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Business Writing in English
商务英语应用文写作

何维湘 编著

中山大学出版社

·广州·

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前 言

《商务英语应用文写作》是一本商务英语写作的参考指导书。主要根据英美出版的教材和书刊,介绍各类商务英语应用文的撰写方法,并配以实例和练习。全书共有九个单元,内容包括:绪论(商务写作的特点、基本写作技巧),业务信函(格式、结构、信封的写法),业务信函的策略,求职函和履历,个人业务信函,其他形式应用文,电报,电传和合同。本书可作为大专院校商务英语应用文写作课教材,也可供大学生、研究生、外资合资企业和涉外单位工作人员自学和参考。

本书从国内外出版的教材中,摘引了一些材料,美籍教师 Adah Kirch 和曾在外资单位工作过的戴灿宇老师也为本书提供了不少实例,美籍教授 Arnold H. Veldkamp 先生校阅了全书,特此一并鸣谢。

由于作者水平有限,本书还有待进一步修订、完善,敬请专家和读者提供宝贵的批评和意见。

编者
1997.6

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Chapter One Introduction

Successful business depends on successful communication. Almost every time you communicate at work, you are the one who gains or loses from the communication. Written communication in business is extremely important because you can refer back to^① what was said. If people relied solely on spoken messages, it would be difficult to remember what had been said earlier; therefore business relies heavily on the written work.

Most business people spend much of their working time writing messages to stay within or send outside their companies. They recognize the importance of good impressions. These impressions depend largely on how people communicate. One way to achieve the image-building goals is to develop a friendly, enthusiastic writing style. The business messages you write should encourage your reader to think favorably of^② you and your company.

Business writing must be effective because money is made or lost based on the effectiveness of the message. In business, decisions usually have to be made quickly, often based only on the written information. Today's tendency is to write in a simple, natural, almost conversational way. There are some common elements of effective business writing.

Section 1 Common Characteristics of Effective Business Writing

What is effective business writing?

Effective business writing contains five characteristics, which can be summed up in the Five C's, i. e. 1) Correctness; 2) Clearness; 3) Completeness; 4) Conciseness and 5) Courteousness.

Correctness

The first C of any message is correctness. Correctness means using standard grammar and spelling. It means choosing suitable stationary and a format acceptable for the situation. It means avoiding obvious erasures or corrections. Certainly, it means choosing the exact word, selecting the appropriate sentence structure, and creating careful paragraphs. Above all, it means accuracy of facts. In short^③, every effort should be made to ensure the correctness of business messages in all respects.

Errors in business writing can cost a company both time and money. The person who receives the incorrect information may also lose both time and money by acting on that misinformation. This will inevitably result in a loss of goodwill on the part of the company, and its reputation and prestige will be tarnished^④. Just imagine what trouble or expense a single misplaced decimal point^⑤, a transposed figure, a misspelled name, or misrepresented fact or statement may entail^⑥!

Avoid any error of fact and errors in grammar, spelling, punc-

tuation, or capitalization. If your message is sloppy^⑦, your reader might justifiably decide you're a slob^⑧ and ignore you.

Adequate attention to details and careful proofreading will reduce errors in business writing and create a favorable first impression.

Clearness

Clearness is the keynote of the other four characteristics. Clarity relates most directly to^⑨ the effectiveness of business writing. A business message does not fulfil its function if its reader does not understand it. So a business message must be clear so that it will be understood the first time it is read.

You achieve clarity by thinking before you write, by defining your purpose and by using clear, plain language, avoiding jargon^⑩ and fancy words. They will only conceal the meaning of the message.

Don't puzzle your reader with long, involved sentences and make sure that what you have written cannot be misunderstood. But you should include necessary details for the reader to understand the subject completely. Inclusion of pertinent^⑪ information is necessary to make the meaning clear.

Completeness

In addition to^⑫ clarity, business message must be complete^⑬. Completeness refers to providing enough information so that the intent of the message is understood by the reader. Business writing that leaves out necessary essential information invariably leads to extra work, extra letters, extra memos – hence extra cost – to add in-

formation that should have been included in the original.

The businessman who forgets to include any relevant details in his message will make a poor impression on his reader. An incomplete message is almost worse than none. Exclusion of pertinent information is exasperating¹⁴. Compare the following notices:

Incomplete: All sales representatives will meet at 9:00 on Monday.

Complete: All sales representatives will meet at 9:00 on Monday,
February 27, in Conference Room C.

Be sure you include all the details that will be needed by the reader of your message. Say every thing that must be said, but do not waste your reader's time.

Conciseness

Conciseness is the soul of business writing. In a business message every word counts and every sentence carries the message. Business people receive many messages every day. If you overburden¹⁵ them with unduly¹⁶ long expressions and tire their eyes with excess words, they might just toss¹⁷ your message in the nearby wastebasket.

To make your message as concise as possible, you must:

(1) get to the heart of the message immediately and stick to¹⁸ the point. For example, instead of saying "I would like to take this opportunity to", begin with the information you want to convey.

(2) Strike out¹⁹ extra words and omit words that repeat. Never use several words when you can say the same thing with a single word. For instance, the words underlined can be omitted

during the year of 1994

costs the sum of ...

full and complete details

(3) Avoid phrases that say nothing, such as “I think”, “I feel” and “I believe”, for your reader will know that the message contains your thoughts, feelings, or beliefs.

(4) Use simpler constructions to save the reader’s time. Use a word instead of a phrase and a phrase instead of a clause for the same thing.

Be concise without sacrificing courtesy^②.

Courteousness

Finally, business message must show courteousness. People respond positively to those who treat them with respect and kindness. Nothing can take the place of words like “please” and “thank you”. It should be remembered, however, that true courtesy requires more than the use of polite words and phrases. For instance, timely information with the desire to be helpful and useful is a genuinely courteous message. It will please your customer who dislikes waiting for a long time before he gets a reply to his inquiry.

A friendly and sincere tone transmits courteousness and opens the way to the pleasant transaction of business.

You may list other attributes of effective writing: creativeness, concreteness and so forth. But if you can master the above mentioned Five C’s: correctness, clarity, completeness, conciseness and courteousness, you’ll be a competent writer of business messages.

Section 2 Basic Writing Skills

Simply learning the Five C's does not make you a skilled business writer. To master the Five C's or to be able to write business messages containing all these characteristics, you must study business writing techniques or skills and practise them. Needless to say^①, good English is the important foundation of the writing skills we discuss.

Create an Appropriate Tone

Tone may be defined as the overall^② impression or feeling a message conveys to its reader. In writing business messages you should match tone to^③ purpose. Try to strike a balance between being formal and being familiar. Be confident, but not aggressive. Be courteous but not stuffy^④. Try to sound natural without becoming too chummy^⑤. Try to create a friendly and sincere tone so that your readers will understand that you sincerely wish to be of service. Your purpose in writing is to persuade them to agree with you. Therefore, adopt a tone that will allow you to be convincing. Remember what is said is often not as significant as how it is said. Compare:

Angry tone: We received our order No. CL 818 yesterday. But when we turned on the machine, it did not work. Because of this bad experience, we doubt your company's ability to make high quality products.

Better tone: I am writing with reference to order No. CL 818 which

we received yesterday. When we turned on the machine, it did not work. It seems that the machine was not tested before dispatch. Please let us know what you intend to do in this matter.

(when turning down an offer)

Poor tone: Unfortunately, we got a better offer.

Better tone: We were pleased to receive your offer, but. . . .

From the above examples, you can see clearly how a poor tone can offend your reader.

Cultivate the “You” Attitude

Effective business writing should show “you”, the reader, what the writer can do for “you” – how “you” will profit and why. The business message written from the point of view of the reader is known as the “you” attitude. If you can see things from the point of view of your reader and express your ideas in terms of[®] his experience, you can most readily create an appropriate tone and produce a favorable impression. Therefore, the purpose of the message will be achieved.

Employ the “you” attitude and stay away from the “I” attitude by emphasizing such words as “you”, “your”, and “yours”, to make your message more effective.

Examples:

The “I” attitude: I need a lot of information on the way business people react to the current crises in our colleges,

and I selected you and some others to send this questionnaire²⁷ to because your names were mentioned in the newspapers.

The "You" attitude: You and several other prominent business people were recently quoted in the newspapers concerning the current crises in our colleges and your comments so interested me that I decided to send this questionnaire to you.

Consider the Level of Diction

Diction may be defined as the manner or style of expression. Generally, there are four levels of diction: learned, popular, colloquial, and slang.

While there are special times and places for all these levels, you will generally choose the popular level of diction for your business writing.

Popular diction is the language used by the mass media: TV, radio and newspapers. These are the words most often used in business world.

Business people have given up the stiff, formal and obsequious²⁸ style of past generations in favor of the natural, conversational, unpretentious²⁹ and inconspicuous modern style. The old-fashioned business language which made use of many ornate³⁰, formal phrases has become obsolete³¹.

Arranging plain English words in concise sentences that say clearly what you mean will leave a favorable impression.

Select the Appropriate Writing Style

Essentially, two writing styles can be created: the personal and impersonal.

The personal writing style places emphasis on the person who will receive the message, to create the “you” attitude. Since many business messages are written to assure a certain action on the part of the reader (whether it’s buying from your company or granting you a credit), the personal style is preferred. You should use this style in memos^⑫, letters, and some kinds of reports, those in which you want the reader to feel a part of your activities.

The impersonal writing style is used when more distance is needed in a message. For example, job descriptions, policy statements and many reports.

Personal style is characterised by the use of first and second person pronouns “I, we, us, ours, you, yours” and so forth. The impersonal can be created in three ways: (a) the use of the impersonal pronoun “one” (This is seldom used in business because of its formality); (b) the use of third person pronouns: “he, she, their, its” and so on, and (c) the use of job titles such as electrical engineer, sales representative and so on.

One final point should be made about writing styles: do not mix the two. The result will sound garbled: friendly one moment, detached the next.

Outline and Organize the Material Before Writing

If you want your writing to be clear and easy to follow, you should decide what you are going to say before you start to write.

You can't let your readers get confused when you move from one point to the next or when you change the direction of your ideas. In other words, your message should be so well organized that there is unity and coherence³³ in it. A good method to achieve unity and coherence is to make a mental or written outline before writing. There are two basic patterns to follow in organizing your ideas.

1. Two basic patterns of organization

Two basic patterns of organization are available for outlining ideas: inductive³⁴ and deductive³⁵.

Inductive organization is also known as the indirect pattern outline that means beginning with the specific facts that are obvious and moving to a general conclusion. The following example shows how this pattern functions.

Facts: a. Today, the outdoor temperature is 33.

b. The temperature in my office today is 30.

c. No air is circulating in my office.

Conclusion: The air-conditioner in my office isn't functioning today.

Deduction organization is also called the direct pattern outline. This pattern begins with a conclusion, and works backward to try to find the facts on which the conclusions based. For the same situation, the deductive pattern would be:

Conclusion: The air-conditioner in my office isn't functioning today because...

Facts: a. No air is circulating in my office.

b. The temperature in my office today is 30.

c. Today, the outdoor temperature is 33.

There are many variations of the inductive and deductive pat-

terns: the cause/effect plan, the problem/solution plan, the comparison/ contrast plan, the chronological plan, and so on. Usually, we do not analyze which pattern or which variation we will use. We simply know that for certain types of information, one pattern or variation is better than the other. For example, favorable messages follow the deductive or direct method, while unfavorable messages use the inductive or indirect method.

Be aware of the two basic patterns and variations and choose a suitable one in organizing your ideas to assure that your reader will understand how each idea relates to each others in your message.

2. *Careful paragraphing*

Once you have decided on a pattern of organization for your message, you must construct paragraphs carefully. Clear paragraphing promotes comprehension and is particularly necessary when a message deals with a number of things.

Good paragraphing is easy to master. Essentially, a paragraph should contain only one main, complete idea. A topic subheading or the initial sentence usually indicates the principle idea. Each sentence in the paragraph should contribute to the main idea.

Short paragraphs are preferable. But avoid too many short, jerky[⊗] paragraphs.

Notes:

- ① refer back to (a) check back through files 回头查阅 (b) mention again 重新提及
- ② think favorably of (think a great deal of/think much of) (a) esteem highly 评价高 (b) consider to be very worthy, valuable,

or important 重视

- ③ in short (in brief/in a word) briefly; in summary; put it into a word or a few words 简单地说, 总之
- ④ tarnish *v.* make or become dull, discoloured, or less bright (使)失去光泽, 使黯然失色, 玷污
- ⑤ decimal point the dot at the left of a decimal 小数
- ⑥ entail *v.* make (an event or action) necessary 使(事件或行动)必要; 必需
- ⑦ sloppy *adj.* not careful or thorough enough 草率的
- ⑧ slob *n.* a rude, lazy, or carelessly-dressed person 懒散的人, 粗鲁的人, 衣着马虎的人
- ⑨ relate to be in relationship with, have reference to 与...有关, 涉及
- ⑩ jargon *n.* language that is hard to understand, esp. because it is full of words known only to the members of a certain group 行话, 黑话, 隐语
- ⑪ pertinent *adj.* connected directly (with something that is being considered); relevant 恰当的, 贴切的, 中肯的, 有关的
- ⑫ in addition to as well as, besides 除外, 此外
- ⑬ complete *adj.* having all necessary, usual, or wanted parts; lacking nothing 完整的, 完满的, 全部的, 十足的
- ⑭ exasperating *adj.* making angry, annoying 使人恼怒的, 激怒人的
- ⑮ overburden *v.* make (someone or something) carry or do too much 使装载过多, 使负担过重
- ⑯ unduly *adv.* too much, very 过度地, 过分地, 非常
- ⑰ toss *v.* throw 扔, 抛
- ⑱ stick to persevere in, not abandon 坚持, 不放弃, 坚守