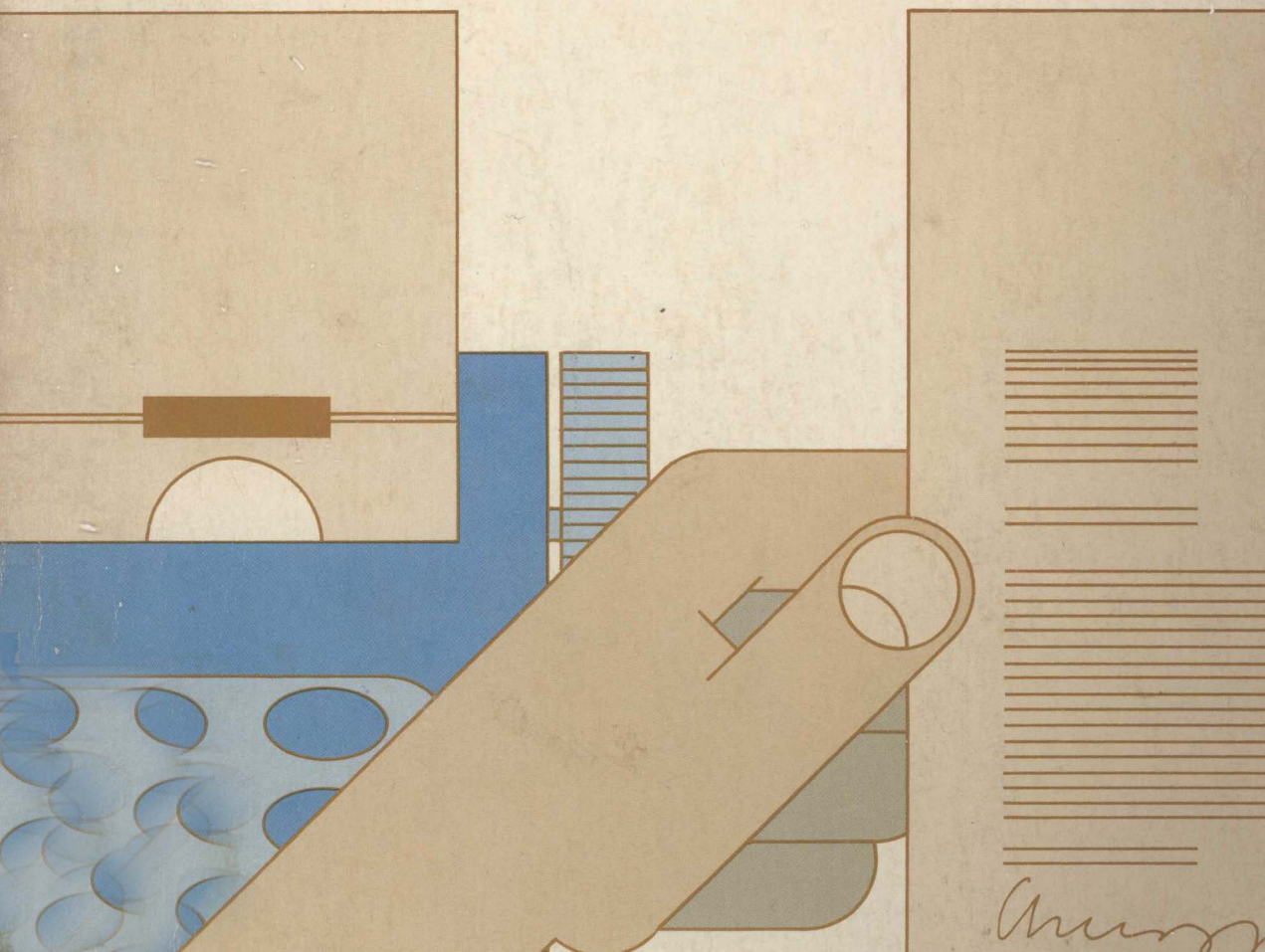


BUSINESS CORRESPONDENCE:

Writer, Reader, and Text



BUSINESS CORRESPONDENCE:

Writer, Reader, and Text

James VanOosting

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Preface

Business Correspondence: Writer, Reader, and Text investigates the most common (and fundamental) mode of business communication, the letter. This study is offered as an introduction to the subject for college and university students. It may serve, too, as a refresher course and reference guide to those already serving in business careers.

In selecting and organizing materials for the book, I have made two assumptions about its reader. First, the reader has successfully completed a freshman composition course or its equivalent. Thus, I do not attempt a comprehensive review of English grammar, although one chapter is devoted to the letter writer's special problems of syntax and punctuation. Second, the reader is making this study in conjunction with the study of basic business subjects. Thus, I restrict the book's focus to aspects of communication and do not attempt a general introduction to business terms and ideas.

Business Correspondence is divided into two parts. Chapters 1–18 consider the underlying principles that govern communication by letter; while these discussions aim at a practical explanation of composition and its problems, they are deliberately philosophical. Chapters 19–32 are decidedly practical in their structure and intent; each chapter offers guidance and practice in the composition of a particular kind of business letter. My decision to construct the book in this way reflects a conviction that good communication practice must be grounded in a knowledge of basic principles. Hence, theory

precedes application. The plan is also based upon a desire that the book's second part should serve as a convenient source of reference.

Although the organization of any textbook prescribes, to some extent, its proper use in a classroom, I have tried to avoid dictating a course structure. Chapters 1–18 interconnect in a logical and necessary sequence. Chapters 19–32 proceed, by arbitrary choice, in alphabetical order according to the type of letter under consideration. One instructor may be comfortable with dividing the course outline in conjunction with my chapter divisions. Another may prefer interspersing chapters from the second half of the book with discussions in the first part. My own preference when teaching business correspondence either in the classroom or in the office is to “punctuate” the lessons of Part I with selected chapters from Part II.

My understanding of business communication, and my perspective toward its practice, owe much to the administrators and managers with whom I've had opportunity to work and to observe. I wish to express special acknowledgment and gratitude to E. D. Oosting, the late James Ahlswede, Joseph P. Antonow, Wallace A. Bacon, Allen Goetcheus, and Lilla A. Heston.

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I

PRINCIPLES OF COMMUNICATION IN BUSINESS CORRESPONDENCE

1

At the Outset

A WORKING DEFINITION

A business letter may be defined as any letter written to conduct business. Simple enough. Perhaps one could argue that this is too simple a definition, that there are distinguishing characteristics about a business letter that ought to be included in the definition. If so, what are these distinctive qualities?

At first glance, one might think that a business letter is distinguishable by its *content* or subject matter. But any broad survey of business correspondence would belie this easy assumption by revealing an enormous range of subjects. Business correspondents must deal with such personal matters as the terms of a will or the delineation of relations between partners. The subject of a business letter may be specialized and highly technical or commonsense and easily understood by any reader. Business letters often deal with practical subjects, but they may deal with philosophical concerns as well. Indeed, it is difficult to conceive of any subject, in itself, that could not be appropriate to a business correspondent under the proper circumstances.

If a business letter is not distinguishable by content, perhaps one could argue that it is marked by a distinctive *intent*. But here, too, there arise problems. The legitimate intentions of a business letter writer vary as widely as do those of any other human

communicator in a nonbusiness setting. The business correspondent's aims may include, but are not limited to, all the following intentions: to introduce, to explain, to sell, to promise, to apologize, to persuade, to analyze, to facilitate, to organize, or simply to get attention.

Perhaps, then, one might argue that the business writer's *approach* to achieving aims is distinctive, that he or she uses unique *communication strategies*. But this limitation to the definition of a business letter, like the others, is indefensible. The business writer has available the same composition tools, techniques, and approaches as those of the personal letter writer, the advertising agent, the report writer, the essayist, the novelist, or even the playwright. Any limitation that the business letter writer has at the point of communication strategies is not inherent in the nature of a business letter but is a limitation of the writer's composition skills and ingenuity.

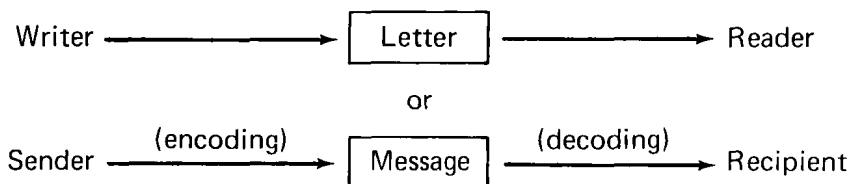
Surely, one may insist, if a business letter may not be defined by such tangible matters as content, intent, or approach, it may be distinguished by the less tangible characteristic of feel, or *tone*. But no, even here one must resist the temptation to restrict the business correspondent by a too limiting definition. The tone of one business letter may be straightforward and serious, whereas another, just as appropriately, is ironic and laced with humor. One business letter may be urbane and sophisticated; another may be "down home." The proper tone of a business letter, ranging all the way from the most impersonal to the most personal, is determined not by the nature of the beast but by the given circumstances that call for the letter to be written.

The more you probe business correspondence, analyzing and categorizing it, the more you will find it to share features with all other forms of human communication, written or spoken. Because we shall insist upon the broad definition that a business letter is any letter written to conduct business, our approach here cannot be a simple "how to." It must also be a "why to" and a "when to" and a "whom to" approach, such are the complexities of business writing.

If it is impossible to state a precise definition for the business letter, it is somewhat easier to judge whether a particular business letter is good or bad, has been written well or poorly, given a certain set of circumstances. Before making such evaluations, however, we must determine some critical standards, expectations based upon an understanding of the communication dimensions of any letter.

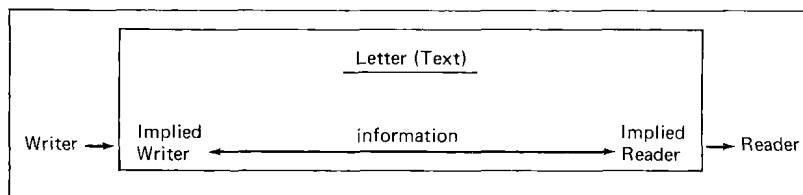
WRITER, READER, AND TEXT

The usual perception of communication by letter is that a writer *encodes* a particular *message* by putting into words on paper the information that he or she wishes to convey to another individual. These words, in the form of a letter, are *decoded* by the recipient in such a way that the reader understands roughly or precisely the letter writer's meaning. In other words, according to this view, a letter is a capsule of intention and meaning exchanged between two parties, each of whom exists apart from the letter itself:



Given this model, the study and practice of good letter writing tend to focus upon “encoding” and “decoding” phenomena: *how* to structure one’s message most effectively and *how* to read a message most efficiently. While this model is certainly useful, it does not depict the communication situation of a letter fully enough.

The writer and the reader do exist apart from and outside the letter, but each one has an identity *inside* the letter as well, in its text. It is true that the writer and reader are in communication *by means of* the letter, but it is also true that they are in communication *within* the letter. Consciously or unconsciously, a letter writer projects a self-image into the composition. Whether or not the writer intends to, he or she also projects a profile of the recipient into the letter. These two projections are in communication within the letter just as surely as the *real* writer and reader are in communication via the letter. For the purposes of this study, a “text” may be defined as the physical document of a letter, presenting information and representing a relationship. This more complicated model is illustrated as follows:



The value of this approach is that it depicts a letter not only as the *transmitter of information* but as the *conveyor of relationship* as well. The interaction between “implied writer” and “implied reader” within the text forms a large part of what the letter says. Letter writers are not always conscious of this dimension in their communication, and letter readers are not always aware of this aspect of their perceptions. Nevertheless, it is true that any letter communicates both information and relationship. The best letter writers understand these two dimensions and seek to structure the communication at both levels. Throughout this book, we shall return time and again to this model as we look at the communication phenomena at work *within* a letter as well as *via* that letter.