

Zing! Add to Your Writing

By Lynn Gaertner-Johnston

When you write flyers, brochures, proposals, solicitations, presentations, and other persuasive pieces, it is not enough simply to state facts in plain, reliable prose. You need to engage the reader to inspire a positive response. You need to add zing.

Here are 10 ways to add zing to your writing. Choose one and try it in your next persuasive document.

1. Focus on you, the reader.

When you use *you*, you immediately engage the reader. Notice the difference between these two letter openers:

- My name is Carla Gomes, and I am the new event-planning specialist at Westwood Catering.
- When it comes to your special event, you want it to be a perfect experience—and a memorable one.

Action Step: Review your pieces. Do they focus on *I* the writer, or *you* the reader?

2. Connect on a human level.

Use *I* or *we* rather than “XYZ Corp.” Companies do not communicate enthusiastically—people do.

Which of these is more appealing?

- XYZ Corporation is pleased to announce a new returns policy.
- I am pleased to tell you about our new returns policy.

Action Step: Look for places to add *I*, *we*, and *you* to enliven a message.

3. Ask an engaging question.

Like *you*, engaging questions draw in the reader. Here are questions from two website home pages:

- Are unanswered financial questions keeping you awake at night?
- Would better writing skills enhance your effectiveness?

When readers answer yes to the question posed, they are hooked.

Action Step: Look for an opportunity to pose a thought-provoking question—using the word *you* or *your*—at the beginning of a presentation or document. Use it to win the interest of your reader or listener right from the start.

4. Tell stories.

Stories bring data, facts, and suggestions to life. People remember stories and relate to the characters in them.

I recently created “A Tale of 101 Emails” in PowerPoint to illustrate how one email can snowball into many. Rather than saying simply “We send too much pointless email,” the tale absorbs the audience and inspires them to think about the part they play in the ongoing saga of too much email.

Caution: Stories need a context. If you begin a business letter or article with a story, your readers may become frustrated, asking themselves, “What is this about?”

For example, if you wanted readers to contribute financially to your historical society, it would be risky to start with a story out of context. You might instead start with a question: “How would you feel if our history vanished?” or “Do you know the story of the ‘Gig’ in ‘Gig Harbor?’” Questions like these can be an effective prelude to a story.

Action Step: Use a story in place of an example or statistic in a presentation, proposal, or article. If possible, use *you* to place your reader in the story.

5. Be generous.

Give readers something of value, and they will keep reading. Share an appealing quotation, a surprising statistic, or tips like the ones you are reading now—things your readers can use. Do not withhold information for fear of “giving away the store.” When readers or listeners get something of value, they stay tuned for more.

Action Step: In your next marketing piece, proposal, or solicitation, give your reader something special such as a table of comparative data, a recipe, or a list of relevant tips.

6. Write in short chunks of text.

Long paragraphs have no pizzazz. Although they may be a delight to travel through when reading for pleasure, long paragraphs plod along in business writing. Short paragraphs burst with energy.

Action Step: Break up one long paragraph into short paragraphs or bullet points.

7. Use an informal tone.

Formality is suitable in some documents, but formal writing doesn't grab readers. If you want excitement in your message, use a less formal tone. Compare the following paragraphs. One of them was used by Westin Vacation Services in a solicitation.

- You are aware of the advantages of a great vacation. A vacation provides the opportunity to modify your normal routine and subsequently to return from your journey refreshed and enriched. Moreover, there is not a better location to accomplish that revitalization than on the island of Maui as a guest of the Westin Hotel.
- You know what a great vacation is all about. It's a chance to break from your normal routine and return home refreshed and enriched. And there is no better place to do that than on Maui with Westin.

Of course, Westin used the second example.

Informal writing typically uses short, crisp sentences. They may begin with conjunctions such as *and* and *but*, and they often include contractions. They also have simple words such as *know* rather than *be cognizant* and *do* rather than *accomplish*.

Action Step: To add energy, look for ways to make your messages less formal.

8. Use crisp words—not thick phrases.

Thick phrases lack energy. Replace them with concise words. For example:

in a timely manner—*promptly, quick, fast*

prior to that time—*before*

on a periodic basis—*sometimes, often, regularly*

Do not hesitate to call—*Call anytime*

Action Step: Find a thick phrase you use often. Replace it with one precise word.

9. Distill information.

Rather than piling on data, distill it for your readers' use. In my newsletter, I once wrote a 1,000-word article reporting on research on how well people identify sarcasm, seriousness, and other emotions in email. Then I wrote a 410-word blog post about it. The shorter version was better: tighter, more focused, and more enjoyable to read.

Action Step: When sharing lots of data, ask yourself whether readers need the details. If not, replace the numbers with a summary, story, or picture.

10. Add visual appeal.

Use bold type, headings, and strong graphics. Feature snappy quotes in text boxes. Use a different color font for a special section of text.

Action Step: Collect reports, letters, and presentations that appeal to you visually. Then try to duplicate at least one zingy element in your own documents.
