Modern Supervisor. What characteristics are people in supervisory roles likely to share? What are their probable needs and expectations from employees? Their goals, pressures, sensitivities? Does the generation a supervisor belongs to suggest additional characteristics?

State a problem you anticipate on the job you'd like to have. For example: Your supervisor isn't giving you the learning opportunities you want. In small groups, see how many