



# 135 Tips for Writing Successful Business Documents

by [Sheryl Lindsell-Roberts](#)

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"Sheryl Lindsell-Roberts once again turns her command of the craft of writing — and her terrific sense of humor — to the job of helping us write better. Her 135 tips help bring clarity to a world of muddled business documents." — Bill Lane, managing editor, *Boston Business Journal*

## About the Book

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Do you sit in front of a blank computer screen and feel a sense of panic? If you're a journalist, perhaps this sense of panic is tinged with elation (assuming you got into this profession because you love to write). But what about your readers? For most of us, whether we're composing a business letter, writing a press release, creating a PowerPoint presentation, or drafting a grant proposal, the flashing cursor seems to taunt as we sit frozen in the chair, unsure of where to begin or how to proceed.

At one time or another, we've all shared this experience.

The ability to write well is a critical skill for professionals in nearly every field. Good writers provide leadership, influence decisions, and advance their own careers. In her twentieth book, *135 Tips for Writing Successful Business Documents* (Houghton Mifflin, May 3, 2006), Sheryl Lindsell-Roberts draws on her twenty-plus years of experience as a successful consultant for clients in business, education, and government. In a lively, engaging style, she explains how to write persuasively for virtually any audience.

In the first part of the book, Sheryl addresses the basics of all business writing. In the second part, she provides specific advice on brochures, executive summaries, speeches, PowerPoint presentations, website content, and much more.

Packed with valuable information obtained from actual clients in the field, *135 Tips for Writing Successful Business Documents* is guaranteed to abolish writer's block and help anyone write with confidence and competence.

## About the Author

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For the past twenty years **Sheryl Lindsell-Roberts** has been the principal of Sheryl Lindsell-Roberts & Associates, a business writing firm specializing in business writing and marketing communications. Sheryl and her team have produced proposals, brochures, and websites that have helped clients close multimillion-dollar deals. Clients typically call Sheryl's firm because they're frustrated by their company's poor communications or they're troubled by lost revenue because of ineffective and inconsistent marketing messages.

Sheryl started facilitating business writing workshops and coaching sessions ten years ago and continues to receive rave reviews from clients in large corporations, academic institutions, and professional associations. *135 Tips for Writing Successful Business Documents* is her twentieth book. She lives with her husband in Marlborough, Massachusetts.

## A Conversation with Sheryl Lindsell-Roberts

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### Why did you write this book?

I run business and technical writing workshops at corporations, universities, and government facilities, so I have my finger on the pulse of writing challenges. I realized there's a strong need for a guide of handy tips that covers in a simple and straightforward manner most of the business and technical documents any business person would need to write. It's all here in *135 Tips for Writing Successful Business Documents*.

### What kinds of writing do people have the most trouble with?

People are struggling most with e-mail, which is often communicated at the speed of thoughtlessness. E-mail is a serious business tool, and you should treat it with the same respect as any other business document you write. Jobs have been lost, reputations have been ruined, and projects have been bungled because of poorly written communications — including e-mail.

Many firms also struggle with writing "winning proposals," which have such a major impact on the bottom line. They think it's adequate to respond to the particulars in the RFP [Request for Proposal]. What they don't realize is that a proposal is a marketing and sales document. When you write a proposal, you must convince the reader that you're the best and the most qualified. Projects aren't necessarily won on price alone.

For example, an architectural firm engaged me to write a proposal for a fixed-price school project. I took the firm through the process of identifying what made it different from all the other firms who would be in the running. Through a series of probing questions, we determined that this firm always finishes projects on time and on budget. I peppered the

proposal with the phrases "always on time" and "on budget," and included a testimonial to that effect at each mention. I also included photos of successful projects and testimonials from delighted clients. At first the firm was reluctant to use the proposal because it "looked like a marketing piece." When I helped the principals to realize that's what a proposal is, they submitted it. This proposal helped the firm to win a \$70 million school contract.

### **What kind of writing trends do you see often?**

Again, people are using e-mail for all sorts of messaging, which isn't always appropriate. For example, if you need to deliver a time-sensitive message to someone, call instead. When you need to schedule an appointment with someone, a phone call is more efficient (so you don't e-mail back and forth about who can't make it when).

### **What do recent graduates need to know about business writing?**

The National Center on the Evaluation of Quality in the Workplace conducted a study of American employers. The purpose was to rate the skills most critical to job performance. The results showed that employers list communications skills as the second most critical job skill. (Attitude was number one.) Employers equate communications skills with the ability to think clearly, examine alternatives, analyze information, and make decisions. Everything you write must hit the mark because your career depends on it.

### **How much do businesses lose because of poorly written communications?**

Several years ago I received a phone call from the editor of a leading business publication. He asked me if I knew the dollar amount that businesses are losing each year because of poor business writing. I thought for a while. I had never come across such a dollar amount and realized why.

*Businesses are probably losing billions of dollars a year because of poor business writing and they don't even realize it.*

Some submit proposals and don't get the contract. Other times a sales and marketing brochure doesn't generate the revenue they expected. While there are a host of reasons why things may have gone awry, writing is the most likely target. Perhaps the proposal was poorly written. Perhaps the marketing message in the brochure didn't set the company apart from the competition.

I could go on and on about businesses losing money because of poor business writing because I hear it from my clients regularly. After that phone call from the editor, I came up with the tag line for my business: *You make more dollars when you make more sense.*  
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### **What would you tell a person who wanted to know how to jump-start his or her writing?**

It's critical to identify your reader and the key point you want the reader to remember. Always ask yourself what your reader needs to know about the topic, what is in it for the reader, and what is your reader's attitude toward the topic. You must also distill your message into a single sentence, much like a fifteen-second spot commercial. This is the one thing you want your reader to remember, even if he or she forgets everything else.

## On E-mail

**Hot Tip:** Instant-messaging shortcuts ("LOL" for "laugh out loud," for example) are fine if you're a teenager writing to your friends. They're not appropriate in business. Neither are little emoticons. :-} (page 82)

## On Grants

**Hot Tip:** Use high-quality paper that doesn't appear to be too expensive. You don't want to be viewed as a big spender or you weaken your chances of getting the funding. Consider using recycled paper.

If your funding request is denied, request feedback about your proposal's strengths and weaknesses. This information isn't always forthcoming. When it is, however, it can be invaluable for future submissions. (page 95)

## On Press Releases

**Hot Tip:** Write with a flair that will interest readers, rather than with the same boring text you tend to see all the time. Notice the difference in the examples below:

- *Flair:* One hundred future business leaders were feted at a black-tie ceremony in New York City. The event was attended by CEOs from across the globe.
- *Boring:* Several CEOs attended a dinner in New York City to honor 100 future business leaders. (page 119)

## On Proposals

**Hot Tip:** Don't use the same boring phrases everyone else uses, such as, "We have an experienced team of people and highly qualified management." What company would say, "We have an inexperienced team of people and unqualified management"? (page 137)

## On Résumés

**Hot Tip:** Never underestimate the appearance of your résumé. Use a good-quality printer and high-quality paper. Allow for ample white space. Highlight key points with bullets. (page 151)

## On Speeches

**Hot Tip:** When you introduce a speaker, avoid the tiresome openers that we all hear too often: "Ladies and gentlemen, this is a person who needs no introduction," "We're truly honored to have with us . . ." "Without further ado . . ." "It's indeed my privilege to introduce . . ." Consider a quick anecdote about the speaker or offer a few highlights of the speaker's career that make him or her worth listening to. (page 172)