

# Business Writing

Richard Hatch

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RICHARD HATCH

San Diego State University

# Business Writing



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Chicago, Henley-on-Thames, Sydney, Toronto  
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**Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data**

Hatch, Richard A.  
Business writing.

Includes index.

1. Business report writing.
2. Commercial correspondence. I. Title.

HF5719.H37 1983 808'.06651021 82-21468  
ISBN 0-574-20665-5

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Printed in the United States of America

Some of the material in this book was adapted from the author's earlier work *Communicating in Business*, © 1977, Science Research Associates, Inc. Appendix C is reprinted from *Typewriting: A Mastery Approach (Advanced Course)* by Mitchell, Mach, LaBarre, ©1978, Science Research Associates, Inc.



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# To the Instructor

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This text is designed to meet the needs of business-communication instructors who wish to emphasize principles of writing as they apply to letters, memos, and reports. *Business Writing* focuses not only on the content of a good message but also on the way a good writer works, a subject seldom mentioned in other texts. The process of writing—planning, writing, and revising—is covered in depth in one chapter (7) and emphasized in all chapters that present basic writing principles.

The basic concepts of business writing are summarized in Chapter 2, which also provides practice problems for immediate application. The techniques underlying these concepts are introduced in Chapters 3 through 7. The techniques are then applied to letters and intra-organizational memos (so often ignored in business-communication texts) in Chapters 8 through 12, to reports in Chapters 13 through 15, and briefly to oral presentations in Chapter 16.

For the instructor's convenience, student writing problems for Chapters 3 through 7 are clustered at the end of Chapter 7. These problems are carefully designed to provide good practice at any point in the early chapters. As students become more sophisticated, they will produce increasingly better solutions to the problems.

A major difficulty for students in business communication is that the writing problems they're asked to solve make it necessary for them



to imagine themselves in a variety of unfamiliar environments and situations, and their imagination (or lack of it) is often a major determinant of their success as writers. This book contains two continuing cases that allow students to write messages throughout the course in the same organizational setting. As students continue to solve the problems in the ABMC Case or the Education and Training Case (both following the problems at the end of Chapter 7), they will develop an increasingly sophisticated understanding of the organizational context of their messages. Thus they spend more time learning about writing and less time trying to figure out the realistic complexities of a whole series of situations. The Forms Design Minicase (also following Chapter 7) lets the student assume a variety of identities in a developing communication situation, with many of the same advantages.

Additional practice problems are provided at the ends of Chapters 8 through 16 for instructors who prefer a variety of practice settings or who wish to supplement the two continuing cases with additional problems. Each problem—there are 230 in all—was designed by an experienced business-communication teacher to give students the details they need to understand and solve it.

Instruction in writing focuses on two major areas of communication. The first area, informational messages, includes both brief informational messages (often called good-news messages) in Chapter 8 and business reports in Chapters 13 through 16. The second area deals with the special problems of messages in emotionally charged situations (bad-news and persuasive messages); this material is covered in Chapters 9, 10, and 11. By concentrating only on these basic message types, the book avoids overwhelming students with detailed instructions for extremely specific types of messages (such as the various kinds of acknowledgment letters used in wholesale and retail trade) which meet the needs of only some students. Varied examples and writing problems help students understand how to adapt these basic approaches to all kinds of specific situations. In addition, Chapter 7 discusses the use of dictation and word processing in message production. Students explore efficient working methods in depth and are shown the advantages of using them.

Experienced teachers recognize that students learn intensively by studying a wide variety of good examples. This text provides nearly a hundred such illustrations, most of them complete messages rather than just isolated fragments.

Instructors who wish to emphasize report writing can go directly to Part III of the text after covering the introductory chapters (1–7). Instructors who want to concentrate on letters and memos should go directly to Part II.

Whatever the emphasis of the course, most instructors find that students react positively to the material on job applications and résumés. Chapter 12 serves a dual purpose; it shows students how to write a good résumé and application letter and gives them an opportunity to apply all the principles, both theoretical and practical, presented in the book.

I would like to thank the following reviewers for their helpful comments and criticisms:

Dorothy A. Anderson  
Foothill College

W. E. Gentzel  
Pensacola Junior College

Jean Johnston  
University of Akron

David H. Kane  
Foothill College

Jon Loff  
Allegany Community College

Kenneth R. Mayer  
Cleveland State University

Rosemary Piserchio  
College of San Mateo

Charlene Schou  
Idaho State University

Andrea Word  
Central Texas College

I am greatly indebted to Ann, Karen, and Kevin Hatch, whose support made this project possible. I thank Douglas Becker for his thorough editing of the manuscript. Michel Lipman provided especially useful example and problem material. Jack Maloney's encouragement kept the project moving through the rough spots, and Sally Boyd made the editing and production process very smooth and pleasant.

San Diego  
November 1982

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1

# The Importance of Communication in Business

*Language serves three functions.*

*The first is to communicate ideas.*

*The second is to conceal ideas. The*

*third is to conceal the absence of ideas.*

Otto Jespersen

*How forcible are right words!*

Job 6:25

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**W**e're at Tribune Square, Chicago. We're in the well-appointed office of the president of WGN-Continental Broadcasting Corporation—"the most powerful broadcast medium in the Midwest." He [Ward Quaal] has been battling a slight sinus condition, but his presence is, nonetheless, felt."

### **Ward Quaal Speaks**

"I'm responsible for all its [CBC's] broadcasting properties. We have radio and television here. We have a travel company here. We have a sales company here. We have Continental Productions Company here. We have radio and television in Minnesota and translator systems in northern Michigan, Wisconsin, as well as Minnesota. We have cable television in Michigan and California. We have television in Denver. We have sales companies in New York and Tokyo. I operate sixteen different organizations in the United States and Japan.

"My day starts between four-thirty and five in the morning, at home in Winnetka. I dictate in my library until about seven-thirty. Then I have breakfast. The driver gets there about eight o'clock and oftentimes I continue dictating in the car on the way to the office. I go to the Broadcast Center in the morning and then to Tribune Square around noon. Of course, I do a lot of reading in the car.

"I talk into a dictaphone. I will probably have as many as 150 letters dictated by seven-thirty in the morning. I have five full-time secretaries, who do nothing but work for Ward Quaal. I have seven swing girls, who work for me part-time. This does not include my secretaries in New York, Los Angeles, Washington, and San Francisco. They get dicta-belts from me every day. They also take telephone messages. My personal secretary doesn't do any of that. She handles appointments and my trips. She tries to work out my schedule to fit these other secretaries.

"I get home about six-thirty, seven at night. After dinner with the family I spend a minimum of two and a half hours each night going over the mail and dictating. I should have a secretary at home just to handle the mail that comes there. I'm not talking about bills and personal notes, I'm talking about business mail only. Although I don't go to the office on Saturday or Sunday, I do have mail brought out to my home for the weekend. I dictate on Saturday and Sunday. When I do this on holidays, like Christmas, New Year's, and Thanksgiving, I have to sneak a little bit, so the family doesn't know what I'm doing.

"Ours is a twenty-four-hour-a-day business. We're not turning out three thousand gross of shoes, beans, or neckties. We're turning out a new product every day, with new problems. It's not unusual for me to get a phone call on a weekend: 'What are your thoughts on it, Mr. Quaal? Would you speak out on it?' I'm not going to hide my posture on it. I'm going to answer that. This may mean going into the studio to make a recording. Or I may do a tape recording at home. Or maybe I'll just make a statement. I am in a seven-day-a-week job and I love it! . . .

"When I come to Broadcast Center, I'll probably have about five or six different stacks of mail. One stack is urgent and should be acted upon before I make any phone calls. Once I handle that, which usually takes about fifteen, twenty minutes, I start the important phone calls. In-between these phone calls and others of lesser importance, I get into the other mail. On a typical day we'll get thirteen hundred pieces of first-class mail addressed to me personally. Every letter is answered within forty-eight hours—and not a form letter. There are no form letters. If they write to the president of the company, they don't want to hear from the third vice-president. They hear from the president. Mail and the telephone, that's the name of the game in this business."<sup>1</sup>

As you can see, communication is important to Ward Quaal. It's what he does for a living.

## WRITTEN COMMUNICATION IS VITALLY IMPORTANT

Communication is important to you, too. As a future manager, you too will be a professional communicator.

Textbooks commonly define a manager as someone who plans, coordinates, organizes, controls, and supervises the work necessary to carry out a given task. All these activities are largely communication activities. And many studies have found that managers spend 75 percent or more of their time in communication activities: listening, reading, talking, telephoning, writing, and dictating. They do their jobs by communicating. Good managers are very skillful communicators.

Although managers communicate in a variety of ways, their written communications are particularly vital. In most organizations, the most important messages are written ones: policies, plans, proposals, and reports. These messages allow the organization to grow and prosper.

Written messages are important in every functional area of an organization. In the marketing area, some of the most important messages pertain to promotional campaign plans, product descriptions and catalogs, sales forecasts and reports, and procedures for handling incoming orders. In finance and accounting, the major written messages include annual reports, financial plans, justifications, procedures, and explanatory material to accompany all the various printouts produced in the accounting process. In production, written messages include plans, procedures, directives, production reports, proposals for changes in methods, and quality control reports. In information systems, written messages include system and program documentation, manuals for users and operators, and requests for proposals from vendors.

1. Studs Terkel, *Working: People Talk about What They Do All Day and How They Feel about What They Do* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1972), pp. 390–91. Used by permission.



Besides this documentation is the heavy flow of correspondence between all parts of the organization and users of its products or services. In addition to that is the virtual avalanche of day-to-day interdepartmental memos, requests, opinions, summaries, advisories, and other routine messages.

### **Your Written Messages Improve**

#### **Your Image of Competence**

In your own department, your boss and others assess your competence and industriousness through their experiences with you. But other people learn more about you from your writing; they don't see you often, but they see your written messages often. As a result, the influence that you build in your organization rises largely on the foundation of your writing.

Exposure through writing is especially important at promotion time, when your boss must persuade his or her superior to promote you, because most of the superior's knowledge of you is based on your writing. Skillful and competent writing can really pave the way for advancement.

In fact, one of the best reasons for studying writing in school is that you can learn—and make the inevitable mistakes all learners make—in a safe environment. If you write a course assignment that communicates poorly, the worst that can happen is that you'll recognize its flaws and have to rewrite it. But if you communicate poorly on the job, you can establish negative images in people's minds that will take quite a while to erase. Having to learn on the job can be very expensive!

### **Your Writing Allows You to Influence Events**

Once you develop confidence in your writing, your willingness to write will give you the opportunity to exercise influence in your organization.

When issues affecting your job are being discussed, you can contribute your arguments in writing, a form that people take more seriously than speech. When you express your ideas aloud, people can get distracted just as you reach a key point. And when they summarize your ideas for others, they'll seldom say them as clearly or forcefully as you did. But they can take your written statement back to their offices to read carefully, and they can show it to others, allowing your ideas to come through clearly and strongly. In fact, your ideas often carry extra weight simply because you felt strongly enough about them to write them down. Writing shows that you really care about an issue, and it suggests that your points are carefully considered and not just mentioned off the top of your head.

Your writing will help you influence events in other ways, too. If you're willing to write the first draft of policies and procedures, then you'll

be the one to work out all the details; the fine points will be the way you think they should be. After you finish your draft, others will surely change certain points, but typically three-quarters or more of your draft of a new policy will remain after all the changes are made. Even as a junior member of your department, you can exert strong influence in this way.

### **Your Boss Will Value Your Writing Skill**

When your boss discovers that you can write well, he or she will begin shifting to you some of the heavy writing load that all managers carry. The fact that you can handle such assignments successfully makes you more valuable to your boss and gives you an opportunity to demonstrate the quality of your work in a very visible way.

Furthermore, such writing can be the best possible training for the day when you take over additional responsibilities. Writing for your boss helps you to see your boss's viewpoint—to see beyond the limits of your own job. That kind of broad view will be valuable as you progress through your career.

## **WRITING CAN BE FUN**

Perhaps most important of all, once you develop confidence in your writing ability, the writing part of your job will become fun. Typically, the first two or three years of a career are spent largely on carrying out routine procedures devised by others; thus writing assignments are often the most interesting and creative parts of your job. At these times, your ideas and your special qualities can make a difference. That's fun!

## **YOU CAN LEARN TO WRITE WELL**

Some people are born with more writing talent than others; that's certainly no secret. What's often overlooked is that people with only average writing talent can become very good writers.

When we say "writing," we mean several different things. Sometimes we mean getting ideas down on paper in grammatically correct form, with all the words spelled correctly and all the punctuation in the right places. And many people think that that's what good writing is. But good writing, as we'll discuss it in this book, is a very different thing: it's writing that gets ideas across. And that's much more a matter of paying attention to your reader than of paying attention to your English.

Please don't misunderstand; good English mechanics are important. They're important because, to many readers, good English suggests good thought. Such readers tend to disregard messages with misspellings and punctuation errors, assuming the ideas in them are probably as sloppy as the mechanics. Whether or not that assumption is correct, we must rec-

recognize that many readers believe it's correct; thus we help them believe in our messages by taking care with the mechanics.

But at the same time, we also recognize that effective written communication is largely a matter of good planning. What makes good writing good is the writer's decisions on how to approach a particular reader and how to explain the ideas. These decision-making skills can definitely be learned, even by people with only average natural writing talent.

You'll be learning about these skills as you study this book.

## HOW THIS BOOK IS ORGANIZED

This book is divided into three major parts. In Part I, you'll learn the basic writing principles that experienced business writers use. By studying how good writers work, you'll capitalize on their experience, thus avoiding some of the mistakes that everyone who learns the hard way has to make.

In Part II, you'll apply the basic writing principles by planning and writing various kinds of short messages, including memos and letters. Here you'll not only learn generally accepted message plans, but you'll also learn how to adapt them to your special situation.

Finally, in Part III you'll learn some special techniques that good writers use to compose longer messages, such as reports. Since the ideas in reports are more complicated than those in short messages, special planning is needed to help the reader understand them. And since report writing is often particularly critical to career success, you must understand the techniques that have worked well in the past.

## THE WAY TO LEARN TO WRITE IS BY WRITING

As you study the material in this book, the most important thing to remember is that no amount of reading and study can improve your writing—unless you practice what you're learning. You must practice your writing to improve it. And the more you practice the techniques discussed in this book, the more your writing will improve.

So even if you're studying this book for a course in which the instructor will assign practice writing, do your own practice writing besides. This book contains about 200 writing problems, many more than any course can use. But you can use them. After every study session, pick two or three practice problems in whatever section of the book you're in and plan how you would write those messages. Then write one or two of them. When you finish, set your practice draft aside and come back to it two or three days later. By that time, you'll be able to look at it objectively and evaluate it critically; you may even be able to spend five or ten minutes improving it. In this way, you'll make the best use of your practice time.



**FURTHER EXPLORATION**

1. Talk to a manager in an organization (or review your own management-related experience) and explore the importance of communication, especially writing, in that manager's career. Specifically, what kinds of writing does that manager do? How important is writing skill in that manager's job? How much difference would it make to that manager if he or she were a better writer? What makes "good" writing good, in that manager's view?