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## Writer's Edge

By Ingrid Sapon\*

Welcome to Writer's Edge — a column by Ingrid Sapon, owner of Good with Words. In her column, Ingrid writes about ways of improving your communication skills. Many of you already know Ingrid — she's been working with the CICBV and CBVs for more than 10 years and is the creator and presenter of the popular seminar: Valuation Reports and Opinions: Your Stock In Trade — Are they as clear as they can be?

### Know thy [fill in the blank]

No, this column isn't about the famous maxim inscribed at the Temple of Apollo in Delphi: Know Thy Self — that topic is WAY beyond my expertise. But, if I've piqued your curiosity with the title, good.

The title is a reference to what you should focus on before you start writing: knowing thy reader. If your reaction to my clarification is, "well that's easy, the reader is my client", or maybe: "the reader is Chris" (or some other specific name), then consider this column directed specifically at you!

Knowing thy reader isn't just about knowing their identity. It's about having a fairly thorough profile of the reader, including:

- their personal attributes,
- what information they want, and
- what they'll do with the information.

Taking time up front to clearly identify as much as you can with respect to these "profile elements" will allow you to focus your writing effort. More importantly, it will help you produce a document that's truly useful to your reader.

### The Reader's Personal Attributes

Things you should know about the reader's background relate to their:

- education and expertise — are they knowledgeable about accounting or about valuations, for example?
- specific knowledge about the matter or issue at hand — are they intimately familiar with the facts that underlie the matter, or do they just have a general understanding?
- general fluency — is their native language the same one the document is written in?

If you know the reader isn't trained as a CBV, for example, then you know you should take extra care to explain special terminology you use. Similarly, the reader's familiarity with the facts will dictate the level of detail and specificity you go into about the facts. Using plain language and avoiding idioms is always a good idea, but it's especially important when the reader's mother tongue is something other than the language you're writing in.

## Understanding What the Reader Wants

You'll probably find that understanding what information your reader wants is the easiest profile element to discern. If you've been hired to provide a valuation report, for example, then you know the reader wants valuation information. But, there will be situations where it may not be clear what the reader wants. Sometimes you can figure out what they want by considering things like how the information will come to their attention. For example, when I write this column, given where it's published, I know the reader will be a professional who is interested in tips and advice about business writing. (If they weren't, they wouldn't be reading this!)

### Understanding What the Reader Will Do with the Information

The most important profile element to understand is what the reader plans on doing with the information you provide in the document. Knowing this will help you decide things like:

- how to organize the information, and
- whether, and to what extent, you address alternatives the reader might want to consider but that they didn't necessarily expect you'd cover.

## No Excuse for a Sketchy Profile

There's really no excuse for not having a fairly complete profile of your reader. If the reader's a client, for example, don't be embarrassed to ask for the information. I've never meet a client who minded talking about themselves and their needs! And, once you explain that the reason you're interested in the information is so that you can provide them with exactly what they need, they'll be impressed.

If your document is for a group of readers, it won't be practical to profile each person. But, chances are there's someone who can provide a group profile that will include useful information. For example, if you're writing something for a journal or conference, ask the editor or conference sponsor for profile element information about the readers.

## Conclusion

The more you know about your reader and their wants and needs before you start writing, the easier it is to provide relevant, useful information, which should be your aim with all business writing.