

# WRITTEN COMMUNICATION IN BUSINESS

third edition



ROBERT L. SHURTER

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# PREFACE

*Written Communication in Business* is intended for two types of readers: college students taking formal courses in the various forms of business writing and readers who are already engaged in their business careers. The book is designed to present a comprehensive treatment of the major principles of business communication, an analysis of the most widely used forms of business writing—the letter, the report, and the memorandum—and a discussion of the associated skills of dictation and reading. It includes a reference section with a commentary on “Writing Correctly” as well as a conveniently organized treatment to provide answers to the specific questions about correct usage which frequently confront both students and business writers. The book is organized to present the general principles of effective communication in the first section and to apply these principles to specific types of writing—business letters, reports, memoranda—in subsequent sections.

In the third edition, I have tried to give equal emphasis to business communication both as a very important activity of business management and as an invaluable skill or technique for the individual whose career goal is a position in business or industry. The result, I hope, is a book which will prove useful both to those students who are primarily concerned with business administration, as well as those who are concerned with the techniques of writing, and to businessmen familiar with management viewpoint who seek to improve their own or their employees’ communication skills. To that end, a number of actual business problems have been added which deal with the management thinking and analysis which must precede and accompany the writing of a business communication. A number of the new problems also deal with situa-

tions in the academic community so that students may use their background knowledge to write about subjects with which they are familiar, as in the chapter "The Report Writing Process—An Example," where the entire process of writing a report, from original assignment to finished report, is followed through in terms of a subject about which all college students have specific knowledge.

Other changes in the third edition involve a new chapter on "Words—Their Use and Abuse," a greatly expanded treatment of reports in Part Three, a number of exercises and cases which stress business's role as a part of our total society in the 1970s, and the inclusion of a great many new exercises designed to force students to think creatively. It should perhaps be added that I have had the good fortune to serve for the past twenty years as consultant, lecturer, and coworker on communication problems for many of America's largest corporations, and the problems and exercises in this book derive from actual business problems I have encountered. Many of them have been specifically selected to stress the opportunity which business provides for original rather than routine writing, for the imaginative rather than the repetitive treatment. For that reason, for example, the exercises at the end of Chapter 1 have been deliberately chosen to disabuse the student of notions such as "anyone can write for business" or "business communication is dull." The section on Cases presents a number of new problems in considerable detail; these are intended to show the interchange of memos, letters, and reports frequently involved in one communication situation. Above all else, I have tried to present a realistic approach to what actually goes on in the practical forms of writing which are so vital to American business.

In writing this third edition, I have been influenced by two questions that business executives have frequently asked:

1. Why don't our employees attain higher standards of performance in their writing?
2. Why are so many people in business reluctant to write?

Both these questions deserve answers in any book dealing with business communication—and the answers naturally depend, in large measure, on the background of the author's thinking and experience. For instance, one answer, advanced by many writers and executives, is that the key to communication problems can be found in devising an organization pattern or organization chart which will maintain a flow of written communication up, down, and across all levels of the organization. It is certainly true that even the best writer cannot communicate effectively in a rigidly authoritarian organization; but it is equally true that communication will not rise above the mediocrity of poorly prepared writers even in the most "open" organization. I am convinced,

therefore, that the best way to improve business communication is by teaching individual writers—whether they be in college or on the job—the principles and techniques of effective writing. Since this book provides one approach to communication, readers, quite properly, should expect some insight into my own thinking about the two questions which executives ask so frequently and how this thinking has been incorporated into this book.

Why don't business writers achieve higher standards of performance? I think there is only one answer—that the real goals of business writing have not been clearly set for them. Too many writers have had only the hackneyed letters in the incoming mail basket or the wordy reports in the files to “guide” them. That is why the early chapters of this book are devoted to a discussion of the goals for business writers and subsequent chapters stress continual measurement of individual performance against these goals. Just as the golfer who plays against par will develop a better game than the one who plays haphazardly without any measure of performance, the college student or business writer who measures his writing against his instructor's comments or the specified goals will learn to approach “par” for the course.

Why are so many people in business reluctant to write? There is nearly universal agreement that of all the forms of communication writing is the most difficult. But the real reason why it is difficult—and why people dislike to write—is that writing forces people to think or, worse, exposes the fact that they have not thought. Because of that belief, this book places a heavy emphasis on the patterns of thinking which must precede all forms of writing. Particularly in the section on report writing, stress is placed on the fundamental thought processes and logical organizational patterns which undergird effective reports. Similarly, in the sections on letters and memorandums, I have emphasized thinking—about the purpose, about the reader, and about the material itself.

For two salient aspects of this edition, I have relied on experts in related disciplines. For the careful background of thinking which goes into management decisions, I have retained much of the viewpoint of Professor J. Peter Williamson, who was my coauthor in the second edition and who is Professor of Business Administration at The Amos Tuck School of Business Administration, Dartmouth College. Since an important part of business writing involves the use of charts and graphic presentation—a specialized field in which few people are really expert—I have asked Mr. Kenneth W. Haemer, formerly Manager, Presentation Research, American Telephone and Telegraph Company, to prepare the chapter on “Conveying Information Graphically” in the section on report writing.

I am indebted to many business executives for helpful suggestions and for the many useful examples they have supplied as a follow-up to my con-

sulting activities with their corporations. To my students and to my colleagues in that most useful organization, The American Business Communication Association, and to its director, Professor Francis Weeks, I am grateful for many helpful suggestions and much assistance. Specific acknowledgments for the use of various printed materials are made throughout the text, but I particularly want to express my gratitude to the many editors and publishers who have generously made these materials available.

Robert L. Shurter

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# PART ONE

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## PRINCIPLES OF BUSINESS COMMUNICATION



In a society where “machines talk to machines” and electronic gadgets bid fair to replace humans, it is comforting to remember one basic fact: like water in its natural state, communication never rises above its source. And that source is a human being. Simply stated, this means that the quality of any written message can never rise above the ability of the human being who wrote it.

At first glance, these statements appear to be so obvious as not to require repeating. But the emerging technology associated with today’s communication explosion, with its array of automatic typewriters, computers, and electronic devices, has created the erroneous notion that emphasis on the medium has somehow replaced emphasis on the message. It is a little like concluding that a stupid speaker, given all the resources of television with its vast audience, will be anything but stupid, when, in fact, he will only be so for more listeners.

Part One of this book, as well as subsequent chapters, is based on two fundamental convictions about written communication:

1. The ability to express one’s thoughts clearly and concisely in writing is one of the most sought-after skills in business—and will continue to be.
2. The quality of written communication is always a result of the writer’s knowledge of the basic principles of communication.

For the student or businessman, therefore, it would be fatuous to “write off writing” for the 1970s because of computers or mechanical devices. No evidence exists to indicate that written communication will play a less important role in the future business world than it has in the past. Plenty of evidence *does* exist, however, to indicate that it will play a changed role, brought about in part by the appalling costs of today’s written word (which are discussed in Chapter 1) and in part by the electronic and mechanized devices now available.

This changed role will undoubtedly involve a technique widely used—and taught—in the business community called “management by exception.” Under this principle, routine and repetitive situations are treated routinely by a carefully planned method of dealing with them, thus freeing executives—and writers—to concentrate on the unusual, the creative, and the original. In essence, therefore, tomorrow’s business writer will require greater skill, broader knowledge, and more flexibility. As the widely quoted advertisement of IBM describes it: “Machines should work; people should think.”

An interesting glimpse of things to come as they affect the writer in a computerized world is provided by William C. Greenough, Chairman and President of Teachers Insurance and Annuity Association, as reported in the *Bulletin* of the American Business Communication Association:

Recently I received an abacus as a graduation present. I got it for graduating

from IBM school early in 1966. Graduating with me were other executives who wanted to know more about how the machine can help their organization.

We studied very thoroughly all of the new-generation machines. We learned the utility and service potentials of their fantastic speeds and capabilities. We programmed them ourselves to answer simple questions, then watched them boom out answers, demonstrating their ability to compute in moments what would take humans years to figure out. We programmed to find out when Mexico will exceed the United States in population; and how much the \$24 the Indians paid for Manhattan Island would be worth now had it been put out at 1%, 2%, 3%, and 4% interest on the day of purchase.

These modern machines can pour out data so fast (1,100 lines per minute) that they literally can inundate the user with paper. So the problems of paper work, always very great, are becoming greater and greater.

Recently, I instructed all TIAA departments to move into the new generation of machines in such a way as to eliminate use of paper wherever possible. We aim to get rid of every bit of paper work we can; to make letter writing as nearly obsolete as possible. . . .

We want communication with the policyholder to be more direct instead of through a lot of intermediate steps and shuffling of paper back and forth among departments. . . .

In such a setup, the communications job will be much more interesting, complex and fascinating. . . . The communicator, far from being obsolete, will be the key figure—right smack in the middle of the operation.

As Mr. Greenough indicates, the obsolete hand of past communication practices is being lifted—and to the advantage of today's writer who wants to deal with original and creative problems. One has only to recall the maxims about communication which we have inherited in our folklore and which we unthinkingly repeat to recognize how erroneous the past has been: "Silence is golden"; "Talk is cheap"; "No news is good news"; "What you don't know won't hurt you."

Equally nonsensical is today's frightened assumption that tomorrow's written business communication will involve dehumanized, impersonal interchange between machines in which English has been replaced by *Fortran* or *Cobol*. Certainly tomorrow's business writer will have at his command the greatest arsenal of methods and techniques—computers, tapes, dictating equipment—that any communicator has ever had, and he will have the responsibility of choosing the quickest or the most appropriate or the least expensive among them, depending on his purpose. But these are servants which provide him with the time and opportunity for the challenging and interesting aspects of communication.

Finally, before we begin our discussion of the principles of business communication, we ought appropriately to make a statement which startles many students and businessmen:

If you are now paid (or will be paid) to write in business, you are in a very real sense a professional writer.

Most businessmen back away from his statement out of modesty—"Come on now. I'm no Hemingway."—or out of mild shock—"Oh, I don't write that much on the job." (Actually myriads of businessmen do more writing during their careers than many novelists, if we consider simply the amount of their writing; numerous surveys show that business executives spend the major part of their day communicating.)

The alternative to being a *professional* is to be a hack writer, turning out words just to make money without concern for ethics or principles or self-improvement. Of course there are hacks in business as in every other facet of our society. But there are professionals too—and if you are now an "apprentice" in college, you should aim at professionalism in your writing. In the chapters of this book, we have tried to emphasize professionalism by raising questions and providing exercises dealing with ethical aspects of business writing; we have tried to select as many examples of creative, original, and humorous business writing as possible to underscore the belief that writing in business does not necessarily have to be drab and stereotyped. Consider, for the moment, how to define or describe a car: it can be "more than 25,000 separate pieces of metal, plastic, rubber, and other materials assembled into . . ." or "a body placed on four wheels propelled by . . ." But then consider this:

A car is to tie shoes on and go off to start a new life in.

A professional has left his mark here, as he has in the beautifully worded letter, just to cite one example, from Yeck & Yeck which is reproduced on page 100.

What is it that distinguishes professionalism in communication from hack writing? A lot of things, but the essence of professionalism is *to keep endlessly trying to improve*. This means seizing every opportunity to write; using every chance to read and to learn how other writers express themselves; and studying the generally accepted principles of effective writing. These principles and techniques are set forth in the pages which follow.





## CHAPTER 1

# THE INFORMATION EXPLOSION AND THE BUSINESS WRITER

Before we go on to discuss the meaning and purposes of business writing, we ought briefly to examine the conditions which affect communication in today's business community. The phenomenon in our society conventionally labeled "the information explosion" has had a profound impact on both the form and the substance of business communication, and it leads to a logical question of "Why put it in writing?" The answer derives from two conditions which are uniquely characteristic of the seventies:

1. Never before has the businessman had so wide a choice of media for his message.
2. The cost of business communication has become astronomical.

Just as the Victorian era of the quill pen gave way to the typewriter in the early twentieth century, today's technology provides the businessman with a myriad of choices beyond the conventional writing it down or talking face to face. Shall he telephone, teletype, televise by closed circuit, use electronic taping or video taping, or employ some other method to get his message across? The age-old dream of instantaneous communication regardless of distance has become a reality. In fact, this dream may well become a nightmare induced by the very abundance of our technical ability to communicate: one