

How To Improve People's Perception of You, and Your Business, Through Improving Your Writing.

Kim Lambert



Dreamstone Publishing

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No matter what business you are in, or what you do in life, we all write, one way or another.

In this digital era, electronic communication is all about writing – be that in a chat window, an email, a Facebook post, a blog post, the content for a business website, or a book.

Even videos are often animated slide shows – words are everywhere.

Why Your Writing Matters

Often, you are communicating with people that you have never met in person, and may never meet – all contact will be digital. The only thing that person has to 'know' you by, is your writing.

So that is what they use to judge you, to assess whether you are a person that they want to be associated with, to do business with.

What are the implications of that ?

Why People Judge You – and What Makes Them React

When you stand in front of a person, and have a discussion with them, they see your facial expressions, see your body language, and, most importantly, they hear your tone of voice, and hear the pacing of your speech – all of those things provide extra information, which allows them to assess what you really want to convey with your words.

It tells them if you are angry or not, even if the words that you use are polite, for example.

When you are not physically present, those cues are removed. Even in audio, most of the cues have been removed, because the person that you are speaking to can't see your expressions.

This makes writing amazingly subject to misinterpretation – people want some clues to who you are, what you are like, and whether they should 'listen' to what you have to say.

What usually happens, therefore, is that people imagine you speaking, as they read.

But when they imagine, they imagine it spoken as they would speak it, and all of their personal doubts and uncertainties get projected onto your words. So they may interpret what you have written in a completely different way from that which you intended!

To add to the challenge here, there is a subtle set of inbuilt programming in all of us, that most people are completely unaware of, which leads others to judge you harshly, even for a seemingly tiny mistake.

This programming comes from the fact that, for many centuries, in most of the 'Western World' only those with significant wealth could afford education. So being able to read and write was important in itself, and being able to do so well was even more a signal of you being a person of wealth and importance.

People like to feel more important than others, better than others – especially if they are struggling in some way in their lives. This leads to the well-known “tall poppy syndrome” where people like to pull down someone who is visibly doing very well.

So, how do people assess your ‘level of education’, your ‘importance quotient’? In person, how you speak, and dress, will be part of it, but in writing, there are less clues. Yet people feel uncomfortable if they can’t put a label on you as far as ‘where you fit’.

So, when people read your content, whether that is a website, a blog post, an article that you have written for a magazine, a sales page, a paper brochure for your business, or a book, on a subconscious level, they are looking for things that they recognise as ‘wrong’ or ‘mistakes’.

Any one person may not see all of the ‘mistakes’ that are there – but all they need is one, that they do recognise, and immediately, to them, you know less than they do, you are less ‘educated’ than them.

And, if you want them as a client, that is not a good thing!

If people buy a service from you, they want to believe that you know more than them, but they need a way to assess that, and as writing is the first thing that they see about you, that will drive their assessment.

One mistake on your part may lose you a customer.

What can you do to prevent that?

The first answer that comes to mind is “make no mistakes” – easier said than done! To avoid issues, you need to know what things will be seen as mistakes, and you need to be able to be aware of them, every time that you write anything at all.

Let’s talk about some ways that you can optimise your writing, to make the most professional and impressive impact on your potential clients, without coming across as patronising or pretentious.

Words Matter !

The words that you use matter!

People from different communities may use different words for the same thing. Even if we speak the same language, it evolves differences – think about the variations between Australian, British and American English.

The words commonly used to describe the same thing vary (such as mobile / cell phone), and the spelling used for common words varies! (a key example is words like optimise / optimize).

This means that you need to be aware of whether your primary audience is local, or global, and of where they live, as it may change the words, spelling etc that you need to use.

You will also need to consider your topic area – if you are writing something that will be read by people who are obsessively interested in a particular topic, does it have its own special words? (like sailing, for example) If so, then you will need to make sure that you describe things using the words that those readers will regard as correct for those things or actions.

Subtleties of words matter – in person, you can often be quite blunt and to the point, and have people be happy with that, because they can see that you are not being dictatorial, lecturing, being angry or anything else – you are simply being concise and telling a truth.

When all they have to go on is the written word, people are very likely to interpret blunt and concise as rude and aggressive.

Whether you are writing an email, an instruction manual, or a sales page, you are really doing just one thing – you are wanting people to do something for you, to respond in a specific way (complete a task, follow the instructions in the manual, buy your product.....). Most people do not like being commanded to do something – that generally pushes the ‘stubborn button’ and has them doing the exact opposite of what you want!

So, if your writing comes across as blunt and demanding, you will not get the result that you want.

To get the result that you want, you will need to add something – that something is words that soften the message, that make the reader feel that you have asked politely for their action, and that convince them of the value of that action in a way that almost makes them think that it was their idea in the first place.

Taking the time to write those extra words, and considering how they will ‘sound’ in the mind of a reader who has nothing else to go on, will save you huge amounts of time later, and will produce, happy clients (or family and friends) who do as you have asked them. And if what you have asked them to do is buy your product – well then, the benefit to you is obvious!

So – is that all you have to do, to get the reaction that you want, to ensure that people will not judge you unreasonably, based on words ? – Not quite – because, apart from the words themselves, you need one more thing, to be certain that the reader will ‘hear’ your words in their mind, exactly as they would hear the words if you were standing in front of them.

That one thing is Punctuation. (no wincing allowed ! please read on to understand why!)



Why Punctuation Matters Too.

Punctuation is there to allow you to write down things like pauses as you speak – those things that you do automatically when speaking, that makes the meaning of the sentence clear to the person hearing you. Punctuation is the only way to write those things down. If people don't know where, in the run of words, to put a pause, then the whole sentence will likely not make sense, or may even end up being read as saying something else entirely from what you had intended.

Few of us are really taught much about punctuation at school. And if we are, it's dry rules and no helpful explanation of why they matter. So it is no wonder that a large proportion of people today have no idea how to use punctuation, or why they should even bother doing so.

Commas are perhaps the most abused of punctuation marks. Commas have two major uses when you write.

The first, which most people are aware of, is as a list separator. This is where we describe there being a large number of things, and put a comma between each one, so that the reader knows where the words for each thing start and finish. For example "The fruit bowl contained bananas, red apples, pears, green apples and a passionfruit." – in this, the reader knows that red apples is a single thing, because there is no comma between those two words, but there are commas between those words and the other items in the list.

The second use, which most people are not aware of, is as a marker of where to take a slight pause for breath, as you speak, so that the meaning of the sentence is clear. (in the list separator situation, the comma is also an indicator of a pause, as we make a slight pause between each item when we speak the list)

When commas are used to indicate where to pause in a sentence they are generally a set of two commas, at each end of a phrase that clarifies, or expands upon, a point in the sentence.

In this sort of use, the sentence should still read sensibly if the words between the two commas are removed – if it does not, then consider whether one of the commas should be moved, to make that true. (although ‘and’, ‘or’ and similar after the second comma must sometimes be ignored for it to read correctly.)

Here are some example sentences to demonstrate this, with the ‘removable’ phrase between the commas highlighted:

“The world of numismatics, **and coin collecting**, is like a whole new world where a different language is spoken. It is extremely important, **right from the start**, to learn the terminology of coin collecting in order to understand numismatics.”

Other key punctuation marks in most writing are periods /‘full stops’ and quotation marks.

Full stops end sentences. If you leave them out, then the reader does not know where one sentence finishes, and the next starts. They can guess, but they may get it wrong. Writing in relatively short, clear sentences is key to having your reader truly understand what you are saying. Always look at your first draft, and make sure that you have all of the full stops required, and consider whether you can shorten any of your sentences, to make the meaning clearer.

Quotation marks have two main uses – to surround a quotation, so that the reader can tell that it is a literal representation of someone speaking those exact words, and to surround a name, or a term, to indicate that the word or words between the quotation marks are a name for something, or a common usage, or even a joke name for something, rather than just being those words as part of the normal flow of the sentence. Always consider whether your reader will know what you mean by words that are a colloquial term for something, and if they may not, then put the term in quotation marks.

Now let’s talk about some other things that can cause people to judge you based on your writing, even if you think that you have the sentences and punctuation right!

Wrong Word Usage - “I Do Not Think That Word Means What You Think It Means !”

This is a key thing that will make people judge you, as unprofessional, or uneducated.

It is a very, very common problem – in part it is created by a lack of education on paying attention to words, in part by the very, very creative variations of the English language (we have stolen words from so many languages over the centuries, that now we have a collection of things that seem similar, but came from different places, just to confuse us!)

It is also something that people love to pick on!

Exactly what am I talking about here ? Those situations where the correct word is identical in sound to other words, but is spelled differently (eh here and hear), or is very similar, spelled differently, and has a completely different meaning. (eg acclimate and accumulate).

Here are some commonly confused and wrongly used words (there are many, many more – this is just a start). Read through carefully, and consider them. This is potentially a chance to expand your vocabulary. Start to consciously look for words like these when you read, and when you write. The dictionary is your friend – make sure that you really do know what a word means if you use it, don't just trust that what you think it means is correct !

Because each of us has a different vocabulary, and learns different words through our life experiences, each person will be sensitive to different errors, and will really notice certain things, and judge you for those errors.

Over time, word meanings actually start to change until what started as an incorrect usage becomes accepted as a correct one. Be very careful with words and phrases that are in that transition !

A current example is the saying “I couldn't care less” – often, now you will see it written as “I could care less”, when people actually mean the former !

Do you know what each word listed below means ? what the key differences are, and when to use them ?

This is a list of some common examples – but there are hundreds more – it is important to check your words, because, often, you may have spent your whole life using the wrong word, without being aware of it!

Phase and faze

Credible and creditable

Complimentary and complementary

Peel and peal

Illusion and allusion

Alternate and alternative

Affect and effect

Historic and historical

Ensure and insure

Than and then

There, their and they're

Woman and women

Your and you're

Sight, site and cite

Here and hear

Advice and advise

Heel and heal

Bought and brought

Bear and bare

Copyright and copy write

Rein and reign

Allude and elude

Hair and hare

Throne and thrown

Groan and grown

Great and grate

Content and contend

Weight and wait

Device and devise

Straight and strait

Hansom and handsome

Brooch and broach

Tousled and tussled

Sew and sow

Coarse and course

Throne and thrown

Doe and dough

Moan and mown

Accept and except

To, Two and Too

Fourth and forth

Where and wear

Break and brake

Ensure and Insure

Reek and wreak

Reck and wreck

Taut and taught

Weather, whether and wether

Court and caught

Collude and collide

Device and devise

Pear and pare

Addition and edition

Other simple things, that make a huge difference to readability

There are a number of other little things that will make a huge difference to how your potential clients (and current clients !) view you, as a result of your writing.

A word of warning here – DO NOT TRUST MICROSOFT SPELLING AND GRAMMAR!!! Whilst Microsoft have done quite a good job of writing computer code to capture complex language rules and check things, its not foolproof. (especially for grammar, where it has some serious deficiencies – if what it suggests sounds wrong, don't accept the suggestion – consult with another human first!)

Let's look at some of them:

Spelling !

Check your spelling, every time – and while you do, do another visual check for any of those sneaky “sounds same or similar “words that we just talked about in the previous section!). When checking spelling, consider your audience – if you are in Australia, or the UK, or New Zealand, you will want the British / Australian spellings, if you are in the US, or targeting US clients, you will want American spelling. Always take extra care to spell people's and place's names correctly!

Grammar

This, along with punctuation, is the number one wince worthy word about writing, for most people. Take a deep breath, it's not that bad! Grammar is about the order of words in sentences, and the 'tense' (that's past, present, future). There is lots more to it than that, but in a day to day sense, those are the things that will make all the difference.

If the order of words is wrong, then the sentence may accidentally read as meaning something different from your intent!

If English is a second language for you, this can be really challenging, as we don't put words in the same order, in a sentence, as many other languages do.

Additionally, in some languages, the position of a word in a sentence can change the level of emphasis placed on it (you can go from coming across as calm, to angry, just by changing where the word is!)

Always leave what you have written for some hours, then come back and read again, as well as getting someone else to read it for you, to make sure that things do read correctly, and that words are in the right order.

If you change tense halfway through a sentence, it will read very strangely – think carefully about how it reads, and make sure that it is consistent.

Missing thats, ofs and similar

This is one of the most common mistakes made in writing, because when we speak, we can often leave out a word, and have our intent clearly understood, based on how we say things. In the written word, that does not work so well.

When you write, if you use the word 'ensure' then it will almost always need to be followed by the word 'that'.

You do not "ensure someone does something" you "ensure that someone does something". In some cases, adding the that simply enhances the clarity. In a small number of cases, if you leave it out, the meaning of the sentence is completely changed (especially if a reader confuses the word ensure with the word insure....)

'Of' is another word which is often left out. You do not say "All the things needed" you say "All of the things that are needed" (there is a missing that example in that one, too!)

Look for words that are missing – your mind is filling them in for you, but the reader's mind may not!

Where do you put apostrophes ?

Apostrophes are another much confused punctuation mark. Here are some simple rules for their use.

- Unless a word ends in 's', adding an apostrophe and s will imply ownership (eg John's car) the only case where this is not done, is if "it" owns something, in which case there is no apostrophe used and the result is "its door" – where, for example it is a car, or a house.
- If the word ends in 's' all you need is the apostrophe to indicate ownership (eg Jess' car)
- If you are shortening two words into one, the apostrophe replaces the removed letters. (eg do not becomes don't, that is becomes that's, it is becomes it's, you are becomes you're)
- The single quotation mark is the same punctuation symbol as an apostrophe, but is used in pairs around words.

Capitalisation in the Right Places

Capital letters are used in specific places – do not use all capitals for anything but short pieces of emphasis – lots of all capitals is still considered written shouting. Capitals are used as follows:

- In a heading, all major words are capitalised, only words like 'and', 'or', 'the' and similar are not capitalised.
- The first word in every sentence should be capitalised.
- The first letters of each of a person's names should be capitalised (unless the person has specifically chosen to have an un-capitalised name, as some now do)
- The first letter of the official or 'proper' names of places or things should be capitalised (eg Mt Kosciuszko, the Eiffel Tower, a Sundowner Apple, the Privacy Policy)
- Official contractions, or acronyms used in things like addresses, or for ease of saying something long, in a shortened form, are often done in capitals. (eg : Australian Capital Territory is usually written as ACT)

Consistency

When you write about something, refer to it in a consistent manner – for example, either use its full name every time you mention it, or use the full name the first time that you mention it, put the abbreviation that you will use after that in brackets (so “Australian Capital Territory (ACT)”) and then use the abbreviation every time that you mention it after that.

Make sure that you are consistent with how you address the reader – are you writing in first person – where you are in the story, as well as telling the story, (I did this) or third person, where you are not in the story, you are just telling the story (he did this).

If you use American spelling, do so throughout, don't mix British and American spelling!

Consistency is very important, as any inconsistencies will make the reader feel uncertain, even if they do not consciously identify why.

Use of Symbols

Unless it is a part of a trademarked name that you are referring to do not use & when you mean the word 'and'. It is in the same category as using ur for your – it's unprofessional and is a sort of casual shorthand.

Any time that you are tempted to use a symbol, or a number rather than a word, consider the context – is using the word more appropriate ?

Different approaches for different types of written work

Depending on your intended audience, there are some things that you may want to vary. Whilst spelling, grammar, and correct word usage are critical regardless, you will almost certainly want to adjust what is called your 'tone' or 'voice' in the writing, based on who you expect to be your readers.

This means that, if your target audience are university professors, then the sort of words and formality of style you might use will be very different from what you might choose if your target audience was people running, or working in, trade based businesses (plumbers, electricians etc).

This is not because any target audience is better or worse educated, or more or less valuable, but simply because the style in which they communicate in day to day life tends to have patterns, and you will connect better with them if your communication to them mirrors some of their normal patterns. They will be more comfortable with you, and more likely to do business with you.

You will also want to use a different style depending on the format. Formats include:

- Email,
- letter,
- chat,
- FaceBook (and other Social Media),
- blog post,
- business website content
- FAQ,
- Policy documents
- sales copy,
- brochure,
- articles,
- books

Some will be more casual than others, some will be more 'advertisy' and some will be more structured and 'educating'. Think about the purpose of the communication, as well as the audience – a Policy document written in a casual style will not work well – it needs to be formal, and to reflect that it has importance, and should be respected by the reader.

Conclusion

Treasure those words! They are your tool for communicating your passion – treat them as precious friends that can work miracles for you and others, rather than as tangly difficult little things.

The words that you present to the world are one place where a certain level of perfectionism is good (so long as it does not completely stop you acting!)

Making sure that the spelling, names, sentence structure and word use is correct will allow your key messages to reach your audience, with no mood crashing distractions from little errors.

If someone is caught up with enthusiasm when reading your beautifully crafted and presented sales letter, you really, really do not want them jarred out of that enthusiasm by one wrong word – you want them to stay enthused, and buy the product!



Courses that Can Help You

If you would like some help with your writing, either as a business owner, with a focus on the image of your business, or as a writer, who really wants to finish and publish a book, then Dreamstone Publishing has a course for you.

The 'Polish My Image' Course

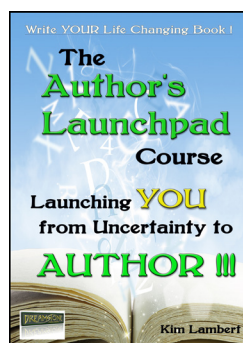
is designed to help you apply all of the things discussed in this report, in YOUR business, and includes a review of your current written material, and a one on one consultation, to develop your business image plan!

See www.dreamstonepublishing.com/polish-image for all the details!

The Authors Launchpad Course

is designed to accelerate you from uncertain to Author, launching you through the writing and publishing process in just 5 weeks ! –

see www.dreamstonepublishing.com/launchpad for all the details !



About the Author



Kim Lambert has extensive business experience in a wide range of areas, from Government and Corporate, to both online and offline small business, wholesale, retail and support services.

She has worked in fields covering everything from Floristry to Information Technology. She owns a number of small businesses currently and is focussing on the areas of Writing coaching, Publishing and Photography at present, whilst also progressively translating years of experience into various book series.

She has been a speaker at conferences on topics as diverse as Women in Business, and Enterprise, IT and Business Architecture. She holds a Graduate Diploma in Applied Science from Charles Sturt University.

She is the Managing editor of Life Change the Revolution – the Magazine (www.lifechangetherevolution.com) and also provides a growing number of online courses, based on writing and publishing topics.

She has published business articles in magazines, Travel articles online, cook books (see details later in this book) and photography books (Detailed Beauty – Australia Through The Macro Lens, available on www.Blurb.com, with a new edition due out soon on Amazon, and “The Photographer’s Quick Guide to Earning Money From Your Photos”, available on Amazon now.)

Should you wish to enquire re articles, speaking engagements or business consultation, she can be contacted through the publisher of this book (info@dreamstonepublishing.com).