

THE BUSINESS WRITING WAY

A philosophy of business copywriting

Understanding Before Writing

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CLEAR WORDS. STRONGER BUSINESS.

Every business deserves to be understood before it is described.

This is the principle behind my approach to business copywriting.

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FOREWORD

Why this work exists

For many years I believed that my work was about writing.

Clients came to me to write copy for websites, brochures, corporate profiles, proposals and other business communication. My role, I thought, was to find the right words.

Over time, however, I came to realise that the writing itself was only the visible outcome of something far more important.

Long before the first sentence is written comes the work of understanding.

Every business has a story, a purpose, a personality and a way of creating value that cannot be discovered through assumptions or templates. It can only be uncovered through curiosity, careful listening, thoughtful questions and genuine conversation.

Without that understanding, even well-written copy risks describing a business rather than representing it.

This work did not begin as an attempt to explain my philosophy of business copywriting.

It began with a simple question posed during a conversation:

"What is your experience of me as a copywriter?"

As we explored that question, another emerged, and then another. Gradually a pattern became visible. The principles that had quietly guided my work for more than three decades were not new at all – they had simply never been gathered into one place or expressed deliberately.

In many ways, this work is as much an act of recognition as it is one of writing.

It is not a reinvention of my business.

It is the articulation of a philosophy that has been present throughout my career, often instinctively, but now consciously understood.

What follows in the various chapters of this work will therefore not define my philosophy.

It will express it.

My hope is that these pages will serve first as a compass for my own work, ensuring that the principles that have guided me in the past continue to guide me in the future.

If they also encourage others to pause, to listen more carefully and to seek understanding before writing, then this work will have achieved something beyond its original purpose.

Because I have come to believe that every business deserves more than good writing.

It deserves to be understood before it is described.

01

Understanding Before Writing

The central philosophy.

Understanding Before Writing

Every piece of business writing begins long before the first word appears on the page.

It begins with a decision - a decision to understand before attempting to describe.

That may seem obvious. Yet much business communication begins in exactly the opposite way. The conversation quickly turns to briefs, headlines, brochures, websites, marketing campaigns or social media posts. The focus shifts to what needs to be written before there is a shared understanding of what truly needs to be communicated.

Words become the starting point.

I have come to believe words should be the conclusion.

The most effective business writing is not the result of finding better words. It is the result of gaining a better understanding.

- Understanding the business.
- Understanding the people behind it.
- Understanding the customers it serves.
- Understanding the problem it solves.
- Understanding why it exists.

Only then does writing become purposeful.

Throughout my career, clients have often approached me believing they needed a writer. In reality, what they needed first was someone willing to listen carefully enough to understand their business from the inside.

That understanding cannot be rushed.

It grows through conversation, observation, research and thoughtful questions. Sometimes it is found in what is said. Just as often, it is found in what is left unsaid.

Businesses are rarely as simple as they first appear.

Behind every product is a reason it was created.

Behind every service is a commitment that has usually been shaped over many years.

Behind every organisation are people whose values influence decisions long before those decisions are expressed in words.

Writing that ignores these realities may still be technically correct.

It may even be persuasive.

But it is unlikely to be truly representative.

Representation requires something more.

It requires the discipline to suspend assumptions, the curiosity to keep asking questions and the patience to allow understanding to emerge before language attempts to capture it.

This is why I have never regarded writing as the first step in my work.

Writing is the visible expression of understanding.

It gives form to insights that have already been discovered.

When the understanding is shallow, the writing usually is too.

When the understanding is genuine, the writing gains a quality that is difficult to imitate because it reflects something real.

For me, this is not simply a preferred way of working. It is the foundation upon which every successful project is built.

Everything else – strategy, messaging, structure and copy – follows from this first principle.

Understanding comes before writing.

Always.

REFLECTION

Every sentence tells two stories: the one the reader sees, and the one the writer understood before putting pen to paper. The quality of the first will always depend on the depth of the second.

02

The First Principle

The foundation.

The First Principle

Every profession has a first principle.

A truth so fundamental that everything else depends upon it.

In engineering, it may be the laws of physics.

In medicine, it begins with the patient.

In architecture, it begins with purpose, people and place.

For me, the first principle has become remarkably simple.

Every business deserves to be understood before it is described.

It is easy to read that sentence as a philosophy of writing.

It is not.

It is a philosophy of professional practice.

Long before words are chosen, there is a responsibility to understand what those words are intended to represent.

A business is more than its products.

More than its services.

More than its marketing.

It is the expression of decisions, values, ambitions, relationships and commitments that have often developed over many years.

Reducing all of that to a collection of attractive sentences without first understanding it does a disservice to both the business and the people behind it.

Understanding is therefore not a stage in the process.

It is the process.

Writing simply makes that understanding visible.

This principle also changes the relationship between writer and client.

The client is no longer regarded as someone providing information for a writing assignment.

Instead, they become a partner in a shared process of discovery.

Together, we seek to uncover what is distinctive, meaningful and true about the business before deciding how it should be communicated.

Sometimes that process confirms what the client already knows.

Sometimes it reveals strengths that have become so familiar they are no longer recognised.

Occasionally, it challenges assumptions that have quietly shaped the way the business has described itself for years.

Those moments require honesty.

They also require trust.

But trust cannot be built through expertise alone.

It grows when clients recognise that the objective is not to produce clever copy, but to represent their business faithfully.

That is why I have never measured the success of a project by the quality of the writing alone.

The writing matters.

It always will.

But it is the visible outcome of something less obvious and far more valuable.

A business that has been carefully understood gains something before a single word is written.

It gains clarity.

And clarity has a remarkable effect.

It simplifies decisions.

It strengthens messages.

It brings consistency to communication.

Most importantly, it gives businesses the confidence to speak in a voice that genuinely reflects who they are.

That is why this first principle – every business deserves to be understood before it is described – extends well beyond writing.

Once understood, it influences every conversation, every presentation, every proposal, every page of a website and every piece of communication that follows.

It is not merely the beginning of the process.

It becomes the standard against which every decision is measured.

Because if a business has not first been understood, it cannot truly be represented.

And if it cannot be represented faithfully, no amount of polished writing can compensate for what is missing.

Everything begins here.

REFLECTION

Understanding is not something we do before the work begins. It is the work. Everything that follows is simply its expression.

The Business Writing Way

The philosophy that has quietly guided your work for more than three decades.

The Business Writing Way

There are many ways to write.

There are many ways to approach a communication project.

Over the years I have discovered that what distinguishes one professional from another is seldom the quality of the writing alone.

It is the quality of the thinking that precedes it.

The Business Writing Way is not a methodology.

It is not a proprietary process.

Nor is it a collection of techniques designed to produce better copy.

It is a way of practising the profession.

Like any professional philosophy, it is built upon habits rather than rules.

It begins with curiosity.

Not curiosity for its own sake, but a genuine desire to understand what makes one business different from another.

Every organisation has its own history, culture, ambitions and challenges.

No two businesses deserve exactly the same questions because no two businesses are exactly the same.

Curiosity naturally leads to listening.

Listening is often misunderstood as simply hearing what a client says.

In practice, it is much more demanding.

It requires setting aside assumptions, resisting the temptation to think ahead to the writing itself, giving full attention to the conversation, asking the right questions, and reflecting on what is truly important.

Sometimes the most important insight is contained in a passing remark.

Sometimes it emerges only after a client has been given the time and confidence to reflect more deeply.

Listening creates the conditions for discovery.

Discovery, in turn, leads to clarity.

Clarity is one of the most valuable outcomes of the process.

Clients often begin a project believing they need clearer communication.

What they frequently discover is that they first needed clearer thinking.

As ideas become more clearly understood, the writing becomes more straightforward.

Messages become more consistent.

Decisions become easier.

The words begin to organise themselves because the underlying understanding has become coherent.

The Business Writing Way also values simplicity.

Not simplistic thinking, but disciplined simplicity.

The kind of simplicity that emerges after complexity has been explored and understood.

Simple writing is rarely the result of simple work.

More often, it is the product of careful thought, thoughtful editing and the willingness to remove anything that distracts from the central message.

Another characteristic of this way of working is respect.

Respect for the client's experience, respect for the years they have invested in building their business, and respect for the responsibility of representing that business accurately.

Writing is never about placing my voice above theirs.

It is about helping their voice become clearer, more confident and more recognisable.

This approach also demands humility.

No matter how many businesses I have worked with, I begin each new project knowing there is much I do not yet understand.

Experience certainly helps me ask better questions.

But it never gives me permission to assume I already know the answers.

That mindset keeps curiosity alive.

It keeps learning alive.

And it ensures that every client receives the same careful attention, whether they lead a small family business, a start-up, or a well-established organisation.

Looking back, I realise that I did not consciously set out to develop a philosophy called The Business Writing Way.

The name came much later.

The practice came first.

It grew quietly through conversations, projects, successes, mistakes and many long hours spent trying to understand businesses before attempting to describe them.

Only in reflecting on those years did I recognise the common thread – in fact, the golden thread – running through them all.

The Business Writing Way is simply the name I now give to that thread.

REFLECTION

A philosophy is rarely invented. More often, it is recognised after years of consistent practice.

What Clients Are Really Looking For

Moving beyond “website copy”.

What Clients Are Really Looking For

When clients first make contact, the conversation usually begins with a practical request.

They need a website.

A brochure.

A company profile.

A proposal.

A presentation.

Sometimes they ask for help with a marketing campaign or a series of articles.

The request is almost always framed in terms of what needs to be written.

That is entirely understandable.

Words are the visible outcome they hope to receive.

Yet experience has taught me that the writing itself is rarely the real reason they came.

Beneath every request lies a deeper need.

Some businesses struggle to explain what makes them different.

Others know exactly what they do but find it difficult to express it with confidence.

Newcomers are excited about what they're creating, but do not yet know how to describe or present it.

Some have grown so familiar with their own business that they can no longer see what customers find distinctive.

Others have changed over time, while their communication has remained rooted in an earlier version of who they are.

In almost every case, the challenge is not simply one of language – it is one of recognition.

Before a business can be described well, it first needs to recognise itself clearly.

That process cannot be hurried.

It asks questions that go beyond products and services.

Why does the business exist?

What values shape its decisions?

What promises does it consistently keep?

Why do customers return?

What experience does it create that competitors find difficult to imitate?

The answers are seldom found in a previous brochure or an outdated website.

They emerge through conversation, reflection and careful exploration.

As clarity develops, something interesting begins to happen.

Clients often stop talking about the words they want.

Instead, they begin talking about the business they want others to understand.

The conversation shifts.

Writing is no longer the destination.

It becomes the means through which that understanding is shared.

Perhaps the greatest value a professional writer can bring is not the ability to write well, it is the ability to help a business see itself more clearly.

That clarity creates confidence.

And confidence changes the way a business communicates.

Messages become simpler because they are rooted in genuine understanding.

Decisions become easier because they are guided by clearly expressed values.

Marketing becomes more consistent because it reflects an identity that is already well understood.

Trust grows for much the same reason.

People trust businesses that know who they are.

Not because they have the loudest message.

Not because they make the boldest claims.

But because their communication feels authentic, coherent and recognisable.

That is why I have come to believe that clients are rarely looking for writing alone.

Whether they realise it or not, they are looking for understanding.

They are looking for clarity.

They are looking for confidence.

The writing simply gives those qualities a voice.

REFLECTION

The most valuable thing a writer can sometimes give a client is not a better sentence, but a clearer understanding of themselves.

The Craft of Understanding

How understanding is built.

The Craft of Understanding

Understanding is often spoken about as though it were a personal quality.

Someone is either naturally curious or they are not.

Someone is either a good listener or they are not.

Experience has taught me otherwise.

Understanding is a craft.

Like any craft, it can be practised, refined and strengthened over time until it becomes second nature.

It begins with curiosity.

Not the curiosity that seeks interesting facts, but the curiosity that genuinely wants to understand another person's world.

Curiosity asks questions without assuming the answers.

It remains open to being surprised.

It accepts that the first explanation is not always the most important one.

Good questions are therefore among the most valuable tools a professional can possess.

Not because they demonstrate knowledge, but because they invite discovery.

A well-timed question often uncovers more than a carefully prepared presentation.

It encourages people to explain not only what they do, but why they do it.

It reveals motivations, values and experiences that might otherwise remain hidden.

Listening gives those answers room to develop.

True listening is an active discipline.

It involves patience, attention, observation and reflection.

It means noticing not only what is said, but also what receives emphasis, what is repeated and what is quietly passed over.

Sometimes clients answer a question immediately.

Sometimes the most meaningful answer arrives several minutes later, after they have had time to think.

Those moments cannot be hurried.

Observation extends understanding beyond conversation.

A business communicates long before anyone begins speaking.

Its workplace.

Its people.

Its interactions with customers.

Its products.

Its website.

Its photographs.

Its proposals.

Every detail tells part of the story.

Sometimes those details reinforce one another.

Sometimes they reveal a gap between what a business says and what it consistently does.

Research provides another layer of understanding.

Not research for the sake of gathering information, but research that places the business within its wider context.

Who are its customers?

What challenges do they face?

What alternatives are available?

What changes are shaping the industry?

Understanding grows stronger when individual conversations are supported by a broader awareness of the environment in which the business operates.

None of these disciplines – curiosity, questioning, listening, observation or research – exist independently.

They work together.

Each one deepens the others.

Together they create something that is difficult to achieve through writing alone.

Perspective.

Perspective allows patterns to emerge.

It reveals connections that are not immediately obvious.

It helps distinguish between what is merely interesting and what is genuinely important.

Above all, the craft of understanding requires respect.

Respect acknowledges that every business represents years of effort, decisions, risks and relationships.

No business should ever be reduced to assumptions or stereotypes.

Every one deserves the opportunity to be understood on its own terms.

That is why I have never regarded the discovery phase as preparation for the real work.

It is the real work.

The writing that follows is simply the visible expression of everything that has already been learned.

REFLECTION

Understanding does not arrive all at once. It is built, question by question, conversation by conversation, until clarity quietly begins to emerge.

From Understanding to Words

How strategy becomes messaging, and messaging becomes copy.

From Understanding to Words

Writing does not begin with a blank page.

By the time I begin writing, much of the real work has already taken place.

Questions have been asked.

Ideas have been explored.

Assumptions have been challenged.

Patterns have begun to emerge.

The business has started to reveal itself.

The task is no longer to invent a message – it is to recognise one.

That distinction changes everything.

Many people think of writing as an act of creation.

There is certainly creativity involved.

Yet, in business writing, I have found that the greatest challenge is seldom finding clever words – it is finding truthful ones.

Words should never compete with understanding.

They should reveal it.

When understanding is clear, language often becomes surprisingly simple. There is less need for exaggeration.

Less need for unnecessary complexity.

Less temptation to sound impressive.

Instead, the writing begins to reflect the character of the business itself.

Some businesses speak with quiet confidence.

Others with warmth.

Some with technical precision.

Others with a strong sense of purpose.

The role of the writer is not to impose a voice.

It is to recognise the voice that is already there and help it become clearer.

This is why I rarely think in terms of writing copy.

I think in terms of expressing understanding.

Every heading.

Every sentence.

Every paragraph.

Every call to action.

Each one should contribute to a single, coherent picture of the business.

When the understanding is genuine, consistency follows naturally, messages support one another, and ideas reinforce one another.

The business begins to sound like itself, regardless of whether someone is reading a website, a proposal, a brochure or a LinkedIn article.

That consistency is not achieved through rigid rules or carefully memorised phrases.

It grows from having a clear understanding of what the business stands for and how it creates value.

Good writing therefore becomes an act of alignment.

The language aligns with the values.

The tone aligns with the culture.

The message aligns with the experience customers can expect.

When those things come together, something important happens – the writing becomes believable.

Readers may not know why they trust what they are reading.

They simply recognise that it feels genuine.

That is because authenticity cannot be added during editing.

It must already exist in the understanding from which the writing grows.

Looking back over many years, I have realised that the words themselves were never my true product.

Understanding was.

The writing was simply the form it happened to take.

REFLECTION

Words have the greatest impact when they stop drawing attention to themselves and begin revealing the truth of the business behind them.

07

The Partnership

How you work with clients.

The Partnership

Every successful project begins with understanding.

It is completed through partnership.

For many years, I thought of my role primarily as that of a professional writer.

Over time, I came to realise that writing was only one part of the relationship.

The more important role was that of a trusted thinking partner.

Every client brings something essential to a project.

They bring the experience of building their business.

They understand its history, its challenges, its ambitions, and its successes and disappointments.

No writer can replace that knowledge.

At the same time, familiarity creates its own challenges.

People who have spent years building a business often find it difficult to see it as others do.

What has become ordinary to them may be the very thing that distinguishes them in the marketplace.

That is where partnership becomes valuable.

My role is not to tell clients who they are.

Nor is it simply to accept every description without question.

It is to create the conditions in which we can discover the business together.

That requires openness from both sides.

Clients need the freedom to reflect honestly on their business.

I need the humility to recognise that there is always more to understand.

The best conversations are rarely rushed.

They move naturally between facts and stories.

Between practical decisions and personal convictions.

Between today's challenges and the reasons why the business exists in the first place.

Often, the most valuable insights emerge unexpectedly.

A passing remark.

A forgotten story.

An example shared almost in passing.

These moments cannot be planned.

They can only be recognised when both persons are fully engaged in the conversation.

Partnership also requires honesty.

Occasionally, I may challenge an assumption.

I may question whether a familiar message still reflects the business accurately.

Or I may suggest that what a client regards as ordinary is, in fact, one of their greatest strengths.

Those conversations are not always comfortable.

But they are always intended to serve the same purpose – to represent the business as truthfully as possible.

Trust grows through that shared commitment.

Not because we always agree.

But because we are working towards the same goal.

When clients know that every question, every suggestion and every draft is motivated by a desire to understand rather than persuade, the relationship changes.

Writing becomes collaborative rather than transactional.

Ideas are explored rather than defended.

The finished work no longer feels like something produced by a writer for a client.

It feels like something discovered together.

Looking back over the years, I have come to believe that the quality of the partnership often determines the quality of the writing.

Not because partnership produces better words.

But because it produces trust and deeper understanding.

And deeper understanding always finds its way into the writing.

REFLECTION

The strongest business relationships are built not on agreement alone, but on a shared commitment to understanding what is true.

The Standard

What you promise yourself and what clients can expect.

The Standard

Every profession is ultimately defined by the standards it chooses to uphold.

Some standards are imposed from outside.

Others are adopted voluntarily.

The standards that matter most are the ones we continue to uphold even when nobody is watching.

Over the years, I have come to realise that the quality of my work is determined long before a client reads the finished document.

It is determined by the standard I set for myself.

That standard begins with understanding.

I cannot represent a business faithfully if I have not first taken the time to understand it.

No amount of experience allows me to shortcut that responsibility.

Every new client deserves the same curiosity, the same careful attention, the same willingness to ask questions before offering answers, and the same respect for the business they have built.

That standard also shapes the writing itself.

Clarity will always matter more than complexity.

Accuracy more than exaggeration.

Authenticity more than persuasion.

Writing should never promise what the business cannot deliver.

Nor should it overlook the qualities that genuinely make the business distinctive. The standard extends beyond the words on the page.

It influences how I prepare for meetings.

How I listen.

How I respond to feedback.

How I handle differing opinions.

How carefully I edit.

How willing I am to revise my own thinking when a better understanding emerges.

Professional standards are sometimes associated with perfection.

I do not believe perfection is attainable.

But I do believe integrity is.

Integrity means remaining faithful to what has been discovered.

It means resisting the temptation to choose the most impressive wording when a simpler expression is more truthful.

It means remembering that the purpose of business writing is not to attract attention to itself, but to represent the business with honesty and clarity.

Clients place considerable trust in those who communicate on their behalf.

That trust should never be taken for granted.

Every project is an opportunity to earn it again.

Looking back over more than three decades, I cannot remember every document I have written.

But I do remember the businesses, the conversations, and the people.

Those memories remind me that good business writing has never been measured only by the quality of its language.

It is measured by whether the people behind the business recognise themselves in the words.

That is the standard I continue to pursue.

Not because it can always be achieved perfectly, but because it is the standard that gives meaning to the work.

REFLECTION

Professional standards are revealed not by what we say we value, but by what we consistently choose to practise.

Looking Forward

Applying the philosophy to every future project.

Looking Forward

A philosophy is never finished.

It continues to develop through experience, reflection and the willingness to keep learning.

That is certainly true of The Business Writing Way.

The principles described in these pages were not created overnight.

They emerged gradually through conversations, projects, successes, disappointments and the privilege of working alongside businesses from many different industries.

I have no doubt they will continue to evolve.

Not because the foundation will change, but because every new client offers another opportunity to deepen my understanding.

Every business has something to teach.

Every conversation has the potential to reveal a new perspective.

Every project reminds me that curiosity remains one of the most valuable qualities a professional can possess.

Looking forward, I do not see this philosophy as something that belongs only in a book.

It belongs wherever business communication takes place.

It belongs in the conversations that begin a new project.

In the questions that shape a strategy.

In the words chosen for a website.

In a proposal.

In a company profile.

In a presentation.

In an article.

And in every other opportunity to represent a business with honesty and clarity.

It also belongs in the decisions that are never seen.

The decision to listen a little longer.

To ask one more question.

To test an assumption.

To rethink a familiar phrase.

To choose understanding before certainty.

These quiet decisions seldom attract attention.

Yet they influence every page that eventually reaches a reader.

As I look back over more than three decades, I am grateful for every client who trusted me with their business story.

They have shaped this philosophy as much as I have.

Without their openness, their questions and their willingness to explore their businesses more deeply, these pages could never have been written.

In that sense, this philosophy is not mine alone – it is the product of many shared conversations.

Those conversations will continue.

New businesses will emerge.

Existing businesses will evolve.

New challenges will require new ways of thinking.

Technology will continue to change the tools we use and the speed at which we communicate.

None of that changes the first principle.

Every business still deserves to be understood before it is described.

If that principle remains at the centre of my work, then I believe the writing will continue to serve the businesses behind it with integrity, clarity and respect.

That is the future to which I remain committed.

Not simply as a writer.

But as a professional whose first responsibility is to understand.

REFLECTION

The future of business writing will always depend less on the tools we use than on the quality of understanding we bring to the people we serve.

THE BUSINESS WRITING WAY

Every business has a story.

Every story deserves to be understood.

And only then does it deserve to be told.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Johan du Preez is the founder of Business Writing, a business copywriting practice based in Stellenbosch, South Africa.

For more than three decades he has helped businesses communicate with greater clarity through websites, company profiles, proposals, brochures, articles and other business communication.

The philosophy described in The Business Writing Way reflects the principles that have guided his work throughout his career.

BUSINESS WRITING

Helping small and medium-sized businesses communicate with greater clarity through thoughtful copywriting.

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