Effective Business Writing Skills

Strong business writing requires attention to organization, sentence clarity, tone, and readability in addition to careful audience consideration. There are steps in the writing process you can take to help it go more smoothly for you. These are:

1. Identify your audience. Know exactly who it is you are targeting with your message. Not all messages should be worded the same way for each audience. Imagine explaining a project delay to a customer. Now, imagine telling the same story to your supervisor or a good friend. Chances are high that your story will vary in tone, word choice and organization. This is because we are already in the practice of catering our messages according to who is on the receiving end of them and to our message purpose. Your message recipient should feel as if you are communicating directly with him or her.
2. Draft your document. When tackling a writing task, it can be easiest to simply start writing – get something on your computer screen. Then, you can go back and edit and proofread your message to ensure you are sending the message you intend to send.
3. Revise your document. When proofreading, you are checking for mechanical errors (grammar, spelling, typos); when editing, you are checking your content, sentence construction, and formatting. Revising is an important part of the writing process, and can be most productive if you finish your first draft early enough to let it sit for a day or so. Coming back to your work with ‘fresh eyes’, allows you to see issues that you might not see when attempting it revise immediately after completing a draft. It is also a good idea to run important final documents past at least one other person to check for errors. Of course, we don’t always have the luxury of another editor or time to put our work aside, so learning to write well is a must when working in business environments.

When revising your work, here are key things to look for:

* **A**. Grammar, capitalization, punctuation, typos, and proper usage of numbers, symbols and abbreviations.   
    
  Test your skills at <http://elt.oup.com/student/practicegrammar/test;jsessionid=4FF033ED7E52FE3565C0EFBAAE1F7769?cc=us&selLanguage=en>
* **B**. Proper use of pronouns – check to see if a proper noun would be the best choice for clarity.
* **C**. Sentence syntax – are your words in the proper order? Do they make sense? The easiest way to identify syntax errors is to read your work aloud. If it is awkward to say them, it is even more awkward to read them.
* **D**. Format – how does your document look?
* **E**. Organization – is it logical?
* **F**. Readability – your work should be targeted to the 9th grade level. There are a variety of ‘test’ you can do to rate the readability of your documents. One quick and easy way is to do the following in MS Word:
  + **a**. Go to Tools > Options >Spelling & Grammar and Check ‘Grammar with Spelling’ AND ‘Show Readability Statistics’.

Here is an example of another way to do the calculation: [Lehman, C.M. and D.D. Dufrene. (2011). BCOMM, 4th ed]

Dear Mr. and Mrs. Lee:

1With interest rates at their lowest level in 20 years, you chose a good time to buy your first house.

2Choosing a fixed mortgage rate allowed you to “lock in” your 6 percent interest rate, protecting you from potential increases in interest rates before your closing.

3Had you selected a variable rate mortgage, you could have taken advantage of the recent drop in interest rates. 4However, you would have been subject to later increases in interest rates.

5If interest rates continue to decline, you may want to consider refinancing your fixed-rate mortgage. 6Refinancing is typically cost effective when interest rates are 1 percent below your current mortgage rate.

7Mr. and Mrs. Lee, we are glad to have been of service in your recent home purchase. 8Please call me if you need information about other financing needs.

**Calculation**:

No. of words: 138

No. of sentences: 8

Average sentence length: (138 ÷ 8 = 17) = 17

No. of difficult words: 16

Percentage of difficult words: (16 ÷ 138 = 11.6) = 11.6

Average sentence length 17.0

+ Percentage difficult words 11.6

28.6

x 0.4 (constant)

Readability level 11.4

Be Clear, Concise and Compelling

Clear

SpellCheck can’t do it all. For example, it could happen that a writer writing a public relations piece for an organization to publicize a speaker's visit, could type '**nudist**' instead of the correct word, '**Buddhist**', and send an unintended message. The problem with counting too much on SpellCheck, is that it only picks up spelling errors, not errors in word choice. This means that it will not correct words that are correct in a different context, such as ‘there’ versus ‘their’.

To make text easier to read, break it up. Short paragraphs with plenty of white space, bullets, numbered lists, charts and graphs and boxes and borders all help to draw a reader to key information that might get lost in large chunks of text.

When revising for clarity, in addition to using proper grammar, be sure to check the syntax of your sentences. Syntax refers to the order of your words. Here is an example of the impact of a syntax error:

**Confusing**: Be sure to make room in your schedule for training session employee evaluation. (Evaluation of the employee or the session, or employees’ evaluation of the training?)

**Clear**: Be sure to make room in your schedule to evaluate the employee training session.

Improper punctuation placement can also cause confusion. There used to be a Facebook page titled, “’Let’s eat Grandma,’ or ‘Let’s eat, Grandma’ – Punctuation Saves Lives.’” The page was dedicated to the discussion of punctuation errors and highlighting the importance of using proper grammar for clarity. The title of the page demonstrates just how much the meaning of a sentence can change as a result of hyphen or comma placement.

Other rules for clarity include:

1. Place action verbs at the beginning of a sentence.
2. Avoid ambiguity – choose the most concrete word possible.
3. Use active voice – in active voice, the agent performing the action serves as the subject. It is better to have someone doing something that to have something done to someone.  
     
   **Passive**: A mistake was made by the new employees, Sara.  
     
   **Active**: Our new employee, Sara, made a mistake.
4. Be sure to place a single idea in each sentence.
5. Check pronouns to make sure they clearly refer to one identifiable noun.

Concise

Brevity is important. In our messages, we don't want to say more than we have to, because extra explanation breeds confusion. There are many words we tend to throw into our sentences that add nothing of substance. Following, is a paragraph with the highlighted words were cut to remove clutter and clarify meaning. Most were redundancies. When we remove them, we do not change the meaning of the sentence. We should edit our own messages like this before sending them out.

Imagine the thought of burning up a priceless painting by Rembrandt just in orderto stay warm for ten minutes. Sounds really crazy, doesn’t it? But that is comparable to just what is happening right now in the Amazon rain forest of Brazil. The president of Brazil authorized a 14,000-mile network of highways to open upthe vast area of the rain forest to settlement. Unfortunately, the project has been nothing but a disaster from the very beginning. Working in the hot, torrid, steamyjungle caused many fatal deaths among the workers. Soon a whole lot of foreign businesses began to get themselves involved in the project. Today there is a very real danger that the rain forest will be irrevocably destroyed completely and altogether. [Lucas, S.E. (2010). The Art of Public Speaking, 9th edition IM, University of Wisconsin]

Wordiness also creeps into our writing when we use more words that necessary. Following are some examples:

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **Wordy** | **Concise** |
| Fill to capacity | fill |
| In a similar fashion | like |
| In the capacity of | as |
| In the context of | in |
| Owing to the fact that | because |
| Raise opposition to | challenge |
| Bring into the open | announce |

Compelling

To be compelling, messages must grab and maintain reader attention. In business messages, you can do this by remaining relevant throughout your message, choosing vivid verbs and maintaining active voice when appropriate. Also, concrete language over the abstract and inclusive language help to avoid the semantic noise discussed in Lesson one, which can cause enough message interference to prevent us from meeting our goal of achieving shared meaning. Inclusive language rules are:

1. Do not use one gender-based word to stand for both genders.  
     
   *Incorrect*: Every man in the company needs to take ownership.  
   *Revised*: Every employee in the company needs to take ownership.
2. Do not use ‘he’ as a generic pronoun for both genders.  
     
   *Incorrect*: Everyone in the room seems as if he is a bit uncomfortable.  
   *Revised*: Everyone in the room seems a bit uncomfortable.
3. Avoid stereotyping jobs and social roles by gender.  
     
   *Incorrect*: He is a male nurse.  
   *Revised*: He is a nurse.
4. Do not use identifying personal traits that are unrelated to the topic.  
     
   *Incorrect*: My African-American business partner is knowledgeable on consumer law.  
   *Revised*: My business partner is knowledgeable on consumer law.
5. Do not use names that groups use to identify themselves.  
     
   *Incorrect*: The broads at the counter need assistance.  
   *Revised*: The women at the counter need assistance.

To be compelling means to be engaging. Checking to make sure you accomplished this will be part of your revision process.