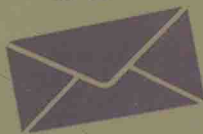


The top half of the cover features a collage of colorful envelopes in various shades (blue, red, green, purple, brown, orange) and a white laptop on the left. The background is a mix of warm tones like orange and brown.

外贸函电

Business Correspondence

陈岩峰 Shirin Boroumand Selph 编著





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Unit 1 Rules of a Good Writing

1.1 Introduction

Writing effective business letters is an essential skill for all business people who engage in the international trade. It defines and solidifies all aspects of the business partnership, including trade negotiations, the conditions and expectations between exporters and importers. Although the current popularity of communication via the Internet, telephone and fax is widely used in the international economic exchange and trade activities, the international business letters are still of particular importance.

The four main functions of a business letter are:

- 1) to convey or to ask for information;
- 2) to make or to accept an offer;
- 3) to deal with details concerning business negotiations;
- 4) to remind the recipient of the sender's existence.

Therefore, a well-written business letter is an essential tool for companies engaged in the foreign trade and commercial activities. Students majoring in International Trade and Business English should learn the basic principles and procedures of writing a business letter.

1.2 Principles of writing a Business letter

The principles for writing an effective business letter include clarity, conciseness, courtesy, completeness, and accuracy.

1.2.1 Clarity

The primary goal of a business letter is to state your purpose clearly, so that the

letter is not misunderstood. When you are sure about what you want to say, express yourself in plain, straightforward, and simple words. When the writer expresses himself or herself more clearly, the reader understands more easily and can respond more quickly. Thus, the process of communication becomes more efficient. **To achieve clarity, the writer needs to pay close attention to the following guidelines:**

- 1) Make sure that the sentence is structured properly to convey what you want to communicate;
- 2) Do not use ambiguous sentences and needless jargon; instead, try to use plain, simple words and short sentences;
- 3) Each paragraph should contain only one idea and should flow naturally into the next paragraph.

If you can follow the above guidelines, you will have clarity in your business letter writing.

1. 2. 2 Conciseness

Conciseness means writing or saying something in the fewest words. To achieve this, try to avoid wordiness or redundancy. Clarity and conciseness often go hand-in-hand. The elimination of wordy business jargon can make a letter easier to read and help eliminate misunderstandings. The author should use straightforward words to replace complex phrases or clauses. Wherever possible, choose the single word over the elaborate phrase. Your goal should be to express yourself in simple language so that your message is clear at first reading. The purpose of writing a letter is to make yourself understood easily, not to show how you can write long and complicated sentences. However, a concise letter is not necessarily a short one. Sometimes a letter dealing with a multiplicity of matters cannot avoid being long.

1. 2. 3 Courtesy

Courtesy means being polite; of course, it is important in business correspondence writing. Being polite is a basic principle of business. The courteous writer should be sincere and tactful, thoughtful and appreciative. Courtesy is not only using polite phrases such as “your kind inquiry”, “your esteemed order”, or “your valued customer”, but also showing consideration for your correspondent. Courtesy is the quality that enables us to decline to do a favor and at the same time keep a friend or to refuse a customer’s request for credit without sacrificing all hope of future

business.

Reply to all correspondence promptly. If possible, answer them the same day you receive them. It is impolite to keep your correspondent waiting for an answer. If you cannot deal promptly with a letter seeking information, explain why and when you will write again. This creates an impression of efficiency and helps to build a goodwill.

Try to understand and respect your correspondent's point of view; resist the temptation to insist that you are right and they are wrong. If his or her suggestions are unfounded or their criticisms seem unfair, carefully construct your reply with tasteful restraint and convey your point of view without sounding offensive. If you receive correspondence that is rude or sharply worded, resist the temptation to reply in similar terms. Instead, answer the letter courteously; you lower your dignity if you allow the writer to set the tone of your reply.

Two people or parties, who are doing business together, have both common and contradictory interests. It is very important to keep in mind distinctions between overlapping concepts: courtesy overdone may amount to flattery and sincerity overdone may amount to featherbrain. In short, any virtue overdone will produce some undesirable effect, and propriety is the watchword in distinguishing the right course from the wrong.

1. 2. 4 Completeness

A business letter is successful and functions well only when it contains all the necessary information. An outline helps you write a full and complete letter. Thoroughly review the letter to ensure that it contains all the details that have been discussed, and answer all of your client's questions. Incompleteness is impolite, and can create an unfavorable impression of your company. The client may decide to work with a different firm that can provide them with all of the information needed to make educated business decisions.

To achieve completeness, keep the following questions in mind: Why are you writing the letter? Have you answered your client's questions clearly and precisely? Did you include facts supporting your statements? Did you communicate clearly what you expect from the reader? Use specific facts and figures, choose vivid, image-building words, and make sure you use modifiers in the right place. If you have given the answers to all these questions, you have a complete letter.

1. 2. 5 Accuracy

A business letter must contain appropriate and grammatically correct sentences as well as factual and accurate information. While you are proofreading the document, special attention should be paid to form and convention, as well as to content. Double check the spelling of articles, specifications, quantities, and anything else that specifically apply to the message you are conveying. To avoid common grammatical errors in business writing, pay special attention to how you use pronouns, adjectives, articles, verbs, adverbs, conjunctions, and participles.

Factual errors are the result of lack of careful attention. Errors in price quotations or delivery dates are oversights caused by careless typing and insufficient proofreading. To avoid mistakes, use a variety of references to check and recheck your facts.

Careful attention to details, thorough proofreading, and the diligent use of references will eliminate errors in business letter writing.

1. 3 The writing process

1. 3. 1 Preparation

1) What are your reader's interests

When writing a business letter, it is very important to know your reader's interests. Ask yourself, what is the reader's cultural and economic background? When you have found out your reader's interests, think about how you can adapt your message to one that your reader will understand from his or her perspective. To adapt your message, begin by visualizing your reader. Form a mental picture of what the reader knows about the subject, what his or her educational level is, and how he or she thinks. Your correspondence must create a good first impression. To achieve this, "put yourself in the reader's shoes" and try to imagine how he will react to what you write. Constantly ask yourself, "What are the reader's needs, wishes, interests, problems, and how can I successfully meet them" and "If I were to receive this letter, how would I feel about it".

The following paragraphs are **examples** from the annual reports of two different companies. The writer of the first report apparently viewed his readers as not being

well-informed in finance. The writer of the second report regarded his readers as being well-informed in finance, such as stockbrokers, financial managers, financial analysts, and bankers.

Paragraph ①

The company had a total sale of 117 million dollars in 2009, which was slightly higher than 2008. After deducting all expenses, the company had a net balance of 380,458 dollars. The increase in profits allowed the company to increase your annual dividend payments 50 cents per share paid over the last 10 years.

Paragraph ②

The total of investments and advances in three unconsolidated corporate subsidiaries and the 50% owned companies was 42 million dollars as of December 31, 2009. The excess investments in certain companies over the net asset value were \$189,000. The corporation's equity in the net assets as of December 31, 2010 was 49 million dollars.

What do you think about the writing? Which one is clearer? Perhaps you think each one is good, perhaps you do not understand both of them. The answer depends upon who read them. Use different words for different audiences, and that is what you should try to do.

2) Collect related information

Collect the information that you may need to refer to when writing your letter, such as past correspondence, information from other employees that have knowledge of the company you are writing to, sales and inventory records, warranties, and product descriptions. Then, use the collected information to evaluate an applicant, acknowledge an offer and predict the reader's reaction. After referring to the information you gathered, try to impartially judge what the reader's reaction will be: positive, negative or somewhere in between. You can't be sure of what the reader's response will be to your letter's objective. The only thing you can do is apply your knowledge of the reader to a specific situation and use your best judgment.

3) Plan your letter

Many business letters are short and routine and can be written or dictated without any special preparation, while others must first be thought about and planned. Jot down all the points you wish to cover and then arrange them in a logical

order so that your letter can be read smoothly and fluently. If your letter is in reply to one received, underline those parts which seek information, or on which comments are necessary. This will ensure that your reply is complete and easy to understand.

1.3.2 Writing effectively

As we have already mentioned, it is important to keep in mind the principles for effective business letter writing. Let us go into further details on how to apply these principles to write more effectively.

1) Choose the right tone

Tone is the manner of expression in speech or writing. If a letter is to achieve its purpose, its tone must be right. Before writing, think carefully about the way you want to influence your reader. You should use right tone and adopt proper attitude. Ask yourself, what do you want this letter to do, and then express yourself accordingly. Being persuasive, apologetic, obliging, firm and so on, depending on the effect you want to produce.

2) Write naturally and sincerely

When you write or dictate a business letter, try to create a genuine interest in the person you are writing to, concerning his or her problems and challenges. Be sincere; say what you have to say with sincerity and respect. Express your thoughts in your own words and in your own way. Be yourself. In this way what you say would sound natural if read over the telephone.

3) Prefer the active voice to the passive one

Generally speaking, an active voice is preferred rather than a passive voice. An active voice conveys stronger and livelier ideas. Using the active voice, the subject does the action while in passive voice it receives the action. **For example:**

- (1) The results were reported in our July 9th letter.
- (2) We reported the results in our July 9th letter.
- (3) Our office would like this problem to be brought before the board.
- (4) This office requests that the secretary bring this problem before the board.

However, your decision on which kind of tone to be used is not simply a matter of choice.

4) Use effective words

Wordiness is expressing a statement in more words than necessary. Make it a rule to use no more words than needed to make your meaning clear. Today's business people receive many letters and welcome a letter that is direct and to the point. First, think about what you want to say and then state it naturally without frills. Write your business correspondence in a way that the reader will understand what you are trying to say clearly as if you were in conversation with him or her. Keep your sentences short and avoid the frequent use of such conjunctions as "and", "but", "however" and "consequently" .

Compare the following pairs of sentences:

- (1) Please be good enough to advise me. (Wordy)
- (2) Please advise me. (Concise)
- (3) We are eagerly awaiting the favor of your early reply. (Wordy)
- (4) We await your reply. (Concise)
- (5) We are in receipt of the letter you sent to us dated June 2020. (Wordy)
- (6) We received your letter of June 20. (Concise)

Familiar words are everyday words that have sharp and clear meanings. Use words that most people use in everyday conversation. In order to create effective communication, avoid stiff and difficult words that do not communicate well. However, at times, difficult words are not all bad. They should be used when they can define your needs accurately and precisely. **The following contrasting examples** illustrate the communication advantages of familiar words over less familiar ones.

- (1) This machine has a tendency to develop excessive and unpleasant audible symptoms when operating at elevated temperatures. (Unfamiliar)
- (2) This machine tends to get noisy when it runs hot. (Familiar)
- (3) The most operative assembly line configuration is a unidirectional flow. (Unfamiliar)
- (4) The most efficient assembly line design is a one-way flow. (Familiar)
- (5) The conclusion ascertained from a perusal of pertinent data is that a lucrative market exists for the product. (Unfamiliar)

- (6) The data studied shows that the product is in good demand. (Familiar)
- (7) Company operations for the preceding accounting period terminated with a substantial deficit. (Unfamiliar)
- (8) The company lost a good deal of money last year. (Familiar)

5) Avoid commercial jargon

Avoid using statements and vague phrases that add little or nothing to the reason behind your correspondence. Such phrases were at one time common, but they have no place in the modern business letter. You can see some examples in the unfamiliar phrases in the preceding section.

6) Write with consistency and clarity

Be consistent in writing business letters. Avoid repeating words in the same sentence or paragraph. However, in your effort to avoid repeating, do not make the opposite mistake of confusing your reader by using different words to express exactly the same thing. Do not state in the same letter that goods have been sent, forwarded, and dispatched. If you begin your letter by referring to a company, Do not change it as you go along into a “firm” or a “business” or an “organization”. If you do, you will leave your reader wondering whether something different is intended.

Preciseness is also required in a business letter. Use expressions with precise meanings. When acknowledging a letter, refer to it by date, subject, and reference number (if any). When referring to a date, mention the month by name and avoid using a numeric alternative. For example, use “October 25, 2009” instead of “10/25/2009”.

Compare the following sentences:

- (1) As to the steamers sailing from Hong Kong to Sydney, we have bimonthly direct service. (Ambiguous)
- (2) We have two direct sailings every month from Hong Kong to Sydney. (Clear)

7) Avoid monotony

Monotony means uniformity or lack of variation in pitch, intonation, or inflection. In a business letter, you should use sentences that will make your message vivid. Short sentences are preferable to long ones, because short sentences