

- ▶ Home
- ▶ News
- ▶ Investor
- ▶ Careers
- ▶ Technology
- ▶ Business Life
- ▶ Company Lists
- ▶ Fortune 500
- ▶ Small Business
- ▶ Magazine
- ▶ Archives
- ▶ Boards & Chat
- ▶ Free Trial Issues
- ▶ Subscriptions

Stock/Fund Quotes:

## FORTUNE

### Business Resources

- Business Books @barnesandnoble
- Computer Stuff @ Outpost.com
- Office Products @officedepot.com
- Free Trial: Money Magazine
- Fortune Education Program
- Fortune Conferences

### Instant Download:

- The NEW Fortune 500 - April 1999
- Most Admired Companies
- Asiaweek 500

**YAHOO! Chat**

Upgrade your thinking.  
**FORTUNE INFOSITE**  
**eCORP**

# ASK ANNIE

Real-World Career Advice

Web Exclusive



Anne Fisher

April 19, 1999

## Does Writing Well Really Matter to My Career? If So, How Can I Get Better At It?

**Q. Dear Annie:**

I had my annual performance review last week and I am still upset about it. My immediate superior said that I am in line for a bigger job, but I will not get it until I can communicate my ideas better in writing. His exact words: "Your ideas are great, but you can't put them on paper worth d--k." We don't do that many memos "on paper" around here--everything is either in person or by quick e-mails--and I wonder if this really matters or if he is just trying to yank my chain. Also, if he is serious about this, how can I get better at writing? Or maybe it is too late? (I am 34 and have been out of school for 12 years.) Maybe I should just go work for somebody else.

**Steamed**

Submit Your Question Here.

**A. Dear Steamed:**

Oh, dear. Your letter as it appears above is so heavily edited, with so many misspellings corrected and so many sentence fragments reluctantly dragged into wholeness, that I must say I can see the point your boss is making. You, my friend, are teetering along on the borderline of functional illiteracy (where, these days, you shouldn't feel lonesome). But if you really hope to get promoted, knock that chip off your shoulder, because--believe it or not--your boss is trying to do you a favor. Whether in person, by quick e-mails, or by "memos 'on paper,'" the ability to articulate an idea is every bit as important as the substance of the idea itself, if not more so. And going to work for somebody else is not going to repair your own deficiencies, now or later.

Of course you can sharpen up your writing skills, and the sooner you start, the better. **Richard Pinsky**, whose eponymous New York City-based firm conducts one- and two-day writing seminars for corporate clients like Pfizer, Merck, Merrill Lynch, BBDO Worldwide, and Fleet Bank, maintains that good business writing is based on a series of 10 steps that are logical, and that is their strength: "That which is logical soon becomes obvious--and that which is obvious soon becomes instinct." An abbreviated guide to Pinsky's system:

- Take your time. Writing too hastily is usually a mistake: "Unlike diving into a frigid pool, when writing it is often best to think about it first," says Pinsky.

From Fortune & CareerMosaic

## EMPLOYMENT CONNECTION

### Job Search

Click here for thousands of hot jobs.

### Post Your Resume

Get your credentials in front of recruiters and employers.

### View Employers

Links to company profiles and corporate Web sites.

### employer services

#### Post a Job

#### Search Resumes

#### Advertising Info

## More Topics

Monday, May 10 1999

▶ **In an Era of High Tech, Do Good "People Skills" Still Matter?**

Monday, May 3 1999

▶ **"Just Because I Can't Walk, Doesn't Mean I Can't Think": Jobs for the Disabled**

Monday, April 26 1999

▶ **Help! I Think I'm a Dull Speaker! How Can I Add Some Pizzazz?**

Monday, April 19 1999

▶ **Does Writing Well Really Matter to My Career? If So, How Can I Get Better At It?**

▶ **Archive**

tools

### Do You Deserve a Raise?

Before plucking up the nerve to go in and ask for a raise, know what your assets and vulnerabilities are.

tools


### How Safe Is Your Job?

Sure, unemployment is low and the job market is strong right now, but companies are still restructuring and issuing layoffs. Take this quiz to size up your chances of being fired.

tools



- Be sure you know what you are trying to say, and why. "What is your message, and why are you conveying it? If you aren't sure, no one else will be, either."
- Don't, as we say in the journalism racket, bury the lead. Put your main point up front, so as to be sure your (presumably busy) reader will see it.
- "Don't chatter." Pinsky notes that much writing is cluttered up with unnecessary asides: "'Related' is not the same as 'relevant.'" Knowing what to leave out is as important as knowing what to put in."
- Remember those outlines you had to do in school, where A. logically preceded B.? No? Well, never mind: Organize your writing so that one point leads to another in a way that will make sense even to someone who is only devoting about half of his or her attention to your memo--as will be the case 9 times out of 10.
- Consider your audience. What are they really interested in? Do you need to tell them all about quarterly sales figures, when all that counts to them is earnings per share? This implies, of course, that you might have to write, say, three memos instead of one--but if you can reach three audiences instead of none, it's worth the trouble.
- Watch your tone. Some people like a few jokes with their facts and figures. Others don't--and then there's the question of which jokes will fly and which will land you in court. If you suspect you may be tone-deaf to these nuances, play it straight.
- Don't leave 'em guessing. "This isn't a mystery novel," notes Pinsky. "Good business writing anticipates readers' questions and answers them immediately."
- State your purpose. Unless you are sure it is crystal-clear (e.g., a memo to someone who specifically requested it), mention why you're addressing this to the person(s) in question--and, when applicable, what's supposed to happen next.
- Before you send it, polish it up a little bit. Line up the margins; check the spelling (or have a computer program do this, but beware: computers will confuse, for instance, "their" and "there"); and in general make sure the thing looks as if a grown-up had written it.

You have a real advantage over most of the memo-impaired, in that your boss sounds as if he might be willing to help you with this. Showing him your next few efforts before you send them to anyone else--and accepting his criticisms without whining or pouting--could get you that next promotion and a whole lot more. 



Annie Fisher

## Is It Time to Switch Jobs?

If your career growth is blocked, or you are no longer learning and growing at work, you may have to change jobs to give yourself a promotion.

### More Career Resources

#### forum

#### Career Boards

Discuss managing your career and exchange ideas and job tips.

#### career coaches

#### A Sounding Board in Cyberspace

Online referrals, phone sessions, and E-mail are changing the way we get career help.