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# WRITING IN BUSINESS

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**J. S. Lindauer**

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## ***Preface to the student***

Picture it: You are hunched over your desk in your room; crumpled sheets of stationery are on the floor around you. Under your hand is another such piece of paper on which you have written the date, scratched it out and put "Tuesday afternoon," then carefully and slowly doodled over and over that. It is dusk, and you have just turned on the desk lamp.

Who *are* you? For one thing, you are a student. In the past five days since your monthly check arrived, you have paid for room and board, for last month's laundry, for a long-distance phone call to someone you met on the beach last summer, for an overdue library book. Furthermore, you still owe your collection-minded roommate \$13.74 and have commitments you must meet long before you receive any more income.

You are in the process of tapping your last and best source of funds—your father. In fact, you have been sitting all afternoon, trying to compose this letter to him, but somehow you have not been able to compose that magic message. It has to be said in the right way, because you need the money now. Moreover, you may need more in the future, so you have to be careful not to alienate him. You are worried.

And who is *he*? For one, he certainly is a sorehead about money; in fact, he is always talking about it to you. His other favorite topic of discussion is the value of common sense: to hear him tell it, he has

never made a mistake, never failed to plan, and never, never mis-planned. In short, he's perfect—so he tells you. He is at the same time a dependable man, and he'd never knowingly let you down. That should make him susceptible to the task at hand; nevertheless you feel miserable that you have to perform it.

So, what do you say to him? You have already considered the direct approach: "Please send me \$40 by return mail. . . ." But you know he would never go for that, not without knowing why. How would you ever explain to him that you want to take out your roommate's cousin on a weekend and that it's got to be the best weekend of your life? You definitely cannot say, "I know you won't understand, Pop, but. . . ." That always makes him stomp off in a blue funk.

You have to find a way to make him feel it is worth his while to help you out—that he is getting something for his money. How about a magnificent investment opportunity you have, a chance to make a lot of money—in any case, gain a lot of experience? Or, how about your needing money for lab equipment—absolutely essential for the course? No, you can't lie to him.

How about the direct, honest approach: "I'm sorry Dad, but I guess I just can't manage my money very well"? You can see his reaction to that: You would be the child again and then the lecture would come. Absolutely not!

You've been sitting so long that your back begins to ache. You rise to get some aspirin. But just as you push back your chair, you remember something he said to you the last time you were home. So! There is something he wants that you can do for him. You know what to say.

You feverishly write your letter offering a plan, showing how you can carry it out, and then asking for an advance on the money he will owe you when you have done the work. And that is that. You have found an approach: You have expressed yourself responsibly, and rather than merely maintaining his respect for you, you probably have increased it.

Almost everyone has to write such a letter at least once. Almost everyone has the same difficulty, because there are so many pitfalls. Yet pitfalls do not arise only in money-seeking, student-to-father letters. They are an intrinsic part of every letter written by a businessman to a customer or agency. Unfortunately, though, many businesses do not realize that (as the rash of junk mail proves).

On the other hand, each letter one writes in a business relationship does not have to be as agonizing as the situation just depicted. There are means to the ends that cut pain, though not corners. The pitfalls are there, and they must be considered. Nevertheless, it is possible to avoid them and to incorporate into your writing the message that

will give you the results you are looking for. There is a way of making the writing process easier and the communication better.

I define *communication* as a message sent by one human being to another, by way of one of numerous channels. The communication we are particularly concerned with is the business letter. Letters must meet the same general requirements of all written communication: clearness, comprehension, and conciseness. Added are the special requirements of the particular motives, the particular goals, the particular restrictions of communication between businessmen and customers or customers and businessmen.

This book is organized around this definition of communication. After the goals of business letters are explained, you will be introduced to the communicants and shown the necessity and value of first knowing yourself and your product and then knowing the person you're writing to and the means to reach him. At that point you are warned of pitfalls that can interfere with your communication. Finally you are shown the various types of messages you will have to convey in the business world.

The large number of illustrations included in each chapter give you different approaches to and different views of the principles that this book is concerned with. Some of the illustrations are extreme, because sometimes it is easier to grasp the subtle once you have dealt with the obvious. Nevertheless, there is diversity as well as number, and it is hoped that you will seek out the illustrations that fit you, and pass lightly through the others.

To emphasize the importance of audience consideration (and to make a somewhat dry subject a little more lively), the book includes the correspondence of only a few people as they are directly or indirectly involved in one situation or as the letters they write and receive illuminate them and offer new possibilities to effect their own ends. The chief writers are the service manager of a large electrical appliance company, a lawyer, a college coed, the president of a railroad, a widow, a plumber, the director of a perfumery, an insurance investigator, a male student, and a physician. They represent a diversity of roles, so you get an idea of the spectrum of writers and readers involved in any business situation.

Of course there is writing you must do, for this book is meant to help you write well. Toward that goal I have placed at the end of each chapter subjects for discussion that deal with the main principles of the chapter and have included a continuous chapter-to-chapter problem to provide you an opportunity for continuity in classroom work. Following the subjects for discussion, you will find writing problems. In each of these sections, several writing problems have been provided, not to overburden you but to give you more of a

selection. Again, here there are continuous problems, should you have an easier time applying the principles of this book by following through with correspondence of one company for the whole course. On the other hand, there are enough assignments so that you may have variety, should you desire it. Many of the writing assignments provide the opportunity for response to other writing assignments; it is suggested that you keep all your writing in a folder or notebook for your own advantage.

The assignments are longer, more complex, and more difficult at the end of the book than at the beginning. Early assignments deal with parts of letters, not whole ones. You should pass through the first few chapters as rapidly as you are able to comprehend the individual principles the chapters deal with. You should be able to do many assignments and still cover the material rapidly. Then, when you get to writing entire letters, you can slow down as you apply the principles instead of simply practice them in bits and pieces. I hope also that the early, shorter assignments will allow you to overcome rapidly any writing problems you may have.

To help you write better, a Glossary has been included. It, like the illustrations, is a resource you should use according to your needs. It contains basic rhetorical principles, punctuation rules, and definitions so that you will have at hand clarification should you be confused about, for example, which pronoun to use. Most of the entries, which are arranged alphabetically and cross-referenced, have exercises following them to help you develop your own skills and correct basic problems.

Just a couple of notes: You may be tempted to make your way through this course by simply paraphrasing the illustrations. At first thought, that seems sensible, for the illustrations—unless clearly intended to show incorrect approaches—are proper and correct. To eliminate such temptation, I have tried to give enough complexity to the writing problems to require your thought and your application of principles. Frankly, if you simply paraphrase the examples, you will have failed to apply the principles underlying any successful letter. Just remember that every letter should be an individual experience between individuals, and you will be all right.

Many people have examined the text of this book and have made suggestions that add significantly to its usefulness and its quality. Particularly I must mention Miss Carol Ford, Mount San Antonio College, Walnut, California; Mr. Alfred Sheldon, California State Polytechnic College, Pomona; Miss Janice Siler, Miami-Dade Junior College, Miami, Florida; Miss Romaine L. Jeffery, Katherine Gibbs School, New York City; and Mr. Arno F. Knapper, University of

Kansas, Lawrence. Countless students also have helped shape the material. I cannot name them all, but I must mention the following ones who worked through the material word by word, problem by problem: John Bernstrom; Fred Clark; Mohamed Elmi; Perry Even; R. E. Figueroa; George France; Ron Ginsburg; Steve Horn; David Kimmich; Luke McCarthy; Kelly McGuire; Barbara Miller; Linda Moffitt; John Parker; Rick Patterson; Ken Phillips; Duane Rogers; Owen Rogers; James Sekerka; Jim Sullivan; William Takano; A. R. Tosolini; Joyce Waithira; Margaret White; Richard Willis; Lucas Yeh; Mark Wong; Andrew Tam; and Harry Williams, who originally lost some perfume in a Paris post office and began the whole business.

I hope that you write business letters with much more effect and satisfaction after you have used the book. That, after all, is *its* purpose.

J.S.L.



## **Writing in *business***

# Contents

## PREFACE TO THE STUDENT ix

### 1. PURPOSES OF LETTERS 1

Short-run purposes / Long-run purposes / Good will / Congratulatory messages / Testimonials / Direct and indirect effects of letters

*Subjects for discussion* 10

*Writing problems* 11

### 2. BUILDING AN IMAGE 12

Factors in image building / Service attitude / Reader benefit / Relationship of purposes and image

*Subjects for discussion* 16

*Writing problems* 16

### 3. MAINTAINING AN IMAGE 18

The reader physically / The reader psychologically / Adaptation / Resale-on-the-goods / Resale-on-the-house

*Subjects for discussion* 28

*Writing problems* 29

**4. WRECKING AN IMAGE 31**

Connotation and denotation / Wordiness / Exaggeration / Trite phrases

*Subjects for discussion* 36

*Writing problems* 36

**5. WRECKING AN IMAGE (CONTINUED) 38**

Indifference and verbiage / Basic cause of bad tone: attitude / Authoritarian tone / Condensing tone / Patronizing tone / Insulting tone / Flattering tone / Undue humility / Overfamiliarity

*Subjects for discussion* 45

*Writing problems* 45

**6. CONVENTIONS OF FORM 46**

Standard parts / Special parts / Punctuation / Placement of parts / Style sheet

*Subjects for discussion* 56

*Writing problems* 56

**7. CONVENTIONS OF CONTENT 57**

Relation to short-run purposes / Relation to reader's response / Conventions of alternates / Clarity, conciseness, and comprehension / Positive attitude / Closes

*Subjects for discussion* 65

*Writing problems* 66

**8. GOOD-NEWS MESSAGES 67**

Intrabusiness letters / Adaptation / Inquiries / Favorable replies / Orders / Acknowledgments

*Subjects for discussion* 117

*Writing problems* 78

**9. GOOD-NEWS MESSAGES (CONTINUED) 80**

Testimonials / Approval of credit / Approval of adjustments or claims

*Subjects for discussion* 87

*Writing problems* 87

**10. PERSUASIVE MESSAGES 89**

General form / Types of appeals / Rationales / Assistance requests / Credit requests / Claims letters / Hazards of tone  
*Subjects for discussion* 102  
*Writing problems* 102

**11. PERSUASIVE MESSAGES (COLLECTIONS) 104**

Requirements of all steps / Notification / Reminder / Inquiry / Appeal / Urgency / Ultimatum  
*Subjects for discussion* 117  
*Writing problems* 117

**12. PERSUASIVE MESSAGES (SALES) 119**

Interest catchers / Adaptability / Campaign series / Wear-out series / Continuing series  
*Subjects for discussion* 131  
*Writing problems* 131

**13. PERSUASIVE MESSAGES (APPLICATIONS) 132**

Product analysis / Market analysis / Adaptability / Résumé  
*Subjects for discussion* 144  
*Writing problems* 144

**14. BAD-NEWS MESSAGES 145**

Defensiveness / General form / Buffers / Relation of explanation to bad news / Closes / Refusal of request / Refusal of order / Refusal of claims / Refusal of credit  
*Subjects for discussion* 156  
*Writing problems* 157

**15. BAD-NEWS MESSAGES (CONTINUED) 158**

Incomplete orders / Insufficient information / Delayed shipment / Alternates / Compromises  
*Subjects for discussion* 166  
*Writing problems* 167

**16. LETTERS AS REPORTS 168**

Short-run purpose / Format / Adaptability / Proper organization

*Subjects for discussion* 179

*Writing problems* 179

**17. A CHECKLIST 181**

**A GLOSSARY OF GRAMMATICAL AND RHETORICAL PRACTICES 183**

**INDEX 261**

## **Purposes of letters**

For many people, writing a letter is a chore. They feel they must fill the paper with words, and they become pencil-chewing automatons just by sitting down in front of a piece of white paper. What results from their efforts is a dull, wooden message that sounds as if it were written by a priggish, stuffed-shirted machine, not a warm, pleasant human being.

What causes the lack of connection between the writer and his words that we find in so many letters? For one thing, there is a genuine fear of communicating at all. In business letters, as in other writing, people hide behind barrages of verbosity that bore even persons who would otherwise be intensely interested in the message. The fearful writers protect themselves, and no real message gets out. The readers wonder irritably why the correspondent bothered to write at all. And the question arises, How *can* people spend so much agonized energy (and, hence, money) doing something they hate so much and producing a result that is almost bound to be ineffectual? The answer is logical: Good letters have proved to be such worthwhile experiences economically (and psychically) that people struggle to write *any* kind of letter, believing their act will pay off. They are wrong, of course. A letter must be effective to be worthwhile. And no amount of agonizing is going to make it effective if certain basic principles (the matter of this book) are not conscious or unconscious habits of the writer.

Unfortunately, few people stop to consider what communication is.

Because they view the writing of a letter as a chore to be endured, they fail to think of it as the exciting matter of “I am here, you are there, and there is something between us to be concentrated upon and then settled to our mutual satisfaction.” In other words, communication is a message sent by one *person* to another *person*. For the purpose of this course, we shall assume the channel of this message to be the mail and the participants in this mail communication to be a businessman and a customer.

The same rules apply to both customer *and* businessman, regardless of the one addressed, because the superficial differences in the purpose for writing business letters have no effect on principles. Ordinarily the businessman wants to make a profit, while the customer wants to satisfy his needs, some of which lie deep, hidden even from his own comprehension. Despite the difference, there is between the correspondents the common denominator of the drive toward satisfaction of selfish interests, and this overwhelms any differences the two may have.

All business letters have two types of purpose: short-run and long-run. The general *short-run* purpose of any business letter is the same: to get the letter recipient to do something for the letter writer. There is a range of “somethings”: give money, pay a bill, rush an order, “think me a nice guy,” lend funds, repair a machine; and the “somethings” do differ somewhat depending on whether one is a businessman (who usually writes to sell something, collect something, or add something to his business) or a customer (who usually writes to obtain something or to maximize the sense of having got his money’s worth). In any case, the businessman or the customer writes to get a specific response favorable to his own position.

The general *long-run* purpose of all business letters—those from businessmen and those from customers—is the creation of good will. Business, after all, is a relationship in which someone is trying to get something from someone else, and good will should make achievement of the goal easier. On the part of businessmen, good will is an integral part of letters because writers want their business relationships to last beyond the moment of correspondence. Their letters must create positive feelings that will be remembered in case the reader needs additional products and services that the writer has to offer. Conversely, customers who have the good will of the firms they deal with derive such short-run values as faster service and speedier delivery. Nevertheless, on a practical rather than theoretical level, the customer can be less motivated to achieve good will than the businessman, for the customer can be much less concerned with achieving relations that will last positively into the future. One can’t imagine a businessman saying, “I won’t take your money because you’ve hurt my

feelings with your criticism of me." One knows, on the other hand, that customers do seek alternates in the marketplace for just such emotional reasons. Nevertheless, I again assert that all the principles I discuss apply to both businessmen and customers because, first, there is short-run selfishness; second, businessmen frequently play the role of customers as they buy to sell or manufacture; and third, customers frequently use the same methods of persuasion that businessmen use, to get the businessman to make adjustments or to give credit.

The good will I have been talking about is respect, trust, and confidence—all resulting in each of the two parties getting satisfaction. There is a time when short-run and long-run purposes are the same, in a special form of letter very effective for creating good will. When the businessman uses the form, it is the *congratulatory message*. What it amounts to is letting your customer know that you are aware of his good fortune when something special happens to him and that you share his pride and happiness.

Such good wishes can be expressed in a number of ways. For one, if you have another reason to write to him, you can simply insert the "good-will builder" into the letter by mentioning the good news in an appropriate spot. (See Figure 1-1.) Or you may send him a clipping

FIGURE 1-1

"Since 1872"

**Shockey Brothers Appliance Center**

1671 Live Oak  
Sagamore, Michigan 10101

April 17, 1971

Mrs. Allison Fields  
17 West Eagle Rock  
Sagamore, Michigan 10101

Dear Mrs. Fields:

I'll drop by Friday morning with the service contract on your color television set. This contract insures you against any labor, parts, or trip charges for the next two years, should you have to call us. As you specified, the amount of the contract -- \$41.78 -- has been charged against your account, No. 416713. Your monthly payment



will increase \$1.19, to \$67.14. I'm sure you'll find that the security provided by our immediate response to any call and the freedom from expensive repair bills are well worth this low price.

By the way, I read in the Courier that your son Jimmy has won first place in the Soapbox Derby. Congratulations to him and to you for giving him the confidence and perseverance to do it.

For answers to any questions about the service contract, please call me at 715-5656 between 8 A.M. and 5 P.M.

Yours truly,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Bill Shockey".

William Shockey III  
Service Manager

FIGURE 1-1 (continued)

of the good news along with an informal congratulatory note. (See Figure 1-2.)

It is essential that such good-will letters be *personalized*, and not simply be form letters with a typed-in name and address at the top. It is also important to distinguish these good-will messages from sales letters developed out of newspaper reports, i.e., a photographer trying to get the contract to take wedding pictures. Such a source of business is legitimate; it is just that in writing the letter, the writer must not confuse his purposes. If he pretends that his short-run sales purpose is only a short-run good-will message, the result may be bad will. (See Figure 1-3. Mr. Balmer's letter will be repeatedly referred to as a negative example.)

When the *customer* combines short- and long-run purposes, the letter that results is a testimonial. The testimonial expresses approval of a new procedure, product, or service, or appreciation for some special treatment. (See Figure 1-4.) The customer has no other short-run purpose than expressing his approval. He does not, for example, go on to order a product.

Congratulatory letters such as the ones cited are relatively uncommon; most messages have a short-run purpose other than express-