The ultimate guide to persuasive writing

Contents

The power of persuasion

We've gathered expert tips on persuasive writing from the team at Articulate Marketing. We want to help you understand the personal and business value of getting your writing... right.

We're going to tell you why it matters, then give you the tools and advice you need to start writing persuasively on your own. You'll be crafting convincing copy in no time.

Here's why it's worth doing:

It inspires action

When the US Army tested two versions of a business message asking the reader to perform a specific task, those who received a well-written, 'high impact' letter were **twice as likely** to complete the task on the same day they received it.

It improves productivity

Emails ping back and forth every day; reports land in your in-tray; a new marketing brochure needs copy. Business writing always seems to just happen; but, if you take a moment to stop and craft your words a little better, it could make a big, measurable difference.

It helps you to communicate better

The US Navy conducted a study that shows that Naval Officers read business memos written in plain English 17 to 23 percent faster than ones written in a bureaucratic style.

You'll save money

Poorly-written, cheap content costs you money in the long run in the form of annoyed customers and poor search engine ranking. Learning the difference between useful and detrimental content – and how to create the former – could save your organisation significant sums of money.

This guide to persuasive business writing gives you the knowledge and the skills you need to translate your writing into action and success.
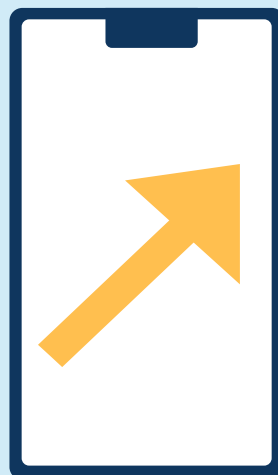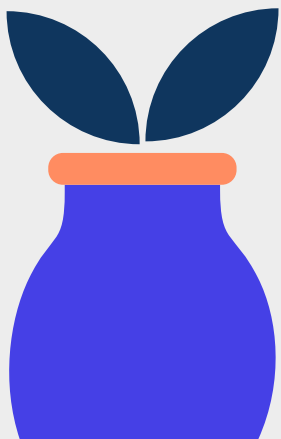
Say what you mean; mean what you say

Preparation may feel like a task you don't have time for. **Make time**.

Think about it. You wouldn't write a letter without knowing who you were writing to, and you wouldn't post it without an address.

This chapter looks at the **what, who and why** of persuasive writing.

Why are you sitting down to write?

Take a moment and think about why you are about to put pen to paper or fingertips to keyboard. If you don't have an answer, then why would anyone else take the time to read it?

The first person you have to persuade is yourself.

Answer the following questions to help you select the right format, tone and structure for your writing:

- What is important, original or exciting about what you want to convey?
- Who do you want to read this?
- What action are you trying to inspire? For example:
    - Get a colleague or customer to take a specific action
    - Sell a product
    - Convince your boss of an idea
    - Enthuse your team
    - Demonstrate thought leadership
- Where will it be read? On a website, in print, in an email?

Get the 'why' out of the way as early as possible and no matter how confusing things might get, you'll have a core goal to return to that'll help you realign your writing.

For more information

Speaking human: 12 best examples of copywriting in tech

What does a copywriter do? The B2B content marketing guide

Grammar for business.

Know the rules before you break the rules.

Download for free

Benefits vs features

Features are not persuasive. The features of your idea or product might sound great to you because you understand them, but if you want to persuade others that they're fantastic, you have to translate them into benefits.

Think of it like house-hunting. Some people have vision, and can see the potential in a fixer-upper. They can see the 'features': the fireplace that needs restoring, the hardwood floors that need stripping. Most people, however, are more interested in seeing the benefits. They need to envision the fire roaring and the floors gleaming before they can picture themselves living there.

When it comes to writing persuasively, you have to make the case for **why and how the features lead to the benefits**, and how they can help the reader with a particular problem or need.

For more information

Why stories sell and feature lists don't
How to sell a tale: the power of stories in marketing

Know your stuff

Before you put your piece together, you have to do your research. Consider what your **readers' questions** might be and have the answers ready to work into your document.

Being persuasive relies on having **solid facts and reliable information** to base your claims on. You have to know why your product works, or how you'll be implementing your idea.

- If you are suggesting a new marketing idea, understand and highlight the potential ROI.
- If you are promoting a product, try to get client testimonials. STAT.
- If you are demonstrating thought leadership, read and quote experts in the field.

Not only does this type of research add to the credibility of your writing, but knowing it yourself also gives you the **confidence to write with authority**. If you are unsure of your argument, it'll show through in your writing.

For more information

A recipe for disaster: 4 research sources to avoid in your writing

Pull it all together

At this point, you should have a clear idea of what your writing will say and who you're saying it to. You've translated the features of your topic into benefits for the reader, and you have the knowledge to back up your claims.

Doing this kind of preparation will bring your central message into focus, and will tell you if there is genuinely a case for you to make. **If you have struggled with any of these stages, you need to question your original brief and tweak your argument or idea.**

Once you're confident with your preparation, then you're ready to start putting words on the page...

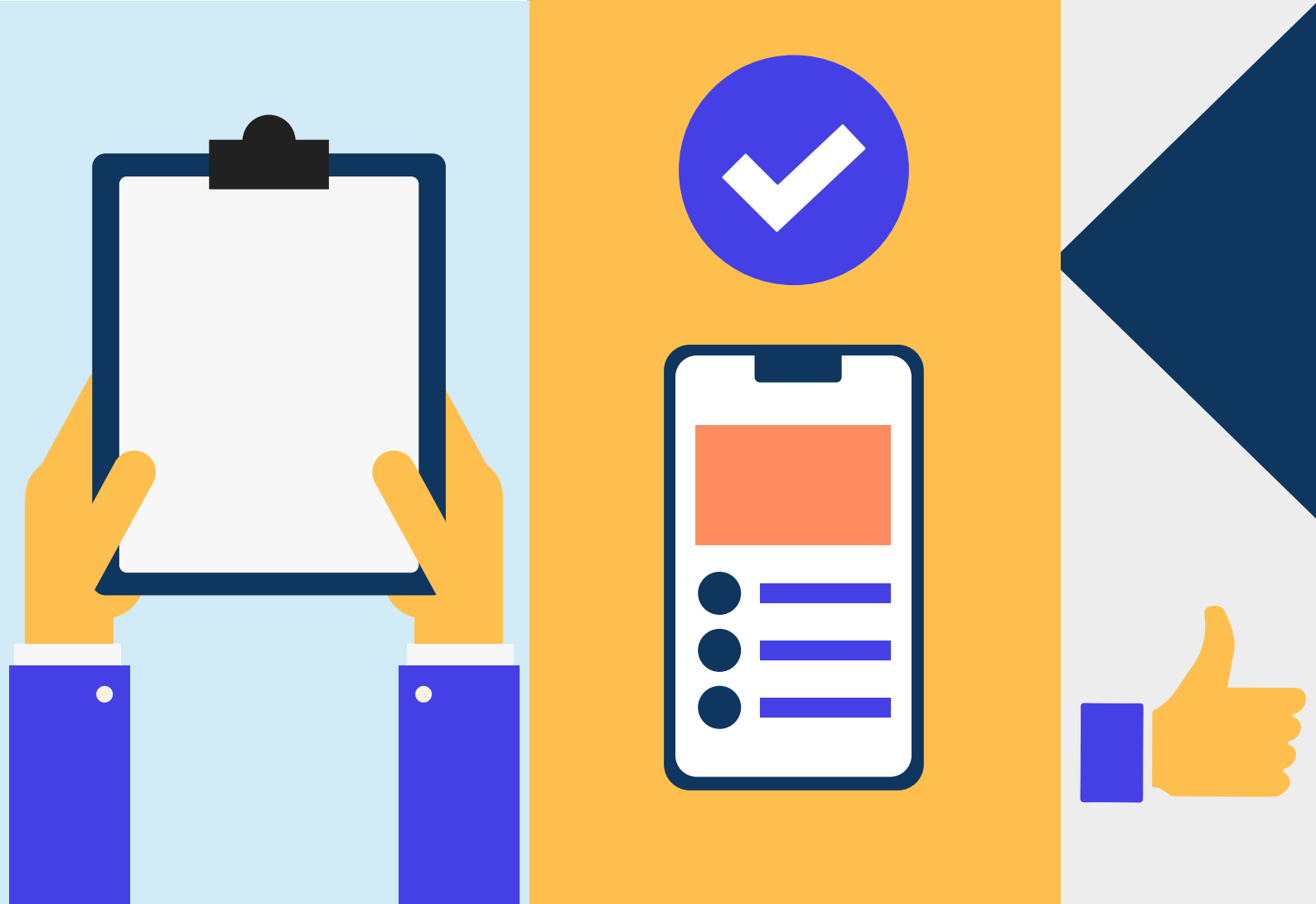### For more information

How to create an editorial calendar
8 timely tips for keeping an editorial calendar up to date

Support your case

Skilful structuring applies at every level, from the layout of your document to the construction of a sentence.

The right words in the wrong order will convince no one.

This chapter addresses the **structural foundations of your persuasion.**

Form is meaning

'The reader will sense a discomfort if the form of the story does not fit the facts. And the reader, on the other hand, will believe and delight in a story in which the form illuminates a significant meaning.'

– Donald Murray

Plan your structure in order to persuade. There are lots of ways to structure a document and argument, such as:

- The 'inverted pyramid' presents the most important information first.
- A profile or case study highlights the significance of a single experience.
- The traditional pyramid structure leads the reader gently to a persuasive conclusion.
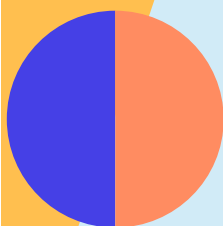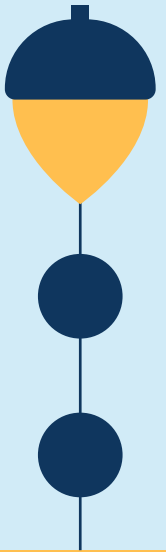
Choose a structure that complements what you have to say. If you're writing to introduce the reader to a new subject – i.e. someone at the top of the sales funnel – you'll want to go with one of the pyramids. Give them the facts so that they can make informed decisions later on. If you're speaking to someone who's further along the buyer's journey, you might want to go with a convincing case study instead. Use logic like this to pick the right format for your audience.

For more information

13 lessons in persuasion: conmen vs marketing pros
The ultimate guide to writing case studies that drive leads

Open with a punch, close with a kick

No matter what structure you choose, you need to [start and finish with a bang](#).

The opening, or 'lede' in journalism-speak, needs to do several things:

· Grab the reader's attention

· Tell them what the document is going to be about

· Set the tone of what they are about to read

Fail to hook the reader and the rest doesn't matter, so draft several options before you pick one. There are some common tricks to this that us copywriters make use of frequently:

· Opening with a punchy quote

· Laying out a relatable problem

· Creating a sense of empathy

· Impressing with a statistic

After the lede, the **kicker, or closing paragraph, is the second most important thing you'll write**. To do this, you'll want to:

- Be clear and concise

- Encapsulate and reiterate your central idea

- Make it explicit what action you want your reader to take

- Avoid introducing a new idea when you're coming to a conclusion

- Leave a memorable impression

Grab their attention from the outset and leave them with something to think about. It's a great way to ensure your writing is making an impact on your audience.

For more information

Surprise and delight: ten tips for writers

Step by step

'The paragraph is essentially a unit of thought, not of length.

– A H Fowler

Readers have a short attention span. In order to be persuasive, you have to hold that attention by feeding your content to them in small bites, and in a logical progression.

Each paragraph should lead on from the last and form a bridge to the next, but always contain a point of its own.

A good way to plan your paragraphs is to put yourself in your readers' shoes – and keep asking 'what do I want to know next?'
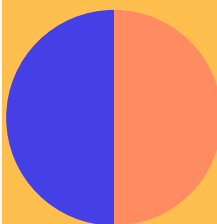
The ins and outs of sentences

Sentences themselves are units of structure. They're the basic elements that make up your paragraphs and organise your thoughts. It might sound obvious to state that, but thinking of sentences as building blocks is important when you're trying to create a rolling rhythm in your writing.

Avoid run-on sentences that just keep going with too many clauses and that make you forget where you started like this one just did...

Remember that **variety is the spice of life**. If all your sentences are the same length and structure, then your writing will be boring to read. Mix it up. Make it fun. And, keep the reader rolling forward.

Of course, taken to its logical conclusion, the smallest

For more information

How to write faster

Use your words

Win or lose by the words you choose.

Persuasive writing calls for clear, snappy and evocative language.

This chapter covers the **golden rules of word selection**.

Keep it clean

Keep your writing clear of messy roadblocks that trip your reader up and interrupt their train of thought:

- **Acronyms**. Always spell it out the first time and place the acronym in brackets. If you haven't used it in a while, spell it out again. You don't want your reader to have to stop and think what the letters stand for.

- **Symbols**. Copyright symbols, %, &, and even excessive punctuation all slow the reader down. The goal is to keep them reading, so spell it out.

- **Jargon**. When a reader hits a buzzword, their immediate response is to question it or wonder what it means. Don't exaggerate claims or use specialized language. You won't sound big or clever.

For more information

[Why you should be a punctuation minimalist](#)

Stay active

Avoid the passive. You want to develop a sense of rapport with your reader, so use 'we' and 'you' and always make it clear who has done what.

Also **use strong, active verbs**. Persuasive writing is lively: too many 'shoulds', 'woulds' and 'coulds' kills the excitement.

Good examples of strong active verbs include:

- Take
- Try
- Develop
- Use
- Challenge
- Engage
- Experiment
- Learn

The passive: If you can add 'by zombies' to your sentence and it still makes sense, then you've used the passive voice. Mistakes were made (by zombies). The passive should be avoided (by zombies).
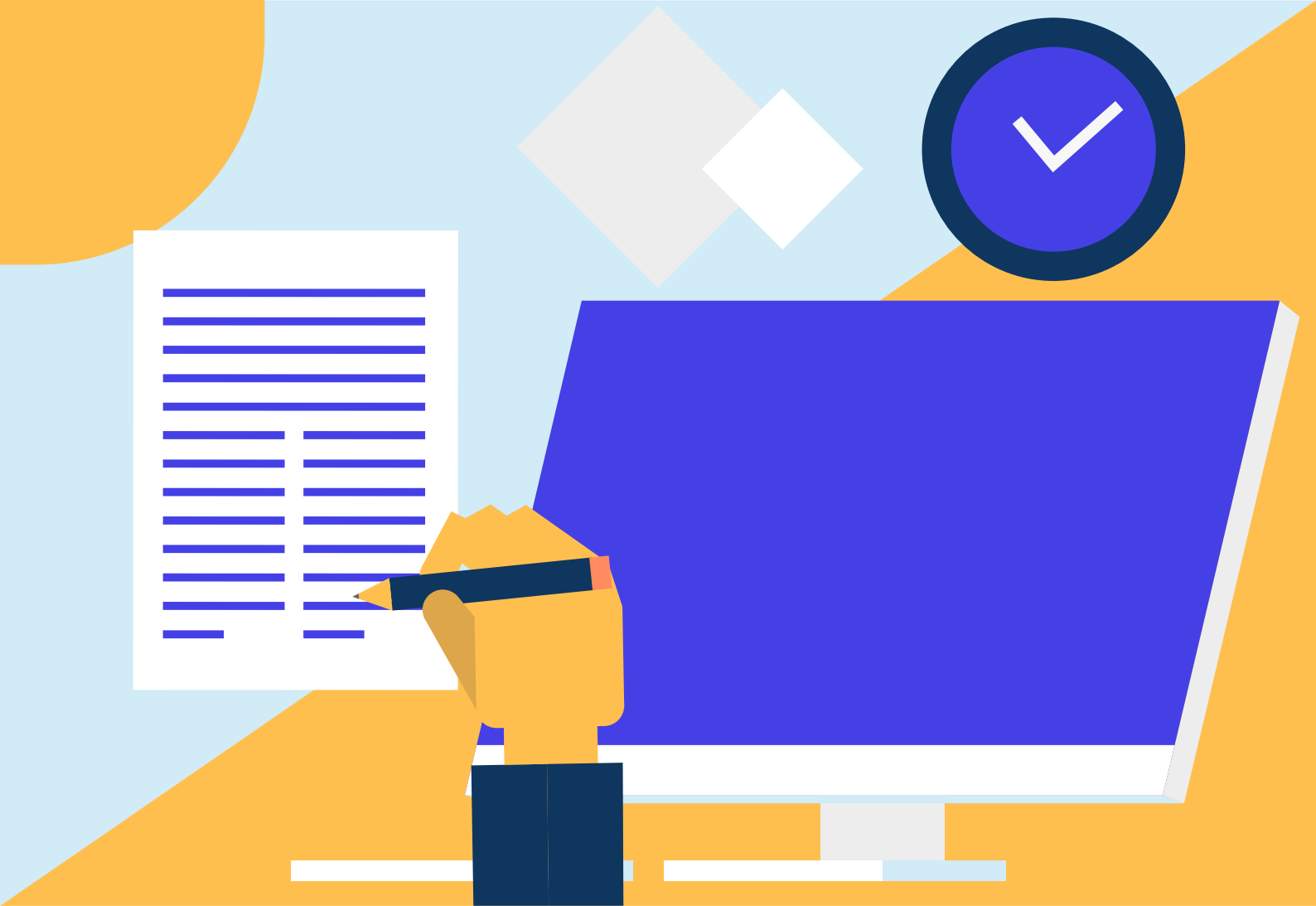
There's a great app that some of us at Articulate use called Hemingway. It'll let you know when you're using the passive voice, and highlight sentences that can be made more concise. This, of course, leads us on to **editing**.

Grammar for business.

Know the rules before you break the rules.

Download for free

Editing is essential

Nobody gets it right first time all the time.

Leave mistakes in your copy, and you're essentially saying that it's so dull the author couldn't even be bothered to read it all the way through. Editing isn't optional, it's essential.

This chapter tells you how minimise mistakes and optimise accuracy.

Spelling

'A synonym is a word you use when you can't spell the other one.' – Baltasar Gracián

Spelling mistakes cost money. Sometimes, they cost a lot of money. Errors create doubt and uncertainty in readers.

With dictionaries and spell-check, there are few excuses for having a spelling mistake in your work. But **beware of relying on the little red line in your word processor**. You can spell a word correctly, but it doesn't mean it's the correct word. Here are a few common errors:

They're is short for 'they are': They're earning more money. Their means ownership: They saw their profits increase.

To: I went to the park and I wanted **to** eat ice cream

Too: I had **too** many ice creams

Two: I should have stopped at **two**, but I had three

Affect is a verb, meaning 'to alter': It affected their profits. Effect is a noun, meaning the consequence or change: The effect on their profits was devastating.

If you get nothing else right, at least make sure you've covered these bases! They're a total freebie and can easily be checked by anyone.

For more information

[Ten writing mistakes that make you look unprofessional](#)
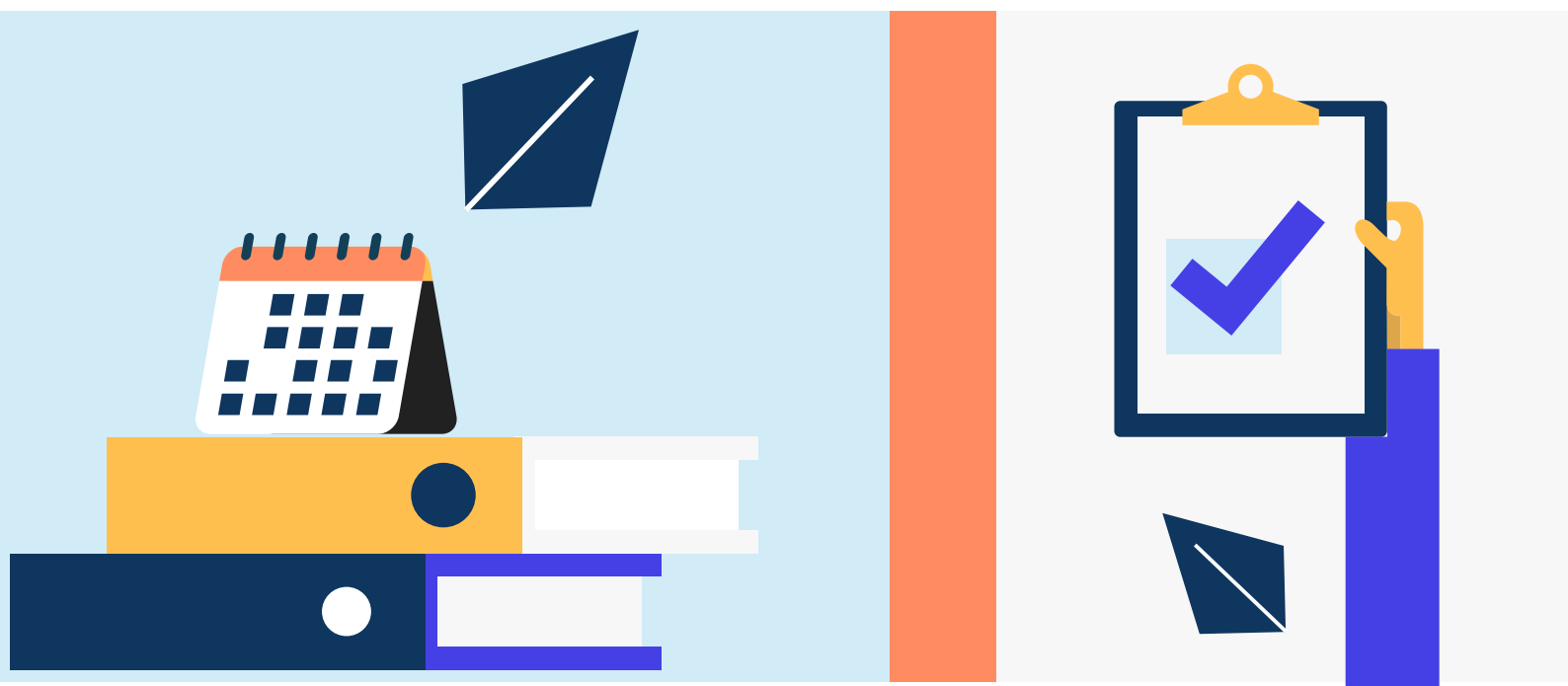
Grammar really does matter

Very few people know all the finer points of grammar, and that's fine. What matters is that you understand the importance of grammar when it comes to communicating clearly and effectively.

Grammar helps you say what you mean to say.
Going back to basics and brushing up on the essentials isn't just about memorising rules, it's about becoming more conscious of how you structure your sentences.

There are also a few rules (or supposed rules) that everyone likes to watch for:

- **Never split an infinitive**. For example 'to boldly go'. Even if it's a silly rule, get it wrong and it looks like you don't care.
- **Apostrophes**. Only use an apostrophe to show ownership: 'Sarah's informative article' or missing letters: 'I haven't read it.'
- **Companies are singular**: Since its founding, Corporation Z has made a lot of money. The company employs many people.

Cut your copy

'Perfection is attained, not when no more can be added, but when no more can be removed.' – Antoine de Saint Exupéry

- **You have no right to your readers' time**. The shorter and snappier your writing is, the more respectful you are being. Don't be precious about what you've written, and remember that you are writing to persuade, not to win the Pulitzer.

- Zap filler text. Pious throat clearing can go – just get straight to the point and delete the run up.
- Cut paragraphs before you cut sentences. It's better to change the structure of your piece by deleting low priority content than it is to try to make all your points but with fewer sentences.
- Write with information. If a sentence doesn't include a fact or make a strong, clear point, it's a candidate for deletion.

For more information

[Read 10 ways to slim down obese copy](#)

Proofread three times

Finally, **proofread**. The best way to catch any lingering mistakes is to read your writing three times.

1. Read through quickly to check for **structure, logic and sense**.
2. Take your time and watch for little typos, spelling and grammar mistakes. **Reading out loud** can help here, as you'll trip up on errors.
3. Third time's a charm. **Read your document backwards**, sentence by sentence. By this stage you are so familiar with your text that it's easy to see what you think you've written, not what you have written. Reading it back-to-front takes the sentences out of context and makes it easier for you to spot mistakes.

And that's it: you're done. Persuasive business writing made simple. Have a copy of this guide with you the next few times you're sitting down to write, and the process will become second-nature in no time. It may seem like a lot of information, but once it's internalised you'll have become a formidably persuasive writer.

Happy writing!

For more information

Download our proofreading checklist

Introducing Articulate

Not the usual yada yada

Articulate helps our customers grow by attracting and converting more customers online. We specialise in the technology sector.

We write persuasive copy and create remarkable content for some of the world's best-known companies, including:

We can help you implement content marketing and integrate it with your existing website and CRM systems.

For more information, visit our website:

www.articulatemarketing.com

Or follow us: