

商务英语写作



Business English Writing

莫再树 编著



国防工业出版社

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Preface

Can you write clearly and effectively in English? Is everything you write polished and professional? Do you know the most effective and appropriate formats for business writing—especially if your audience is international? Are you 100 percent confident of your ability to make correct grammar, punctuation and diction while avoiding glaring and costly mistakes? Do you write with ease and exactness, or do you struggle every time you must put words to paper because you're just not sure if what you produce is "good enough"?

Words sell no matter what your career is or where you live; one of life's major tasks is to sell. You "sell" yourself to an employer, you "sell" your manuscripts to a publisher, and you sell your products and services to clients and customers. How can you accomplish these tasks more successfully? The basic fact is that if you want to sell more, write better.

Polishing your writing helps to achieve your business goals. Business today is international and English is the tool that unites it. From business e-mails and letters to sales proposals, English is now the international language of business, finance and technology. If you want to succeed in business today, you must know how to write clear, concise and grammatical business correspondence to an international audience. This means that your ability to write well in English is critical to your profession. No matter who you are or where you are, the fact is that your ability to write in English affects your career. From lost jobs and career promotions to lost sales and cost overruns, the bottom line is that excellence in written English is absolutely critical to success in today's competitive business world. So it pays greatly to learn to write clear, targeted messages.

Mastery over communication skills is generally recognized by researchers as an essential prerequisite for employees who hope to succeed in business and industry. Andrews, D. and Andrews, W. (1992), commenting on the challenges of business communication in the global economy, emphasized that good communication skills will be far

more important to business and personal success in the 21st century than it has been in the 20th century because communication will be central to everything we do.

The term of Business Writing is a generic term including the writing of business letters, e-mails, memos, minutes, proposals and reports that people understand and take seriously. This book is primarily designed to help learners to acquire the skills required to communicate clearly and effectively in business communication so that the business letters, e-mails, memos, minutes, proposals and reports that are written have the impact the writer wants, motivate readers to respond as expected, and accomplish the writer's business objectives. For example, an effective sales letter by sales professionals is a letter that moves a potential customer to action by understanding the customer's needs and desires. It is not just a matter of simply communicating a message to the potential customer. On the contrary, it moves the reader to feel the motivation, excitement, and conviction of the writer and to want the product or service the sales person is promoting. In a word, today's business professionals must be able to communicate effectively through the written word if they are going to succeed in today's business environment. For learners who are potential business professionals, today's preparation ensures tomorrow's achievements.

This book is specifically written for business English students and inservice professionals, designed for classroom use and for self-study. The core language has a distinctive business flavor. In this book, learners are introduced to business communication in an understandable, practical way. The book focuses on written business communication because written English is widely used in business and is most challenging to master.

An introduction is presented, at the very beginning of the book, of business correspondence classifications and writing principles, and a tentative pragmatic analysis is made of the writing principles so that proper approaches will be employed accordingly.

A relatively complete and sound explanation of foreign business process is also introduced at the beginning of the book so that the learners will have a general idea of how foreign trade is conducted and what business letters are involved in the process of business transactions.

Each and every chapter is arranged so that it includes an introduction (including the introduction to the relevant business and the writing as well), samples, commonly used sentences, new words and expressions, notes and exercises.

The book includes the structure of business writing as a series of slots into which persuasive information will be placed and also gives some methods or tips of persuasion and effective, clear, correct writing.

We have obtained valuable help from many books and papers from various sources at home and abroad to which we are greatly indebted. The bibliography listed at the end of the book is by no means complete, and so our heartfelt gratitude also goes to those authors not mentioned in the references.

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Part I Business English Writing

Chapter 1

Business English Writing: Classifications and Principles

Did you know that if each of America's 100 million workers made just one \$10 communication error (and most make more than that), it would cost the economy over a billion dollars? The average executive spends four hours a day reading letters, emails and reports. Eighty percent of those executives say much of this time is wasted because of poorly written materials. Many employees from executives to support staff require extensive ESL training in order to write clear and concise business correspondence. It's a fact. Badly written communications waste time and money and damage a company's image.

In our daily lives, at school and on the job, there is a need for effective written communication skills. We have all turned in a report at one time or another that wasn't written as well as it could have been. Poor writing reflects badly on us, it limits the influence we can have on others, and it steals time away from those who do decipher what we mean. To avoid these problems, there are a few commonly accepted principles of writing that we can follow. The purpose of this writing guide is to outline these principles for the learners.

Everything you write makes an impression, so making a bad impression on your audience can have serious consequences. For example: If you make frequent grammar and spelling mistakes, your reader may assume that you lack expertise and the ability to pay attention to details. As a result, they may fail to hire you or buy from you. If you use nonstandard formats when writing a business letter, your audience may assume you are not a professional and decide to look for someone else who is. If you write a proposal with disorganized ideas, convoluted sentences, and paragraphs that extend for a whole page, the reader may decide it's just not worth the trouble to struggle through it.

1.1 The Classifications of Business Correspondence

Business correspondence may be classified from various perspectives. The most common ways of classification are as follows:

Classification is made according to the contents of the letter. The following are among the most frequent letters in use: request letters, letters answering requests, claim and adjustment letters, credit inquiry and collection letters, sales letters, employment letters and social business letters, etc. (Steward, 1984: 380-381).

Classification is made according to the functions in the process of a business transaction of the letter. Business letters may be in every phase of business activities. There are letters for establishment of business relations, letters for the inquiry of business. There are quotation letters, negotiating letters, ordering letters, confirming ordering letters, payment letters, shipment and insurance letters, acknowledging goods receipt letters, claim letters and adjustment letters, etc. (Shi Ruifen, 1993).

Classification is also made according to the nature of the information given. Steward (1984: 382) summed up four different kinds of information in terms of its effect on the reader's needs: good news, neutral news, bad news and persuasive letters.

According to illocutionary functions categorized by Leech (1983:104), business letters are classified into four kinds: competitive letters, convivial letters, collaborative letters and conflictive letters.

1.1.1 English Business Letters of Routine, Good- and Bad-News Messages

There are two common ways to organize business writing, deductive way (direct approach) and inductive way (indirect approach). The way to be used depends on the messages delivered.

1.1.1.1 Direct Approach for Routine and Good News Messages

The direct approach means arranging ideas in a direct order, usually beginning with the most important point and working downward. This approach is good for all good news and neutral (routine) messages in business English correspondence.

Furthermore, the direct approach gives the recipient a sense of immediacy. In modern life, people live a faster tempo of life. By taking the recipient directly to the issue in question, you save his time.

Simply put, the direct order (deductive sequence) goes like this: the message begins with the main idea to present good (neutral) news deductively, followed by

supporting details and ending with goodwill. Specifically, in the direct approach, the message is organized as follows:

(1) Begin with the main point. If the writer has something good or neutral to tell the recipient, he will state it right away without beating around the bush.

(2) Present necessary explanation(s) or cover the remaining part of the objective. If the writer wishes to provide the recipient with more information, he can explain whatever is necessary immediately after the main point. If the writer has more than one point, he will arrange them in order of importance. It is always better to number or itemize them.

(3) End with goodwill. This is the same as bidding farewell. By closing with goodwill, the writer not only shows courtesy to the recipient but also attracts a more positive response from the recipient.

Generally speaking, the direct approach can be used on many occasions such as inquiry, order, order acknowledgement, shipping instruction, just to name a few. Now let's examine the direct approach with an example in order to get a concrete idea about how it is used in business English writing.

Dear Sirs,

We are pleased to inform you that the following goods under our Contract NO.CC1200 have now been shipped by s.s. Dongfeng sailing tomorrow from Guangzhou to Sydney. (*Beginning with the main point*)

Copies of the relative shipping documents are enclosed, thus you may find no trouble in taking delivery of the goods when they arrive. (*Necessary explanation*)

Availing ourselves of this opportunity, we wish to thank you for your close cooperation. (*goodwill*)

Yours sincerely,

× ×

In this letter, the writer or the seller directly informs the buyer of the shipment of the contracted goods in the first or opening paragraph. And in the second or purpose paragraph the writer presents necessary explanation. Then he closes with goodwill in the last or closing paragraph. In other words, the writer puts the satisfactory news at the beginning of the letter, and then he presents his explanation of the letter, and last he ends with courtesy. By writing in this way, the writer not only makes the letter direct

and concise but also adds to the satisfaction of the recipient. Thus, we can conclude that the writer gets right in adopting the direct approach.

1.1.1.2 Indirect Approach for Bad News Messages

The purpose of a business is to render services to the customers and meet their demands so as to gain maximum profits. But no business can expect to meet all the demands and requests of all the customers all the time. In other words, a business sometimes has to say “no” to its counterparts. And nobody would like to receive a “no” answer. In fact, the negative effect of the rejection may damage business relations. So, a business should try its best to alleviate the negative impact.

By the indirect approach we mean that we do not state the bad news at the beginning. Instead, we begin with some good or at least neutral information and put off the bad news until some explanations are made. The main reason for adopting this approach is to avoid hurting the counter-party and affecting the business relations. Another reason is that the key tone of the letter seems to be so considerate and polite that bad news may be received less negatively or even favorably. Common sense tells us that people tend to be happy and more accommodating when they get good news, thus it is much easier for them to accept some bad news afterwards. So, customarily, the indirect approach is used when dealing with bad or unsatisfactory news. We know that good news can put people in good mood, and that people in good mood tend to be more understanding and accommodating. On the contrary, bad news may put people in bad mood and cause them to reject even reasonable explanations. The “Audience Memory Curve” shows the effect of memory to information. According to the curve, we know the beginning and the end are the most impressive parts, and the middle is the least. So in writing bad-news letters, usually we follow the indirect approach. In the indirect approach, a business English letter is organized in the way below.

(1) Begin with a buffer. A buffer is a device or a piece of material for reducing the unhappiness and shock. In the case of the indirect approach, the buffer—the temporary delay or withholding of bad news—means some writing that reduces the negative impact of the bad news. The purpose of a buffer is to put the recipient in an agreeable or open frame of mind—ready to accept the bad news. Mostly, a buffer does prove to be something to which the recipient will respond positively.

(2) Reason(s). Explain why the refusal has to be made. When you have to say “no” to the customers, a good reason is needed. If the reason is presented tactfully,

logically and convincingly, the recipients may come to the conclusion that the refusal is based on careful consideration and is unavoidable.

(3) Bad news. State the refusal. When the recipient accepts the reason and explanation, much of the negative impact has been reduced. Then it is suitable to release the bad news clearly. However, it should also be presented as positively as the situation permits. In doing so, the writer must make it certain that the negative message is made clear.

(4) Alternative(s) if possible. In order to prompt further business and maintain the business relations, an alternative is often suggested. This can further reduce the negative impact on the recipient. However, what is suggested should be obtainable. Alternative plans or ideas far beyond feasibility will only enhance the negative effect.

(5) Close with goodwill. A goodwill ending not only shows courtesy to the recipient, but also ends the letter in a positive tone. On some occasions, an apology for the refusal is both appropriate and necessary.

With this kind of textual structure, the writer abides by the Politeness Principle and the Cooperative Principle, so that the negative impact on the recipient can be reduced to the highest degree.

Now let's analyze the indirect approach with an example of refusing an adjustment request.

Dear Sirs,

We are in receipt of your letter dated June 8, 2003 and regret to note your complaint respecting the Wooden Goods we sent you by s.s. Dongfeng.
(*Neutral statement*)

We have booked up the matter in our records, and so far as we can find, the goods in question were in first-class condition when they left here, as was evidenced by the B/L. It is, therefore, quite obvious that the damage complained of must have taken place in transit. (*Reasons*) In the circumstances, we are apparently not liable for the damage (*Refusal*) and would advise you to claim on the shipping company who should be held responsible. (*Alternative*)

At any rate, we thank you for bringing this to our attention and if you feel it necessary we shall be pleased to take the matter up on your behalf with the shipping company concerned. (*Goodwill ending*)

Yours sincerely,

× ×

In the indirect approach, the writer begins with a neutral statement (buffer) to temporarily withhold the bad news, and then he or she gives the reasons and explanations for being innocent of the damage. After that, he or she clearly puts forward his or her refusal and wastes no time in suggesting an alternative to further decrease the negative effect. Lastly, he or she ends with goodwill, which leaves the recipient a good and positive image. By dealing with bad news this way, the writer achieves what is desired. So, the indirect approach is especially effective when a letter must say no to a request or convey other disappointing news. The main reason for this approach is that negative messages are received more positively when an explanation precedes the reader. In fact, an explanation may even convince the reader that the writer's position is correct; in addition, an explanation cushions the shock of bad news.

1.1.2 English Business Letters in Terms of Categorizations of Illocutionary Functions

1.1.2.1 Illocutionary Functions

Business letters are of so various and rich types that there is an overlap between some types suggested above, so it is sometimes difficult to distinguish one kind from another. Based on the categorization of Leech (1983: 104), illocutionary functions may be classified into four types, according to how they relate to the social goal of establishing and maintaining comity:

1) The competitive

The illocutionary goal competes with the social goal. It refers to such acts as requesting, requiring, ordering, asking, demanding, begging, etc. which are impolite in essence. Whatever the tone is, the goal is to ask the reader to do something according to the writer's own will, and is "desirable for the speaker". So the goal of the writer does not harmonize with the request for politeness. For this reason, the writer should pay more attention to the use of polite language to reduce his or her request's impoliteness.

2) The convivial

The illocutionary goal coincides with the social goal. It refers to such acts as offering, inviting, greeting, thanking, congratulating, appreciating, etc. which are "desirable for the hearer" and polite in essence.

3) The collaborative

The illocutionary goal is indifferent to the social goal. It refers to such acts

as asserting, reporting, announcing, instructing, informing, telling, stating, etc. for the purpose of information exchange. What both sides care most is the information and how the information is delivered most effectively and quickly. So it requires both sides to cooperate closely and to observe the Cooperative Principle.

4) The conflictive

The illocutionary goal conflicts with the social goal. It refers to such acts as threatening, accusing, cursing, reprimanding, claiming, refusing, etc. which are "undesirable for the hearer". Since these acts are impolite in essence, they need to be expressed indirectly and politely to avoid the conflicts between two sides.

1.1.2.2 Business Letters in Terms of Categorizations of Illocutionary Functions

According to Leech's categorizations of illocutionary acts, business letters are classified into four categories: competitive letters, convivial letters, collaborative letters and conflictive letters.

1) Competitive letters

This category includes persuasive letters, such as letters of request, collection and sales. The writing purpose of these letters is to persuade the reader to do something accordingly, so it's impolite essentially. However, this "impoliteness" can be shifted into "politeness" if the persuading skills are suitable.

2) Convivial letters

Letters of approval, appreciation, invitation belong to this category. The writing purpose is to establish favorable business relationships with the counter party through exchanging beneficial information. And these letters can also be called good-news messages.

3) Collaborative letters

This category includes letters of inquiry, offer, confirmation, notification, recommendation, instruction and directions. The messages these letters deliver are usually neutral news.

4) Conflictive letters

This category includes letters of refusal, claims, adjustments, counter-offer, counter-counter-offer, etc. These letters, if not written skillfully, may lead to a conflict or even ruin the bilateral cooperative relationships for bad news is delivered. Since the impoliteness gradations of these letters are quite high, they need to be presented in the indirect approach.

1.1.3 The Tendency of Business Letter Writing

Many years ago, the tendency to write business letters used what was known as “commercialese”. Now it has given way to the more modern, direct and concise approach.

Some business people think that the spoken style used in business letters produces a friendlier atmosphere. Sometimes they even use anecdotes, jokes, puns and sarcasm. Some of the business people, however, will not go as far as that. The letters they write are more reserved and dignified.

It is recognized however that the style of modern business letters tends to be something like a piece of conversation by post. The language used can be formal or informal in accordance with the relevant circumstances. But abused formal English, even in its best sense, is almost always unsuitable for business writing. Whatever style it may be, conventions of wording, punctuation, sentence structure and grammatical rules must be observed. If we go contrary to the conventions, we distract attention from our message and hence lose the reader's respect and confidence. So in writing a business letter, we should bear in mind that every letter that leaves the office is a representative of the company in which we are working and as messengers of goodwill. Its style and appearance must be in compliance with its function. It needs to have a decent dignity and personality.

Some people criticize business English as a “practical writing”. It certainly is practical, for the ability to write good business messages is useful. Nevertheless, it is also a cultural study because its main purposes are to develop the writer's ability to maintain pleasant relations with others and his/her language effectiveness.

1.2 The Principles of Business Writing

The goal of communication in business is to get the response you want and to promote goodwill. You-Attitude—you-centered writing—is the key to successful business communications. The eight writing principles—consideration, conciseness, correctness, courtesy, clarity, completeness, concreteness and credibility—are guidelines for clear messages that accomplish the goal of all business communications: to get the desired response from the reader while promoting goodwill. These principles are you-attitude because they focus on the reader's needs.

The development of principles of business English writing experienced a