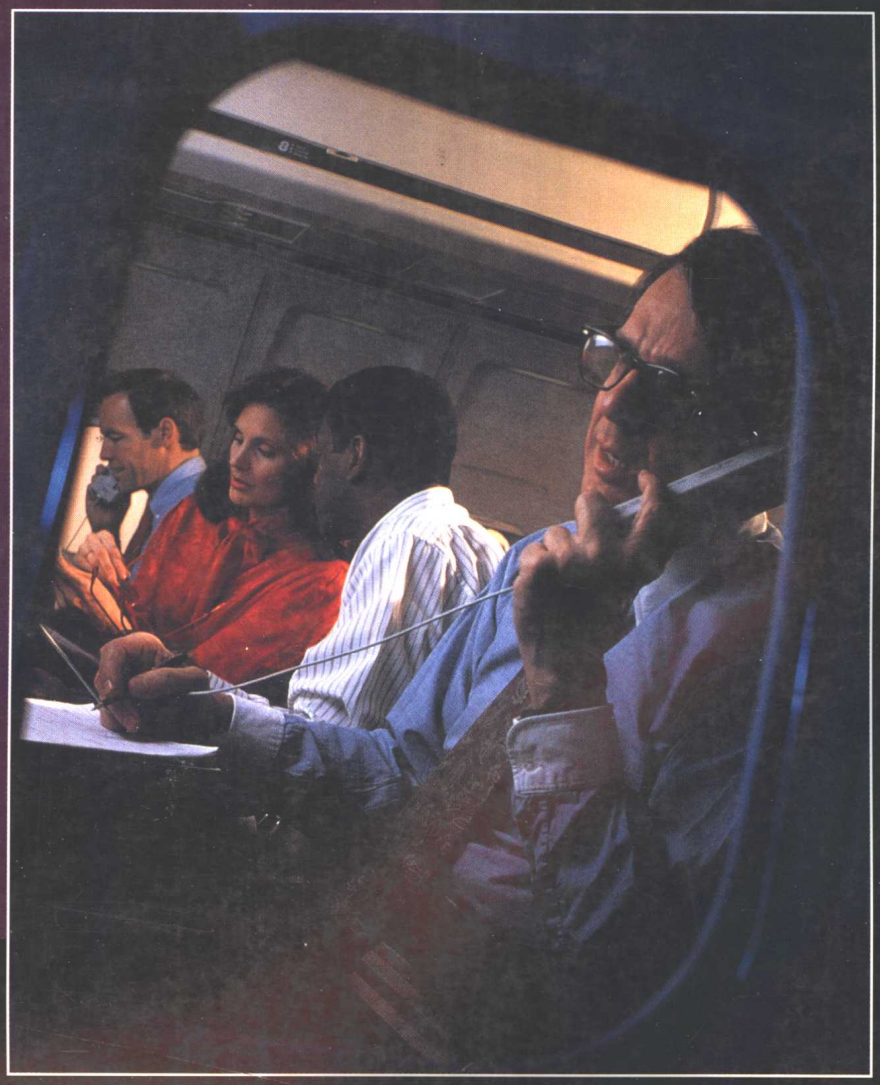

A SHORT GUIDE TO BUSINESS WRITING

HARRY J. BRUCE RUSSEL K. HIRST
MICHAEL L. KEENE

A SHORT GUIDE TO BUSINESS WRITING

Harry J. Bruce
Chairman, President and CEO,
Illinois Central Railroad (ret.)

Russel K. Hirst
University of Tennessee, Knoxville

Michael L. Keene
University of Tennessee, Knoxville

Prentice Hall, Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey 07632

Foreword

Throughout history, businesses of any significant size have faced opportunities and challenges so new or complex as not to be immediately recognizable or comprehensible to any single leader or small group of leaders. The continued success of such businesses has always been dependent on communication systems that made it possible for those in the field who were witnessing changes in the competitive environment to pass information about those changes and possible responses on to those in the headquarters who were responsible for mobilizing and deploying the organization's financial, technical, and managerial resources.

In recent years, the emergence of very sophisticated new producers and marketers here and abroad, and increases in the rate of technological change, have radically altered the competitive environment in which businesses operate. The available evidence suggests strongly that rapid and far-reaching changes in this environment are not temporary phenomena. In the years to come, such changes are more likely to accelerate than to abate. Effective communication systems are likely, therefore, to become increasingly critical elements not only in a firm's continued success, but in its very survival.

Advances in technology have made it possible for businesses today to transmit huge quantities of data and text from one corner of the globe to another quickly and relatively inexpensively. Technology, however, has done and can do little to enhance the quality and readability of the information businesses transmit. Harry Bruce, Russel Hirst, and Michael Keene have written *A Short Guide to Business Writing* to address that need.

Businesses today have many thousands of men and women in their manufacturing facilities, laboratories, sales outlets, and administrative offices with facts and suggestions that could and would be of great value to upper management. In their headquarters, those same businesses have many executives who need and want access to the expertise and views of their associates in the field. In an ideal world, those executives and their associates would exchange views over lunch or in a car pool every day. However, ours is not an ideal world, and most business communication today, therefore, is written.

By encouraging their associates to improve their ability to write concisely and clearly, executives can greatly enhance the competitive capabilities of their firms. By responding aggressively to that encouragement, men and women in the field can assist in improving their employer's competitive capabilities and can enhance their individual careers. *A Short Guide to Business Writing* can assist in accomplishing these objectives.

John J. Nevin, Chairman and Chief Executive Officer,
The Firestone Tire and Rubber Company (ret.)

Preface

Since the great American postwar business expansion of the 1950s, a steadily growing cadre of critics has been accusing the nation's business managers of bad writing. People who respect and practice good writing continue to charge that today's corporate documents simply don't measure up to their predecessors of a generation or two earlier. We see those charges in editorials, in letters to the editor, in feature articles, and in corporate and governmental memo "bloopers" published as humorous filler items in *The New Yorker* and other popular publications.

As a retired board chairman and chief executive officer whose career spanned the same three decades during which the collapse of business writing took place, Harry Bruce agrees. As teachers of professional writing who, year after year, find so many students ill-prepared for the writing they must do at the university, Russel Hirst and Michael Keene have seen the root causes of poor writing in business.

We have all witnessed, both in the academy and in the business world, many of the dreary phenomena the critics continue to bemoan and ridicule: the poorly organized and hard-to-follow structure of so many reports and speeches, the lack of sound research, the inappropriate style, the sloppy diction, the wrong choice of words, the failure to cite sources, the failure to assemble coherent arguments, and the disturbing inability to articulate ideas in ways that suggest their real relationships.

This book had its beginning in two of Harry Bruce's defining personal experiences. Those experiences convinced him that business writing simply didn't have to suffer this kind of abuse.

The first experience was Harry's own business education, which at both the academic and practical levels insisted on excellence in the use of the written word. Unlike most of today's MBAs, he had to complete a master's thesis in order to graduate from the School of Business at the University of Tennessee in 1959. Performing a thorough job of research and then marshaling specific pieces of evidence into arguments leading to a convincing conclusion was an exciting challenge for which he developed a real taste. When he landed his first job, he found that his employer, United States Steel Corporation, not only maintained the same high standards in its written communications but supported those standards with a large, well trained

staff of professional writers and editors. They were always willing to help a tyro, as was his immediate superior, Dr. Gayton E. Germane.

Both segments of Harry's business-writing education convinced him of a fundamental truth: Business problems get solved faster if they are first described and analyzed accurately in writing. With that truth goes a corollary: Managers who write effectively will advance faster in their careers than those who don't. Those who can describe a business problem in language that focuses attention on solutions have penetrated to the core of the managerial mission.

The second defining experience began less pleasantly but came to a positive conclusion that led almost directly to the inception of this book. It happened in 1975, when Harry was elected Senior Vice President of Marketing at the Illinois Central Gulf (now Illinois Central) Railroad. Taking up his new position at the company's headquarters in Chicago, he asked the senior managers in the department to analyze and report on the marketing potential of each of the major commodity groups the railroad was transporting.

With all due respect to his former colleagues—some of whom remain friends and all of whom remember the episode—the reports they submitted were terrible. All the errors of style and composition cited by the corporate writing critics were there, along with others the critics had overlooked, including the basic elements of presentation: Several reports lacked covers, and one was even presented with a distinct, ring-shaped coffee stain on its wrinkled first page. Most depressing of all, the reports failed the basic test of all corporate writing: They did not furnish sufficient information, organization, or argument to lead to a business decision. Work was being stymied by the staff's inability to communicate the information needed to get the job done.

The solution was radical. For several weeks, an *ad hoc* school of corporate writing convened after business hours in Harry Bruce's office. From 5:00 to 6:00 P.M. each day, the senior executives would gather for a series of impromptu lessons in business-report writing. The school proved highly effective, and within about a month's time much improved reports began to appear, several of which led to marketing decisions that raised the fortunes of the railroad.

The brief but successful life of this informal school of corporate writing convinced Harry that business managers can learn to write, and they can do it in a short time if they have two essential ingredients: proper motivation and effective instruction. Harry began putting together a book for business managers who needed to prepare reports and speeches, but his own managerial duties forced him to shelve the project until 1989, when he retired. He has now joined up with two coauthors. Hirst and Keene bring to the book their theoretical understanding of human communication, their intimate familiarity with the needs of today's business students, and decades of experience in teaching others to write well. This team of authors now brings to bear on the problem of business writing a combined expertise that has expanded the original core of instructional materials into a comprehensive manual for writing effective reports and speeches.

Harry J. Bruce
Russel K. Hirst
Michael L. Keene

Acknowledgments

Harry Bruce thanks those long-suffering Illinois Central managers of nearly two decades ago who worked so hard to master the fundamentals of corporate writing and who went on to build a better company.

Russel Hirst and Michael Keene thank their students and colleagues, who have taught them invaluable lessons about the needs of writers.

All the authors thank those who have contributed to the substance and physical production of the book, most notably Karmen N. T. Crowther, University of Tennessee Business Librarian and Associate Professor; and William I. Greener, Jr., Consulting Partner, Fleishman-Hillard, Inc., who opened up to us his files full of so many wonderful examples of writing in industry and government. We were ably assisted in the production of the manuscript by Kathryn G. Aycock, Dariel Mayer, and Susanne Nilson.

A number of people have read and responded to drafts of this manuscript: Dr. Scott Buechler, manager of the MBA program at the University of Tennessee, who was instrumental in test marketing two drafts of the book with his students; Dr. Ernie Cadotte, Professor of Marketing, Logistics, and Transportation at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville, who also organized focus groups to test the book; Eugene D. Fanning, Professor of Career Communications at Notre Dame University, who also test marketed manuscript drafts with his students; and F. K. Plous, communications consultant.

We thank the students of the University of Tennessee MBA Program, classes of 1992 and 1993, and the students of the Business School at Notre Dame University, classes of 1992 and 1993, for their responses and contributions.

We also gratefully acknowledge careful readings and valuable comments from these reviewers:

Academics

Dr. Carter A. Daniel, Director, Communications Programs, Rutgers Graduate School of Management, Rutgers University

Dr. Sidney Davidson, Ernst and Young Distinguished Service Professor Emeritus and former Dean, Graduate School of Business, The University of Chicago

Dr. Robert Fulkerth, Assistant Professor, English and Communications, School of Arts and Sciences, Golden Gate University

Dr. Kathleen Kelly, Associate Professor, English, Babson College

Dr. Marianne T. Miller, Penn State University

Dr. C. Warren Neel, Dean, University of Tennessee College of Business Administration

Dr. Pedro Nueño, Department of Production, Operations, and Technology Management, International Graduate School of Management, University of Navarra, Barcelona, Spain

Dr. Judith P. Saunders, Marist College

Dr. Shelby J. Pierce, Owens Technical College

Dr. Julian L. Simon, Professor of Business Administration, College of Business and Management, University of Maryland, College Park

Dr. E. Ray Smith, Dean, College of Business, Western Illinois University

Dr. Bill M. Stiffler, Harford Community College

Prof. W. D. Wagstaff, Department of Operations Management, Golden Gate University

Dr. Heidemane Z. Weidemer, Texas Tech University

Dr. Deborah S. Workman, Dyke College

Executives

Richard P. Bessette, President and Chief Executive Officer, Roman Adhesives, Inc.

John W. Bruce III, Data Security Administrator, Southern California Gas Company

James M. Denny, Vice-Chairman, Sears, Roebuck and Co.

Richard U. De Schutter, President and Chief Operating Officer, G. D. Searle & Company

Robert Douglas, Business Editor, *The Palm Beach Post*

David W. Grainger, Chairman, President, and Chief Executive Officer, W. W. Grainger, Inc.

Rolf Gullans, Vice President, Logistics, International Paper Co. (ret.)

Douglas D. Hagestad, President, Hagestad Associates, Inc.

Paul B. Haley, President and Chief Operating Officer, Marketing Force, Inc.

C. R. (Jack) Kopp, President and Chief Executive Officer, Leo Burnett Co., Inc. (ret.)

Robert D. Milne, Chairman of the Board, Duff & Phelps Investment Management Co.

Ronald J. Mueller, President and Chief Executive Officer, The Florsheim Shoe Company

Philip J. Niehoff, J. D., Partner, Mayer, Brown & Platt

John J. Nevin, Chairman and Chief Executive Officer, The Firestone Tire and Rubber Company (ret.)

James B. Peterson, Managing Partner, James B. Peterson and Associates

Richard J. L. Senior, President and Chief Executive Officer, Morgan Services, Inc.

Raymond C. Tower, President and Chief Operating Officer, FMC Corporation (ret.)

Robert F. Wall, J. D., Partner, Winston & Strawn

Donald D. Wallace, First Vice President and Branch Manager, Robert W. Baird & Co., Inc.

About the Authors

HARRY J. BRUCE is former Chairman, President, and Chief Executive Officer of the Illinois Central Railroad. Prior to that, he was Vice President—Marketing of the Western Pacific Railroad, Assistant Vice President—Plant Operations for Jos. Schlitz Brewing Company, Vice President—Marketing for Spector Freight System, Inc., and Assistant to the Director—Transport Research for United States Steel Corporation. Since his retirement from Illinois Central in 1989, Mr. Bruce has been elected Chairman—Roman Adhesives Corp. Additionally, he holds a number of corporate directorship positions. Mr. Bruce received the Bachelor of Science degree in Transportation and Industrial Engineering from Kent State University and the Master of Science from the University of Tennessee. He also attended the Harvard Business School Advanced Management Program. He has held teaching positions at Duquesne University and the University of Pittsburgh and is currently Adjunct Professor of Business Strategy at Florida Atlantic University. His publications include *How to Apply Statistics to Physical Distribution* (Chilton), *Distribution and Transportation Handbook* (Cahners), and Chapter 25, "Physical Distribution," in *Handbook of Modern Marketing,* Second Edition (McGraw-Hill). He has published over fifty articles in international business and academic journals, and in 1993 he was elected Fellow of the International Academy of Management. The guiding philosophies of *A Short Guide*—the idea of encouraging writers in business and business students to use their writing skills to differentiate themselves and to speed their progress toward promotion, and the idea of employing a systems-thinking approach to writing—are ideas Harry Bruce worked out during his long and successful business career.

RUSSEL K. HIRST, Assistant Professor of English at the University of Tennessee, is a graduate of the doctoral program in Communication and Rhetoric at Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute. While at Rensselaer, he taught composition and technical communication and tutored in the writing center. Before that, he was an

instructor in the Program in Scientific and Technical Communication at the University of Washington. He has also taught technical communication at special seminars for gifted students, and he has been a writing instructor for the New York State Public Service Training Program. Professor Hirst has interned as a technical writer/editor for Care Computer Company of Belleview, Washington, and for the Environmental Restoration Division Publications Group at Martin Marietta Energy Systems, Inc. in Oak Ridge Tennessee. As a freelance technical writer, he wrote and edited *Highlights of the Municipal Energy Recovery Facilities Handbook* (New York State Department of Environmental Conservation, 1988). Professor Hirst has published in *The Journal of Technical Writing and Communication* and has essays on the history of communication in *Oratorical Culture in America: The Transformation of Nineteenth-Century Rhetoric* (Southern Illinois University Press, 1993), and *Ethos: New Essays in Rhetorical and Critical Theory* (Southern Methodist University Press, 1994). His current projects include entries for the *Encyclopedia of Rhetoric* (Garland Press, tentative publication 1995) and a collaborative book entitled *Teaching Technical Communication: Academic Programs That Work.*

MICHAEL L. KEENE, Professor of English, created and directs the program in technical communication at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville, and teaches in the graduate program in Rhetoric and Composition. He was also director of technical writing at the Tennessee Governor's School for the Sciences, 1985–1989. Previously, Dr. Keene taught Freshman English, Argumentation, and Technical Writing at Texas A&M University, where he helped create the Undergraduate Writing Specialization. His publications include *The Heath Guide to College Writing* (D.C. Heath, 1992, 1995, with Ralph Voss), *Effective Professional and Technical Writing* (D.C. Heath, 1987, 1992), and the revised Eighth Edition of W. Paul Jones's *Writing Scientific Papers and Reports* (Wm. C. Brown, 1980). He has also published numerous chapters and articles on composition and technical communication. In addition to *A Short Guide,* his current projects include *A User Manual for College Writers* (with Kate Adams, for Mayfield Press); *Writing Articles, Theses, and Dissertations in Science and Engineering* (tentative publication 1995); and *Teaching Technical Communication: Academic Programs That Work.* Dr. Keene is regularly retained as a writing consultant by clients in engineering, marketing, manufacturing, and government.

Contents

Introduction

It should not be an unreasonable assumption that people who have risen to positions of power and respect can write without difficulty.

—The Chicago Tribune, *January 14, 1985*

"The firms identified writing as the most valued skill, but said 80% of their employees at all levels need to improve." From a 1992 survey by Olsten Corp.

Success in the business world today requires many skills: writing ability, speaking ability, the ability to work with graphics, interpersonal skills, analytical skills, knowledge of the industry (and its major players), persistence, consensus building, networking, and a little luck, just to name a few. The point of this book is to show you how to make your writing and speaking skills strong assets to your career. To a greater extent than you might imagine, the key to improving your writing and speaking skills is to bring the same intelligence and good work habits to bear on them that you use in all other parts of your business activities.

Writing is another way of delivering quality to customers.

Today's world of business lives on written documents—memos, letters, and especially reports. Everyone in business reads reports constantly. The higher you go in management, the more time you will spend reading reports—and writing them. The same imperative that drives all successful business activities should also drive your performance as you use words to influence superiors, peers, subordinates, and customers: the need to deliver the highest quality of product or service to the customer. The only difference is that here, *the "customer" is the reader.*

By viewing readers as customers, you can improve your writing and speaking. You achieve this by using many of the skills and techniques you have already mastered—such as the ability to organize and categorize, to establish priorities and schedules, to identify and eliminate the unnecessary, to break down complex phenomena into smaller units, and to reorganize simple units to function better in larger systems. Thus, our approach focuses on making writing part of the larger system of business. Writing is another way of delivering quality to customers.

THE NEED FOR WRITING

Contrary to some predictions, the rapid emergence of electronic information technology has not eliminated the need for clear writing. In fact, by making it easier to create printed documents, to enhance them with visuals, and to reproduce and distribute them, high technology has accentuated the importance of the printed word. As you probably know, computers do not abolish paperwork; they multiply it.

Consider these situations:

- Your boss is a fanatic about record keeping and reporting. Every week you are expected to turn in a one-page progress report on every project on your desk. (See Chapter 10 for help with letters and memos.)
- As a middle manager, you have been commissioned by the CEO to research and write a long-range planning report examining strategic options and suggesting new directions for the organization.

Any reasonably intelligent person should be able to read your report without help.

- You are a member of the task force charged with writing the company's new policy on strategic development. Someone needs to write up the results in the following forms:

  1. A resolution to be approved by the Board of Directors.
  2. An advisory to be distributed to all managerial-level employees.
  3. A speech to stockholders.
  4. A presentation to customers.

  The task force is sitting around a table, right now, with these "things to do" in front of them. Will *you* volunteer to handle them?
- You see a chance for your company to be the first to move into a new and (you believe) highly profitable area. You tell your boss about it, and you are given a green light to research and write up your proposal. Your boss says, "Be brief, be factual, be persuasive, and above all be right." Can you do it?

"If you can't explain what you are doing in simple English, you are probably doing something wrong." Alfred Kahn, in *A Treasury of Business Quotations,* 1991.

The people you work for expect you to handle these and many other kinds of writing situations. How forthcoming you are, and how clear and well written the resulting documents are, will play a major role in how well your career goes. Late, unclear, incomplete, or hard-to-read documents are unacceptable. *Any reasonably intelligent and informed person should be able to read your work through to the end and understand it without asking you or someone else for clarification.*

Too much of the writing in business today fails to meet that test. Readers are often asked to wade through swamps of confusing verbiage, and too often they just turn the pages uncomprehendingly—hoping to find a heading or a visual that will return them to the main theme or argument. Nonessential details get the same coverage as essential ones, key ideas are buried, and the writing

style is deadly. The sentences are five or six lines long, every verb is "is" or "was," every noun ends in *-tion*, and the jargon makes the reader feel like an outsider. Worst of all from the reader's point of view, there is no sense to the structure.

HOW TO BE A BETTER WRITER

Effective writers in business approach their writing tasks using skills remarkably like those they use in the rest of their work. They seek to articulate a clear purpose for the task. They are organized and focused in searching for information. They use numbers and graphics to support their ideas. They are curious and intuitive, listening to their hunches as well as relying on their quantitative methods. Perhaps most important, they are practical. "Practical" here means that their writing has a *problem-solving, audience-specific orientation*. Usually this also means a *bias toward action*: When you finish reading a good piece of business writing, you should want to get up and *do* something. And because the report is well written, you will know exactly what it is you need to do.

Business writing needs to have a problem-solving, audience-specific orientation.

How can you achieve these qualities in your writing? We believe the answer lies in taking a *systems* approach to your writing:

The systems approach to writing

1. Make sure that in your writing you see yourself and your work as part of the business system, rather than seeing the system as an extension of yourself.
2. Make the steps in your writing process flexible and recursive so that they accommodate your larger project, not vice versa.
3. Develop the habit of seeking feedback on interim drafts of your writing, and especially of listening to criticisms and suggestions.
4. Stay interactive with the larger business system throughout the duration of your writing process.
5. Do not let your "product" (your report) die on the shelf; monitor and "sell" its acceptance and use.

Systems thinking reinforces the notion that any piece of business writing (or speaking) succeeds only to the extent that it furnishes its audience with information that leads to practical business decisions. Writing a memo, letter, or report is one activity within a large and complex enterprise made up of thousands of such activities. Only when those parts serve each other's mutual interests do they form a true system.

You and your writing are valuable only insofar as you add value to the larger system.

As a manager, you are part of many systems. The global economy is an increasingly important and interwoven system. The national economy is another. Your particular field or area of business is another. Clearest of all is your own business. If you are an employee of USX Corp., you have to consider the global picture, the national picture, USX's contribution to the world around it, and your own de-