



HARVARD BUSINESS ESSENTIALS

*Your Mentor
and Guide
to Doing Business
Effectively*

**AUTHORITATIVE
ANSWERS
AT YOUR
FINGERTIPS**

Business Communication

**FREE ACCESS TO
ONLINE TOOLS**

HARVARD
BUSINESS
ESSENTIALS

Business Communication

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Business Communication

The Harvard Business Essentials Series

The Harvard Business Essentials series is designed to provide comprehensive advice, personal coaching, background information, and guidance on the most relevant topics in business. Drawing on rich content from Harvard Business School Publishing and other sources, these concise guides are carefully crafted to provide a highly practical resource for readers with all levels of experience. To assure quality and accuracy, each volume is closely reviewed by a specialized content adviser from a world-class business school. Whether you are a new manager interested in expanding your skills or an experienced executive looking for a personal resource, these solution-oriented books offer reliable answers at your fingertips.

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Finance for Managers
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Managing Creativity and Innovation

Introduction

Communication is an essential function of enterprise. Whether written or oral, it is the conduit through which an enterprise speaks to its customers. It is management's mechanism for influencing employees and directing the work they do. And it is the means through which employees provide the information and feedback that management needs to make sound decisions. An organization that is clear, consistent, and effective in its communications with customers, employees, shareholders, creditors, and the community is in a good position to establish trust and to elicit their collaboration.

What is true about communication at the enterprise level applies equally at the individual level. People who are good communicators are more successful at advancing in their careers, other factors being equal. Think for a moment about the people you've most admired in your own professional life—people who have moved ahead to leadership positions. They may be colleagues, division heads, CEOs, managers, board members, or industry spokespersons. In addition to having other qualities, these people are probably very good communicators, right? When they speak to a group, send a letter, or talk to you one-on-one, their messages are thought-out, focused, and purposeful. They use every communication opportunity to engage people, share information, or advance their agendas.

Communication skills are an essential element of leadership. Scholars have known for a long time that effective leaders excel at communicating purpose, ideas, and direction to others. Though few would be described as eloquent, all effective leaders are clear and

consistent in their communications—and that inspires confidence in others.

What's Ahead

Business Communication, part of the Harvard Business Essentials series, addresses communication at the individual level. The aim is to help you become a more effective communicator—in your writing, in your presentations, and in your one-on-one dealings with others—and is organized accordingly.

The first five chapters will help you with effective writing. The next three address formal presentations. Chapter 9, the last chapter, discusses what makes one-on-one interactions different from all other forms of communication.

Chapter 1 explains a number of principles that you should keep in mind before you tap out a single word on the computer. These principles are concerned with the purpose of your communication, the audience and its needs, the message you want the audience to walk away with, and the best medium and timing of delivery.

Chapter 2 aims to get you started—one of the toughest parts of written communication. It offers many suggestions for overcoming writer's block.

Chapter 3 explains how to create a reasonably good first draft. This job begins with getting your thoughts out in the open, where they can be logically organized.

Once the draft is created, it will need to be edited for style, content, and accuracy—the subject of chapter 4. Some styles are appropriate for directing action, conveying facts, or delivering news—good and bad. Others are more appropriate for being convincing. You'll learn how to choose a style that matches your purpose and how to fine-tune your writing.

Once you've learned the principles of good writing and how to draft and edit your work, you can apply what you've learned to virtually any form of written document: a report, a letter, and so forth. In chapter 5, we take up the particulars of the three most common

written forms: memos, letters, and e-mail. Each has features you need to understand if you want to get your ideas across—and stay out of trouble.

Chapters 6 through 8 involve formal presentations in which you have to stand and deliver in front of a live audience. These chapters explain the principles and practical tools for improving your presentations and for overcoming the fear that many people experience as they stand before an audience.

Chapter 9 is concerned with the one-on-one communication that characterizes the majority of our interpersonal encounters in the workplace. Here you'll learn how to understand the other person's perspective and to deal with the other person's perception of you. You'll also gain insights into the importance of dialogue, the most productive form of communication between people.

You'll find that the vocabulary used in these chapters is generally familiar and straightforward. Nevertheless, the book contains a helpful glossary of key terms, which are italicized when they are first introduced in the text.

Three short appendixes supplement the information provided in the rest of the book. Appendix A offers worksheets and checklists you may find useful when planning an oral presentation or a written document. One special letter form—the job application cover letter—is detailed in appendix B. You'll find a primer on the design and use of presentation visuals at the end of the book, in appendix C. In addition, the Harvard Business Essentials Web site, www.elearning.hbsp.org/businessstools, offers free, interactive versions of the tools introduced in this series.

This book is based on numerous books, articles, and online productions of Harvard Business School Publishing. Particularly useful were articles prepared by staff writers for the *Harvard Management Communication Letter*, and modules on business writing and presentations in Harvard ManageMentor, an online management resource. Some chapters on strategic business writing and writing productivity draw from books written by Deborah Dumaine, founder and president of Better Communications (www.writetothetop.com).

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1

Good Writing

It Begins with Principles

Key Topics Covered in This Chapter

- *Having a clear purpose*
- *Being audience focused*
- *Stating your key message clearly*
- *Staying on topic*
- *Observing economy of words*
- *Using simple sentences*
- *Considering your delivery strategy*

EFFECTIVE business writing rests on a foundation of principles developed over the centuries. In this chapter, we explore these principles. Master them, and you'll know how to handle the many different writing tasks that come your way: memos, e-mails, letters, reports, and so forth.

Have a Clear Purpose

Literary writing expresses the writer's feelings. Business writing, on the other hand, is utilitarian, aiming to serve any one of many purposes. Here are just a few purposes of business writing:

- **To explain or justify actions already taken:** "Given that situation, we have determined that the best course of action is to reject all current bids and to seek others."
- **To convey information, as in a research report or the promulgation of a new company policy:** "Management wants all employees to know that the floggings will stop as soon as we have evidence of improved morale."
- **To influence the reader to take some action:** "I hope that you will find that our new, Web-based cash management services can reduce your working capital requirements and save you money."

- **To deliver good or bad news:** “Unfortunately, the engine fire you reported occurred one day after the expiration of the warranty period.”
- **To direct action:** “Your team should complete and deliver the product specifications by May 1.”

So the first thing you should ask yourself is, “What is my reason for writing this document? What do I aim to accomplish?” Keep that purpose uppermost in your mind as you begin writing, and you will be observing the first principle of business writing. Jot the purpose down at the beginning of your draft as a reminder, and refer back to it as you proceed. Doing so will help you stay on course and assure that your writing serves its stated purpose.

And once you’ve finished your draft, ask yourself, “Has this document fulfilled my stated purpose?” Many writers, in attending to the mundane tasks of preparing a document, lose track of their purpose for writing. Don’t make that mistake.

Be Audience Focused

Just about every businessperson understands the critical importance of being customer focused. The customer is, after all, the source of the economic value sought by the organization—a value that can only be extracted if the customer perceives value in what the organization has to offer. Being customer focused means understanding customer preferences and attitudes, how customers perceive value, how they want to be served, and their hot buttons (i.e., what really gets their attention).

There’s a clear analogy between the business principle of customer focus and the writing principle of audience focus. Just as a company won’t connect with its customers if it fails to understand them, their needs, and how they prefer to be served, you won’t connect with your readers if you don’t understand them, their needs, and how they prefer to receive information. Will your readers be recep-

tive, indifferent, or resistant to your message? Do they already know a little or a lot about the subject? How much technical information can these readers digest? What are their styles of processing information, and how can you match these styles? That is, do these readers need visual content, or will words suffice? Since reading your document will require their time and attention, what's in it for them?

Case Study: Applying the Audience-Focus Principle

Herb is the product manager for a line of consumer electronic products. With a new gizmo in the early stages of development, Herb knows that it's now time to bring the R&D, marketing, and manufacturing people together. Their collaboration is the company's best assurance that the new product will (1) meet customer requirements and (2) be designed in such a way that the manufacturing division will be able to build them efficiently.

Herb determines that he should write a memo as the first step in building collaboration between the three different groups. Here are some audience issues Herb should consider before he composes the memo:

- **His relationship with the readers:** Since the readers—personnel in marketing, R&D, and manufacturing—do not work directly for Herb, he has no authority over them. A few actually outrank Herb. Given these facts, Herb cannot command or direct his readers; he must elicit their collaboration through persuasion.
- **Different information processing styles:** Herb knows that the marketing people are highly verbal and intuitive, whereas most of the R&D and manufacturing people are engineers; they are less verbal and respond better to data and analysis. He must craft his message with this knowledge in mind.
- **What they already know:** Each member of Herb's audience is familiar with the new gizmo under development, its tech-

nical features, and the target market. Consequently, Herb will not have to explain these aspects. But the broader marketing and manufacturing issues have not been resolved.

- **Divergent interests:** Even though all three groups depend on the effectiveness of the corporation for their well-being, each of the three functions—R&D, marketing, and manufacturing—tends to fixate on its own immediate issues. Thus, Herb must communicate in a way that will satisfy these very different parties.

Here's the memo that he wrote:

July 14, 2002

*To: Carl Jones, Emma Smith, Roland Carrero, Justine Roussel,
Lynn Ravenscroft*

From: Herb Bacon

Subject: Time for Gizmo 5 cross-functional planning

As you know, design specs for the Gizmo 5 electronic garlic press are moving forward within R&D. That means that it's time to begin planning for the new product's marketing and manufacturing. Early cross-function planning helped make the Gizmo 4 a tremendous success, and I know that we are all eager to repeat the experience. Great things happen when we put our heads together to focus on a problem. Agenda items will include (1) user benefits and (2) product specs and manufacturability.

I would like to schedule an initial meeting for noon, Monday, August 5, in our small conference room. Lunch will be provided. Does that work for you?

Herb

Notice how Herb does not command or direct his readers, but tactfully elicits their collaboration by giving a clear reason for the meeting—and for his memo. Note too that he suggests benefits for all the readers—marketing, R&D, and manufacturing.

State Your Key Message Clearly

The key message is what you want readers to remember. In contemporary business-speak, it's the so-called take-away. That message should be clear and compact—just a sentence or two for the typical business communiqué. Most communication experts say that if you cannot get the message down to that length, you probably are not clear about what you want to say. The sooner you can isolate the key message into one or two sentences, the easier it will be to write the entire document.

If you experience difficulty in isolating a clear and compact key message, the reason may be that you're struggling to cover two unrelated messages in the same document. In this case, write two separate documents. Stick to one topic per document, and your writing will have more impact.

In most cases, your key message should be stated at or near the very beginning, with the rest of the piece used to flesh out the details or to provide supporting evidence. Doing so assures that skimmers will pick it up. They may or may not want to probe deeper.

Isolating the key message is especially challenging when a committee is involved. A committee generally has members with different viewpoints, and each person often insists on having his or her view represented in a document, inadvertently weakening the focus.

The case study underscores the challenge of writing on behalf of committees. The best antidote is to educate committee members on the importance of drafting focused documents with single themes. When more than one message needs to be communicated, encourage the committee to use more than one document.

Stay on Topic

Many attribute Bill Clinton's victory over George Herbert Walker Bush in the U.S. presidential election of 1992 to Clinton's strategy of continually hammering his opponent on the weak state of the economy. For Clinton, staying on message didn't come naturally. He was