

Handbook for Business Writing

L. Sue Baugh/Maridell Fryar/David Thomas

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NTC Business Books

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Acknowledgments

Several people gave their support and assistance in preparing this handbook. For the chapters on business letters, we would like to express our appreciation for the valuable assistance of Patricia A. McDonough, corporate communications consultant. She made many excellent suggestions for sample letters and provided numerous tips on creating effective business communications for various audiences.

Special thanks also to Booz·Allen & Hamilton Inc. and Mitchell Bros. Realtors for their kind permission to use their letterheads for our sample letters.

For the chapter covering employment letters and resume writing, we drew on materials developed by the University of Houston Career Planning and Placement Center for its *Placement Manual*. Thanks are due to David B. Small, Director of the Center, for permission to use that material. Thanks also go to TOPS Business Forms, Division of Wallace Computer Services, Inc. for permission to use their Employment Application Form.

Section Seven, The Electronic Office, is unique in its future orientation. We are indebted to Mr. Jules Vieux of the Public Relations Department of Computerland's Houston area headquarters for his assistance in obtaining current information about office technology. In addition, special thanks go to Linda Montgomery of Digital Equipment Corp., Jack Ciak of Dictaphone Corp., Edward F. Clough of Wang Laboratories, Inc., Don Mathias of National Cash Register, and Bobbie Bethel of Xerox Corp.

Our sincere gratitude goes to our editor, Gay Menges, and copyeditor, John Stec, for their patience, tireless work, and many valuable suggestions.

1991 Printing

Published by NTC Business Books, a division of NTC Publishing Group.

©1986 by NTC Publishing Group, 4255 West Touhy Avenue,

Lincolnwood (Chicago), Illinois 60646-1975 U.S.A.

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Manufactured in the United States of America.

Library of Congress Catalog Card Number: 85-71592

How To Use This Handbook

Whether you are a beginning or experienced writer, this handbook is designed to help you find answers to your specific business writing problems quickly and efficiently.

Finding What You Need

To get the greatest benefit from this handbook, you should be familiar with four ways you can locate the guidelines, information, and examples you need.

1. Read through Chapter 1. The first chapter, *Three Steps to Effective Writing*, summarizes a step-by-step approach to good writing you can use for any type of business communication. The approach breaks down the writing process into three stages: prewriting (preparation and background research); writing (outlining and writing first drafts); and revision (rewriting and proofreading). These three steps will help you prepare, plan, and write your letters, memos, reports, and other types of communication.

2. Use Specific Sections. Sections Two through Five cover specific types of business writing. Beginners will appreciate the detailed guidelines and examples in section chapters that show how to create effective business messages. Experienced writers can use the chapters' quick reviews, checklists, and samples to strengthen writing skills they have already developed.

3. Use Specific Chapters. You can select the particular business communication you need—letter, memo, proposal—and turn to the chapter(s) covering that topic. For example, you may need guidelines for writing a press release. Chapter 11 contains brief tips and complete examples for creating press releases commonly used in business.

4. Use the Index. The Index is cross-referenced to help you find related topics or locate a subject when you are not sure what to call it. For example, you may want to know how many dots to put in a quotation to show you have omitted part of the quote. Under the heading "Quotations" you will find an entry "ellipses" and a page number. You will also find the same entry under "Period."

Special Features of This Handbook

As a business writer—beginning or experienced—you will find several features of this book particularly valuable.

1. Review of Business Style. While there is no special language for business writing, certain points of style—tone, clarity, accuracy, brevity—are important to your message. Chapter 2: Choosing the Right Word; Chapter 4: Style in Business Letters; Chapter 10: Business Report Writing; and Chapter 11: Proposals and Press Releases provide brief, vivid reviews of major points in business style. These guidelines can help you write messages that will influence your readers and get results.

2. Finding Business Information. In the Information Age, locating the data you need can cost considerable time and money. Chapter 12: Finding Business Information shows you how to locate data sources and use the computer to save time gathering information. Advances in electronic communications technology have brought vast quantities of data within the reach of individuals as well as companies.

3. Finding the Right Job. Section Five: Business Writing and the Job Search covers resumes, job applications, and various employment letters you will need to find the job you want. You will learn how to create an attention-getting resume; fill out job applications; and write letters of application, acknowledgment, acceptance or refusal of a job offer, recommendation, and resignation. A well-written letter can be one of the best ways to introduce yourself to a prospective employer.

4. Review of Business Grammar and Style. Section Six provides a practical and thorough review of grammar, style, and spelling questions that plague most business writers. Chapters 14 through 18 cover parts of speech, sentence structure, punctuation, capitalization, abbreviations, numbers and spelling guidelines. You can review an entire chapter or look up specific topics in the Index to locate the exact information you need.

Good writing is no accident; it's the result of planning, practice, and revision. The guidelines and examples in this handbook can help you become the effective business writer you would like to be. We hope you enjoy the process!

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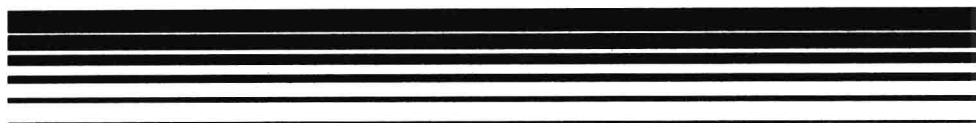
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Section 1

Business Writing Today

Chapter 1 Three Steps to Effective Writing

Many competent, articulate business people experience a moment of panic when they are asked to write a report, memo, or letter. Faced with putting their thoughts in writing, they become confused about what to say, how to say it, and how to manage the mechanics of grammar, spelling, and format.

If you are one of these people—and many of us are—relax! Like any business task, writing is manageable once you break it down into a series of smaller steps. Good writing is the result of good planning and clear thinking. The steps outlined in this handbook will help you identify your purpose in writing any type of business communication, clarify your thinking about what you want to say, and show you how to go about the actual process of getting your message to the reader.

This chapter presents an overview of the three basic steps to effective writing. You will see how to apply these steps in more detail in the chapters on business letters, memos, proposals and press releases, and special writing projects. Once you have a grasp of the principles of good writing, you will be able to use them for any written message, regardless of its length or complexity. The three steps to effective writing are:

- | | |
|--------------------|---|
| <i>Step One:</i> | Prewriting—preparation, planning, background research |
| <i>Step Two:</i> | Writing—organizing and outlining material, writing the first draft |
| <i>Step Three:</i> | Revising—reworking and editing the draft, final typing and printing, proofreading |

Step One: Prewriting

Before you begin any project, you must decide what you want to accomplish and how you wish to accomplish it. You begin with a *concept*: a question, a problem,

a new situation. You gather *facts* to flesh out the concept. What type of problem is it? What is the question? How much can you learn about the situation? Finally, you end up with a *finished product*: a letter, a report, a memo.

In step one, prewriting, you are defining the concept and gathering the facts that will serve as material for step two, writing.

Preparation

All your written communications in business should seek to answer these questions:

1. What is the purpose of this message? Why am I writing it?
2. Who is the audience? Whom do I want to influence?
3. What do I want to say? What is the scope of my subject?

You will first decide on a *purpose*. Do you want to sell a new product or replace an old one? Do you want to supply information or ask for a favor? In one or two sentences or a brief paragraph, state the purpose of your message. If necessary, talk the subject over with others until you have a clear idea of your objective.

Second, think about your *audience*. What should readers know or be able to do after reading your message? What is their level of understanding or expertise regarding the subject? Do you want to persuade them to do or to accept something? What are their interests and motivations—profit, comfort, health, convenience, savings?

Put yourself in the readers' place as much as you can and look at your subject from their perspective. For example, when reporting on company year-end performance, you would write different reports to the vice president of sales, the marketing manager, the president of the company, and the stockholders. Each reader would want to know different types of information and would have different levels of expertise. You need to tailor your message to the level and interests of the audience.

Answers to the first and second questions will help you answer the third—what do you want to say and what is the *scope* of your subject? You must distinguish between information the reader *needs* to know and information that is merely nice to know. For example, in your year-end performance report you would include product sales figures but not a history of the product in American culture—unless the reader specifically had requested it. You must limit your subject and focus on specific topics.

Background Research

By answering the first three questions, you determine what types of information you will need for your writing. The amount of research required can vary greatly,

depending on the subject and purpose. In general, you have four basic sources of information:

1. Libraries—public, specialized, and industry libraries
2. Other people—interviews with experts and others, questionnaires, surveys
3. Industry and government—industry associations and groups, government agencies and officials
4. Your own knowledge—experience, training, education

Your research may be as brief as jotting down sales figures from memory or as lengthy as several weeks or months of gathering data for a report on new site locations. Replying to customer inquiries or complaints can also vary from a few minutes to several days or weeks. If your job requires research, learn how to use the various research tools available through libraries and other reference sources. Chapter 13: Finding Business Information provides a list of resources for locating data quickly.

When gathering information, remember the three cardinal rules of journalism: accuracy, accuracy, and accuracy. Make sure you copy or quote information correctly and have the data to support your statements. Nothing loses a reader's confidence in a writer's work more quickly than discovering errors in the material. Two or three careless mistakes can cast doubt on the credibility of the entire document. Check your facts from sales figures to the correct spelling of the company name and name of the addressee.

Step Two: Writing

You have established your purpose, identified your audience, defined your topic, and gathered your data. Now you are ready for the second step—organizing and writing the first draft.

Organizing

How you organize your material depends on your subject and your purpose for writing. For example, if you are giving instructions on machine assembly, you would choose a step-by-step approach to explain how the machine is put together. If you are making a special offer to a customer or breaking bad news to a client, you would put the most important information first, then fill in the details. Each type of letter or report has a specific purpose that will determine how you organize and arrange the material for the most effective presentation.

Outlining

Once you have chosen the format, the next step is outlining what you want to say and the order in which you want to say it. An outline breaks down a large topic into manageable bits and helps ensure that your writing flows logically from one part to another. The outline corresponds to a blueprint for a building. The more complete the blueprint, the easier it is to construct the building. Likewise, the more detailed the outline, the easier it will be to write the letter, report, or memo. Developing the outline enables you to see the process of your thinking at an early stage. You can spot gaps in data or logic quickly and fill them in before you get to the writing stage.

Outlining is also a good time to think about illustrations or graphics. Will your sales figures mean more to the reader if they are shown in a bar chart or colored pie chart? With the graphics capabilities of many computers, creating illustrations for text can be relatively easy. Check through your outline to determine where illustrations could make your presentation more effective.

Writing the First Draft

Your outline is complete, and you are ready to write your first draft. Many writers make a common mistake at this point. They try to “get it right” the first time. They may work on a paragraph for hours, fine-tuning the words until they are perfect. Writers thus shut off their creativity by insisting on perfection.

Remember: *The first draft is a working draft*. It should be written quickly without too much thought to elegant expressions or final order and paragraphing. Your object is to get the material on paper to flesh out the structure of your outline. Let the words flow. Start wherever you can—in the middle, even near the end. The opening or introduction can be completed later. Any weaknesses in logic or gaps in information, any points that are out of place can be corrected in the final version.

As you write the first draft, keep your audience in mind. Doing so will help you stay focused on the purpose of your work. Keep writing until you have completed the first draft.

Step Three: Revising

When you begin to revise your material, you are reading it primarily from the *reader's* point of view, not the writer's. If possible, give the draft to others and ask for their comments and suggestions. Let a few hours or days go by before you read your draft again. By allowing the material to “cool off,” you can spot inconsistencies and errors more easily.

Read the draft several times. Don't try to correct everything the first time through. Check the facts and data in your draft. If you change a set of figures in one place, be sure you change the same set of figures when they appear again. Make sure your ideas are unified and transitions smooth from paragraph to paragraph, leading the reader from one step to the next. The lead sentence or "topic" sentence in the paragraph should give the reader the substance of what is discussed. Following sentences should elaborate on the idea and develop it fully.

Ask yourself, Is the text clear? Do you need to define special terms or phrases? Are your explanations complete or do they skip steps? Have you packed too many ideas into one paragraph? Have you fully developed your argument or explained your proposal so the basic objectives are clear to the reader?

Check your work for errors in style and grammar. Perhaps you can eliminate overused words and phrases. Make sure you write in the active voice rather than the passive voice. Vary your sentence structure to avoid a series of short, choppy sentences or long, complex ones. Read your draft for errors in spelling and punctuation. Section Six provides a review of grammar and style used in business communication.

Finally, revise your work for awkward phrases and lapses in tone. Awkward writing will sound clumsy and over-written, as though the words were stumbling over one another. For example, "We would like you, if you could, to look into the delay and readvise us of certain aspects of the situation which we have not been able, at this end, to ascertain." The writer meant to say, "Please investigate the delay and let us know why it happened. We have not been able to discover the reason ourselves."

Tone is the relationship you wish to establish with the reader. It may be formal, informal, academic, casual, or humorous, depending on the subject and the situation. For example, in a letter to a financial institution, company officer, or board of directors, you would adopt a formal, conservative tone. In a sales letter, you may want to use a more casual, humorous tone to engage the reader at a more familiar and friendly level. You can recognize lapses in tone by the appearance of inappropriate words or phrases in your material. For instance, you would not want to use slang or jargon in the letter to your conservative client. Nor would you insert a formal discussion of product specifications in a casual, light-hearted promotional piece. Consistency of tone will help you establish and maintain the appropriate relationship with your reader.

After your revised draft has been retyped in final form, be sure to proofread the material carefully. It's your last opportunity to catch any errors that have slipped through or that the typist has inadvertently overlooked. You don't want the reader to catch your mistakes. Proofreading your work carefully can save you considerable embarrassment.

Summary

Below is a brief checklist for the three basic steps to effective writing.

Step One: Prewriting

1. Identify and state your purpose.
2. Know your audience.
3. Define the scope of your subject.
4. Conduct background research and gather data.

Step Two: Writing

5. Organize the data and devise a rough plan.
6. Outline your writing project.
7. Write the first draft.

Step Three: Revising

8. Edit and rewrite the draft for clarity, tone, accuracy, brevity.
9. Check for grammar and spelling errors and other careless mistakes.
10. Make sure the final typed copy is neat and free from erasures, strikeouts, smudges, and other marks.

The three steps of effective writing—prewriting, writing, and revising—can be used for any type of business communication. As you practice them and become more skilled in the writing process, you will be able to work through each step more quickly. Throughout the handbook, you will see how these steps are used to develop the various types of letters, reports, memos, and proposals in business.

Chapter 2 ***Choosing the Right Word***

Throughout much of your business career, you will use the written word to communicate with co-workers, managers, customers, suppliers, and creditors. Your messages must speak for you; you cannot stand at the reader's shoulder and explain what you mean. In addition, your letters, memos, reports, and other communications represent not only you but your company. As a result, you must choose your words with care.

In this chapter, we look at some of the guidelines used in business style, including business vocabulary, words frequently confused, and gender-inclusive language. We provide only an overview here. More detailed discussions of style are taken up in the chapters on writing various business communications. For specific grammar questions, see the chapters in Section Six reviewing business grammar and spelling.

Business Vocabulary

Business vocabulary is more than simply knowing some of the special terms used in various professions and industries. It is understanding the difference between everyday language and the language we adopt for more formal communication. Our casual conversational style is generally too vague and imprecise for most business writing.

Avoid the use of slang in your writing. It not only weakens your message but often leaves the reader wondering what you meant to say.

Avoid: The Purchasing Department considered the price from Allied a rip-off.

Better: The Purchasing Department considered the price from Allied much too high. (Explains more precisely what is wrong with the price.)

- Avoid:* I think Carla's analysis is a little far out in this case.
- Better:* I think Carla's analysis doesn't take into consideration the long-term impact of the problem. (Explains in specific terms the speaker's objections to Carla's evaluation.)
- Avoid:* The requirements for this job are unreal!
- Better:* The requirements for this job include having a Ph.D!

Avoid using overly technical terms, unfamiliar abbreviations, or terms that relate to a particular profession or specialty when you are writing to someone who may not be familiar with such terms. Jargon, like slang, can confuse the reader and obscure your message.

- Avoid:* We place a great deal of emphasis on employee participation through our QWL and MBO programs.
- Better:* We place a great deal of emphasis on employee participation through our quality of worklife and management by objectives programs.
- Avoid:* After analyzing your software program, we found an error that produced an infinite do-loop in the run.
- Better:* After analyzing your software program, we found an error that instructed the computer to repeat a step endlessly.

In general, avoid the use of clichés, that is, worn-out phrases such as “big as a house,” “nose to the grindstone,” and the like. Instead, choose words that convey more precisely the particular condition or situation you are describing.

- Avoid:* To reduce costs, we've got to keep our eye on the ball.
- Better:* To reduce costs, we've got to keep accurate records of all expenditures and look for ways to cut our overhead.
- Avoid:* Richard has heard from only one of two clients and is waiting for the other shoe to drop.
- Better:* Richard has heard from only one of two clients but is expecting a reply shortly from the second.