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## Clinton native aims to improve business workers' writing

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**By Diane McLaughlin, Correspondent**

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Kim Kerrigan wants writers to grab his attention in the first line. In the business world, he too often finds impersonal and unfocused writing that overlooks the reader altogether.

“You need to make it so interesting they’re going to want to read it,” Mr. Kerrigan said. “Not like they have to read it.”

A native of Clinton who now lives in Malden, Mr. Kerrigan is president and chief training specialist at Corporate Classrooms, a business communications company he co-founded in 1987 with his partner, Steven Wells. Along with offering workshops and training programs, Mr. Kerrigan and Mr. Wells recently co-authored and published two books: “Sound Advice for Successful Writing: Creating Powerful E-mails and Letters in Today’s Workplace” and “Punctuation and Language Usage Made Easy: Concise Grammar Guidelines for Busy Professionals.”

Mr. Kerrigan and Mr. Wells consider writing critical to today’s business world. Poor writing affects not just the reader’s experience but also worker productivity and company costs.

They’re not alone in their view. Business writer and consultant Josh Bernoff concluded in his 2016 report “The State of Business Writing, 2016” that poor writing is costing U.S. businesses nearly \$400 billion a year. His survey of 547 business writers showed 81 percent said they wasted time reading poorly written material.

Holly Lawrence, director of the business communication program at the Isenberg School of Management at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst, sees business writing as a genre that people need to learn.

“Many employers would like their employees to be well-trained in how to write for business,” Ms. Lawrence said. “There is a call from organizations and employers that students learn the genre of business writing.”

While not familiar with Corporate Classrooms, Ms. Lawrence said she was not surprised to hear about their business writing curriculum.

“I am not sure that any student in the United States gets enough exposure to [business writing],” Ms. Lawrence said. “It’s a process, it takes time.”

Mr. Kerrigan and Mr. Wells developed their books from their training programs. In “Sound Advice for Successful Writing,” the authors encourage business writers to adopt a “you viewpoint.” They define that as “a style of writing that focuses on your readers’ needs, interests, and expectations while it emphasizes the main message you wish to communicate to your readers.”

The authors identify six ways writers can achieve the “you viewpoint”: by being organized, conversational, clear, personal, creative and positive. Key components include:

- Focusing on only one purpose for each letter or email.
- Avoiding “businessese” — pedantic language, clichés and redundant expressions.
- Adhering to basic grammar rules.
- Using personal pronouns and the active voice.
- Trying creativity in the opening sentence (such as a brief anecdote or open-ended question).
- Maintaining an upbeat and gracious tone, even in uncomfortable or sensitive messages.

Mr. Wells said letters and emails often involve a request or instructions from the writer. Using the “you viewpoint” helps persuade readers to honor the request.

Their books and training programs help writers recognize their responsibility to readers, Mr. Kerrigan said.

“Unlike speech, where you get a chance to repeat yourself, writing is like a one-shot deal,” Mr. Kerrigan said. “It’s your responsibility as a writer to make the message so clear that the reader cannot miss it the first time.”

Steven Murphy of Citrix Systems Inc. hired Corporate Classrooms a few years ago to train approximately 30 salespeople at the software firm’s Bedford and New Jersey offices. Mr. Murphy, who is now vice president of enterprise sales for the western region of the United States, said Mr. Kerrigan was effective in helping employees sharpen their skills.

“It was almost like an awareness or awakening,” Mr. Murphy said. “People know how to write — they understand the concepts — it’s just organizing their thoughts and putting some methodology in place.”

Mr. Murphy said taking salespeople away from their work was expensive, but the staff responded favorably to the ways Mr. Kerrigan tailored the class to their needs.

When discussing younger employees, Mr. Kerrigan said texting is “hurting our communications” because the writer does not need to think through how to compose the message.

Ms. Lawrence of the Isenberg School of Management said business students are open to improving their business writing skills, a priority for her program. But she has heard employers express concerns about the “touch-screen oriented” generation accustomed to writing text messages.

“[Employers] are really struggling with employees who can’t quite make the transition smoothly to the kind of writing they need to do,” Ms. Lawrence said. “They’re using that kind of text-talk, if you will, in something that needs to be a little more serious and professional.”

But Mr. Kerrigan and Mr. Wells see a potential benefit from the concise writing associated with technology. In “Sound Advice for Successful Writing,” the authors write: “As it becomes more technological and streamlined, the modern workplace is becoming more humanistic in its approach to both written and oral communication. Sophisticated business correspondents, consequently, are writing with fewer words, yet with words that convey more compassion and graciousness to their readers.”

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