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How to get your docs ignored, misunderstood or misinterpreted

By Frances Gordon

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We all know how to write effectively, or do we? How often have you sent out an email, letter or report, only to find that it is misunderstood, misinterpreted, or perhaps worst of all, ignored?

Just in case this has never happened to you, here we present (with our tongues firmly in our cheeks) some writing principles for how to go about it.

1. Whatever you do, don't plan your document - it wastes time. It's better to write the document then spend a few days (or weeks) going over it and correcting things. Or, better still, just put together a rough draft then send it out - no-one will notice.

2. Think about what YOU, the writer, want to get across. After all, it's your document - here's your chance to have a rant!

3. Pepper the document with phrases such as 'notwithstanding the generality of the foregoing' or 'herewith the aforementioned said persons in their instances...' . Be generous.

4. Remember that you need to sound as clever as possible, so use lots of long, complex words. Even if readers don't understand, at least they'll get how clever you are. And never use a word or phrase when an acronym will do. TLC, VIP, CRI, ISP, ACI, MSA... these TLAs help to keep your document short and professional.

5. If you have bad news, whatever you do, don't put it at the top of the document - can you imagine how the reader would freak out if you did? Rather hide it near the bottom. You could start the letter by telling the reader how groovy your company is instead - then they won't mind the bad news so much.

6. If you ever have to give the price of something or tell readers about the dreaded terms and conditions*, please put this information in small print. When you can just read it with a magnifying glass, take it one size smaller - your reader might have a magnifying glass, too.

7. Latin isn't just for lawyers. Ergo, have a go at making your modus operandi per se to use de facto bona fide ad hoc phrases in situ, ex gratia, ab initio, inter alia and ad nauseum.

8. If you have to use graphs or charts, go all out with them - use bright colours and bold shapes. It's not important that the reader understands them as long as they are not boring to look at. You could even add one or two little characters

- how about a tiger or something?

9. If you have to give a heading, make it vague and short. If your heading tells the reader what comes after it, they're never going to read it! And don't forget to hop around topics.

10. When your document is finished, make sure it's noticed by PUTTING AS MUCH AS POSSIBLE IN CAPS. THEN **ADD SOME BOLDING AND A COUPLE OF EXCLAMATION MARKS AND IF IT IS AN EMAIL, DON'T FORGET THE 'URGENT' FLAG!!!**

Of course, if this isn't for you, write in plain language. Say what you mean and mean what you say.

*An asterisk makes it sound more official.

ABOUT FRANCES GORDON

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