

Karen Stefano, Esq. and Penny Nathan

Before

Hitting

Send



Power Writing Skills for Real Estate Agents

Karen Stefano, Esq. and Penny Nathan

# Before Hitting Send

Power Writing Skills for Real Estate Agents

This publication is designed to provide accurate and authoritative information in regard to the subject matter covered. It is sold with the understanding that the publisher is not engaged in rendering legal, accounting, or other professional advice. If legal advice or other expert assistance is required, the services of a competent professional should be sought.

President: Dr. Andrew Temte  
Chief Learning Officer: Dr. Tim Smaby  
Vice President, Real Estate Education: Asha Alsobrooks  
Development Editor: Julia Marti

BEFORE HITTING SEND: POWER WRITING SKILLS FOR REAL ESTATE AGENTS

© 2011 Kaplan, Inc.  
Published by DF Institute, Inc., d/b/a Kaplan Real Estate Education  
332 Front St. S., Suite 501  
La Crosse, WI 54601  
www.dearbornRE.com

All rights reserved. The text of this publication, or any part thereof, may not be reproduced in any manner whatsoever without written permission from the publisher.

Printed in the United States of America  
11 12 13 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1  
ISBN: 978-1-4277-1118-2 / 1-4277-1118-6  
PPN: 6610-1001

# CONTENTS

Introduction vii

PART

1

## **CONTENT, STRUCTURE, AND STYLE**

---

### **CHAPTER 1**

Getting Started: What Do You Want to Say? 2

### **CHAPTER 2**

What Tone Do You Want to Convey? 14

### **CHAPTER 3**

Structuring a Message for Maximum Impact 29

### **CHAPTER 4**

Use Transition Words to Signal Where Your Message Is Going 41

### **CHAPTER 5**

Enhance Readability with a Visually Appealing Layout 47

### **CHAPTER 6**

Be Specific and Precise in Your Writing 60

**CHAPTER 7**

Watch the Order of Your Words 69

**CHAPTER 8**

Use Your Verbs Wisely 74

**CHAPTER 9**

Get In, Get Out, Move On: Eliminate Unnecessary Words 83

**CHAPTER 10**

Shorter Sentences Are Better 93

**TECHNIQUES FOR GETTING HEARD: POWER LANGUAGE FOR REAL ESTATE**

---

**PART**

**2**

**CHAPTER 11**

Power Writing for Real Estate 102

**CHAPTER 12**

Writing to Persuade 111

**CHAPTER 13**

Delivering Bad News Gracefully 122

**PART**

**3**

**GRAMMAR AND PUNCTUATION BASICS**

---

**CHAPTER 14**

Proper Word Usage and Three Simple Grammar Rules 134

**CHAPTER 15**

Proper Punctuation 141

**CHAPTER 16**

Take the Time to Get It Right: Twelve Questions to Ask as You Review and Revise 149

**CHAPTER 17**

A Message for Brokers: Ten Steps for Improving Your Agents' Writing Skills 151

**APPENDIX**

Writing Samples 153

# INTRODUCTION

## Why You Need This Book

---

Real estate agents now spend more time writing than ever before, with e-mail dominating modes of communication with clients, banks, other agents, and more. Beyond e-mail, agents need writing skills to prepare compelling Web site text, client handouts, and other marketing material. All of this makes writing key to real estate business development in any type of market. Although written communications now drive the profession, many agents lack basic writing skills.

Some books teach general writing skills, but until now, no other book has addressed the specific needs of real estate professionals. The premise of this book is that strong writing skills are a key performance tool that will enhance your image and make your productivity skyrocket. Powerful writing must be front and center in your self-marketing plan because it's a way to set yourself apart. In addition, strong writing skills save you time and trouble, and, in the end, they help you close more deals. As a real estate professional, how you write and how you communicate define you. Either your writing says you are a sharp communicator, or it says you are awkward and ineffective. Your writing can serve as persuasive evidence of your competence. Excellent writing demonstrates that you are an excellent agent.

***Strong writing skills save you time and trouble, and, in the end, they help you close more deals.***

It doesn't matter what grades you received in English class, and it *certainly* doesn't matter how well you diagrammed sentences. Agents who demonstrate outstanding writing skills do so by employing a handful of the most important writing principles and using those principles over and over again. If you can follow the straightforward rules outlined in this book, you can dramatically improve your writing. This book is a practical, user-friendly guide loaded with specific examples, exercises, and even model language for you to take and use in your own communications. All of it is targeted with precision to make you a better agent.

**BEFORE HITTING SEND** is a must-read for agents at all levels of writing proficiency. Part 1 addresses structuring a message for maximum impact, tone, elimination of unnecessary words, using plain English, using the active voice, and more. Part 2 coaches agents in the art of persuasive writing, breaking bad news gracefully, and strategic use of language to create a more powerful message. Part 3 shows agents how to avoid common grammar and punctuation errors. As a bonus, the appendix and Web site ([www.beforehittingend.com](http://www.beforehittingend.com)) offer over 200 sample items that you can modify and use in your communication with clients, potential clients, other agents, and more. Read on, empower yourself with new communication skills, and reap the many rewards.



# Part

umamemivores  
ueesspicitecert  
ellicacumeacu  
evoleclurOlorupla  
arehenhilalauteme:  
sartuntalupsexerun  
rvirlelelacumquati  
secutaleve  
derhatulBe  
nImajorer  
flaudisquis  
srestumcc  
llaquamcid  
erumandit  
stouyent  
lestiuntac  
iodendanc  
scusumfo  
Judiallabo  
nursenda  
ndaperfer  
tatererovic  
aperuntibul  
nillimnuc  
smaximaut  
Namaliac  
estullocor  
amouosm  
svenhnic  
ilicuisamill  
oligimeas  
cissinooc  
smaximau  
quevalesa  
ilmagnam  
ustiquidali

CONTENT, STRUCTURE, AND STYLE

# CHAPTER 1

## Getting Started: What Do You Want to Say?

---

When a new buyer meets you at your office for an afternoon of viewing properties, do you hop in the car and drive haphazardly, hoping to run across a suitable home for sale? No. First, you invest the time to think about your client's needs and what you want to accomplish. You map out a schedule and plan the most efficient route. The same should be true with your writing: know in advance where you want to take your reader.

All too often in real estate, we encounter the written equivalent of an agent driving in circles, rambling around and around, hoping that the reader will eventually grasp her point. Consider Example 1 below, a poorly crafted e-mail sent by the agent representing Mr. and Mrs. Vandorfen, the sellers of a home on Easy Street. The e-mail was intended to respond to a letter from a buyer's agent whose clients had transmitted a weak offer and had outlined a series of arguments to support the low offer price.

### **EXAMPLE 1** (Before):

To: jane@realestatel.com  
Fr: joem@realty2.com  
Re: 123 Easy Street

Dear Jane:

Joe and Claire Vandorfen are offering some really terrific incentives to make this work for everyone. We received your offer on 123 Easy Street. We thank you! Your letter stated that

parking is a problem. In regards to the sales comparables you selected, it is our position that none of these apply to the home on Easy Street. The Easy Street home carries the zoning that may allow for additions for extra rental income. With the sellers paying most or if not all the closing costs and perhaps one point toward the loan, this helps financially. This home is located near all of the best of Oakdale which most of it can be reached by foot. There were three spaces out in front of the house when I went to visit the Vandorfen's regarding this offer. Your 52nd Street comp is nowhere near this home. The zoning adds a tremendous value to the home at really no substantial cost to the buyers. If you choose the \$7,500.00 appliance credit, this will help with a kitchen remodel. The Vandorfen's submit the attached counteroffer, at \$480,000.00. We look forward to hearing from you.

Sincerely, Joe Martin

This e-mail is not only painful to read, it also reveals that the writer did not bother to think through what he wanted to say before he started to type (the written form of not thinking before speaking). This message makes the writer appear disorganized, ineffective, perhaps even scatter-brained. So how can you avoid authoring such muddled ramblings yourself?

One way to begin is to ask yourself the Four Questions to Get You Started. The answers will help clarify what you want to say and how you want to say it.

## **FOUR QUESTIONS TO GET YOU STARTED**

---

- Question 1:** *Why am I writing this e-mail or letter? What is the situation or problem that makes it necessary to write this message?*
- Question 2:** *What do I need to say? What does my reader need to know right now?*
- Question 3:** *Who is going to read it?*
- Question 4:** *What action do I want my reader to take? How do I want my reader to feel about my message?*

These questions are discussed in the following sections. In Chapter 3, we will build on these prompts further, demonstrating how to organize and structure a message after you figure out what you want to say.

**Question 1:** *Why Am I Writing This E-mail or Letter? What Is the Situation or Problem That Makes It Necessary to Write This Message?*

This is the most important question because it immediately focuses you on the purpose of the communication. Stop. Think. Jot down a few notes. You cannot write effectively until you have a clear idea of what you want to say. Then you can begin to structure and organize the message.

Still, sometimes it's difficult to get started. One trick to overcoming the fear of a blank screen or page is to start your draft with "I am e-mailing you to tell you that..." or "The purpose of this letter is..." and then launch into what you want to say. Before sending the message, go back and revise it to delete those first words. It's a simple technique, but it works for writers who can't seem to get started.

**EXAMPLE 2** (Before):

I am e-mailing you to tell you that the inspection has been scheduled for Tuesday, June 12th, at 3:00 PM.

**EXAMPLE 2** (After):

The inspection has been scheduled for Tuesday, June 12th, at 3:00 PM.

**EXAMPLE 3** (Before):

I am writing to tell you that my client wishes to cancel escrow.

**EXAMPLE 3** (After):

My client wishes to cancel escrow.

Now that the hardest part—getting started—is out of the way, this agent-writer can continue her message to provide necessary additional information. In Example 2, this may include what to expect from the appointment or what steps will follow the appointment. In Example 3, the writer can move on to explain why her client wishes to cancel escrow.

Keep in mind that there might be multiple agendas behind a message, some straightforward, some more subtle. For example, if you speak to a For Sale By Owner (FSBO) and that FSBO asks you to send him some market comps for his area, your message will have two purposes. On its surface, the purpose of the message will be to convey the requested comps, but your ultimate

goal will be to convince this person to list with you. Your awareness of this purpose is essential in allowing you to craft the best message possible. Consequently, you may want to distill Question 1 even further to ask, “What is my immediate purpose in writing this message?” and, “What is my ultimate goal in writing this message?”

**What is my ultimate goal in writing this message?**

Turning back to Example 1, the writer can immediately focus on the purpose of the e-mail, thus allowing her to rewrite it more effectively.

**EXAMPLE 1 Why am I writing this e-mail or letter? What is the situation or problem that makes it necessary to write this message?:** I am writing this e-mail to acknowledge receipt of the buyers’ offer, to transmit a counteroffer, and to rebut the buyers’ arguments that they believe support their price.

**Question 2:** *What Do I Need to Say? What Does My Reader Need to Know Right Now?*

Answering this question practically drafts the message for you. Remember that you must provide the reader with everything she needs to know in order to achieve your objective in sending the message.

Going back to Example 1, by asking himself Question 2, the sellers’ agent could have clarified what he needed to say:

**EXAMPLE 1 What do I need to say? What does my reader need to know right now?:** I need the reader to know that the offered price is unacceptable, and I need to state our counteroffer. I need to articulate why each of the buyers’ arguments is unfounded, including (1) the problem with the comps and (2) the parking issue. I need to point out the zoning for the property and highlight the valuation impact of that zoning. I also need to reiterate the credit incentives offered by the sellers.

**Question 3:** *Who Is Going to Read It?*

Before starting to write, it is important to consider the following:

- Your relationship to the reader
- Your reader’s real estate knowledge
- What you know about the reader and the reader’s needs
- How you expect the reader to react to the message

Are you writing to a long-time client who is a sophisticated real estate investor? Or are you writing to a first-time buyer you just met at an Open House yesterday? Are you writing to an

experienced agent? Or is the agent on the other side new to real estate? Will the reader respond negatively to your message? Or is the message transmitting good or neutral news? The answers to these questions will impact what you write and how you write it. Question 3 will be addressed further in Chapter 2 when we discuss tone.

Posing Question 3 in the context of Example 1, we get the following:

**EXAMPLE 1 Who is going to read it?:** The readers of my message are an agent with whom I have never worked and her clients, whom I have never met and know nothing about. Checking sales records, it appears that this agent has closed only five deals in five years, so she may lack experience.

**Question 4:** *What Action Do I Want My Reader to Take? How Do I Want My Reader to Feel About My Message?*

We write messages with a variety of intentions. Sometimes we write simply to convey information or to respond to a specific request for information. Other times, we write to press the reader into action.

**EXAMPLE 4** (To convey information):

Dear Seller,

Yesterday's Open House was a success, with approximately 30 visitors, one of whom came back for a second look. In addition, we received six agent showings during the past week.

I will continue to keep you updated. If you have any questions, please call me.

Sincerely,  
Agatha Sparks

When writing to convey information, action is not necessarily sought from the reader. As with Question 1, however, there may be an agenda behind the message beyond merely transmitting information. In Example 4, the agent not only wants to update the seller and convey information concerning the number of showings, but also likely wishes to impress upon the client that the agent's actions are having the desired effect. When drafting an e-mail or letter, think about what underlying messages you wish to convey beyond the facts themselves. Think about how you want the reader to feel about those facts or what those facts say about *you* and your performance.

**EXAMPLE 5** (To respond to a specific request):

Dear Janice,

Per your request, here is the phone number for the roofer I recommend. Wayne is licensed and insured, reliable, and reasonably priced. Several of my clients have used him and been pleased with the results. You can reach him on his cell phone at 409-688-7897. Please let me know if I can assist you with any other contractor referrals.

Alice Gray

Always respond to requests for information by providing precisely what the person asked for, under the conditions specified. Again, no action is necessarily sought from the reader in Example 5. Alice probably has no strong feeling either way concerning whether her client uses the roofer she recommended or someone else; however, she should care very much about sending the underlying message that she is a knowledgeable, competent agent who knows about home repairs that get a house sold.

**EXAMPLE 6** (To press your reader into action):

To: claude@abc.com  
 Fr: smccoy@realty1.com  
 Re: Tenant Problem at 626 VanBuren Street

Claude:

The situation with the tenants at 626 VanBuren Street requires action. Several agents have complained that the house shows poorly, and I personally observed these conditions when I showed the house yesterday. In addition to the yard being overgrown with weeds, the kitchen counters were covered with dirty dishes, and the trash can was overflowing. One agent complained that the tenant came to the door in his underwear when she arrived to show the house to her client. This happened in spite of the fact that the agent had called and cleared the appointment time with the tenant, pursuant to the instructions in the MLS. These conditions continue to make it difficult to entice an offer on the property.

Sam McCoy

Writing to convince a reader to take action will be discussed further in Chapter 12, Writing to Persuade. The point to focus on for now is the need to think through, before drafting the message, what action you want the reader to take. Returning again to Example 1, Question 4 helps the writer finalize the message.

**EXAMPLE 1 What action do I want my reader to take? How do I want my reader to feel about my message?:** I want the agent, Jane, to understand my points and to agree with their validity. Ultimately, I want to convince Jane and her clients that the counteroffer is reasonable and should be accepted.

Having asked the Four Questions to Get You Started, we can rewrite the rambling e-mail in Example 1 more effectively:

**EXAMPLE 1** (After):

Dear Jane:

Thank you for your July 30, 2012, offer to purchase 123 Easy Street. For the reasons outlined below, Joe and Claire Vandorfen submit the attached counteroffer of \$480,000.

None of the selected sales comparables apply to the home on Easy Street. For example, your 52nd Street comp is located nowhere near 123 Easy Street. Furthermore, unlike the comps selected, the Easy Street home is located near all of the best of Oakdale, including restaurants, shops, and markets, most of which can be reached on foot. In addition, the Easy Street home carries R2 zoning, thus permitting additions and posing the potential for future rental income. This zoning adds a tremendous value to the Easy Street property that is not captured in any of the comparables you selected.

Joe and Claire Vandorfen are also offering some terrific incentives. They will pay most, if not all, of the closing costs and perhaps one point toward the buyers' loan. If your clients choose the \$7,500.00 appliance credit, this credit will help with a kitchen remodel.

Finally, your letter stated that parking in the neighborhood is a problem, but there were three open spaces in front of the house when I visited Joe and Claire concerning this offer.



Please contact me if you have any questions. I look forward to hearing from you.

Sincerely,  
Joe Martin

## EXERCISES

---

You will use the Four Questions to Get You Started in each of these exercises. The questions are repeated here for your convenience.

**Question 1:** *Why am I writing this e-mail or letter? What is the situation or problem that makes it necessary to write this message?*

**Question 2:** *What do I need to say? What does my reader need to know right now?*

**Question 3:** *Who is going to read it?*

**Question 4:** *What action do I want my reader to take? How do I want my reader to feel about my message?*

**EXERCISE 1:** You've just gotten off the phone with a potential For Sale By Owner (FSBO) you are trying to convince to list with you. The FSBO explained that she is selling the house herself in order to save money. She has asked, however, that you send her an e-mail providing some information about yourself and why you're the right agent for the neighborhood. She has also requested some comps for her home. The seller noted that she is a single mother who works full time, so she would like to receive the comps before the work-week begins.

Using the Four Questions to Get You Started, write an e-mail that provides the requested information and asks for a listing appointment.

**EXERCISE 2:** You and your family just moved across town, and you have decided to market yourself to your new neighbors. Using the Four Questions to Get You Started, write the text for the direct mail piece you plan to send to these neighboring homeowners.

**EXERCISE 3:** You have learned that a tenant in the apartment complex you manage has adopted a ferret. The lease agreement, however, prohibits pets. Using the Four Questions to Get You Started, write a letter to the tenant advising him that he is in breach of the lease agreement. Notify him that he will be evicted if he does not comply with the lease agreement.

**EXERCISE 4:** What letters or e-mails do you need to send today? Use the Four Questions to Get You Started to determine what you need to say and how you need to say it.

## EXERCISE KEY

---

These exercises can be completed in a number of different ways. This key provides an example for each.

### EXERCISE 1:

Question 1: I am writing this e-mail to sell my background and skills, to inform the seller of my experience in her area, and to respond to a specific request for information. Ultimately, I am writing this e-mail to persuade the seller to schedule a listing appointment and to list her home with me.

Question 2: I need to provide the requested comps and educate my reader concerning my sales experience and superior knowledge of her neighborhood. She also needs to be educated on why selling the home herself is an enormous undertaking that will not save her money in any event.

Question 3: The reader knows nothing about me other than what I told her in a ten-minute conversation that ensued from a cold call. I know little about her except that she wants to sell the house on her own in order to save money. I also know she is a single mother who works full time.

Question 4: Ultimately, I want her listing. Immediately, I want to build trust and rapport and for her to meet with me as soon as possible.

Here is one possible version of your e-mail:

Dear Seller:

It was a pleasure speaking with you this afternoon. I am an award-winning agent, ranking in the top 1 percent of nationwide sales in 2011, and have enjoyed five years of sales experience in this region. In your neighborhood, I currently represent the seller at 456 Fordham Street, two blocks east of your home. In the last year, I have sold three other homes in your area. I know the community well.

As you requested, I have attached some comps for your home. These comps were selected based upon recent sales in the neighborhood and reflect prices for homes of a similar age and square footage. I have specific recommendations for the sale of

your home based upon these comps and would like to meet with you to discuss these ideas at your earliest convenience.

I understand that you need to save money right now, and that goal is your primary motivation for seeking to sell your home yourself. I also understand from our conversation, however, that you are a busy woman with many responsibilities. I would like to sit down with you to discuss how I can make your life easier and get your home sold, while still addressing all of your financial concerns. I will make myself available for a meeting any time that is convenient to you.

I hope the attached information is useful to you. I will contact you again in a few days. In the meantime, please contact me if I may be of any assistance.

Sincerely,  
Joe Martin

## EXERCISE 2:

Question 1: I am writing this to introduce myself to my neighbors, to let them know I am an experienced agent, and to establish a foundation in their minds for when we meet in the future. Ultimately, I seek to become their agent.

Question 2: I need to set forth my sales record and emphasize that I'm knowledgeable about their neighborhood because I live here too. I need to let them know I'm accessible and want to talk to them.

Question 3: My audience is neighbors who have not met me, know nothing about me, and likely receive generic marketing material from other agents on at least a weekly basis.

Question 4: I want the reader to remember who I am and to convey a positive, professional image. Ultimately, I want the reader to become my client or to send me a referral.

Here is one possible version of your resultant marketing text:

Hello!

I'm Joe Martinez, your new neighbor at 567 Luxury Lane. I wanted to take a moment to introduce myself and let you know that I'm a knowledgeable real estate agent with more than ten years of experience in our beautiful city. In addition to

being your neighbor, I have assisted numerous clients in the area with both sales and purchases of neighboring homes. I am knowledgeable about our community and would like to share my experience with you.

Please call me any time to introduce yourself or stop by to say hello. I would love to talk with you about our neighborhood and recent sales, or about the real estate market generally.

Joe

On this piece, Joe included his photo, company logo, and contact information. He also included a chart reflecting prices of recent neighborhood sales, listing street names his neighbors would recognize.

### **EXERCISE 3:**

Dear Tenant:

It has come to our attention that you have had a ferret in your apartment since approximately October 15, 2011. As you know, Section 5.C of your lease agreement prohibits pets of any kind. Your breach of this portion of the lease agreement constitutes grounds for eviction. In order to avoid commencement of eviction proceedings, please find a new home for the animal no later than October 25, 2011.

Sincerely,  
Property Management Corp.

## A MUST-HAVE BOOK FOR REAL ESTATE PROFESSIONALS!

Before Hitting Send is a practical how-to writing guide fulfilling the unique needs of real estate agents. It teaches the fundamentals of effective writing through examples and exercises from scenarios agents face daily. In addition to instruction chapters, the book includes writing samples that are also available electronically for download and use at [www.beforehittingsend.com](http://www.beforehittingsend.com).

---

*"Before Hitting Send is a book every REALTOR® should add to their book box."*

– Steve Goddard, President, California Association of REALTORS® 2010

---

*"Bravo! Finally a balm for one of my pet peeves—poorly written and grammatically incorrect emails, contracts, and other missives utilized throughout the typical real estate transaction! When dealing with contracts and negotiations on a house or other real property, one simple miscommunication between agents can mean a huge problem for the principals involved in the transaction. **Before Hitting Send** should be required reading in our Industry!"*

– Debbie Neuman, Neuman&Neuman, Prudential CA Realty

---

*"How and what we communicate as professional salespeople is a crucial piece of a successful close of escrow and a happy, referring client. **Before Hitting Send** is a powerful resource for making your written communication clear, effective, and full of positive impact."*

– J'aime Nowak, Director of Training & Presenter, Buffini & Company

---

*"This is a must-read for real estate professionals or anyone who wishes to communicate effectively in writing. Awesome information. Onward and upward for us all."*

– Linda Lee, Women's Council of REALTORS® San Diego Chapter President 2009 & 2010;  
National Association of REALTORS® Leadership Academy, Class of 2011

[www.beforehittingsend.com](http://www.beforehittingsend.com) |   follow us on Facebook and Twitter #B4HS

 **Dearborn**™

A Kaplan Real Estate Education Company

332 Front Street South, Suite 501, La Crosse, WI 54601  
[www.dearborn.com](http://www.dearborn.com), 800-972-2220

ISBN-13: 978-1-4277-1118-2

ISBN-10: 1-4277-1118-6



9 781427 111182

Reorder No.: 6610-1001