

Business Writing

Note: This document should only be used as a reference and should not replace assignment guidelines.

The ability to write clearly and effectively is essential in business. To develop these writing skills, consider the following guidelines for content, tone, organization, style, and revision.

Content

Include all information the reader will need to fully understand your point, but eliminate any information that is redundant. Having a clear purpose and audience in mind will help in this process.

Purpose

Before you begin writing, ask yourself, “What do I want to accomplish?” Then state your purpose clearly for your reader.

Audience

Ask yourself the following questions about your intended audience before you begin to write:

- Who is my audience?
- What do they already know about my topic?
- What new information will I need to tell them?

Tone

The tone of what you write includes all words, details, and devices you use to convey an attitude toward your subject and audience. For example, small changes can dramatically alter your tone from impatient to considerate, or from casual to formal. Consider the following guidelines in developing your tone:

- Remember your tone will vary for different audiences. For example, a note to a coworker may have a more casual tone than a proposal to a potential client.
- Express yourself in a way that is confident but not arrogant, and avoid language that sounds artificially inflated.
- Be courteous and genuine. Beware not to use exaggeration or flattery that might seem insincere.
- Adjust your tone according to how your audience will receive the information conveyed. For example, you may want to present your message differently if it contains bad news.

Use the “You” Attitude

Write with the “you” attitude, focusing on the readers’ perspective and how information conveyed will affect them.

WEAK EXAMPLE: We are pleased to offer you the position of assistant manager. Our company has a fine team of employees, and we are confident we will benefit from your addition to our staff. We would like you to contact us with a reply as soon as possible so that we can begin your hiring paperwork.

STRONG EXAMPLE: We are pleased to offer you the position of assistant manager. We are confident you will have a positive and rewarding experience as you join our team of skilled employees. Please contact us at your earliest convenience so that you may begin work.

Use Gender-Neutral Language

Use unbiased language to create a respectful and professional tone. Avoid language or ideas that might be interpreted as sexist, and remember the following guidelines:

- When referring to an individual that could be female, do not use a masculine pronoun (he or him). Instead, use “he or she,” or change the sentence so that you can use plural pronouns such as “they.”

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- When referring to a female, use Ms. unless explicitly instructed to use Miss or Mrs.
- Avoid most words that end in “man.” For example, replace “chairman” with “chair.”

Organization

Your organization will emphasize certain information, so make your purpose and main ideas clear early in your composition. Then organize your paragraphs and sentences to concisely and effectively complete your message. In longer compositions, use white space, bullets, shorter paragraphs, and section headings to make your composition more readable. Keep in mind the following concerns:

Sentence-Level Organization

- Use transitions, or repeat key words to move smoothly between sentences and show how they relate.
- When listing ideas of the same relative importance, use parallel structure.

NON-PARALLEL: My responsibilities include evaluation, drafting proposals, and to prepare budgets.

PARALLEL: My responsibilities include writing evaluations, drafting proposals, and preparing budgets.

- Within a sentence, emphasize the main idea by placing it in the main clause. Notice how the emphasis changes in the following two sentences depending on the words in the main clause:

EXAMPLE: Although she was extremely busy, Laura wrote the proposal.

EXAMPLE: Although Laura wrote the proposal, she was extremely busy.

Paragraph-Level Organization

- Remember that the position of ideas within a composition affects how much emphasis they receive. The first paragraph is the position of greatest emphasis. The final paragraph is also a position of emphasis whereas ideas in middle paragraphs tend to be de-emphasized.
- Consider how your reader will view the message you write. Good news should be stated immediately. Bad news should not be saved until the end, but the reasons, rather than the bad news, should receive emphasis.

GOOD NEWS: We are pleased to offer you a position at our company.

BAD NEWS: We received the package after the 30-day return period. If we had received the package during the return period, we would have been able to refund your purchase.

- Begin each paragraph with a topic sentence that clearly expresses the main idea of the paragraph. Then make sure everything within the paragraph builds upon that single idea.
- Organize your paragraphs so that each leads logically to the next.
- Use transitions at the beginning of each paragraph to show how the paragraph connects to the one before it.

Style

The way you craft words, phrases, and sentences significantly impacts the readers' perception of you and your message.

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Word Choice

- Never use large words just to impress your reader. Short, common words are often more powerful than complex words.
- Keep your writing concise by eliminating unnecessary words. Wordiness buries meaning. (See the *Economy in Writing* handout.)
- Generally, keep your words at a difficulty level between 8th and 12th grade.
- Use precise words. A few well-chosen words are more powerful than a long string of vague words.
- Avoid clichés (overused words and phrases) and slang.
- Use jargon (terminology specific to a field) only when it is necessary and when the reader will understand it.
- Use a strong verb to express the most important action of each sentence.

Sentence-Level Concerns

- Vary the sentence length and pattern. For emphasis, consider using a short sentence after a series of longer ones.
- Use active voice (Actor – Verb – Receiver) in most cases. Passive voice (Receiver – Verb – by Actor) should only be used when the actor in the sentence does not matter, when you want to emphasize the receiver, or when you want to deemphasize blame. (See the Active vs. Passive Voice handout.)

ACTIVE: You did not process the order correctly.

PASSIVE: The order was not processed correctly.

- Use punctuation to emphasize important points. For example, dashes or colons show greater emphasis than commas. (At the same time, beware not to overuse such devices.)

Revision

Be prepared to revise. First, focus on organization and the logical presentation of ideas. Then, in later drafts, pay careful attention to specific issues of grammar, spelling, and punctuation. Have someone else look over a draft. Use your computer's spell and grammar check, but also proofread on your own, since these programs often miss errors.