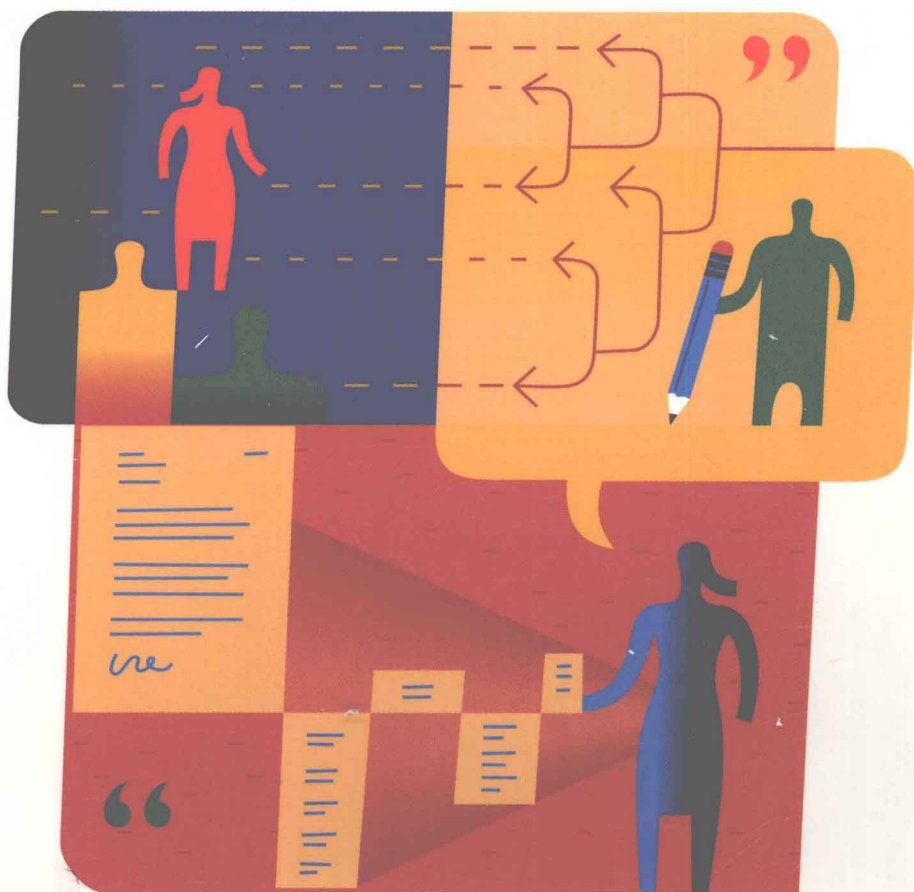


IMPACT

Fourth Edition

A Guide to Business Communication



MARGOT NORTHEY

Free Electronic
Grammar Workbook
Included

IMPACT

A Guide to Business Communications

Fourth Edition

MARGOT NORTHEY

Queen's University

Assisted by Joan McKibbin

St. Lawrence College

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Preface

New technologies have affected the way we communicate as much as they have affected other business practices. In the last decade we have become accustomed to the presence of voice-mail, e-mail and the Internet, even if we are not all adept at using them. More and more of us have gone from picking up a pen for roughing out some ideas to now drafting directly onto a computer. This fourth edition of *Impact* recognizes these changes and offers advice for communicating effectively with these technological tools.

Other recent changes in the environment of business influence how we communicate. As organizations move toward less hierarchical structures and more team-based activities, we need to sharpen our ability to influence and persuade. As markets become global and business becomes multicultural, we need to recognize differing cultural sensibilities. These changes reinforce the central challenge of writing and speaking well—the need to adapt to suit the context.

If you are wary about writing, this book can help you gain confidence and competence in putting words on a page or computer screen. It will take you through the steps of planning and producing good letters, memos, and reports. It will reveal strategies for attacking common business-writing problems—ways to address different kinds of readers for different purposes. You will learn how to avoid common grammatical faults and how to write with a clear, concise, and vigorous style.

You will also discover when and how it is best to talk—what to do for an oral presentation and how to handle a job interview or run a meeting.

Good writing and speaking reflect good thinking. The explanations and exercises in *Impact* show how thinking through a task and making informed choices will bring you better results. It's a practical approach since, after all, business is a practical matter.

Acknowledgments

For this fourth edition of *Impact* I am grateful to Joan McKibbin of St. Lawrence College, Kingston, who was a major force in its preparation. Her knowledge of her students' writing needs, as well as her detailed understanding of language and technology-based communication, contributed greatly to the revisions. I owe her special thanks.

I would also like to acknowledge the contributions of Pam Young, Crystal Fulton, and the following reviewers: Anita Agar, Sheridan College; Deborah Blenkhorn, University of British Columbia; Sandy Campbell, University of Ottawa; John Chiarcos, St. Clair College; Jennifer Dinn, Career Academy; Burl Levine, Communications Consultant; Shelley Ramsay, Ontario Business College; and Ilona Ryder, Grant MacEwan Community College.

I appreciate the help of the staff at Prentice Hall: David Stover, Marta Tomins, Jane Schell, Amber Wallace, and freelance editor Nick Gamble.

About the Author

Margot Northey is the Dean of Queen's School of Business, Queen's University, and a Professor of Management Communications. Previously she was a professor and Director of Communications at the Ivey School, University of Western Ontario and, before that, the founding Director of the Writing Program at Erindale Campus, University of Toronto. She has also been a Visiting Professor at Helsinki School of Economics.

She is also the author of many articles and books, including *Making Sense: A Student's Guide to Writing and Style*, *The Hunted Wilderness: The Gothic and Grotesque in Canadian Fiction*, and *Writer's Choice: A Portable Guide*. She has conducted seminars and consulted widely with organizations across Canada.



Note to Instructors

The changes in this fourth edition of *Impact: A Guide to Business Communication* reflect changes in business, especially the impact of new technology. They also reflect the latest trends in language use and an awareness of cultural differences that add to the complexity of communicating in Canada as well as internationally.

Underscoring the advice is my experience working not only with many business students but also with a wide range of business, government, and professional organizations.

Since business students typically are practical and results-oriented, this book is deliberately lean, giving them the least they need to know to do the job well. A good reader will take only a few hours to go from cover to cover. I've tried to follow my own advice to produce a clear, concise, and forceful text that students will want to read and remember.

My approach is based on three assumptions:

- Thinking through a communications problem is more effective than simply learning a formula.
- Writing well is less a matter of right or wrong than of making choices between better and worse.
- Inexperienced writers pay too little attention to planning and editing.

Since reading about a problem is no substitute for addressing it, the chapters have exercises, which are specific and technical, as well as more in-depth assignments called Thinking It Through, which require a broad range of decision-making skills.

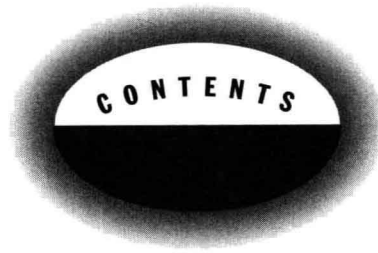
The fourth edition of *Impact* provides:

- more discussion of new technologies, such as e-mail and voicemail, as well as of word processing and computer graphics capabilities. References to the influence of these technologies on communication are interspersed throughout the text.
- a stronger focus on examples, highlighting them graphically for greater clarity.
- additional exercises.
- some trends in business communication, such as the trend to greater directness in communicating bad news.

These and other changes incorporate the suggestions of readers as well as the findings of recent research.

When students have mastered the material in *Impact*, they should be able not only to handle the particular problems discussed in the text, but also to apply the principles to any other writing or speaking task. Whatever the business challenge, they should be able to think their way through to effective communication.

Supplements to the text include an Instructors' Manual, which has additional exercises and resources, and a free electronic grammar workbook packaged with every copy of the text.



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Thinking about Communications

The prospect of having to write fills many businesspeople with dismay. Owing to the emphasis on quantitative methods in business courses, many students and recent graduates have had little practice writing or speaking formally. As a result, some feel more at ease working with numbers than with words. Yet the ability to communicate effectively is important in getting to the top in business.

Why is writing so important? The reasons can be summed up in three words: flexibility, power, clarity.

Writing Gives Flexibility

Let's suppose you have an idea for a new product that you want to propose to the managers of marketing and production, two busy and more senior people. You make appointments to see them. First you go to the marketing manager's office and enthusiastically make a brief presentation. Unfortunately, she has had a bad day. The president has come down to see her about declining profits, the latest sales figures are discouraging, and she has just finished arguing on the phone with a major distributor. She responds half-heartedly, makes a few nit-picking points about your proposal and, politely showing you to the door, vaguely says she'll think about it.

When you start to talk to the production manager, he is even more distracted. He says one of the expensive new robots in the factory has just broken down, causing a production crisis. He apologizes that he is really too busy to think about new ideas at this time. You leave, feeling unhappy and defeated.

Now let's suppose you had put your ideas in writing. The two managers could have set your proposal aside to read at a time when they were feeling less harassed. One might even have taken it home to study quietly in the evening. Since the managers would be reading the proposal at their convenience, they would have been in a more receptive mood—ready to see your suggestion as a possible benefit rather than another headache.

Writing allows this kind of flexibility. It allows readers to decide when and how much they want to read. They have a chance to reread if necessary and to reflect upon a message or proposal.

Writing Has Power

The old saying, “The pen is mightier than the sword,” suggests the enormous influence the written word has had over people, both individuals and groups. Martin Luther's Ninety-five Theses, which ushered in the Protestant Reformation, or Karl Marx's *Das Kapital*, laboured over in the damp rooms of the British Museum, have had more influence than the armed might of most rulers. On an admittedly far less profound level, writing in a business setting can also be a powerful force.

To begin with, it has staying power. Often a written proposal or report will be shelved because it is ahead of its time or not in line with current policy. Later, sometimes several years later, when conditions are more favourable, the same document can be picked up and made the basis for company action. To stay alive, the spoken idea relies on memory—a notoriously unreliable vehicle—whereas the written word needs only an adequate filing system. It provides a permanent record.

Writing also has travelling power. Young employees of medium to large businesses are sometimes surprised to discover that a memo or report they have written has made its way into the president's office before they have. Clearly written ideas or information will often travel quickly up the rungs of the corporate ladder. It is not unusual for good writing to catch the eye of a senior manager and lead to speedier promotion for the writer.

Writing Helps Clarify Thinking

Writers often say that the act of putting things down on a page not only records what they have in mind but helps them to sort out their thoughts. Consider a letter sent to Ann Landers several years ago. It began:

I have written you dozens of letters in the last 10 years and I have never mailed one until now. Yet I can truthfully say you have helped me a great deal. Let me explain.

When I ran into trouble in my life, I would sit down and write you about it. In order to put my thoughts down on paper, I had to think in a logical manner and figure out how the trouble started. By the time I got to the end of the letter, I could see many

aspects of the problem that I hadn't seen before. (Courtesy Ann Landers, News America Syndicate, Toronto Star.)

Although the context differs, you will find—or may already have found—that you can analyze complicated business problems more clearly when you try to sort things out on paper. Beyond being a medium of communication, therefore, writing becomes a tool for understanding. It's a tool worth learning to use well.

Communicating in Organizations

It's perhaps not surprising that Marshall McLuhan, the most influential communications expert of this century, was a Canadian. As a nation, we have been preoccupied with forging communication links among a sparse, widespread population. The old Canadian one-dollar bill, with its line of telephone poles receding to the distant horizon, illustrates this preoccupation. Year after year we strive to maintain a national radio and television broadcasting system in the face of foreign competition. We have been aggressive in entering the international high technology market with our telecommunications equipment.

Nevertheless, while we have put our imaginations to work on the technological aspects of communicating, we still have a distance to go in recognizing the importance of communications on a day-to-day level. Business as a whole is just beginning to appreciate what the successful Japanese and North American companies have known all along—that excellence comes not only from technological know-how but from handling people well. Good managers are usually good communicators, whether the process of communication is systematic or informal.

Communication Systems

As they expand, most businesses institute systems or mechanisms for communicating inside and outside the organization with people who are important to their success. Shrewd managers aim to set up an effective communication system, not as an end in itself, but because it is a way of improving overall performance and exploiting opportunities. They recognize the usefulness of both formal and informal systems in helping achieve their corporate goals.

Written Systems

Both internal and external methods of communication tend to become more structured or formal as an organization grows. Internal communications are designed for company employees, and can include newsletters and magazines, departmental reports, regular group meetings, opinion surveys, and suggestion boxes for employees' ideas. Increasingly, businesses are realizing the need for systems encouraging two-way communication between

management and subordinates. Often the least formal method of written communication is electronic mail, or “e-mail,” which allows the writer to send a message instantaneously to one or more recipients. The speed of e-mail has made it a common, although often relatively unpolished, means of communication in the business world.

External communication aims to inform through various written and spoken communications outside stakeholders in the organization, whether they are shareholders, governments, customers, or the public at large. Building good relations with the media also matters. The growth of public relations departments illustrates the increasing dependence of business on a favourable public image—and the recognition that an organization cannot operate independent of its environment.

Oral Networks

Conversations over coffee, spontaneous meetings, and even casual access to the boss’s office down the hall all contribute to an informal communications network. Peters and Waterman’s research (1977) revealed that companies they consider to be excellent are, in part, characterized by a rich network of open, informal communications. Management by “wandering around” contributes to the sense of openness. However, this kind of informal communication can’t be based simply on aimless chitchat; it must engage employees in purposeful talk about their concerns and ideas.

The “grapevine” is a major source of information in most organizations. News about hirings, firings, or layoffs is more apt to reach people first through the grapevine rather than through formal channels. Grapevine information may be distorted or based on rumour, but it always travels fast. Managers can learn who the key people in this informal network are and make use of them. They can also anticipate what’s likely to spread by rumour and give the official version first.

Recent developments such as teleconferencing have added a new dimension to oral communication by allowing people to “meet” without having to travel to a common location.

The Flow of Information

Whether communication is channelled through formal structures or an informal network, employees have information needs that must be met if they are to continue giving of their best. Roger D’Aprix suggests employees want answers to three questions:

1. How am I doing and does anybody care? (The need for personal evaluation.)
2. How are we doing? (The need to know group or company performance measures.)
3. How can I help? (The need to contribute meaningfully.)

Managers who are good communicators see that those who report to them have answers to these questions. However, creating good communication in an organization isn’t a

one-shot effort. Rather, it's a continuous process, requiring continuous management commitment.

An organization with good communications has an efficient flow of information in three directions: downward, upward, and lateral.

Downward Communication

This flow of communication follows the hierarchical route from superior to subordinate. It may take place at any level. Top executives often use this route to explain corporate strategies, to instill loyalty, or to rouse employees to greater effort. Lower-level managers often give job instructions, details of policy, and feedback to employees about employee performance.

Downward communication often is serial—that is, it is transferred from person to person through several levels. The more links in the chain of command it passes through, the more distorted it becomes. According to Pace and Boren (1973), serial communication has several tendencies:

- The original message can become simplified, with some details such as qualifiers omitted and the remaining parts highlighted or “sharpened”;
- Some details are changed according to the predisposition, communication style or status of the interpreter;
- The order and details of events are adapted according to what is plausible. What one expects to have happened overrides what actually happened.

Serial communication is more likely to be distorted if it is oral, but changes in meaning can occur in any message. A good practice, therefore, is to monitor important messages—to check on how they have been received after passing through several levels, so that any distortion can be corrected.

Upward Communication

Communication from subordinate to superior can increase productivity and help create a team feeling. Yet too many companies still pay only lip service to it. Participative management, which the Japanese have used so effectively, does not mean that subordinates make all the decisions, but that they provide input into the process.

Upward communication takes two forms:

1. requested feedback to superiors on policies, practices, or performances
2. unsolicited ideas or suggestions

For either form to work, there must be a climate of trust. Subordinates must feel free to make critical comments or suggest changes without being considered troublemakers. Without a climate of trust, employees will say only what the boss wants to hear.

Lateral Communication

This kind of communication moves horizontally across areas that are on the same level in the hierarchy, or sometimes diagonally to a different level. In complex organizations, such communication helps coordinate activities across functions or departments and can produce a spirit of cooperation. When there is little lateral communication—when “the right hand doesn’t know what the left hand is doing”—departments often operate at cross purposes. Often companies trying to be more productive reduce some of the layers of management. In this “flattening” of the organization, lateral communication becomes even more important, since each manager will have a wider span of control—that is, a greater spread of people to manage.

Some Help from Communications Theory

A growing body of research and theory is emerging about various aspects of communications, from semiotics (the study of signs), to linguistics (the study of language), to cognitive psychology and persuasion theory. For communications specialists, these are fruitful areas to explore. However, for those of us interested in the individual acts of writing and speaking in business, the most important feature of modern communications theory is its description of communication as an exchange. Rather than thinking of communication as only the delivery of a message, we should envisage a process in which the receiver of the message matters as much as the sender.

This idea is not new. The ancient Greeks had at the centre of their education system the art of rhetoric. Students learned various techniques for communicating ideas; they practised ways of swaying an audience to the speaker’s point of view by appealing to both reason and emotion. In more recent times, however, with the Western world’s emphasis on reason, we have tended to overlook the importance of the listener in the communication process. The thinking has often been that since people are reasonable, they will agree with your conclusions, as long as you address them with a reasonable argument. You need concentrate only on the logic of your message.

In the twentieth century we began to correct this mistaken approach. The insights of psychology have made us realize that human reactions are much more complicated than we once thought. In our dealings with others, a simple reliance on reason will not work. Moreover, the insights of linguistics, especially in the area of semantics, have made us aware that meaning itself is a complex matter. Words do not have a fixed meaning; they are only symbols and their meaning may differ with different users and in different contexts. The word *cool* may mean one thing when a meteorologist refers to “a cool temperature”; it has another meaning when a politician bemoans “a cool reception” for his speech; and yet another when a teenager talks about a friend being “a cool guy.”