

Rules of Thumb

for Business Writers



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RULES OF THUMB FOR BUSINESS WRITERS

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Rules of Thumb for Business Writers was written in response to friends in the business world who encouraged us to adapt our college textbook, *Rules of Thumb: A Guide for Writers*, for a larger professional audience. Over the years, their suggestions and questions shaped the concept of this book. In particular, we benefited from the advice of Russell Bosworth, Evelyn Brooks, Joylene Carlson, and Carolyn Roughsedge.

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Portions of *Rules of Thumb for Business Writers* have appeared in different forms in *Rules of Thumb: A Guide for Writers*, *Rules of Thumb for Research*, *The McGraw-Hill Guide to Electronic Research* (all from McGraw-Hill), and *Finding Answers: A Guide to Conducting and Reporting Research* (HarperCollins).

A NOTE FROM THE AUTHORS

The phrase “rule of thumb” refers to a handy guideline: The top part of your thumb is roughly an inch long. Sometimes you need a ruler marked in millimeters, but often you can do fine by measuring with just your thumb. Your thumb takes only a second to use, and it’s always with you.

Rules of Thumb for Business Writers is the third book in a series written by the three of us. The first book, published originally in 1989 and now in the fourth edition, is *Rules of Thumb: A Guide for Writers*. *Rules of Thumb for Research* was published in the fall of 1998. We wanted to call your attention to the other books because *Rules of Thumb for Business Writers* follows the same basic concepts as our prior books. Our aim has been to create handbooks that writers can use on their own—handbooks that are brief and readable, covering the main writing problems most people have trouble with.

We’ve made *Rules of Thumb for Business Writers* the same sort of guide. You can use it out of order, in small doses, to find what you want when you need to solve a specific writing problem, whether in the office, on the job, or at home. We’ve covered most of the basic writing problems that you will face on a regular basis and have also included guidelines for writing the most common kinds of documents used in business writing.

In this book, you will find some points that have to be exactly right, and in those cases, we’ve given the complete details. However, where we could, we’ve given you a rule of thumb—a brief guide that you can use quickly any time you need to compose a good piece of business writing.

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PART
ONE

THE WRITING
PROCESS

1 WRITING IN THE BUSINESS WORLD

Most of the time, you must grab the attention of your reader immediately, or your carefully written material will end up in the recycling bin.

Writing in the business world is not like the writing that succeeds with teachers. In school, you write to demonstrate what you have learned. Teachers usually give you a chance to prove yourself. Remember the math teacher who gave you partial credit for a wrong answer if you had followed the correct procedure? You can't, however, assume that your audience in the business world will be so lenient. You need to put your best effort into every single document you write.

Know what you're talking about. Everything you write must be grounded in your sure knowledge of what is true. You can't fake it, so do your homework before you write.

Take care of errors in punctuation and word usage. Make everything you write as perfect as possible. Errors in spelling and grammar—even in e-mails and informal memos—will always work against you.

Follow the basic business forms and protocols. Creativity is often welcomed in projects, but each professional field follows standard presentation formats. Your office may have a "style sheet"—rules and formats your company has adopted—or there may be sample documents that you can use as guidelines.

Be positive. Most business writing attempts to solve a problem. You should try to be constructive, to praise others where praise is merited, and to offer criticism in terms that are helpful.

■ IDENTIFY THE KINDS OF WRITING YOU MUST DO

Whether you are new to the business world, or are a seasoned veteran, you can benefit from analyzing the kinds of writing

required at your office. Examine the current files or seek out a senior colleague who does a lot of writing on the job and who is willing to serve as a mentor.

Categorize the types of documents you regularly must produce both by content and by the types of audience. Take a look at the Table of Contents of this book to see what chapters can best help you become a better writer.

■ KEEP YOUR READER IN MIND

In many cases, you know who will be reading your memo or report—a specific person or group—and can tailor your style and information accordingly. Knowing your reader allows you to

- Adopt an appropriate style—formal or friendly.
- Stress points your reader will care about.
- Explain points your reader may not know about.
- Address questions and concerns you expect this reader to raise.

Often, however, you do not know the specific person—for example, when writing a letter to a customer. Even when you do know the reader, someone else may see what you write—either now or in the future. For these reasons, it's best to

- Strike a balance between being too informal or too formal.
- Avoid being unnecessarily negative or accusatory of others.
- Make each separate point clear and concise.
- Give credit for the work of others.

Writing is a form of office politics. Be aware of what you put into writing and of who may see it.

■ STAY ON TOP OF THE PAPER FLOW

Time spent reading and keeping files organized can contribute to your success in writing. Minimize the amount of time you spend shuffling paper.

- Find a regular time in your schedule for uninterrupted reading.
- Store a second set of copies of documents essential to a project or to your career in a separate, safe place.
- Store files electronically whenever possible. If your e-mail program doesn't provide an easy way to store your mail in folders, cut and paste important messages into another program.
- Be smart about paper copies. Often, it is most efficient to print out a document and work on the hard copy, then enter the changes electronically. Some print documents should always be kept on file.
- Purge paper and electronic files regularly.

2 FINDING YOUR FOCUS

Time spent before you start writing saves time and energy later.

Before you begin any writing project, take a few moments to assess the following characteristics.

■ THE IMPORTANCE OF THE PROJECT

Who is the intended audience? A report intended for potential customers obviously warrants far more time and psychic energy than a summary of a meeting to be distributed to colleagues.

What is the expected life span of the document? An evaluation that will be part of an employee's personnel file requires more care than a thank-you note. You may want to save a well-written report to present as a justification for your promotion.

What is the purpose? Will you be writing to inform or to persuade? The latter requires more effort.

■ THE SPECIFIC REQUIREMENTS OF THE PROJECT

Is creativity required? In some organizations, originality or style may be primary considerations.

Is collaboration required? If so, you will need to consider the schedules and personalities of the people involved. See Chapter 33, "Collaborative Projects."

How polished does it have to be? Keep your perspective. Don't allow a low-level but urgent project to take time from a more important one with a later deadline. Expend the right amount of energy necessary for the project to be successful, being careful to conserve enough of your energy for other important projects.

However, remember that your writing reflects on you; errors, even in an e-mail, indicate to some readers that you don't care enough—that you do not bother to get details right.

■ THE GENERAL REQUIREMENTS OF THE PROJECT

Tone Your audience and purpose determine whether you will need to use a formal or informal tone, and whether you will need to spend great care on your phrasing.

Format Letters are usually more formal than memos; e-mail messages are even less formal—and often short lived. Reports can be a variety of types, sometimes requiring graphics or artwork.

Expected length Keep in mind that often a short piece of writing requires more effort than a long one. Readers prefer short documents; however, when given an assigned word- or page-count, you should conform. For tips on how to adjust length, see Chapter 9, "Revising."

■ THE DEADLINE

Count back from the due date and assess how much time you have for gathering information, drafting, revising, and editing. The length of the product does not determine the production time. If, in spite of all your best efforts, you find yourself unable to meet the deadline, be sure to inform in writing everyone concerned.

3 SIZING UP YOUR WORK STYLE

To face any writing assignment effectively, you must first face yourself and own up to your actual work style.

The writing process requires four distinct phases:

- Developing your points and a plan
- Producing a first draft
- Revising—polishing for logic and style
- Editing—fine-tuning for correctness

Some writers move step-by-step through each phase of the project. They dislike chaos and prefer to work steadily, spreading the work over the full time available. Other writers, however, get excellent results by putting themselves under last-minute pressure. They thrive on tension and excitement. They often work out of order, moving back and forth, writing different parts and reorganizing as they go.

A particular *result* may look the same to an outsider, regardless of the method that produced it. What is important is to identify your own personal quirks and to make the most of your work style.

■ PROCRASTINATORS AND PERFECTIONISTS: WHAT TO DO ABOUT YOUR WORK STYLE

IF YOU ARE A PROCRASTINATOR

The advantages to procrastination are intensity, concentration, and a sense of adventure. The disadvantages are well known to all procrastinators and their families. A few shortcuts for the chronic procrastinator follow.

Accept that you don't have the luxury of time. Recognize that some aspects of a project may have to be correct but only