Richard J. Londo

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Preface and Acknowledgments

The approach this text takes to business writing is unusual enough to require some explanation. So is the content. Both are the result of practical experience in teaching college students how to write effective letters and reports and in tutoring middle-management employees of large companies in these same skills.

Part III (Business Letters) and Part V (Reports) are the heart of the text, of course; and they are not very unusual. They cover the standard types of messages most people in business need to write. The focus in these parts of the book is on the basics of organization and strategy, rather than on the wide variety of business forms and situations that the student can quickly and easily learn when on the job. In my experience, students who have a solid foundation in logic and organization have little trouble writing whatever kinds of business messages their jobs demand.

There may be some surprises in the other parts of the book, however. An entire chapter on avoiding noun clutter, another on using transitive active verbs, and some of the others on reducing language fog may seem more appropriate for a freshman composition textbook than for one in business writing. Yet, I have found that these are precisely the things students need to learn in order to improve their proficiency as writers of reports or business letters. In fact, these same chapters have proved very successful in helping managers and engineers, some of them with master's degrees in their fields, to write much clearer, much more readable reports than they thought they were capable of. I am *not* suggesting that English composition courses fail in their responsibility; I *am* suggesting that the clearest, most concise expository prose is not always the object of those courses; nor should it be. This book, then, aims at helping the student adapt previous writing instruction to the specific needs of business writing. The business context imposes its own demands on the writer, and that is why the grammar and rhetoric I include in this text are quite different from the material found in any freshman composition text. Certainly the *emphasis* is far different.

I have also tried to make the text useful to the student who has had very little instruction in grammar or writing skills. That is why some of the chapters may seem overexplained. But even the student who already knows the content of the chapters may well find that developing a writing style which incorporates that content is challenge enough.

Often during my courses for managers and engineers, after I have suggested changing transitive passive verbs to transitive active, a student, surprised at the improvement this one technique can produce, would ask why textbooks do not stress that as a major lesson. Now there is one that does.

Concerning approach, this text presents a few surprises, too. First of all, it orients the entire writing process toward the reader. The first chapter explains why that is important.

Secondly, the writing style I use is rather informal for a college text. I use contractions and an occasional colloquialism, not because it is easier for me to write that way, but because I want the reader to feel as if I am *talking* to him or her. The student learns much more quickly from a *coach* than from a *judge.* I purposely keep the tone informal and unsophisticated so that the student will regard the text as the voice of a sympathetic friend. That is very close to the actual truth, anyway.

Finally, the structure of the chapters themselves needs some comment. The exercises woven into the text are not really programmed frames, but they are similar to them. The student should conscientiously write the answers in the book on the lines provided, even if the only change is to add a comma or an apostrophe. The mere practice of rewriting the entire sentence will help develop a feel for sentence structure and spelling.

The Test Yourself section of each chapter exactly parallels in form and difficulty the tests included in the *Instructor's Manual.* The student should try the Test Yourself section, check the answers at the end of the chapter, and restudy any troublesome areas before taking the test which the instructor may give for that chapter.

The text is flexible enough so that report writers and business-letter writers can use it for self-instruction while on the job. It should also work well for in-plant training programs. I have tried to apply common sense to the business-writing situation, and that approach has value for writers at any level.

RJL

Mr. David Morgan, Mr. Don Skupas, Mr. John Tessier, Mr. Bill Komsi, Dr. John Phythyon, and Mr. Cliff A. Bowers generously provided sample material for this text. Mrs. Billie Kontney, Mr. Harry O. Hoehne, and Dr. Kenneth Zahorski read sizable portions of the manuscript and offered valuable suggestions for improving it. Dr. Robert L. Horn, dean of St. Norbert College, provided encouragement and support. I am deeply grateful to all these kind friends.

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Professor Stanley Matyshak deserves my very special thanks. As only a best friend would, he made me defend every word of the manuscript. Few are blessed with friends as talented and generous as this.

I am grateful to Mr. Lyle Lahey for his excellent cooperation in producing the cartoons sprinkled throughout the book.

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Part I

Introduction

1

The Reader Comes First

Until a few years ago, most texts on business writing devoted several early chapters to giving students pep talks on why they should study the subject. Today such attempts to motivate would seem superfluous because help-wanted ads that plead for technical writers, and public lamentations by executives who need clear writing but are not getting it, have already convinced most people of the importance of good writing in the business world. Today's students know that, next to technical knowledge, the ability to communicate that knowledge on paper is the most important qualification a business person can have.

The question is no longer "Why should I study business writing?" The question today is "How can I improve my business-writing skills?" This book addresses itself to the second question only; you already know the answer to the first one.

The format of the text may seem strange to you at first. I place heavy emphasis on the dynamics of the sentence because no piece of business writing can be more clear and effective than the sentences that make it up, although it can be less so. I blend paragraphs of explanation with a quasi-programmed series of questions for you to answer right in the book because the best way for you to understand a principle fully is to apply it immediately. I have tried to see the subject from *your* point of view, tried to anticipate *your* needs in developing your business-writing skills; and that is why you will run into several topics in these chapters that may seem to you rather elementary for a text at this level—until you try to apply them. You may have studied grammar and sentence structure in earlier college courses or even in elementary school, but *not* in the context of a business-writing situation. It is one thing to define a transitive-active verb, for instance; but it is quite another thing to develop the habit of *using* transitive-active verbs in your business letters and reports. So be patient with the

text; there is nothing in it you don't need to know or to reapply in new ways in order to become a successful business writer.

Perhaps the most unusual aspect of this text is the approach it takes to the business-writing situation itself. The communication theory that underlies this approach is a very old one indeed, dating all the way back to Aristotle. But the interpretation of that theory, the parts emphasized, and the application of them are altogether new.

Aristotle rightly identified the three essential elements in any act of communication; but because he stressed oratory, he called those elements the speaker, the subject, and the hearer.[1] For our purposes, the speaker corresponds to the writer, the subject to the message, and the hearer to the reader. We can therefore translate Aristotle's concept into a diagram that looks like this:

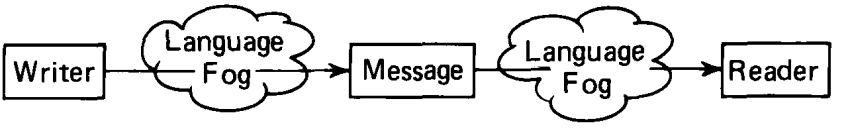
If we regard the arrows as symbols of predication, we can get three statements from this diagram: (1) The writer has an effect on the message; (2) the message has an effect on the reader; and (3) the writer has an effect on the reader through the message.

We could hardly imagine a simpler model for communication than this one. In fact, at first glance it seems too simple to offer much help for improving business-writing skills. But if we use it as a heuristic device, we will see that isolating the subject, or message, both from the writer and the reader enables us to make some interesting observations about these three elements.

First of all, it becomes evident that the writer's intended meaning and the written message itself could be two different things. The same is true of the relationship between the message and the reader; what the message says and what the reader perceives it to say could also be very different things. There are many reasons for this. The writer may assume certain implications are clear when they are not, may be wrong about the meanings of some words chosen for the message, or may use inappropriate grammatical structures to encode the message into written English. At the other end of the process, decoding the message, the reader may have only a vague notion of the meanings of certain words in the message, may not recognize certain grammatical structures used, or may get inaccurate concepts of the relative importance of the various parts of the message.

Not even a single word means *precisely* the same thing to any two people; and when we consider the wide range of connotations most words, phrases, and statements are likely to have, we can see there is a problem indeed. We will call these difficulties language fog because they obscure the direct transmission of meaning from writer to reader. Adding this to our diagram, we get the following:

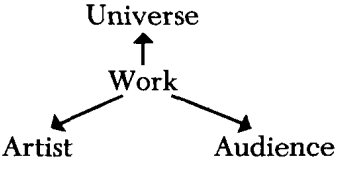
[1] W. Rhys Roberts, "Rhetoric," *Aristotle's Rhetoric and Poetics* (New York: Random House, Inc., The Modern Library, 1954), p. 32.



Fortunately, the less language fog there is between the writer and the message, the less there is likely to be between the message and the reader.

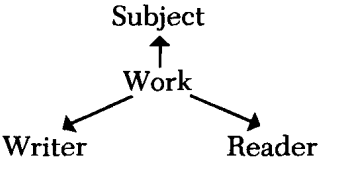
Many chapters in this text have the purpose of helping you to reduce language fog to the point where it can do little harm. Unless you work very hard to eliminate wordiness, dangling modifiers, noun clutter, passive-voice verbs, and the like, language fog will engulf your message and prevent you from ever becoming a successful business writer. Assuming you are willing to expend enough effort to minimize language fog, we will consider the little bit of it you cannot remove as inconsequential and leave it out of our future diagrams. But don't forget that some of that fog will always be there, no matter how hard you work at removing it.

The second observation we can make about Aristotle's concept is that the middle element, the message, is too general to be useful for our purposes. Does the term *message* mean the paper with the words on it or does it mean the subject, the meaning, of those words? We need to separate the two, and luckily someone has already done that for us. Meyer H. Abrams, in his excellent analysis of a specialized communication process, distinguishes four elements and arranges them this way:[2]



The arrows here mean "has a relationship to," so that if we are to analyze the "Work" we must take into account the "Universe," the "Artist," and the "Audience" because the "Work" has a relationship to all three.

Even though designed to explain certain aspects of literary criticism, Abrams's model has considerable usefulness as an explanation of what happens in business communications. For our purposes, we will translate the three terms *Universe, Artist,* and *Audience* into *Subject, Writer,* and *Reader,* respectively. We will use Abrams's term *Work* to represent the piece of business writing itself, whether letter or report. This gives us a more complex description than Aristotle's:



[2] Meyer H. Abrams, *The Mirror and the Lamp* (New York: W. W. Norton Co., 1958), p. 6.

This model begins to reveal relationships the other model hid. For instance, we must consider the relationship between the subject and the work itself; this has to do with the truth or accuracy of the piece of writing. The model also suggests that the work, being in the middle of the triangle, has some part to play in the interrelationships among the other three elements. Only the writer can insure that all these relationships remain intact.

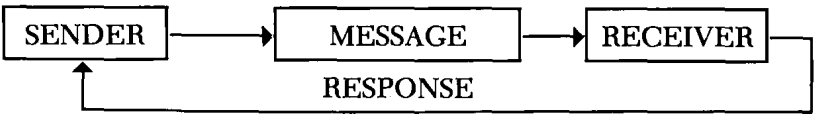
The relationship between the writer and the work is important, of course, because the work can never be any clearer than the writer's own understanding of the subject. Strange as it may seem, some people think they will get lucky and write something that makes more sense to their readers than it does to themselves. But it never happens that way.

The relationship between the subject and the work is also important. For example, if the writer does not pay close attention to the subject, but instead includes only the information the reader will like to read, in a short time both the reader and the writer will be in serious trouble. The letter writer who promised a discount to a customer and later found the discount applied only to larger orders did not last very long, nor did the report writer who "invented" some of the data on a feasibility report that cost the company thousands of dollars. You must make sure your letters and reports tell the truth; your writing must explain your subject *accurately.*

The relationship between the work and the reader is perhaps the most important of all. The writer who concentrates so much on the subject that the report becomes nothing but a mass of undigested details, and the writer who sends a business letter containing everything about the subject except what the reader needs to know about it, are not communicating. Remember that every letter or report you write is useless unless your reader can make sense out of it.

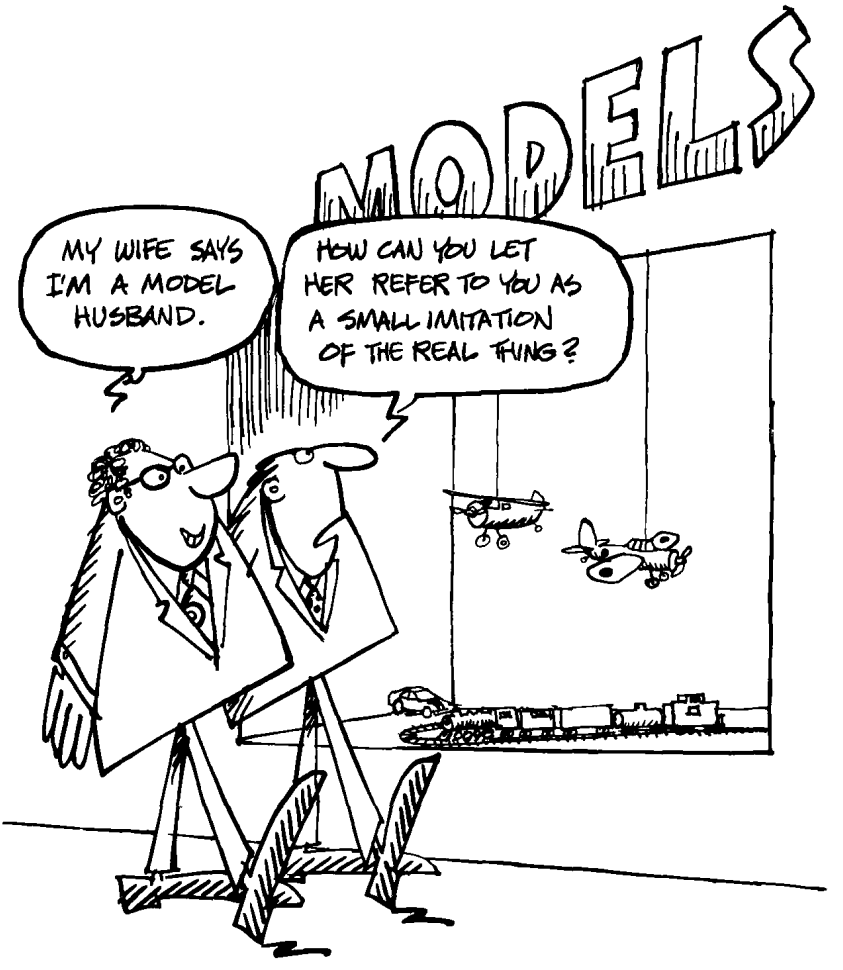
Yet, the model we have just developed shows only half of the story. True, it reveals the proper relationships among the four elements; but it does not describe the *process* of successful business writing. It fails to take into account the sequence, the generation, the *dynamics* of writing in business.

J. Harold Janis, in his 1973 text, *Writing and Communicating in Business,* proposes the following model,[3] which takes into account the cyclical *process* of business communication:



The importance of this model is that it introduces the cardinal element *response* into our concept of business communication. It shows very clearly that the business writer must use feedback from the reader—or, generally, *any* available knowledge of the reader's needs—as a necessary factor in shaping the work, whether a letter or a report.

[3] Second edition (New York: Macmillan Publishing Co.), p. 22.

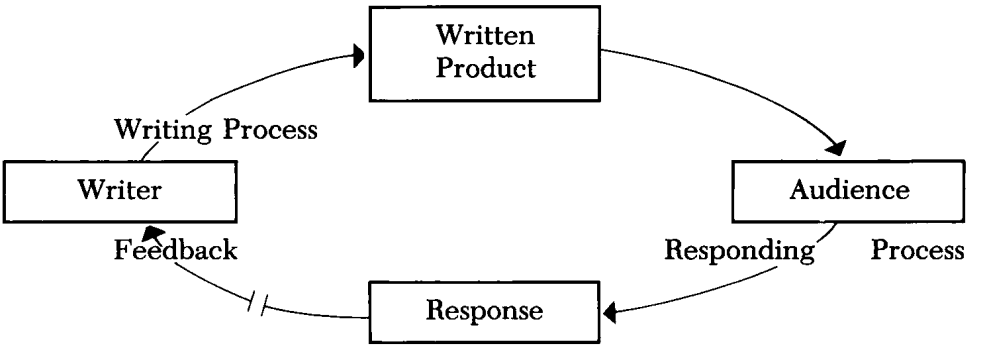


More recently, Ruth Mitchell and Mary Taylor, writing specialist at UCLA and researcher at The Rand Corporation, respectively, have developed a model that further emphasizes the importance of this feedback or response:

> *Our model postulates that all writing is directed towards an audience and is to be regarded as the written medium of a transaction. Writing will therefore be classified according to its effects, not according to its conformity with extrinsic standards. Writing is a means of acting upon a receiver. Its success will be judged by the audience's reaction: "good" translates into "effective," "bad" into "ineffective." Instead of a product, we are studying an interaction, a dynamic relationship, with all the complexities that involves.*[4]

[4] "The Integrating Perspective: An Audience-Response Model for Writing," *College English*, Vol. 41, No. 3 (November 1979), 250.

Their diagram resembles Janis's, except that it adds prominence to the *response* element, making it equal in importance to the piece of writing itself:



As the diagram shows, the feedback line between the response and the writer is not always complete; and when such a break occurs, the writer has very little hope of shaping the writing process so that the written product will be effective for the particular reader intended—except, of course, to follow the standard writing conventions *all* readers will understand. This is often the case when a writer constructs a formal report; there may be so many readers of the report that the only common denominator may well be standard writing conventions. But in any event, the writer must always employ the one ingredient that all readers are sure to respond to: common sense.

In explaining their communication model, Mitchell and Taylor emphasize the importance of the audience in any writing process:

> *The audience not only judges writing, it also motivates it. A writer answers a challenge, consciously or unconsciously. The conscious challenges are assignments, demands for reports, memos, proposals, letters. They may be requested by the audience directly, or for transmission to secondary audiences.*[5]

After declaring that it might seem best to consider the audience first in their audience-response model, they unfortunately begin with the writer in presenting the explanation. This is understandable; most people tend to think of the writing process as originating with the writer. But it really doesn't. In fact, we should have realized that long ago, for Aristotle hinted as much when, although discussing oratory, he said:

> *For the three elements in speech-making—speaker, subject, and person addressed—it is the last one, the hearer, that determines the speech's end and object.*[6]

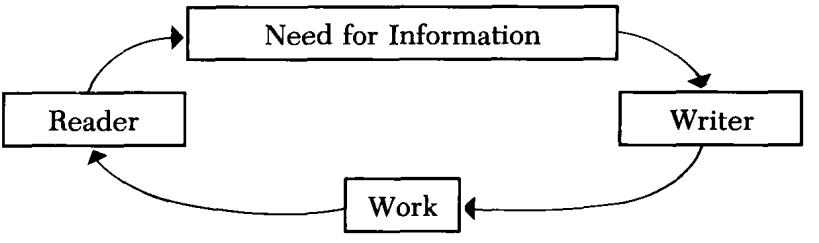
[5] Mitchell and Taylor, pp. 250–251.
[6] Aristotle, p. 598.

And, of course, the end, object, or purpose must always be the *first* thing considered. Not only must we consider it first, but in a very real sense the *reader* of the business report or business letter is the *originator* of the whole writing process.

Here are a few examples to illustrate in what way the reader is the originator of the letter or report:

1. A manager finds he or she must decide whether or not to switch to a new accounting system, and this sets in motion a chain of activity that results in a recommendation report.
2. A customer wants an extension of credit, and this starts a process that ends in a letter granting or denying that extension.
3. A potential client could increase sales by hiring your advertising agency, but doesn't know it. When you write to that potential client and explain what your agency has to offer, you are trying to increase your own business, to be sure; but unless you focus your letter on possible benefits for your reader, you will not succeed. Like every other piece of business writing, your letter would have to start with your *reader's* need for information, even if your reader is unaware of that need.

We will need to modify Mitchell and Taylor's model to reflect this change of emphasis. Our model will look like this:



Once you, as the writer, recognize your reader's needs concerning a certain subject, you are ready to begin your writing process, but not before. Your first step must be to increase your understanding of that subject *and* of your reader's needs relative to it. Your *primary* purpose must be to satisfy your reader's needs concerning that subject. Hence, the first commandment of business writing:

Keep your reader in mind.

To familiarize yourself with the format used in all the chapters of this book, and also to find out how well you remember what you have learned so far and whether you can apply it, try answering these questions. The answers are on page 19.

CHOOSE ALL *ANSWERS THAT APPLY*

1. The main purpose of this text is to
(a) discuss communication theory.
(b) convince you that writing skills are important in business.
(c) help you improve your business-writing skills.
(d) help you get rid of semantic fog entirely.

2. The Aristotelian communication model suggests that
(a) the writer's intended meaning could be different from the actual message.
(b) the writer's intended meaning and the reader's interpretation will always be identical.
(c) the reader's interpretation could be different from the actual message.
(d) there is no difference between the actual work the writer produces and the subject of that work.

3. What element does Janis's model for business communication add to the Aristotelian model of communication?
(a) Language fog
(b) Subject of the message
(c) Writing process
(d) Response

4. According to Mitchell and Taylor's theory of communication, and also according to the model we ourselves have developed in this chapter, which of the following initiates, generates, and motivates the writing process?
(a) The writer
(b) The reader
(c) The written work itself
(d) None of the above

5. Because the business writer must keep the reader in mind, which of the following should be factors in shaping the letter or report?
(a) The reader's knowledge of technical terms
(b) Whether the recipient of the letter will regard the content of the letter as good news or bad news
(c) The sequence in which the writer gathered the information for the letter or report
(d) Whether the letter or report will be easy to read

The principle of keeping the reader in mind immediately raises two questions we need to consider in this chapter: (1) Should the writer try to use the same clichés, inflated language, and convoluted grammatical structures the reader has become familiar with in a particular trade or profession? (2) What are the best ways to minimize the semantic fog that prevents the reader from understanding the writer's intended message?

We will begin with the first question. Looking at our model for business communication, you might reasonably conclude that shaping your writing to satisfy your reader's need for information involves not only selecting and arranging the *content* of your letters and reports, but their *language*