

Are business writing courses worth paying for?

My short answer—in most cases, no.



I have been an educator and professional development trainer most of my career. I taught “business English” for a several years before veering off into academia and the development sector where I was frequently asked to teach ‘report writing’ or ‘proposal writing’ or [some other adjective] writing. I would say, in most cases it was a waste of time, effort and money. Here are my reasons.

You can’t put 10 kg of potatoes in a 5 kg sack

Writing is a highly complex and demanding cognitive task. The human brain comes hardwired to learn speech, but writing must be consciously learned, and it takes years of deliberate practice to get good at it. Most writing courses I have seen try to cover far too many topics in too short a time. In the typical half-day or one-day workshop, you can realistically achieve one or two learning objectives, not ten.

What do we measure?

There are metrics for assessing writing, but none that can measure the small, incremental changes needed to build capacity for ‘better’ writing. And what exactly is ‘better’ writing? Better is a value judgement. What most writing courses lack is [an operational definition of writing](#). Without an operational definition, you cannot measure anything.



Sopping up budget crumbs

Too often, language training courses are a convenient way of using up whatever unspent budget HR has at year end. Like ‘cross-cultural communication’ or ‘team building’, language training has that feel-good factor because everyone sort of kind of knows it’s a good thing—and it will be fun!

Academic writing is not workplace writing

Most business writing courses are taught by ESL or ELT professionals. I have great respect for trained, professional language teachers, but few have real-world experience of the kind of writing required in the workplace. For example, my undergrad students were all taught to fill a page with big words and long complicated sentences with lots of adjectives and adverbs because that is how you get high scores on TOEFL and IELTS and other standardized language tests. That is exactly *not* the kind of writing needed in the workplace.

Forget about grammar

Most professionals I work with speak at least two or more languages, one being English. Their English is fine and would be better if they could get over their obsession with grammar. The focus on grammar is the single biggest obstacle to improving writing skills. Unfortunately, however most writing courses start out, they always seem to end up focussing on grammar.

What should I look for in a professional writing course?

Focus on Plain English

I don’t believe in business writing or report writing or proposal writing and especially not email writing. Forget the adjectives. There is only [the writer, the reader, and a writing problem space](#). The writing problem space defines the goal you are trying to achieve through writing. Whatever that goal might be, the Plain English style of writing is your most effective tool. There are lots of Plain English courses out there. Look for ones that offer specific principles using real-world examples and avoid those offering prescriptions like word substitution lists (e.g. use ‘help’ instead of ‘assist’).

Use real-world writing for content

Look for courses that incorporate the actual writing you need to do for your work. This might take the form of assignments that ask participants to submit samples of writing they are doing right now.

Weeks and months, not days

If you expect to see measurable results, a writing course should extend over weeks or months. For example, meeting for an hour or two once a week to focus on a specific objective (in the classroom or online) will be far more effective than cramming everything into 3-hour classroom sessions Monday, Wednesday and Friday.

Knowledge and experience over formal qualifications

Someone who has worked as a copyeditor for a PR firm, a technical editor, a content writer, a journalist, or a policy analyst may have a better understanding of workplace writing than someone with a masters in TOEFL. The two are not mutually exclusive I hasten to add. Knowledge of adult learning principles and teaching skills are important because expertise does not automatically confer those skills on anyone.



These are a few of my favorite things

These are among the first considerations in spending your training dollars effectively. As you would with any training program, consult with a subject matter expert to plan your needs assessment.

About this resource

This resource is part of Terry's self-paced online learning course Beyond Grammar: Writing as thinking made visible at www.terryerleteaches.com



About Terry Erle Clayton

Terry is a cognitive psychologist, author and educator originally from Canada but based in Thailand since 1992. Terry is a trained teacher and coach and has worked with hundreds of STEM professionals in over 80 organizations on five continents. Writing, editing, communications consulting and training remain the core of his business.

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