

Twain Associates, Inc.

Writing Training: Four Common Questions

What I need is a letter-writing program. Why should I consider a full writing course?

Letters, business proposals, memos, policy statements, reports, all must do the same thing: arrange words in a meaningful and convincing order. Learn to write concisely and persuasively, and you'll be able to pen a heart-pulling love letter as easily as an irresistible business proposal.

If you focus on the *differences* between letters, memos and reports, you will miss the forest and not do much good for the trees, either. Good writing techniques apply to any message. Teaching them is what Twain is about.

Do you offer a technical writing course?

Someone said it well: In technical writing, only the subject is technical. Twain has successfully taught tens of thousands of scientists, engineers and lawyers to write well-- not because we are masters of every technical specialty, but because we understand what makes a message work.

What is technical writing, anyway? Is the "Wall Street Journal" technical writing? No. But it covers specialized subjects from high tech to high finance. What's more, it does so in a way that not only satisfies the technical reader but also communicates to the layperson.

And science-fiction doesn't attract and spellbind its readers because of its scientific content (although that content is there), but because of the language that brings those concepts home.

There is only one English language, not a separate one for finance, another for engineering, another for biology...

Nor does a complex subject guarantee a "hard read," although it's a convenient "out" for the technical writer to pretend that. Any technical subject can be explained in concise, readable copy.

Don't confuse complexity of language with complexity of thought. "The meek shall inherit the Earth" is a simple sentence, yet one so profound as to have caused theological debate for centuries.

When you see a training company selling "Technical Writing" or "Proposal Writing" or "Writing for Plumbers"--and pretending that those things are basically DIFFERENT from each other--you may have run into a hustler rather than an educator.

Shouldn't first things come first? Shouldn't I begin writing training with a grammar course?

Twain offers programs that give solid instruction in basic usage, including grammar. But, to answer your question: No, grammar is not the place to start. In fact, your common sense will tell you that in almost all cases it will waste your training dollar.

First off--short of signing up for a one-term (or multi-term) course in college or high school--your people will not learn grammar. Certainly if such knowledge has eluded them throughout all their formal schooling, it won't suddenly materialize in a short "workshop"--no matter what miracle cures are promised.

The most common writing problems--all readers agree--are poor organization, wordiness and blandness. To spoon a small dab of grammatical finesse atop verbose, rambling and boring writing is like wiping the runny nose of a pneumonia sufferer; it doesn't help.

Your employees or readers need to write concisely and persuasively, and organize well in reasonable time. What they do not need is yet another boring rehash of English 101--even one squeezed into the unlikely format of one or two days.

But doesn't good grammar create conciseness, persuasiveness, sound organization? **Not in the slightest.**

On the other hand, conciseness does lead to better grammar. Wordy writing is prone to all sorts of structural ailments, from bad punctuation to subject-verb disagreements.

Yes--admittedly, grammar crash-courses are the current fad. And a lot of ex-English teachers or English majors do need the work. Is that a good reason to invest money in these courses, money that might instead do you some good?

Is grammar important? Yes; a writer ought always put his or her best foot forward. Is it the MOST important writing need? **Almost never.**

Why pay Twain to teach writing when we can hire a local college Ph.D. for less money?

Hiring the Ph.D. is like having the fox guard the hen house. Where did your employees become verbose, anyway? In the little red schoolroom, the little red high school, the little red college--where the longest papers were always given the best grades and bulk was equated with importance. In the competition for the world's wordiest writers--as recurring newspaper articles point out--no one even comes close to the Ph.D.

We're sure you won't take our word for this. Ask your professor for a copy of his or her doctoral dissertation. If you are not bored to tears--if you even stay awake through it all--hire him or her.

Otherwise, think Twain. When the boss says, "Why can't anyone around here write?" spend your money on course material or a seminar that will guarantee they can.