

MODULE 1

Good Business Writing Style

YOU don't need to be a genius with words or have a degree in English to be a good business writer. You just need to have good ideas, be able to figure out what your readers need to know, and be able to express yourself clearly.

At its best, business writing is simple and straightforward. It's what you write about that can be complicated. Good writers write plainly so that the meaning comes through clearly. Good writing does not draw attention to itself. Instead of "Wow, this person has a great vocabulary!" your readers should be saying "Wow, that's a great idea!" Or simply, "Yeah, I understand."

But many people have different ideas about what is good business writing. We've all been influenced by different people over our lives—our parents, our teachers, our friends, our bosses. They've all helped shape the way we write (and a lot of other things too). And we've been exposed to many different writing styles in our reading—both good and bad.

In this module, you'll learn about different writing styles—good and bad—and decide for yourself what is appropriate writing style. If you're like most people, you'll agree that it's *plain English* (also called *plain language*). And that's what this workshop is about—learning to express yourself clearly using plain English.

Over-the-top style

An aspiring writer sent me his resume with this cover letter. To get you thinking about what is good business writing style, read this letter. (Yes, this is a real letter!) His

writing made a big impression on me—but probably not the way he intended. Read it and decide for yourself. Would you hire him?

Sample cover letter

Dear Mr. Kent,

Thank you for speaking with me on the phone on Friday, December 2nd, and inviting me to submit a resume to your firm. Please find it enclosed.

Let me pay you the compliment of honesty. You can see my experience is limited. But I can write. I know what makes beautiful language, and I have sewn silk purses from sows' ears. I know how to persuade, to argue, to narrate and to relate. My language is always "definite, specific and concrete," to paraphrase that venerable tome. I can maintain a sustained argument, laying out my premises in an order which is at once logical and elegant, flowing to their predetermined conclusion. I am ruthlessly self-critical, excising every word, sentence and paragraph that does not move forward or prove my thesis. In two words, my writing is "motion" and "economy."

But again, I have limited experience. My degree was an excellent start, and my military staff-writing and infrequent editorializing have proven worthwhile forays into other language venues. I now launch forward, tentatively but fearlessly, into another possibility of writing: the hired gun. I see my skills as marketable, just as marketable as butchery or blacksmithing. And just as a butcher learns skills and begins his apprenticeship, I too have learned the basics. I too am ready to apprentice.

Where I stand, you stood. The gulf between us consists of time and experience but can be bridged by your wisdom, my desire and your willingness to risk your time and some writing assignments on me. I realize I ask more than I dare, but only because you have stood here. You know the agony of waiting for that "Yes!" which I now hope to hear. Will you, sir, say "Yes"?

Sincerely,

Write down the words that best describe the writing style of this letter:

_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____

Legal style (legalese)

Avoid writing like a lawyer, even if you are one. No laws or rules require this hackneyed style. It may be true that certain legal language has been interpreted by the courts and has specific meanings under the law, but it has no place in most business writing.

Example

Enclosed please find our response pursuant to your inquiry of Wednesday last. We hereby advise you, as per your request, that we will be forwarding said refund in due course under separate cover. (**Legalese**)

We received your letter written last Wednesday. We agree that you are entitled to a refund and will mail it to you in a few days. (**Plain English**)

Bureaucratic style

Some people think that business writing must be passive and use big words. While on the surface this style of writing may sound impressive, it actually conveys less meaning because it's ambiguous.

Example

It has been recommended that the organization prioritize its strategic management objectives before decision options are quantified and the distribution network is regionalized. (**Bureaucratic**)

We recommend that the company decide its business objectives before trying to rate the various possible locations for its regional distribution centres. (**Plain English**)

Excessive courtesy

Avoid inauthentic expressions of friendship, courtesy, or caring. Honesty is refreshing. Most of us have heard too much of this marketing drivel to think that it's genuine.

Example

It has been a pleasure to serve you and we trust that if we can be of any additional assistance in the future you will not hesitate to call upon us.

(Excessively courteous)

I enjoyed working with you. Call again if you need more help. **(Plain English)**

Exercise 1: Make this sentence more believable

You've reached the offices of A-to-Z Manufacturing. Unfortunately, all of our operators are busy at the moment, but please be assured that we value your business—each of our customers is very special to us. Please stay on the line and the next available operator will be right with you. Again, we value your business and look forward to serving you!

Abbreviated scientific style

Don't drop articles or other words, even in procedures. Remove unnecessary words for conciseness, but don't remove words that are essential to the meaning. This telegraphic style is simplistic, irritating, and occasionally ambiguous.

Example

When creating new file, ensure code not assigned to existing file. (**Avoid**)

When you create a new file, ensure the file name has not been assigned to another file. (**Better**)

Exercise 2: Add back the missing words

If oil pressure under 40 lb, loosen right-hand banjo screw.

Exercise 3: Top 10 list of attributes of good business writing

Prepare a list of the 10 most important features of good business writing.

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____
4. _____
5. _____
6. _____
7. _____
8. _____
9. _____
10. _____

Say it in plain English



In the last exercise, you listed the 10 most important features of good business writing. Here's a list of some of the important features of plain English. See how your list compares to this one. While *plain English* means different things to different people, there's general agreement about these features.

Plain English guidelines:

1. Write to your readers as though you were talking to them in a friendly, straightforward manner (often called *conversational* style).
2. Use the same short, everyday words that you use with friends and co-workers—avoid big fancy words.
3. Use first person (“I” or “we”) or second person (“you”) point of view, where appropriate—they’re shorter and more direct than using the third person (“he” or “the clerk”).
4. Use short sentences in normal subject-verb-object sentence order.
5. Prefer active rather than passive verbs (for example, “I wrote the report” instead of “the report was written”).
6. Use strong verbs (for example, “analyze” instead of “conduct an analysis of”).
7. Write concisely, removing all unnecessary or redundant words.
8. Use gender-neutral terms (for example, “firefighter” instead of “fireman”).
9. Use contractions, such as “can’t” and “you’ll,” to make your writing more conversational.
10. Avoid slang, clichés, and other bad habits of speech.

Tone

The *tone* of your writing is the feeling that it leaves with the reader and results from the choices you make as you write. Look at the list of words that describe tone. Which tones are you striving for in your writing?

Exercise 4: Writing tone

Circle the words that best describe the tone that you strive for in your business writing:

- | | | | |
|-----------------|--------------|---------------|---------------|
| • abrasive | • courteous | • helpful | • personal |
| • aggressive | • demanding | • honest | • polite |
| • assertive | • distant | • impersonal | • sarcastic |
| • authoritative | • earnest | • informal | • silly |
| • blunt | • engaging | • insulting | • sincere |
| • bureaucratic | • formal | • informative | • stiff |
| • casual | • forthright | • objective | • subjective |
| • condescending | • friendly | • officious | • threatening |

Guidelines for achieving a friendly, helpful tone:

- Write in the first person (“I” and “we”) or second person (“you”). Avoid the third person (“he” or “the customer”), which is cold and impersonal.
- Write the way you would speak to a friend, and use the simple, everyday words that you would use in normal conversation, minus the slang and other bad habits of speech.
- Avoid long and convoluted sentences that are usually only found in writing—keep them short and to the point.

- Avoid passive sentences, which don’t mention the real subject. Instead of “Your application has been reviewed...,” write “We reviewed your application...”

Formality

Some documents are more formal than others. The most formal are usually legislation, legal documents, and policy statements. The least formal are usually memos, emails, and in-house training and instruction manuals. Of course, the formality of these documents will vary depending on the author, the reader, and your organization’s culture. The trend over the past few decades has been towards greater informality in all but a few types of documents. Are your documents more formal than they have to be?

Styleguides and style sheets

All types of writing require you to make a variety of decisions, particularly if you're writing longer documents, such as reports, proposals, or manuals. Even the most experienced writers rely on styleguides and style sheets to help them write and format their documents consistently.

Styleguides

Organizations that prepare a lot of documents will typically either use a published styleguide or develop one of their own. Even the most experienced writers can't remember all of the rules and conventions set out in these essential reference sources. Most writers will own several for different kinds of documents. Keep your styleguide beside your dictionary, within arm's reach of where you write.

Styleguides usually cover:

- word choice
- writing style and tone
- spelling of certain words
- capitalization and hyphenation of certain words
- format and layout of documents
- process for preparing documents
- how documents should be word processed

Style sheets

Styleguides are great, as far as they go, but they won't cover important writing issues such as:

- names, capitalization, spelling, and hyphenation of terms specific to your industry, organization, or product
- formatting standards and guidelines for your documents
- your organization's process for researching, writing, editing, reviewing, and approving publications
- anything else not covered in the styleguide you use

This is where style sheets come in. They're the place where you record the day-to-day decisions you make about your documents. Without them, you'd have to remember all of the decisions you make. And if you have several people working on the same document, style sheets are essential. Often, a style sheet is just a sheet or two of paper pinned to the bulletin board and added to as you encounter issues and make decisions.

Some good styleguides:

A Canadian Writer's Reference, Diana Hacker, ISBN 0-17-604211-3. Not just a great styleguide of Canadian English, but a book of essential grammar focusing on typical problem areas, with lots of examples.

Editing Canadian English, Freelance Editors' Association of Canada. ISBN 0-88894-624-4. A relatively compact (about 200 pages) book prepared by and for professional editors working in book publishing and other industries, focusing on the problems that Canadian editors face.

Microsoft Manual of Style for Technical Publications, Microsoft Press, ISBN 1-57231-890-2. Microsoft's own internal styleguide for its software manuals. Microsoft has set the industry standard for Windows-based software, and this guide sets the standard for technical publications. A must-have for all manual writers.

Read Me First! - A Style Guide for the Computer Industry, Sun Technical Publications, ISBN 0-13-455347-0. Originally the in-house styleguide for technical publications at Sun Microsystems. Now, one of the best-known styleguides for writers of end-user manuals for the software industry.

Science and Technical Writing - A Manual of Style, Philip Rubens, ISBN 0-415-92551-7. A modern reference of North American conventions that focuses on scientific and technical writing—a must for engineers who write, and all writers of technical manuals and reports.

Style Guide for Business and Technical Communication, Franklin Covey. ISBN 0-9652481-1-9. A comprehensive styleguide intended for the general business writer—one of the best general styleguides around.

The Canadian Press Stylebook, The Canadian Press, ISBN 0-920009-10-7. The styleguide used by many Canadian journalists. These are the conventions used in most of our papers and magazines, so are the ones most familiar to the general public.

The Chicago Manual of Style, Editorial staff of the University of Chicago, ISBN 0-226-10390-0. One of the best-known, most respected and, at over 700 pages, most comprehensive styleguides around—a definitive reference focusing on book and academic publishing.

The Elements of Style, Strunk and White, ISBN 0-20530902X. One of the oldest and best-known styleguides, and a model of the style that it preaches—it belongs on every writer's shelf.

Words into Type, Marjorie Skillin, ISBN 0-13-964262-5. A classic, comprehensive reference source covering the fine points of grammar, usage, style, and production methods. Last updated in 1974, but it stands the test of time.