

Communicating in the Workplace

Administrative Accounting and Bookkeeping Program

Handout: Communicating in Writing

Principles of Writing

Thanks to the ubiquity of email and text messaging, everyone is a writer nowadays — whether you consider yourself one or not. And, though we don't think of email (and certainly not texting) as being particularly formal modes of writing, all written channels of communication share some characteristics. Knowing these will make you a better, more effective writer, whether you're sending an email, writing a text, scripting a presentation, producing a policy document, making lesson handouts, or writing marketing copy. Whether in business, education, or the professions, writing for work should always meet the following basic standards.

Purposeful

Writing at work has a clear purpose. Before you put pen to paper (or fingers to keyboard), take a moment to consider why you are writing. Does this message have a clear purpose that's worth the time it will take you to write (and your audience to read and comprehend it)? If not, consider whether it needs to be sent at all. And, if it does have a worthy purpose, are you using the most effective channel? For example: If you need the team to help with a decision, or give you their thoughts on a topic, a quick meeting might serve your purpose better. Finally, if you're replying to an email or other communication that annoyed you, is your purpose to defuse the situation or get your own back? (A good rule is to *never* email while you're angry. If you can feel that you're hot under the collar at all, wait until tomorrow.)

Audience Oriented

I've mentioned the importance of audience orientation above. Writing in the workplace is usually tailored to a specific audience in accordance with its purpose. To this end, it is typically worded positively.

Professional

Professional writing doesn't mean overly formal. In fact, "business casual" or "conversational" is now the standard for most workplace writing. The use of "I" is acceptable for when you're stating your own opinion (no need to use the royal "we" any more!). And contractions are allowed. Business writing is professional in the sense that it sticks to the facts, doesn't get personal, and maintains an objective tone.

Clear And Concise

Obviously, business writing should have a clear meaning. This applies to even the most casual email or text sent in a work setting. However, clarity doesn't justify excessive wordiness or wasted repetition put in just to emphasize your points. Anything like this, that doesn't contribute to the message's meaning, should be eliminated. They tend to just wear out your reader, or bury your main point fluff. This is what "concise" means: keeping your message as short as it can be — *without sacrificing meaning*. If you have a lot to say (in a complicated planning or policy document, for example) your message might be quite long. However, if you eschewed redundancies and wasted verbiage, it would still be concise.

Stages of Writing

Since all written communications (excepting those leave-no-trace confidential services) produce a record that might be used as the basis for decisions, actions, or expenditures, even the quickest and most casual written message should follow a structured process.

1. Prewriting

This starts with prewriting — an essential pause for thought and analysis before you hit the keys (too many people start hammering out an email and then try to figure out what they're saying as they go). Even if you're just sending a quick text or a short email, you should take a moment to analyze its purpose and audience. If the purpose isn't clear, do you need to send it at all? If you do have a clear purpose, how do you need to shape your message to this specific audience? Make the language more or less formal, for example? Or, provide some essential background they're unaware of?

If your message requires you to look up or research some relevant information, this is also best done in the prewriting stage. The actual writing is much easier to compose and

organize if you have your facts checked ahead of time. Though, the reality is, for longer and more elaborate documents, the need for more research will crop up as you develop your thoughts.

2. Writing

In the writing phase, you organize your information and compose your message. As noted in Reading 1-1, you often find at the composition stage that, once you try to put the idea you had in your mind into words, that idea wasn't nearly as clear as you thought it was. Remember that any written message leaves a permanent record. So, even when the writing is relatively informal, as with quick emails or texts, it's worth doing a bit of cutting and pasting of what you've produced to put your words and sentences into a logical order.

3. Revising

Finally, even if it's only a quick read-though, even the shortest written message should be put through a revision phase. Scan your message to ensure it meets the goal you established in the prewriting phase, and see if there are any blatantly wrong word choices or glaring grammatical errors. For much of the writing we do in offices nowadays, that's enough.

For longer or more formal documents, the revision phase needs to be much more thorough and is probably the most important of the three writing phases. For critical writing, such as contracts or policies, a good practice is to have someone else proofread your work and mark any errors they find for you to revise. (It's a good practice to have someone else proofread the document for you, but you are always responsible for your own work, so the revising is your job.)

If there's no-one available whom you'd trust to proofread your work, it's fortunate that automatic style checkers have got much better than they used to be. The gold standard here is Grammarly (<https://www.grammarly.com/>), which integrates with a wide variety of software. But, the open-source LanguageTool also has an excellent reputation (and a free plan (<https://languagetool.org/>)). It works with Microsoft Word documents, or you can paste your text into a web field.

Language Usage

The English language has many ways to say anything, and finding just the right word can be difficult at the best of times. With written channels of communication, you don't have the advantage of being able to use your facial expressions or tone of voice to help convey meaning and tone, so your word choice matters. Here are some examples that might help show appropriate word choice in action.

Professional language

Here are some examples of that go beyond business casual to unprofessional tone along with an example solution to improve them:

1. **Unprofessional:** Hang loose until I get back to you.
Better: I will get back to you (or, send you a reply) by close of business today.
2. **Unprofessional:** She ran out of gas at the end of the speech.
Better: She was tired by the end of the speech.

Positive Language

Business writing is normally positive in tone, as this emphasizes audience benefits and gives it a better chance of succeeding.

1. **Negative:** I can't let you start your vacation until 1 May.
Positive (Better): You may begin your vacation on 1 May or later.
2. **Negative:** Customers cannot return merchandise without a manager's approval.
Positive (Better): You may return your merchandise with a manager's approval.

Audience Orientation

Audience orientation goes beyond empathizing with them and seeing the situation from their standpoint. You can also orient your language to emphasize the benefits to them.

1. **Sender Orientation:** Please return the enclosed card so we can update our beneficiary records.
Audience Orientation: Please return the enclosed card promptly so we can promptly process your dividend cheques.
2. **Sender Orientation:** Our warranty becomes effective only when we receive an owner's registration.

Audience Orientation: Your warranty begins working for you as soon as you return your owner's registration.

Positive Tone and “You” Point of View

Related to audience orientation, the “you” view maintains a positive tone by orienting the message in terms of receiver benefits. It is especially common in marketing materials and messages to customers.

1. **Negative:** We can't send your shipment until we receive proof of your payment.
Positive: We will send your shipment immediately up receipt of payment.
2. **Negative:** You won't regret opening an account with us.
Positive: Your new account enables instant rebates on clothing and a whole host of other items.

Courtesy

Business or workplace writing is almost always courteous. There is nothing wrong with using “please” when your request is actually a demand. This is sometimes referred to as a “polite command”. An adult audience knows what you mean, and it doesn't hurt to be courteous about it.

1. **Blunt:** Have that report to me by close of business Friday.
A Polite Command: I'd like that report by close of business Friday.
2. **Blunt:** Don't eat all the muffins!
A Polite Command: Please don't eat all the muffins; they're for guests.

Bias Free Language

Your co-workers and customers will almost always represent a diversity of people. When you aren't referring to a specific person, it's only courtesy to use bias-free language that doesn't make assumptions about gender, race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, age, or disability. Opponents of this will always point to the ugly malapropisms that have occasionally resulted (“chairperson”) but with a little skill, you can avoid biased assumptions in your language while keeping it fluent and even elegant.

- The workmen (workers) removed the shattered glass.
- The stewardess (flight attendant) closed the emergency door.
- The mail man (letter carrier) was here earlier.

- The chairman (chair) opened the meeting.

Plain Language

Avoid pretentious and pompous language. Use “obvious” words to convey meaning. For example:

- Use “begin” instead of commence or initiate.
- Use “pay” instead of compensation.
- Use “end” instead of terminate.
- Use “return” instead of reciprocate.

Precise Language

Plain language doesn’t mean imprecise language. The lack of non-verbal cues means written communication can easily go astray. And, the fact that written channels tend to be asynchronous, means there’s usually no chance to notice and correct any errors at the moment. So, precise language is all the more important when you’re writing. Use concrete nouns instead of abstract ones whenever you can:

- 1,000 (or some other number) instead of “many”.
- 5:30 AM (or some other specific time) instead of “early”.
- 33° Celsius (or some other specific temperature) instead of “hot”.
- 89.9% (or some other specific percentage) instead of “most”.
- Business Administration Students instead of “others”.
- A millionaire instead of “very rich”.
- An oak desk instead of “nice furniture”
- 8:00 PM Wednesday instead of “soon”.

Regarding the last, lack of precision in dates, times, and locations for events or meetings in the WORST. It has probably cost us more wasted time and energy than any single other factor in human history (I only slightly exaggerate).

Emoticons and Emojis

Emoticons are the faces and other symbols constructed from standard text characters, such as: :). With the move to the Unicode character set, which includes graphical icons,

these have largely been replaced by graphical emojis: 😊. Although emoticons have been in use since 1982, and emojis since 1997, their use remains controversial for business writing. Certainly, in the absence of non-verbal cues they can help you convey tone (indicating that you're being humorous is common), but many of your recipients will regard emojis as akin to slang and too juvenile for workplace writing.

My opinion is that you can almost always convey your tone adequately through careful wording and the use of traditional punctuation — it just takes a little more effort. However, language is constantly changing, and the general acceptance of emoji use (especially in online communication) means you're probably safe using it with internal recipients you know well to be more casual with.

Finis: Key Takeaways

- Follow the three-step process for written communication: prewriting, writing, and revising.
- Good business writing:
 1. Emphasizes audience benefits,
 2. Uses inclusive language,
 3. Uses plain and familiar language, and
 4. Uses precise expressions.