The Career Benefits of Writing Without Bullshit

Josh Bernoff

Clarity. Boldness. We say that we value these qualities in communication at work. So why is nearly everything we read so full of bullshit?

Our inboxes, browsers, and smartphone screens are filled with jargon-laden, meandering drivel. Why can't people get to the point and say what they mean?

This is a pervasive problem that erodes all of our productivity, and I can prove it. I surveyed 547 businesspeople just like you—people who write at least two hours per day for work, outside of email. Here's what they told me.

First off, they average 46 hours per week spent reading and writing for work. Consuming and creating text has become a full-time job. Taken together, the email, Web pages, reports, and social media posts we all create and consume have taken over our time at work.

Second, people are frustrated as hell with what they read. More than 80% say that poorly written material wastes a lot of their time. They rate the average effectiveness of what they read as a pathetic 5.4 on a ten-point scale. Most of them agree that what they read is too long, poorly organized, unclear, and filled with jargon.

After 35 years of reading and writing for work, I decided to face this problem head-on: to determine what causes bullshit, and how we can all learn to write without it. The problem is real. And the solution is within reach. It's just a question of committing yourself to writing without bullshit.

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Why There Is So Much Bullshit

Bullshit is nothing new, but the problem seems to be getting worse.

Here are four big reasons why.

1. **Fear muddles meaning.** Everyone who communicates at work is worried. To cover their asses, they ramble and equivocate. Getting past this culture of fear is the first problem.

2. **Lack of editing erodes quality.** Most of what we read now is email, and most of that is first drafts directly from the sender's fingertips. Other internal communication, even if it goes to hundreds of people, gets only a cursory review. The implosion of the media industry means that even our news doesn't get nearly the level of editing it once did. Cumulatively, what we read is just of lower quality.

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3. **Poor training makes bad business writers.** Our high school and college writing teachers taught us to write too long and to use big, obscure words to get better grades. Those are exactly the wrong qualities for clear and direct communication in the workplace.

4. **Reading on screens impairs concentration.** Reading on monitors and smartphone screens doesn't actually cause bullshit, but it does erode our attention spans. The average person reading an article online spends only 36 seconds on it, according to Chartbeat. Because reading on a screen is harder, bullshit-laden material is even more challenging to figure out.

Writing Without Bullshit Starts with Three Principles

You may believe that covering your ass saves your career, but leaders don't think that way. People who communicate clearly, and boldly, get ahead—they stand out from the mass of drivel. So the first step to getting ahead is to gird your loins and say what you mean.

But how?

To start, you need to change how you think about writing for work, whether it's an email to the boss or a report for your department. It all starts with three principles.

First, embrace the Iron Imperative:

Treat the reader's time as more valuable than your own.

Everything else stems from this. It means you have to put a little more effort into everything you write. But a little more effort on your part will mean a lot more effective writing—and a lot less frustration on the part of your readers.

Second, recognize that business writing is different. In contrast to other writing (fiction and news, for example) business writing has only one purpose:

Recognize that the only purpose of business writing is to create a change in the reader.

That means that anything you write for any purpose other than creating change is waste. Any words that don't help create that change, toss 'em.

And let's get specific about what to toss. The third thing you have to do is forswear bullshit.

Bullshit is any form of communication that wastes the reader's time by failing to communicate clear and accurately. Get rid of it.

Put this all together and you have a coherent philosophy. You don't waste readers' time with bullshit and you include only what you need to create the desired change in the reader.

The result is a short, direct, pointed style that says what it needs to right up front. That's writing without bullshit.

How to Write Without Bullshit

Believing in writing without bullshit is easy. Doing it is hard, because the way you write now is an ingrained habit. As Yoda said, "You must unlearn what you have learned."

I spend much of my time these days teaching people this new way of writing (and undoing their previous training). It's quite doable. This essay is too short to give you everything you need, but in the spirit of no-bullshit advice, I'll share seven tips you can apply immediately.

1 | **Cut 20% from everything you write.**

Writing without bullshit means writing shorter. People reading on a screen give up on long writing so commonly that there's an abbreviation for it: TL;DR (too long; didn't read).

In my survey, 65% of people said that they frequently encountered ineffective material that was too long. And 45% of them admitted that what they wrote was often too long, too.

How can you write more briefly? It's a question of cutting what doesn't work.

10 tips on how to write shorter

For the context behind this table, see wobs.co/SHORTER

Tip	What to do	Why it helps	Why it's hard
Edit everything.	Always self-edit what you write.	After the draft is done, keep only the best bits.	You don't set aside editing time.
Aim for a word count.	Determine target word count before you start.	It's makes your brevity goal concrete.	Hard limits cramp your style.
Say what you really mean.	After drafting, figure out your true meaning.	You can rewrite to make that meaning clear.	You must cut cherished stuff that's off topic.
Start boldly.	Get rid of introductory "warmup text."	It's more powerful to get right to the point.	It's uncomfortable to open without an intro.
Organize relentlessly.	Combine related points, cut redundancy.	Result is shorter and easier to comprehend.	Reorganizing and rewriting is hard work.
Prune sections and arguments.	Delete extra sections, arguments, examples.	Three strong points beat four or five weak ones.	You want to show off how much you know.
Use bullets or tables.	Replace prose with lists or tables.	Lists make structure visually explicit.	It forces you to think in rigid structures.
Use graphics.	Replace text with simple diagrams.	Pictures are easier to comprehend.	You're a writer, not an illustrator.
Trim connective tissue.	Reduce linking words and transition text.	Connecting words make wordy, noisy prose.	You like to show when you're shifting gears.
Delete weasel words and qualifiers.	Get rid of qualifiers like "very" and "generally."	Qualifiers make writing mushy.	You're worried you might be wrong.

Build time into your process to edit everything, even emails, and cut the fluff.

If it typically takes you a few paragraphs to get to the point when you write, that's fine. Just cut those opening paragraphs before you publish or hit send. You'll find you don't need them.

Sometimes you don't figure out what you want to say until you get to the end of a piece of writing. That's typical for writers. But if that happens to you, go back to the beginning and rewrite. Leave the stuff that makes your point; cut the rest.

Organize relentlessly. If you make a point in three different places, pull them together and compress them. Prune sections and arguments that don't pull their weight.

Shorter is better; you'll gain more than you lose. As Roy Peter Clark, author of *How to Write Short*, says, "During revision, I realize that 90% of my cuts are helpful."

2 | **Front-load your emails.**

Everybody emails. You probably write (and read) more words in email than in any other format. That's why effective emails can save so much time—and ineffective ones can waste so much.

One quick change can make your emails dramatically better: front-load the content.

Commit right now that every email will have a descriptive subject line that describes what you want the readers to do. Stop using subject lines like "An idea I had" and "Strategy." Instead, write "How do you like this product idea?" or "A new strategy for our group: please review."

Beyond the subject line, the first two or three sentences are crucial. Make sure they reveal the main message of the email; don't assume your readers will read the rest. Here's an example of how those sentences should read:

> We have developed a new strategy that focuses the department on our top three products. As a result, we'll be spending more effort on those and far less on the others. I'll describe the details below, but recognize that this will affect what you spend your time on every day.

3 | **Declare war on paragraphs.**

What's wrong with paragraphs?

Nothing, per se. But an unbroken wall of paragraphs puts off the reader. They'll give up on you, because you didn't put in the work to save them time.

You can reduce the wall of paragraphs by creating visible structure that breaks up and organizes your writing. Use these elements to make your writing skimmable:

- **Subheads.** Even emails and short documents are easier to digest if you break them up with headings.

- **Bullets and numbered lists.** If you've got several items in parallel, turn them into a bulleted list. If they're in sequence, use a numbered list. Use bold to set off the first few words (as I'm doing here).

- **Tables.** If your lists have multiple dimensions, create a text-table, like the one earlier in this essay on how to write shorter.

- **Graphics.** Pictures don't have to be fancy. You can even build them in PowerPoint, like the one below. If you can use a graphic to illustrate a concept, you'll make it easier to digest.

- **Links.** People read your documents online. Use links to lead them to sources and additional material.

4 | **Get sensitive to passive voice—and then get rid of it.**

Passive voice makes for indirect writing. When you read a passive voice sentence, you know that something's supposed to happen, but not who's supposed to do it. This sets up tension in the reader's mind. Any businessperson attempting to act on a passive voice sentence is stuck, since there's nobody to hold responsible.

The only way to become a better writer

For the context behind this chart, go to wobs.co/writealot

Write something

Get feedback

Rewrite

Write something else

" *If you need something to be done, your communication must describe who will do it …*
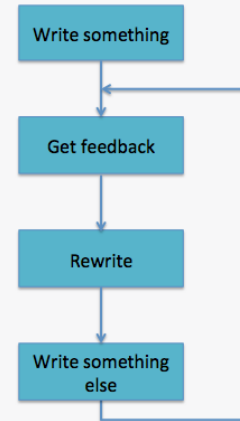
For example, take a look at these three sentences from a report that the Donahue Institute at the University of Massachusetts wrote in support of the Boston bid for the 2024 Olympics. (I used bold to show passives and added the material in brackets.)

> [These] issues … **will need to be closely monitored** in order to ensure the public sector **is protected** from extensive financial commitments. [Who is supposed to monitor them? Who is protecting the public sector?]
>
> The operations expenditures for the Boston 2024 Olympics **are estimated** to create or support nearly 34,000 direct jobs during the year of the Olympics. [Who estimated this?]
>
> [A]fter the Olympics, the Olympic Stadium site and Olympic Boulevard **could be developed** into seven million square feet of mixed use residential and commercial space. [Who will develop it?]

The bid for the Boston Olympics went down to defeat; the people of Boston wouldn't stand for it. And it's no wonder, because nobody locally was willing to be responsible for the things in this passive-voice-laden report.

If you need something to be done, your communication must describe who will do it, whether it's your department, your company, your boss, or your customers. Rewrite sentences in the active voice, with the actor as the subject of the sentence. For example, you could rewrite the first of these paragraphs from Olympics report this way:

> Public planners working for the city of Boston must closely monitor these issues to protect the public sector from extensive financial commitments.

5 | Swear off jargon.

Jargon is fun. Once you've learned about a topic, you're an insider. Whether you're writing about "predictive analytics" or "intertextuality," jargon shows that you're fully steeped in the latest buzzwords. Too bad it leaves your readers bamboozled. Your job is to save the reader time and communicate clearly. You're not going to make a change in the reader if you use words they can't figure out.

For example, here's part of a job description from Johnson & Johnson with the jargon highlighted:

> The Area Vice President, Enterprise Customers will develop and manage a **sustainable strategic relationship** that transforms the **current commercial model** by creating joint value that results in the ongoing reduction of costs, **continuous process improvement,** growth and profitability for both partners with the ability to **export key learnings.**

Why make the reader work so hard? This is a description for a senior sales job. A "sustainable strategic relationship" means you play golf together. The "current commercial model" is just a fancy way to describe whatever J&J is currently selling. Export key learnings? That means "when you figure something out, write it down and share it."

There are only three reasons to use jargon:

1. Your whole audience uses it (so biologists are allowed to talk about DNA)
2. The legal department requires it (so lawyers are allowed to talk about indemnification)
3. You use a term over and over, so you define it up front to make things more efficient (as I did with "Iron Imperative")

Notice that "sound like an expert" isn't a valid reason.

Dump any jargon that doesn't fit these criteria. Replace it with clear and simple language.

6 | **Don't be a weasel.**

You may think words like "very" and "incredible" will make your readers enthusiastic. They don't. They just set off our bullshit detectors. I call them weasel words, a term that refers to any vague intensifiers intended to make something sound really great.

For example, here's part of what Marissa Mayer wrote to her staff when she sold Yahoo to Verizon (weasel words shown in bold):

> The strategic process has created a lot of uncertainty, but our incredibly loyal and dedicated employee base has stepped up to every challenge along the way. Through the first half of the year, we met our operational goals and overachieved on plan. But, further, there are things that you cannot measure, like the passion of the people behind the products. The teams here have not only built incredible products and technologies, but have built Yahoo into one of the most iconic, and universally well-liked companies in the world. One that continues to impact the lives of more than a billion people. I'm incredibly proud of everything that we've achieved, and I'm incredibly proud of our team. For me personally, I'm planning to stay. I love Yahoo, and I believe in all of you. It's important to me to see Yahoo into its next chapter.

Cheer down, Ms. Mayer. We know Yahoo was in trouble, and so does any employee who has stuck around this long. The more super-duper intensifiers you use, the less we believe you.

As you can see, weasel words include adjectives ("iconic," "important") and verbs ("overachieved"), but the worst are the adverbs ("incredibly," used three times, and "universally").

To make your writing more believable, stick to the facts. If you want to make something sound stronger, add a statistic, a new fact, or an example, instead of a weasel word. Marissa Mayer's full communication is 6% weasel words, about one every other sentence. If you've got more than one weasel word per paragraph, you're overdoing it.

7 | **Manage reviews like a boss.**

Of those in my survey who work on writing projects, only 32% say that their process for collecting and combining feedback works well. And it shows; I hear all the time about writing that was fine until it got screwed up in the review process.

If you are the main writer for a writing project, the piece you are working on is your responsibility, no matter who suggests changes to it. Here's how to manage it:

- **Ask each reviewer for a specific kind of feedback.** Don't let the technical reviewer tell you where to put the semicolons, and don't let the copyeditor insert her opinions on COBOL programmers.

- **Manage deadlines.** Give reviewers enough time to read what you've sent—ideally, a week or so. Give them a date by which you need the material back, and make it the same date for the whole bunch of them. Then you'll have all the reviews back at once, and can act on them.

- **Maintain control of your writing.** A reviewer's job is to identify problems and suggest solutions, not to tell you what to do. Your job is to spot the problems and fix them your own way, not necessarily the way the reviewer suggests. Don't set this up as a war of wills between you and the review, or your ego will get in the way of making the text better.

Follow these rules and you won't end up adding back jargon and weasel words or making the piece too long. You'll be keeping the bullshit out.

**" *Bullshit is an organizational problem, not just a personal one.*

# Eventually, You'll Need to Take on the Bullshit Culture

Bullshit is an organizational problem, not just a personal one. Some workplaces seem to run on jargon, evasion, and obfuscation. No matter how clear your own writing gets, you'll have to deal with bullshit from everybody else.

But workplaces where people write without bullshit are healthier. You can see what people mean. You don't waste time on impenetrable prose. Everybody gets to the point quicker.

To make a bigger improvement, you're going to have to change your department, your division, and your boss. But it's worth it. Don't just write better. Evangelize.

And if enough people listen, we might actually create a world that's not so steeped in bullshit. ⌑

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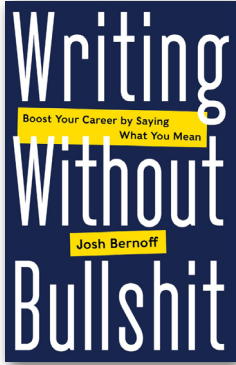
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ABOUT THE AUTHOR | Josh Bernoff has been a professional writer for more than thirty years, including two decades as a well-known technology analyst. He is the coauthor of three books on business strategy, including the bestseller *Groundswell*. He lives with his family in Arlington, Massachusetts.

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