

Effective Business Writing

“Communication is the most important skill in life”
Steven Covey
Author of the Seven Habits of Highly Effective People

Managers nominate communication skills as the number one ability they seek in staff. For many of us, speaking with colleagues and clients comes easily and we are able to get results from our conversations and face-to-face meetings. However, are we just as effective with written communication?

In this course, you will learn a quicker, more organised way to get your ideas across on paper.

What is effective writing?

Effective business writing gets results. It persuades clients to do business with you; it informs staff of management changes; it influences an existing client to consider options. The reader is in no doubt about the purpose and outcome of the communication and what is required of them.

Effective business writing is:

- Easy to read and understand
- Logically structured
- Accurate and concise.

What are your business writing strengths?

What are your writing challenges?

What type of communication to use?

Is writing always the best way to communicate? Think about the following examples and consider what methods you might use to get the message across and why you would use that method.

Meeting follow up about price changes

Invitation to lunch

Conveying good news

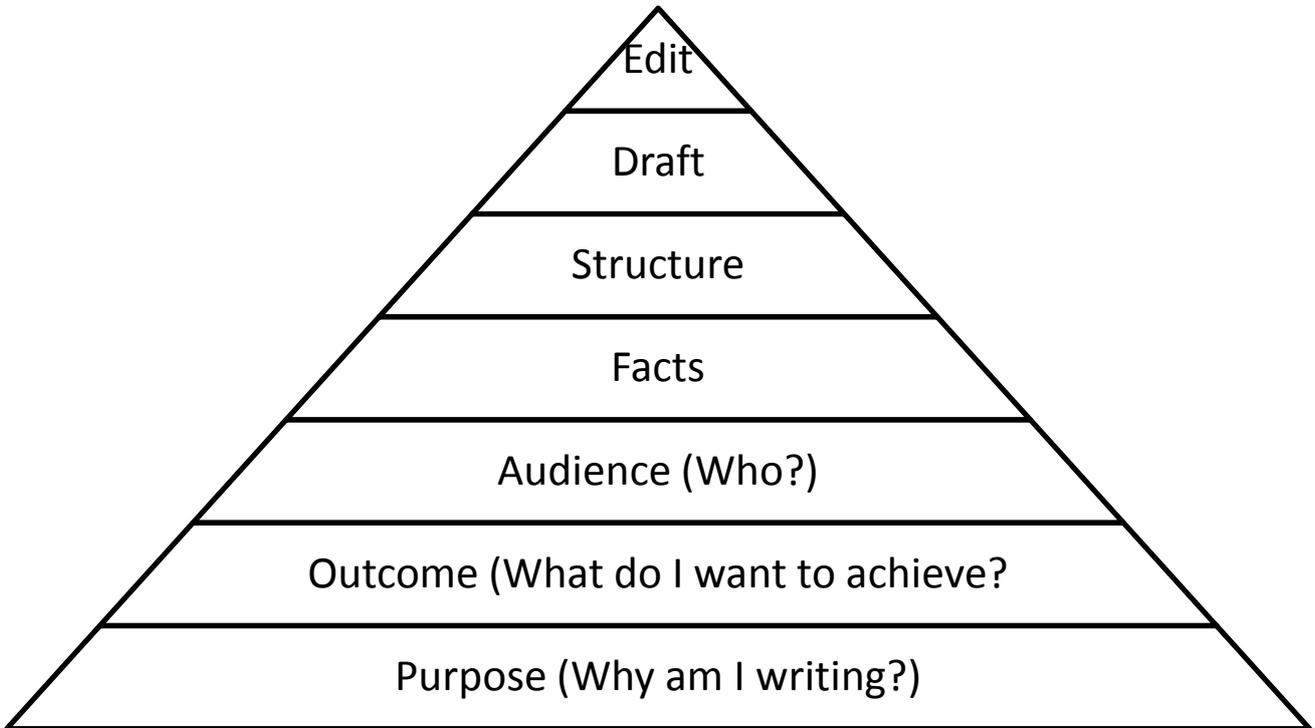
Conveying bad news

Congratulating a colleague

Complaining to management

Communication Pyramid

Just like a building, your writing must start from a strong base and build sequentially.



Purpose

The first thing to consider is why you are writing. Can you express the purpose in one sentence? If you find this difficult to do, it may be that you are trying to accomplish too much with one document.

In general, in business writing we are writing to **ask** or to **inform**.

Think about the document that you are going to work on today.

In one sentence, what is the purpose of this document?

Outcome

Remember that effective business writing gets results. In this step, you need to determine your outcome or what you hope to achieve by writing. You need to ask yourself how the reader will be changed and what they will do differently after reading your communication.

When thinking about an outcome, consider it in terms of a **SMART** goal.

- S**pecific What exactly are you trying to achieve?
- M**easurable How will you measure your success?
- A**ttainable Is what you are trying to achieve possible?
- R**elevant Is it relevant to the reader?
- T**imely Is there a time frame for action?

Examples of Wishes	Examples of SMART Goals
Exercise more	To walk 2 kilometres in 30 minutes, 5 times a week starting in February
Get a better job	To find a job in the insurance sector that pays \$20000 more per year with advancement possibilities by December this year
Increase my sales	To increase my sales total by 30% over a 3 month period by focusing on new products for existing customer

Think about the document that you are going to work on today.

Write the outcome as a SMART goal

Audience

Communication always involves at least 2 people- the writer and the receiver. Tailoring your writing to suit the receiver is not only smart business, but also absolutely essential to ensure you realise your outcome.

What are some things you may need to consider about your reader?

Remember that your writing is to the reader. By using a personal tone and considering the benefit to the reader, you can create communications that spur readers to action. A handy acronym to consider is WIIFM.

What does WIIFM stand for and why would it be important?

Rewrite the following sentences in a personal stressing the benefit to the reader.

We need the account details by Friday 13 November.

The claim is being processed and details will be sent in due course.

Failure to follow procedure may result in penalties.

The 4MAT model

The 4MAT model, developed by Bernice McCarthy and expanded by Honey and Mumford, shows 4 ways of communicating and learning. Most people will have a preferred style for receiving and delivering information.

There is no right or wrong about any style. It's a bit like hair colour; it just is. Like hair colour, you can alter your style to fit the situation.

Here is the model. **Where would you put yourself?**

	Big Picture		
Action	Activists (What if?)	Reflectors (Why?)	Thinking
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Tend to act first and consider consequences afterwards • Are always willing to try new things • Focus very much on the present • Tend to be bored with process and procedure • Prefer to learn by doing 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Like to have time to consider information • Like to think it through before making a decision • Are cautious and thoughtful in their choices • Tend to be quiet in meetings and listen to discussion before contributing 	
	Pragmatists (How?)	Theorists (What?)	
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Want to know how ideas will be applied in the real world • Search out news ways of doing things • Are comfortable with trying new techniques • May be impatient with open ended discussions 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Think problems through in a logical fashion • Assimilate facts into a coherent theory • Like to receive information in diagrams and graphs • Tend to be perfectionists and like things to fit into a rational scheme 	
	Details		

When you are talking to someone, you are usually unaware of their preferred communication style so you focus on satisfying your communication style. As a result, the conversation may not go according to plan.

If you find some people more difficult to communicate with than others, this could be because their communication style is different to yours.

Facts

For many of us, getting the facts together may seem like the first step in writing. But until we have considered why we are writing, what we want to achieve and who we are writing to, we don't know which facts to include.

Thinking back to the 4MAT model, you may prefer the type of information you want to include. Your reader may also prefer how the facts are presented. It's a good idea to jot down all the facts you might include and then decide on the structure. This method allows you to gather all the facts in an order that makes sense to you before reorganising them in the way that will work best for your reader.

This technique is especially useful if there are certain things you don't want to include. By writing down all the facts and then consciously excluding those that are not relevant to your outcome makes it easier to avoid unnecessary information.

Structure

Once you have collected your facts, it's now time to structure them. Start by putting like facts together. For example, if you need to ask for information, you would group together the types of information required as well as the format needed.

A good technique to follow is to answer the questions in the 4MAT model in order starting with Why, followed by What, How and What if. Read the example below and see if you can recognise the 4MAT structure.

The purpose of this memo is to inform you of the upcoming changes to parking availability.

Lot A needs upgrading due to recent wet weather and increase in parking demand. The improvements are an asphalted parking area with better drainage and space for 1200 cars instead of the current 600 spaces.

The parking area will close from Monday 6 June to Wednesday 8 June for the improvements. During this period, parking will be restricted to Lot B only. Lot B has 50 spaces and is open from 7 AM to 7 PM.

Those employees who normally drive have the option to catch a free bus from the train station at Burnley. The bus will run every half hour from 7:30 AM to 6:30 PM for the duration of the Lot A closure. You need to show your employee pass to board the bus.

If you have any questions, please phone Marina Adams on 9478 5000. There is also additional information on the intranet. www.mycompany.com.au/intranet/parkingupgrade.html

Consider what information you need to include and where it would occur in the structure of the document.

Add the facts needed for your document in note form.

Why?

What?

How?

What if?

Sample letter

Hi James

Thanks for our meeting on Monday. I really enjoy meeting customers, it's always nice to have a break and chat about our favourite team. (Go the Cats!)

Anyway, further to our discussion about the extension of the terms of agreement regarding the provision of monies required to fund your business for the month's preceding the end of the financial year, I have some further queries to be explored before the granting of the contract. As you know, money has tightened up significantly and it is of the utmost importance that the capital be protected in it's entirety. The bank will need additional information in order to proceed with the documentation required in order to process the request. Of course, the usual reports such as BS and IS are essential as is the CF for the next 6 months. In addition, a list of the assets and of the inventory stating the declared value of said items expressed wholly in Australian dollars. We must receive these subsequent to the meeting of advisors which takes place monthly on the 23rd. I will need at least a week to summarise so if I could get them by the 16th that would be great for me.

If you have any further queries, please don't hesitate to contact me on my mobile. Also, it works best for me to get your reports in a format that works with Excel. I think that is CSV or delimited, but if you are not sure, just give me a ring.

Kind regards

Sam

How would you improve this letter? Think about the steps in the Communication Pyramid.

Draft

After completing the planning stage, you are now ready for the physical part of the task. Simply write, not one perfect sentence after another, but a series of sentences and paragraphs to review and change in the editing stage. One of the biggest time wasters in the writing process is to attempt to polish and perfect your sentences as you write.

“Anything worth doing does not have to be done perfectly—at first.”

–Ken Blanchard, author of the One Minute Manager

“Get it down. It may be bad, but it’s the only way you can do anything really good.”

–William Faulkner, American author

“The best reason for putting anything down on paper is that one may then change it.”

–Bernard de Voto, American historian

So, turn off the internal editor and consider this stage just writing, without a pause to think of the exact wording. You need something on paper to edit in the next stage. If you cannot think of what to say, try writing a summary of what you need next.

For example:

Include here a reason why this is the best product mix. Get some help from James.

This will remind you what would be logical and important to say even if you cannot think of the proper phrase yet.

Edit

Once you have something down and you have taken a break, you are now ready to put on your editor's hat. The editing process has two parts: language and layout.

Vigorous writing is concise. A sentence should contain no unnecessary words, a paragraph no unnecessary sentences, for the same reason that a drawing should have no unnecessary lines and a machine no unnecessary parts.

William Strunk, Jr, author of [The Elements of Style](#)

Language

For some reason when we write in a business environment, we abandon our easy way of speaking and become unnecessarily formal. You would not say to a client "Forthwith, all correspondence will be subject to rigorous proofreading standards prior to the dispatch of said object". Instead, you might say, "We will check all letters and emails before we send them to you."

Using big words and lengthy sentences makes the task of the reader much harder. If you think back about the things we need to consider about our audience, one is the time factor. The quicker the reader can understand what is required and start on the action, the better. So think about **KISS** (Keep It Short and Simple) instead of **KILL** (Keep It Long and Lengthy).

Plain language includes:

- avoiding unnecessarily formal language
- using the active voice
- using short sentences and clear language
- avoiding unnecessary phrases and
- replacing "legalese" and jargon with familiar terms and phrases.

Translate these words and phrases into plain English. In the blank lines, add any phrases or words from your workplace you think could be said more simply.

Formal Business Language	Plain English
Prior to	Before
Subsequent to	
Ascertained in accordance with the formula	
Institute proceedings	
Furnish	
Terminate the agreement	
On behalf of	
Furthermore	
Request	
In regards to	

Active voice

Because business writing is about results, most of the sentences are in the active voice. The active voice is where the subject of the sentence is the doer of the action.

Look at these examples. Tick the sentences using the active voice.

Ben hit the ball.

The ball was hit by Ben.

The driver of the bus was Jan.

Jan drove the bus.

The implementation of the plan was performed by Luca.

Luca implemented the plan.

Using the active voice drives the action forward. The person doing the action is named and the action is more dynamic and immediate.

For business communication, the active voice should dominate. Business communication is about efficiency—people doing actions.

Rewrite the following sentences, using the active voice.

The system was updated.

Errors were found in the self-audit, but steps have been taken to correct them

The recommended guidelines for replacing equipment should be followed.

The conclusion of the project is scheduled for March.

Readability

Readability is the ease at which text is read and understood. The length of words, sentences and paragraphs all contribute to readability

It is actually much harder to write simply. Initially, it may make the writing task longer. However, if the reader is able to comprehend and then complete the action required, aren't you better off to make the time at the start?

Very long sentences are difficult to comprehend and they waste the reader's time. When a sentence is 35 words and longer, the reader will often need to reread the text to understand it.

Shorten these sentences

If there are any points on which you require explanation or further particulars, we shall be glad to furnish such additional details as may be required by telephone. (28 words)

It is important that you shall read the notes, advice and information detailed opposite then complete the form overleaf (all sections) prior to its immediate return to the Council by way of the envelope provided. (35 words)

Your enquiry about the interest rates for your business loan for the purpose of updating and improving the proposed business site which will accordingly be used as a restaurant establishment, gives rise to the question of the appropriateness of loan type for your specific purpose and needs. (47 words)

Unnecessary phrases

What phrases do business communicators find most offensive? A survey of 7,500 managers and executives enrolled in writing programs named the following:

- “To be perfectly honest” suggests that everything else has been dishonest
- “Needless to say” contradicts whatever follows, so skip it.
- “Enclosed herewith, please find” is wordy and dated; substitute “enclosed”.
- “Please don’t hesitate to call” or “Please feel free to call” assumes the reader must not pause before calling or feel liberated before calling. Try “Please call” instead
- “As you know,” “as you are aware,” “as per our conversation” are unnecessary and may be insulting.
- “Please rest assured” sounds as if you are asking the readers to take a nap.
- “Please be advised that” wastes time and says nothing.
- “At your earliest convenience” and “as soon as possible” are too vague; provide a specific date.

Source: “Don’t Use These Phrases!” Winning Strategies for Corporate Communication, Virginia Springfield

Opening and closing

What kinds of openings and closings do you use when you are writing letters or emails?

Punctuation

Modern business writing may have less punctuation, but that doesn't mean the punctuation you use can be sloppy. Here is a list of the punctuation marks and some tips for their use.

Apostrophes ‘

This is the most common mark to be misused. Apostrophes do two things: show possession and represent missing letters in contractions. Apostrophes are not used to show plurals.

Watch out for:

- Using an apostrophe to show possession for a pronoun. Pronouns such as his, hers and its never have an apostrophe. **The car lost its wheel.**
- Including an apostrophe to show possession of plurals ending in s. **I went to my parents' house.**
- .
- If the noun is singular and ends in s, the correct way to show possession is 's. **The bus's driver was by the shed.**

Colon :

Colons indicate lists, a series or a quote.

Consider the following in planning:

- Purpose
- Outcome
- Audience
- Facts and
- Structure.

Paul J. Meyer: *Communication - the human connection - is the key to personal and career success.*

Semicolon

Semicolons join related sentences.

John was late; I went to the pub without him.

The semicolon is unnecessary if you join the sentences with a conjunction.

John was late so I went to the pub without him.

Semicolons are also used in a list that has relative clauses or for wordy bullet lists.

The group included Lina Peng, CEO of Peng Ltd; Marco Bagno, CFO of Sella Corp; and Lila Vitali, HR Manager of BHP Ltd.

Consider the following in planning:

- Purpose of the document;
- Outcome expressed as a SMART goal;
- Audience attributes and attitudes;
- Facts to include; and
- Logical structure.

Comma ,

The comma joins a sequence and also separates a noun from an explanatory clause.

I have roses, daisies, asters and tulips in my garden.

The course, Introduction to Finance, starts on Wednesday night.

Watch out for commas joining two complete sentences. This is a comma splice and is incorrect.
What could you do instead?

Anne opened the door, the dog came in.

Brackets ()

Brackets can be used instead of commas for relative clauses. It's also useful for defining acronyms.

The course (Introduction to Finance) starts on Wednesday night.

The RBA (Reserve Bank of Australia) will make a decision next week.

Dash -

A dash may be used in place of brackets to indicate supporting information.

The course -Introduction to Finance- starts on Wednesday night.

Exclamation Mark !

This mark is rarely used in business writing. What could you use instead to show emphasis?

Punctuate the following sentences.

1. The dog was in its basket
2. The stationery order includes paper clips markers staples and paper
3. Jan Moritus recently returned from Africa will head the new committee.
4. Why is the train running so late
5. Lets make it for eight I will pick up coffee on the way
6. Chris book is on the table under the newspaper.
7. The best way to connect with a new client is to find common ground look for mutual acquaintances and practice active listening
8. The invitation list included Brad Pitt movie star Kari Webb golfer Spiderman super hero and Julia Gillard PM of Australia
9. Caitlin one of the newer members of the team is getting excellent results she will be promoted soon I think
10. Brian ideas will really help the company

Layout

Now you are ready to look at the design aspects. **What makes a document easy to read?**

Bullet Points

Check that each point follows a similar grammatical structure and would form a complete sentence with the opening phrase.

Please ensure you are ready for the course by:

- Having a topic in mind for your document
- Participating in the activities
- Sharing ideas with your colleagues and
- Trying new techniques in your writing.

Other Methods of Communication

The communication pyramid is useful in constructing all types of communications. By thinking about the 5 steps, your message will be more clear and concise and your outcome more likely to be achieved.

However, each form of communication has its own challenges. What tips would you give your colleagues about communicating:

By phone?

By email?

In person?

Editing Checklist

- ✓ Have a break before the final edit.
- ✓ Ideally, have someone else read and review it.
- ✓ Check that your purpose and outcome have been achieved.
- ✓ Think of the reader and try to imagine any other questions they might have.
- ✓ Read the document out loud to check for ease of reading.
- ✓ Change passive verbs to the active voice.
- ✓ Remove redundant words.
- ✓ Simplify complex language.
- ✓ Check the length of sentences and paragraphs.
- ✓ Check the spelling and grammar.

Future Actions

Thinking back to the new techniques you have learned today, what will you change in your daily routine to become a better writer?

References:

www.manageyourwriting.com (Good overview of business writing and links to other sites)

www.plainenglish.co.uk (Lots of good information about the worldwide Plain English campaign)

www.weaselwords.com.au (Site containing some of the worst of business writing. Very funny.)

www.freerice.com (Useful for expanding your vocabulary and testing your grammar. As you play, you donate rice to poor counties)

The Elements of Style (4th edition)

William Strunk, Jr WLC, 1999

Effective writing - Plain English at work

E Murphy and S Snell FT Prentice Hall, 1991

Eats, Shoots and Leaves

L Truss Profile Books, 2003

Supplementary Material