

The '4 Cs of business writing'? Hogwash.

 By [Tiffany Markman](#)

13 Aug 2019

In doing some competitor research recently, I came across a glut of local training companies selling business writing workshops. Almost all of these seem to have borrowed their sales pitch from the same place - 1995 - because not one, not two, but five promise to teach delegates the '4 Cs of business writing'.



Image credit: Aaron Burden on Unsplash.

These are, if you're wondering, clarity, conciseness, completeness and correctness.

There's also, in much of the proffered course content, generous reference to memos and letters. Sorry, *what?* It's 2019, people. So if your 'business writing' course isn't 80% email-focused, it's out of touch. (I almost expected to see 'how to write a fax'.)



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31 Jul 2015



Now the problem isn't necessarily with the training company, although one might expect better vetting from them – and higher quality research into what the market needs. The problem is with the trainer. *This* is why I'm so irate.



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Amanda Patterson 25 Jan 2016



The trainer should be teaching trainees how to read critically, summarise and structure documents and phrase arguments. There should be an emphasis on user behaviour, message planning and editorial quality control. All of this goes way beyond keeping it clear, concise, complete and correct.

In fact, the 4 Cs are so entry-level as to constitute basic permission to play.

So please listen up, trainers, facilitators and course content developers:

If you're not studiously researching best practices (both global and local), keeping up to date with the skills that business writers *in 2019* require and engaging with companies in the real world to find out what kinds of writing skills they need, you're simply not doing your job. You're just pretending.

“ You're part of the reason that so many business-people – even highly educated ones – write badly or inefficiently in today's workplace. ”

And in case you think that this is an empty rant intended only to draw attention to *my* business writing training courses, without adding actual value, here's my take on the supposed 4 Cs of business writing, for the modern world:

Before: Clear

Uh, yes. Obviously. Otherwise, why bother? But: *how*?

The sales blurbs that I saw promised to teach trainees to create business writing that readers could understand without any difficulty. They suggest that writers use “no obscure words” and “no extraneous words”.

You mean, words like ‘obscure’ and ‘extraneous’?

After: Plain

Let's replace C for clear with P for plain. The simplest, shortest, cleanest, most obvious word in every instance. Nothing must be looked up. Nothing is pretentious. The writer writes to express, not to impress (and so does the trainer.) Clarity goes without saying. Or, at least, it should.

Before: Concise

Oh for heaven's sake. Yes. Of course. Leave out adjectives unless you absolutely need them and adverbs under all circumstances.

But there's a lot more to conciseness than qualifiers and modifiers. What about sentence length? Paragraph length? Open space? Lists? Sub-heads? Bolding? Hyperlinks?

After: User-centric

Let's replace C for concise with U for user-centric. Make every word count. Consider how the text will look on the page, as well as what it says.



'You had me at hello' - Five ways to capture your business audience's attention

Anthony Ehlers 8 Oct 2015



Be generous with visual breathing room. Guide the reader's eye. Be sensitive to the reader's time, attention span, medium of choice and information needs.

Before: Complete

No, no, no, no.

The goal is *not* to ensure that the reader has all the information they need, in case they make the wrong decision. That's how you end up with documents so long your reader wants to jab a pencil in her own eye instead of engaging with it.

After: Focused

Let's replace C for complete with F for focused. The goal, people, is focused and targeted business writing, that is specific to the audience, while also being relevant, timely and considered.

Any writing training that does not start with how to identify your audience and how to nail down each message's specific objective and purpose is a waste of your valuable time and money.

Before: Correct

Argh. This one really annoys me. (No, I wasn't truly annoyed til now. I was just harrumphing for effect.)

Obviously your content should be correct. This inane suggestion should go without saying and should be replaced with...

“



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After: Friendly

Let's replace C for correct with something that will make a nice memorable mnemonic for you. How about F for friendly?



But how did the email make you feel?

Amanda Patterson 2 Nov 2015



Not too friendly, but friendly enough to establish rapport, show that there's a real human behind the message and stand out in a crowd of over-blown, oft-repeated, templated triteness.

So instead of the 4 Cs, I present to you Puff: plain, user-centric, focused and friendly. That's how we should be doing it in 2019.

ABOUT TIFFANY MARKMAN

I spend 10 hours a day writing - and teaching others to write. I was South Africa's Freelance Copywriter of the Year in 2020 and one of the world's 'Top 50 Female Content Marketers' in 2021.

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