

Step 6: Build trust

Build trust with your team members and subject-matter experts. Writing is personal.

- If you are a civil engineer who is summarizing how a bridge design will benefit the neighborhoods on the east side of town, it's personal.
- If you are longtime manager of license applications, the customer letter you draft explaining a change in ID requirements is personal.

It's important to respect this when you are revising a draft prepared by a subject-matter expert, whether an engineer, an office manager, or a personnel manager. People become attached to the terminology they use routinely in their profession and may become defensive when you suggest simpler language or shorter explanations. They know that what they have written is correct and think that if you revise it, you will change its meaning.

- Focus on the problem you are trying to solve together, not on the writing.
- Find things to praise about what they have written.
- Explore with respect the reasoning or history behind why they have written something the way they have: "Tell me about why you write, This is our demand for election , rather than, You are now required to choose."
- Refer to your rewrites as suggestions: "Take a look at what I've done and see what you think. Does his work for you? I changed the word abate to fix. Would this change the meaning or cause problems?"
- Draw the writing team into the discussion so you can listen to people with the same expertise debating among themselves.

Agency Insight

I recently finished a project to overhaul a set of responses my agency sends when workers file complaints against their employers for not paying wages. As it turned out, I had recently rewritten a high-level letter composed by the woman who was to be the key member of my new team. She'd been justifiably hurt by my complete rewrite, mostly because no one in management had actually explained to her what was wrong with her earlier drafts, which they kept sending back to her. When we began working together, she was clearly exasperated with the agency's "plain language thing." But once she realized I respected her expertise in wage law and was willing to work one-on-one with her to develop her skill, she became a solid writing partner. She soon realized that she needed only to write the way she spoke to workers on the phone each day, using ordinary language. In the end, she developed a flair for composing simple "translations" of the "government style" materials we were overhauling.

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