

Brief Guide to Business Writing

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Introduction

In our daily lives, at school and on the job, there is a need for effective written communication skills. We have all turned in a report at one time or another that wasn't written as well as it could have been. Poor writing reflects badly on us, it limits the influence we can have on others, and it steals time away from those who do to decipher what we mean. To avoid these problems, there are a few commonly accepted principles of writing that we can follow. The purpose of this writing guide is to outline these principles for you. You should keep this guide and refer to often; especially when you are writing a paper for a professor or a letter to your boss.

The manual is broken into three sections. The first section deals with the document as a whole. This section addresses issues including the best format to use in certain situations, word choice, and document flow.

The second section deals with paragraphs, their structure and function. It addresses issues such as paragraph generalization and support, and transitions.

The third section of this guide will deal with the individual sentence structure. This includes writing a complete sentence, wordiness, and punctuation. This section finally touches on the active/passive word use.

The first appendix to this guide contains a diagram, taken from Munter (1997), about the writing process. This diagram divides writing into five steps: (1) Gather, (2) Organize, (3) Focus, (4) Draft, and (5) Edit. An important feature of this diagram is the arrows that return to the beginning after each step. This is an important feature to emphasize because it highlights the fact that writing is an iterative process. Good writing does not appear magically, nor is it a limited skill available only to those with

brilliant minds. All good writing goes through a process of thoughtful analysis (gathering, organizing, and focusing ideas), drafting, editing, and rewriting. This guide will help you make some improvements to your writing, but nothing can compensate for thought and time. We highly recommend that develop a habit of finishing a draft well before the due date so you can spend consider time editing and rewriting. Moreover, we encourage you to enlist a friend or colleague who can critique your writing and make it more effective.

The remaining appendices to this guide contains examples of document format, including a business letter, a memo, and an e-mail; commonly misused words; a reading resource list; and self-grading checklist to use in your own writing.

If you have comments or suggestions about this guide, please send them to Dr. Brown at kenneth-g-brown@uiowa.edu. We hope that you find this brief guide useful in class and at work!

I. Document Guidelines

Purpose and Audience

Your purpose and your audience will determine many critical features of your document, including your format, strategy, and word choice. So the first thing to determine when you are writing a document is -- Who are your primary and secondary audiences? Primary audiences are those who receive the communication directly. Secondary, or "hidden", audiences include anyone may indirectly receive a copy of the communication. These include anyone who will receive a copy, need to approve, will hear about, or be affected by your message. You should determine the level of knowledge, interest, and any potential biases the audience may have with regard to your message.

Format

Business Letter. A formal business letter is preferred when presenting information to a professor, a superior, or when the communication will be seen by many. See appendix A for a sample business letter.

Memo. A memo (memorandum) is a less formal style that is used when the information being communicated is of less importance, does not leave the office, and when communicating with subordinates. See appendix B for one sample format.

E-mail. E-mail is the least formal of the styles presented here and should only be used for informal communication such as reminders, questions, or when preferred by the recipient. It is important to note that e-mail is public domain. No confidential messages should be sent via e-mail unless you have company technology and policy that allows for secure communication. See appendix C for a sample e-mail.

Strategy

It is important to know your audience's interests and biases because they will have a tremendous impact on your communication strategy.

If your audience has a high interest level in your communication you can go directly to the point without taking much time to arouse their interest. Build a good, logical argument. If your audience has a low interest level, you should use more of a tell/sell style to motivate the reader's interest. Keep your message as short as possible, long documents are intimidating and listeners tend to tune out what seems like rambling.

You should also know your audience's probable bias: positive or negative. If your audience is positive or neutral, reinforce their existing attitude by stating the benefits that will accrue from your message. If they have a negative bias, try one of these techniques: (1) Limit your request to the smallest one possible. (2) Respond to anticipated objections; you will be more persuasive by stating and rejecting alternatives than having them devise their own, which they will be less likely to reject. (3) State points you think they will agree with first; if audience members are sold on two or three key features of your proposal, they tend to sell themselves on the other features as well. (4) Get them to agree that there is a problem, then solve the problem. Finally, if you are liable to encounter strong opposition use the "inoculate" technique. List the opposing arguments and explain why you rejected them. If you think they will not hear strong opposition, don't bother to inoculate them.

Word Choice

Overuse of jargon or acronyms in a communication make document hard to read, even if the primary audience is familiar with them. You should limit the use of jargon and acronyms in a communication to as few as possible, particularly if your primary or secondary audiences are not as well versed in their use. You must also watch for confusing or incorrect word choice in your document. See appendix D for a list of commonly misused words.

Structure

The introduction is an important place to set up the underlying flow for the rest of the document. An effective introduction accomplishes three aims: It builds readers interest, explains your purpose for writing, and it provides a preview of the document.

Build the readers interest. One method to build interest is to refer to an existing situation, to establish a context. For example:

As we discussed yesterday,
As you know, we are currently planning for the new fiscal year.

Explain your purpose for writing. Let your readers know your reason or purpose for writing. That way they can read with that purpose in mind. Example:

This report summarizes the results of our first-quarter sales.
I am writing to solicit your opinion on this proposal.

Provide a preview. Include a brief "table of contents," so your readers will be able to comprehend your writing more easily and to choose specific sections for reference, if they wish. Example:

This report is divided into three main sections: (1) what equipment you need, (2) how to use the equipment, and (3) how to maintain the equipment.

The end of your document is another emphatic place in the document. One option – if you are using the direct approach and if the document is long – is to restate your main ideas. Obviously you don't need to restate your main points in a one page memo or letter. Or, if you are using the indirect approach, state your conclusions or recommendations. Perhaps the most typical closing is to end with an "action step" or feedback mechanism." Examples include:

I'll call you next Thursday to discuss this matter.

Please let me know if I can be of any further assistance.
Once I have your approval, I will proceed with this plan.

Three pitfalls to avoid in the closing include: (1) introducing a completely new topic that might divert your reader's attention from your communication objective, (2) restating your main idea in pompous words, or (3) apologizing for or undercutting your argument at the end.

II. Paragraph Guidelines

Generalization and support

Each paragraph should begin with a generalization, and every sentence in the paragraph should support the generalization. You may start your generalization in either of two ways. For a standard paragraph use a topic sentence. For sections, use a heading or subheading.

Example topic sentences

The new brochures are full of major printing errors.
Three causes contributed to the problem at Plant X.

Example headings

Printing Errors in Brochure.

Causes of Plant X problems.

Transitions

To ensure your document flows from one idea to another throughout its entirety, use appropriate transitions. This can be accomplished using traditional transitional words or phrases. The following example illustrates achieving coherence through the words "first," "second," and "third."

XYZ Company should follow these recommendations to clear up its financial crisis. First, cut back on labor, outside services, and overhead expenses. Second, do not approach shareholders for more capital. Third, renegotiate short-term liabilities with the bank.

Here are some frequently used transitions:

To signal - use transitions

Addition or amplification and, further, besides, next, moreover, in addition, again, also, too, finally, similarly, subsequently, last

Contrast but, or, nor, yet, still, however, nevertheless, on the contrary, on the other hand, conversely, although

Example for example, for instance, such as, thus, that is

Sequence first, second, third, next, then

Conclusion therefore, thus, then, in conclusion, consequently, as a result, accordingly, finally

Time or place at the same time, simultaneously, above, below, further on, so far, until now

Carefully consider the nature of your transition when you select one of these words or phrases. Even within category there are substantial differences in the point conveyed.

III. Sentences

Complete Sentences

A complete sentence contains both a subject and a verb. Do not make the mistake of breaking sentences into two. In other words, do not use periods in the place of commas.

Write I met them in Chicago on their way home from a European vacation.
Instead of I met them in Chicago. Coming home from a vacation in Europe.

Wordiness

Use of extra or "flowery" words is irrational and uneconomical in business writing. You should use no more words than are necessary to convey your meaning.

Flowery

The question as to whether
There is no doubt but that
He is a man who
In a hasty manner
This is a subject that
The reason why is that
In spite of the fact that
The fact that he had not succeeded

Concise

Whether
No doubt
He
Hastily
This subject
Because
Though (Although)
His failure

Spelling

Remember to always use spell-check before printing your document, but realize that spell-check is not foolproof. You must, or have someone else, proofread the document to ensure spelling and overall accuracy. Common mistakes include typing a correctly spelled word that is not exactly what you wanted. This can cause big problems and even change the entire meaning you are trying to get across.

Grammar

One common grammatical problem is that a verb must agree in number (singular or plural) with its subject despite intervening phrases that begin with such words as together, including, plus and as well as.

"The bittersweet flavor of youth – its trials, its joys, its adventures, its challenges – are not soon forgotten."

Should be written

"The bittersweet flavor of youth – its trials, its joys, its adventures, its challenges – is not soon forgotten."

Use a single verb after the each, either, everyone, everybody, neither, nobody, someone.

Everybody thinks he has a sense of humor.

Punctuation

In a series of three or more terms with a single conjunction, use a comma after each term except the last.

The colors used were red, white, and blue. She went to the door, opened it, and went outside.

Enclose a parenthetical expression between commas.

John's friend, William Smith, came by to see him yesterday. The best way to see a country, unless you are pressed by time, is to travel on foot.

Use a colon after an independent clause to introduce a list of particulars, an appositive, an amplification, or an illustrative quotation. A colon tells the reader that what follows is closely related to the preceding clause. A colon should not separate a verb from its complement or a preposition from its object.

Your dedicated whittler requires: a knife, a piece of wood, and a back porch.

Should be written as

Your dedicated whittler requires three props: a knife, a piece of wood, and a back porch.

A colon may introduce a quotation that supports or contributes to the preceding clause.

The squalor of the streets reminded him of a line from Oscar Wilde: "We are all in the gutter, but some of us are looking at the stars."

Use a semicolon if two or more clauses grammatically complete a compound sentence and are not joined by a conjunction

It is nearly half past five; we cannot reach town before dark.

It is, of course, equally correct to write this as two sentences, replacing the semicolon with a period. If a conjunction is inserted, the proper mark is a comma.

It is nearly half past five, and we cannot reach town before dark.

Use a dash to set off an abrupt break or interruption and to announce a long appositive or summary. A dash is a mark of separation stronger than a comma, less formal than a colon, and more relaxed than parentheses.

His first thought on getting out of bed – if he had any thought at all – was to get back in again.

Active/Passive Voice

The best way to define passive voice is to give an example and then to convert it to active voice.

Example of a sentence in passive voice: The car is washed by Fred.

The same sentence in active voice: Fred washes the car.

In the first sentence, the subject ("car") is passive (that is, the car isn't doing anything). In the second sentence, the subject ("Fred") is active. Fred is doing something (washing).

Avoid passive voice as much as possible to give your writing interest and excitement.

Appendix A The Writing Process

Start Finish

Gather

Files

- Articles
- Books
- Financial Statements
- Interviews
- Databases
- Information from the World Wide Web
- CD-ROM's
- Brainstorm
- Personal notes
- Anything else that may help you!

Organize

- Strategic Ordering
- Batching or grouping ideas
- Introduction and Conclusion
- Headings

Focus

- "Skim only" technique
- "Nutshell" technique

- "Teach" your ideas
- "Elevator" technique
- "Price per word" technique

Draft

- Organize and focus first
- Compose in any order
- Avoid editing
- Get a typed copy
- Leave a time gap before editing

Edit

- Edit for strategy
- Edit for macro issues
- Edit for micro issues
- Edit for correctness

This chart was adopted from: Guide to Managerial Communication, fourth edition, by Mary Munter, 1997.

Appendix B
Sample Business Letter

July 27, 1999

Mr. Bryan Hansen
Hometown Computer Company
5123 Dubuque Street
Iowa City, IA 52240

Dear Mr. Hansen:

We are having trouble again with the five computers you recently installed. As a result, we're returning them to you today and requesting our money back – as you agreed today on the telephone. You asked for a brief documentation of the problems we're having so you can tell your suppliers. Here are the main problems we had:

- Two notebook computers wouldn't boot up. Your technicians suspected a problem with the motherboards but never could solve the problem.
- One monitor made a continuous, high-pitched whining sound.
- Two desktop computers came infected with viruses.

Because of the number of problems, we don't have the confidence in any of the equipment you installed.

Sincerely,

Stephen J. Powers
President

Appendix C Sample Memo

Memorandum

To: Stephen Powers
From: Dan Smith
Date: July 26, 1999
Re: Computer problems

We are still having problems with the five new computers we have purchased from Bryan Hansen at the Hometown Computer Company. The problems we have been having include:

- Two notebook computers won't boot up. Hometown's technicians think it may be a problem with the motherboards, but they can't solve the problem.
- One monitor continues to make a high-pitched whining sound.
- Two desktop computers came infected with viruses.

I feel that we should check into sending these computers back and get new ones from another supplier. I don't feel confident with any equipment from this supplier.

Appendix D Sample E-mail

From: "Dan Smith" <dan-smith@uiowa.edu>
To: Stephen Powers <stephen-powers@uiowa.edu>
Subject: Computer Problems
Date: Mon, 26 Jul 1999 08:59:32 -0500

Steve:

We are still having problems with the five new computers we have purchased from Bryan Hansen at the Hometown Computer Company. The problems we have been having include:

- Two notebook computers won't boot up. Hometown's technicians think it may be a problem with the motherboards, but they can't solve the problem.
- One monitor continues to make a high-pitched whining sound.
- Two desktop computers came infected with viruses.

I feel that we should check into sending these computers back and get new ones from another supplier. I don't feel confident with any equipment from this supplier.

Attached is our original purchase contract with Hometown Computer Company in Microsoft Word 97 format.

Thanks,

Dan

Appendix E Word Choice

Some words are commonly, and mistakenly, used for others. The following is a short list of common mistakes to watch out for in your writing.

accept, except Accept is a verb meaning "to receive." Except is usually a preposition meaning "excluding." Example: I will accept all the packages except that one. Except is also a verb meaning "to exclude." Please except that item from the list.

affect, effect Affect is usually a verb meaning "to influence." Effect is usually a noun meaning "result." The drug did not affect the disease, and it had several adverse side effects. Effect can also be a verb meaning "to bring about." Only the president can effect such a dramatic change.

a lot A lot is two words. Do not write alot. We have had a lot of rain this year.

among, between Ordinarily, use among with three or more entities, between with two. The prize was divided among several contestants. You have a choice between carrots and beans.

amoral, immoral Amoral means "neither moral or immoral."; it also means "not caring about moral judgments." Until recently, most business courses were taught from an amoral perspective. Immoral means "morally wrong." Murder is immoral.

capital, capitol Capital refers to a city, capitol to a building where lawmakers meet. Capital also refers to wealth, resources, or money. The capitol has undergone extensive renovations. The residents of the state capital protested the development plans.

Data Data is the plural for datum, which means "a fact or proposition." New data suggest (not suggests) that our theory is correct. The singular (datum) is rarely used.

farther, further Farther describes distances. Iowa City is farther from Chicago than I thought. Further suggests degree. You extended the curfew further than you should have.

firstly Firstly sounds pretentious, and it leads to the ungainly series firstly, secondly, thirdly, fourthly, and so on. Write first, second, third instead.

kind of , sort of Avoid using kind of or sort of to mean "somewhat." The movie was a little (not kind of) boring. Do not put a after either phrase. That kind of (not kind of a) salesclerk annoys me.

principal, principle Principal is a noun meaning "the head of a school or organization." Or "a sum of money." It is also an adjective meaning "most important." Principle is a noun meaning "a basic truth or law." The principal expelled her for three principle reasons. We believe in the principle of equal justice for all.

regardless, irregardless Irregardless is nonstandard. Use regardless.

try and Try and is nonstandard for try to. The teacher asked us all to try to (not try and) write an original haiku.

wise Not to be used indiscriminately as a pseudo-suffix: taxwise, pricewise, saltwater taffywise. Chiefly useful when it means "in the manner of": clockwise. –wise can be attached to any noun if the spirit moves one to add it. The sober writer will abstain from the use of this wild additive.

Appendix F Resource List

Here are books that were consulted in the making of this business writing guide. Many of these are classics that we recommend you own. Highly recommended books are noted with an asterisk (*)

*Bailey, Edward P. Writing and Speaking at Work: A Practical Guide for Business Communication. New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 1999

*Munter, Mary. Guide to Managerial Communication: Effective Business Writing and Speaking (4th Edition). New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 1997.

*Strunk Jr., William and White, E.B. The Elements of Style (3rd Edition). Massachusetts: Allyn & Bacon, 1979

Hacker, Diana. A Writer's Reference (2nd Edition). Boston: Bedford Books, 1992.

American Psychological Association. Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association (4th Edition). Washington, DC: American Psychological Association, 1994

Houp, Kenneth W. and Pearsall, Thomas E. Reporting Technical Information (7th Edition). New York: Macmillan, 1992

Appendix G Self-Grading Checklist

General Writing Guidelines

- I organized my ideas before drafting.
- I created a first draft without constantly editing and rewriting as I wrote.
- I left a reasonable time interval between drafting and editing.
- I edited and rewrote my first draft.
- I carefully read the document one final time before calling it "done!"

Document Guidelines

- I know the primary and secondary audience for my paper, including their level of knowledge and interest, as well as any potential biases.
- The strategy and tone fit the characteristics of the audiences.
- The correct format has been selected for the purpose and audience.
- Jargon and acronyms are not overused.
- The introduction sets up the rest of the document.
- The conclusion is effective for the type and length of document.

Paragraph Guidelines

- Each paragraph starts with a general topic sentence or heading.
- Transitions between paragraphs are appropriate and clear.

Sentence Guidelines

- Each sentence is complete.
- The subject and a verb of each sentence agree in number.
- I have correctly used punctuation throughout the document.
- The active voice is used as often as possible.
- Each sentence is concise.
- I have spell checked the entire document.