

Business Writing Basics

Business writing is one of the simplest forms of writing. It's a system that combines clear and direct language with practical, no-frills conventions for formatting and organization. Although it's easy for anyone to grasp, the minimal rigors of business writing are being forgotten in an age of conversational e-mail and slapdash instant messages.

That's why today's business world places more importance than ever on traditional business writing. With so much information flying around in so many forms, well written memos, business letters, e-mails, and other documents stand out, and not just because they communicate effectively. A memo that follows the proper format, a letter addressed, dated, and signed the right way, and an e-mail that practices careful netiquette all convey a second subliminal message to the reader: "I care." When you practice good business writing, you're showing your readers respect. In return, you'll get respect back.

In this short refresher course, you'll look at how you can improve your business writing skills. You'll explore how to communicate better in three steps, how to keep readers focused on what you're saying, and how to make action items more palatable. You'll also learn to improve your business writing voice and learn the different forms of business documents to which that voice can be applied. At the end of the course, you'll find resources for business document templates and other valuable Web sites to help your business communication. So let's start communicating.

Communicate Better in Three Steps

The fast pace of office environments and the prevalence of casual e-mail is no excuse for sloppy communication. Effective business writing demands at least a little prior planning. Before jumping into a business document, you need to keep three basic principles in mind:

1. Understand your purpose
2. Know your audience
3. Decide the outcome and how to get there

Understand Your Purpose

Before you start writing, it's important to ask yourself what you intend the document to accomplish. In determining your purpose, ask yourself what action you want the reader to take in response to your message. This will have an impact on how you decide to get that message across. If you can sum up your purpose in one sentence, you're in good shape to proceed. If not, you should take a step back and plan a little more. After you've figure out your main point, state it as early as possible in the document.

Know Your Audience

The audience makes all the difference. People subconsciously tailor their conversation to different

people, and same rule applies to writing. Just because you may be on the same payroll as the rest of your fellow coworkers doesn't mean they'll be any more receptive to what you have to say -- working to make your message relevant to readers can get your points across much more effectively. The following factors all play a role in what you write to your audience:

Who they are: Consider your audience's age, career, ethnicity, culture, socio-economic status, education level, and gender. And most of all, make sure you understand their relationship to you. Are they supervisors, subordinates, or equals? It all makes a difference.

What they know: Determine whether you need to debrief your audience with additional background and history on the subject you're covering.

How they feel about the subject: Knowing any prejudices or preferences your reader may already have for the subject at hand will help you shape your message.

Why they want to know: You can't deliver what your readers want or need unless you know their motivation for reading your document in the first place.

Decide on the Outcome and How to Get There Although a quick e-mail memo takes less planning than a 20-page report, the same basic principles are in play with both forms of business writing. Both require that you take some time to think about the conclusions you'd like your readers to reach by the time they finish your document. In general, your document will either inform or persuade, and you should have one of these two approaches in mind as you prepare your thoughts.

If you aim to inform: In informative documents, you likely won't be able to cover everything relating to your subject, but you should be able to hit the highlights. Figure out the key points you want to get across about your subject and stick to them.

If you aim to persuade: Persuasive documents should identify three things: the problem, who cares about the problem, and the solution to the problem.

After you have the approach in mind, determine which facts and arguments support your message and help convey what you want your audience to know, understand, or feel. Throw out anything that doesn't support these facts.

Now you're ready to write.

No matter what the length of your document should be, it generally includes the same basic elements:

Opener: Depending on the length of your document, you may want to briefly summarize the points you came up with here.

Body: This is where you'll flesh out each point in greater detail and build the evidence that supports it. If you don't think you can give a point the time it deserves, consider throwing it out.

Conclusion: When you've run out of points, it's time to wrap things up. The conclusion is the last thing you tell readers and what they'll take away from your document. So as you summarize what you've said, leave the audience with a final overall message. You don't want to introduce any new thoughts here. Instead, restate the purpose of your document.

Keep Readers Focused

The key to maintaining readers' attention lies in how much information you give them and how you give it to them. Keep in mind these points gleaned from Purdue University's [Owl Writing Lab](#) to make sure your audience stays focused.

Make It Look Good

Nothing can be more distracting to a reader than a poorly formatted document. To avoid unsightliness, be sure to do the following:

Place all the parts of the message in the correct positions. Make the document look attractive on the page. Put information where your reader expects to see it. Read the document aloud to catch missing or wrong words and other errors. Proofread backwards, from the end of a line to the beginning, to catch spelling mistakes or electronically spell-check the document.

Organize Well

How you arrange how your information directly affects how easily your readers follow it. Take time to make sure your document meets these criteria:

1. The points proceed in a logical and organized way.
2. Each paragraph is organized around one main idea.
3. The most important information in the message can be identified quickly.
4. Like information is kept together.
5. Enough details and examples have been included to support your main point.
6. The message has enough context and background information.

Emphasize Important Ideas

To ensure readers stay with you and come away from the document with the points you want them to understand, you need to emphasize your main points. There are a number of ways to do this:

Place the main idea in the first paragraph: The idea you start with is the one readers will keep in their minds as they continue through the document.

State the idea in a short sentence: There's no better way to get an idea across than to say it as briefly and bluntly as possible. Proceeding sentences can go into more detail, but the initial short sentence is practically guaranteed to grab attention.

Following a question by a series of statements can produce a similar effect to the preceding one.

Go from general to specific: Lay down your blanket statements, and then follow them with your supporting evidence.

Repeat important ideas: If at first an idea doesn't succeed to penetrate a reader's brain, let it try and try again. Just don't overdo it with this tactic -- readers are naturally attuned to the difference between repeating information and sounding repetitive.

Tip

Descriptive words such as "particularly", "above all", and "most importantly" can also help emphasize certain points and ideas, but sprinkling in too many of these can sound repetitive and clunky. Use them judiciously.

Set ideas apart with formatting: Don't be afraid to highlight essential information by bolding it or emphasizing it somehow. Just don't overdo it, or your document will fill with distracting elements

and loud clutter.

Give important ideas more space: Readers intuitively understand which ideas are more important than others based on how much space they receive.

Organize clauses within a sentence: Putting the main clause at the end of the sentence makes it stand out as the main idea of that sentence. You won't want to use this technique for every sentence, but it can be effective throughout a document.

Make Action Items More Palatable

Action items, short sentences that lay out plans and directions in a business document, can easily lose some of their punch if you don't present them correctly. Here are a few tips to make sure your action items are heard loud and clear.

- *Highlight Action Items.* You can set aside action items with italics, bold type, or underlining, but separating them in bullets provides the reader with the best visual cue of their importance. This technique works especially well with multiple action items.
- *Use Positive Wording.* People respond better to positive thinking than negative thinking. In your business writing, you can get your readers to focus better if you use positive words rather than negative ones. Avoid words such as no, unfortunately, cannot, failure, or do not. Instead, try the opposites, such as yes, fortunately, can, success, and do. The key is to look at a negative message in the best possible light (without completely lying) with techniques such as these:
- *Focus on what is rather than what is not.* Emphasize the good news at the beginning and end of your document, as well as in its paragraphs and sentences. Devote the most space to the positives of the situation. Never open a list of action items that convey bad news with an explanation or apology. Just say what happened and list them from there.
- *Practice Graceful Negativity.* The same rules apply to a negative message. Whether you're denying or declining something, you should still be confident, courteous, professional, and avoid writing over the reader's head. However, you may want to leave the words I and you out of the document in some cases.

To avoid connecting the negative subject to you or the reader, consider using passive voice instead. "The project will be cancelled immediately" sounds better than "I will cancel the project immediately" or "You will desist from pursuing the project further." That's because passive voice draws attention to no one.

Developing Your Business Writing Voice

Establishing your own business writing voice creates a sense of familiarity for readers, making them more open to what you have to say in a document. Whether you're writing a letter, e-mail, report, or other document, your own personal writing style can serve you well.

As you develop your voice, inject your writing with the following elements that should be present in all business writing, regardless of the author:

Confidence: If you want readers to accept what you have to say or do as you request, you have to sound confident. Confidence persuades readers and puts them at ease about your information.

Be wary of laying on the confidence too thickly. Sounding pompous and presumptuous can turn off people to your message more quickly than no confidence at all.

Courtesy: Always be polite, but never fawning and obsequious. Avoidance of I: Your readers will respond better if you leave yourself out of the document as much as possible. Phrase your sentences carefully to address the reader instead of yourself. Rather than, "I'll have the report on your desk tomorrow," say "The report will be on your desk tomorrow."

Nondiscriminatory language: No matter to whom you're writing, you don't want to upset them with coarse and offensive language. All business writing should be free of any bias relating to race, sex, sexual orientation, religion, politics, age, disability, and so on. Also, as you write, keep in mind other fair and equal practices such as using neutral job titles (use chairperson instead of chairman) and avoiding demeaning or assuming terms (use spouses instead of wives and women instead of girls.)

Don't write over anyone's head: Here's where knowing your audience comes in especially handy. Knowing your audience's education and comprehension level helps you determine the complexity of terms and ideas to use. Remember that most newspapers are written at a junior high reading level. If that approach works for them, it will work for you.

Dos and Don'ts for Different Types of Communications

Although the basic opener-body-conclusion model holds for all forms of business documents large and small, different types of communication call for different formats with their own little rules and tricks to be effective. Let's take a look at some of the conventions for the most common types of business documents.

For memos, you typically have the following elements:

Listed at the top of the memo, this includes four elements that generally fall in this order:

- **TO:** Always use the readers' correct name and title.
- **FROM:** Always include your job title along with your name.
- **DATE:** Use the standard American format: month before the day, as in April 19, 2004.
- **SUBJECT:** Be concise and specific, like a newspaper headline. Don't just use one word, but a sentence fragment that gets to the heart of what the memo's about.

Purpose statement: Either explain your intentions in sending this memo or indicate that you're following up on a request for this action. **Opener:** A paragraph or sentence that establishes the background, explains the problem, and gives a general idea of what information will follow. **Body, or discussion segments:** A paragraph or paragraphs that explain what can be done to solve the problem. Consider summarizing memos longer than a page on a separate sheet to help your reader understand the meat of it faster. **Closing:** A sentence or paragraph recommending (or nicely demanding) a course of action. You can add any additional graphs, tables, or other attached information at the end of the memo.

For business letters, you typically have the following elements:

- **Date:** Two inches from the top of the page, using the standard month before the day

format.

- Your address: Optional. Put it one line below the date if you use it at all, and don't bother writing your name or title to avoid sounding repetitive when you put it in the closing.
- Recipient's address: Make it left justified, and also put it one line below your address or one inch below the date. Always try to write to a person in a company, not the company itself.
- Salutation: Always follow the recipient's title and name with a colon, not a comma. Use the recipient's first name if you know him on a first name basis. Use To Whom It May Concern if you don't know who the recipient is. If you don't know the recipient's gender, use the person's full name.
- Body: Begin your first paragraph one line after the salutation. Pleasantries are optional. State your main point then follow it up with supporting paragraphs. Your last paragraph should summarize all of your points and possibly recommend some type of action. The block is the most common format for business letters: single-spaced, left-justified paragraphs with a line of space between each. Modified block follows the same format, but centers the date and closing. Semi-block follows the modified block format, but indents each paragraph. For all of these formats, Times New Roman size 12 is the most-used font.
- Closing: Comes one line after the last paragraph of the body, your sign-off aligns on the page with the date. Follow your Thank you or Sincerely yours with a comma and four lines. Once you print the letter, type your name and sign the space in between.
- Enclosures: Note any attached documents with the word Enclosures and a line after the closing.

Abstracts

Informational Abstracts summarize reports into briefs to let readers decide if they want to read the full text or not. They may span a paragraph to a few pages (10 percent of the report is a good rule). They don't add new facts or draw different conclusions; they simply present the information (purpose, method, scope, results, findings, and recommendations) in the same order that it appears in the source material.

A shorter type of abstract, the descriptive abstract, summarizes the purpose, methods, and scope of a report but doesn't get into the results, conclusions, or recommendations. This type of abstract rarely exceeds 100 words. Abstract paragraphs should be able to stand alone.

E-mail Basics

Although it's still a relatively new form of business communication, a unique set of dos and don'ts has already arisen around the use of e-mail. On top of the other writing rules already covered in this course, keep these considerations in mind as you compose and send e-mails.

E-mail Etiquette

Follow e-mail etiquette, such as the following:

Keep e-mail public: You may send a message to someone privately, but that doesn't matter if it gets forwarded, printed, or otherwise seen by someone to whom it's not addressed. So only write what you can say and defend to a group of coworkers at a meeting. Write no more than a page: Unless you're sending newsletters, orientation schedules, or some other lengthy document, try to

make your e-mails fit on a printed page.

Return e-mails as you would phone calls: It's just as rude to ignore e-mails as it is to ignore phone calls, and it usually has a very negative result. Don't reply to nasty messages (flames): Before you reply to an unfriendly message with a devastating quip, ask yourself if you'd say it to the recipient in person. If not, don't send it.

Don't forget the salutation: Although it's fine to drop the greetings when replying back and forth, you should treat each new e-mail with a new subject as a letter that needs a proper salutation.

Be direct in the subject line: Get to the heart of the matter in the subject line so your recipient knows immediately what may be required of him. For example, "Meeting is on for March 12" relays the message more clearly than "Greetings." Keep one topic to one e-mail: You'll get better responses if you cover unrelated items in different messages. Otherwise, it's too easy for readers to lose your requests in the shuffle

Avoid Emoticons and Acronyms: The fast and loose grammar and [*bizarre acronyms*](#) of e-mail communications works for teens and casual communication, but not for the business world. Always write e-mails as you would any business letter or memo. The same goes for emoticons, those expressive faces created with clever positioning of letters, such as :-), :0, :-(), and so on. Avoid using these symbols unless you feel comfortable enough in your relationship with the recipient.

Know When Not to Use E-Mail: E-mail fills several gaps left by other forms of business communication, but it's not a universal substitute for them. Tempting as it is to relate bad news through a quick and painless e-mail, it only causes bitter feelings down the road. Communicate any conflicts, discipline, or other concerns in person or over the phone.

Don't Use Fancy Fonts or Backgrounds: E-mails weren't meant to be Web pages. Even though you can add all sorts of HTML-formatted backgrounds, colors, and fonts to e-mails, doesn't mean you should. Such decoration can look unprofessional and distract from the content of your message. Use white backgrounds with a black-colored common font, such as Helvetica, set at 12-point type. While we're on the subject of fonts, avoid ALL CAPS. In e-mails, it's the equivalent of screaming.

Forward with Care: When it comes to business communications, you need to ask the sender for permission to forward an e-mail before passing it along to others. It's also polite to cut extraneous information such as the large lists of other recipients, which can create a confusing mess to scroll through.

Think Before You Send or Receive Attachments: One of the most useful features of e-mail is also its most dangerous. Computer viruses spread through attachments by logging in to computer systems, messing them up, and then launching themselves over e-mail addresses they find in address books there.

Before opening any attachments, make sure you know who the sender is and -- even if it's from a friend -- whether you were expecting the attachment.

To help ensure your recipient doesn't assume your attachment is diseased, give her a heads-up that you're sending it in a separate message. For the recipient's convenience, give your message the same title as your document and mention which application (Word, Microsoft PowerPoint, or

so on) opens the file. Bear in mind recipients' Internet connections before sending attachments as well. It takes people with 56 Kbps modems much longer to download a file than users with DSL (Digital Subscriber Line) or cable modems. Helpful resources

When it comes to business writing, you're not alone. Type "business writing tutorial", "business writing templates", or any other search you can think of in Google and you'll get plenty of results to help the writing process. The following lists contain some valuable resources.

An essential resource for any writer is an online dictionary. Here's a list of some of the most popular: Dictionary.com: A one-stop language resource, including dictionaries in multiple languages, a thesaurus, a translator, and word games. Cambridge Dictionaries Online: A standard dictionary with links to French to English and Spanish to English dictionaries and more. Merriam-Webster Online: Another standard dictionary. This one has links to encyclopedias, a kid dictionary, and a collegiate dictionary. Word Spy: A dictionary of new and emerging words and slang not included in the major dictionaries. Landenberg.com: A combination cliché, anagram, rhyme, and quotation finder, with a thesaurus and translator thrown in to boot.

Another useful tool for a writer is an online grammar guide. If you don't have your own real, live editor, these resources help tremendously: Guide to Grammar and Writing: Information on all parts of speech divided into sentence, paragraph, and paper levels. Owl Online Writing Lab: Purdue's outstanding series of articles on grammar, punctuation, and spelling. Grammar Station: A grammar and spelling checker, with a grammar guide thrown in for good measure. You have to sign in to use this Web site.

As mentioned earlier, Word presents you with some business writing templates, but you can also find some online at these Web sites: Owl Online Writing Lab: Samples of memos, letters, resumes, cover letters, and more. About.com's Job Searching Page: Examples of resumes, reference letters, and other employment documents, plus lots of good advice

Moving On

With the help of this refresher course, you should now be more comfortable in your business writing adventures. If you have questions, feel free to visit the numerous online resources sited in this course. Good luck!