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Business Writing for International Communication

Supong Tangkiengsirisin, Ph.D.

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Preface

This book, *Business Writing for International Communication*, aims to help learners of English sharpen their business writing skills. The focus of this book is on principles, guidelines, and techniques for writing emails, letters, or memos in business-related contexts. Consisting of eight chapters, this course book starts with the basic principles of written business communication and continues to describe and justify the writing process. Subsequent to that is the discussion of the major types of business messages, including neutral and positive messages, negative messages, and persuasive messages. This book ends with a chapter on guidelines for business writing in intercultural settings.

Each chapter is made up of sections and subsections on various topics related to written business communication. Techniques for effective writing skills are provided with examples and exercises. There are tasks that require learners to think, discuss, share, and create. As writing is a process, planning always precedes composing, which is followed by revising and editing. Through each cycle of the writing process, learners will become more familiar with steps for writing business messages. Peer and teacher feedback are provided for the improvement of drafts.

Despite the latest technological tools that facilitate business communication today, this course book emphasizes the traditional content and skills essential for professional business writing. Business documents used for illustrations and practice are those commonly found in international organizations. In addition, writing styles introduced throughout this book accommodate the current need for English as a *lingua franca* rather than the styles mainly used by native speakers. Using this course book, learners will master more advanced skills in crafting effective business messages for different purposes and for international readers.

Supong Tangkiengsirisin

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As this book was created to meet the learning needs of students interested in developing skills in written business communication in international contexts, many efforts have been made to ensure that it is a useful and resourceful one.

I would like to express sincere thanks to colleagues who used the book and provided constructive feedback to help me improve the earlier version of this book.

I also value the help of some graduate students who contributed some actual samples documents to be used in this book.

My thanks also go to the students who used this book during their studies. Their valuable comments have resulted in this better, fully-fledged version.

Basic Principles of Written Business Communication

Learning Outcomes

By the end of this chapter, students will be able to

1. understand and apply strategies for communicating through writing
2. use appropriate word choice and create effective sentences in business messages
3. construct effective paragraphs and use an appropriate style in business writing

Introduction

Communication is vital to a successful understanding that involves two or more people. Written communication refers to any kind of interaction using written words. Communicating through writing is a very important skill that is needed in the modern world and is becoming more and more important in the current period of time, commonly known as *the information age*. Written communication in business is usually regarded as one of the most common forms of business communication. Business owners and managers are expected to master effective written communication skills

and so are most or all employees in an organization. In the information age, the ways in which people communicate have changed and more emphasis has been placed on written communications.

Competent skills in writing, particularly those for business purposes, are increasingly needed due to the more extensive use of computers and computerized networks to organize and transmit information. This situation holds true throughout the globe where millions of people are now expected to write frequently and rapidly. Survey results from *The National Commission on Writing* found that a third of employees in multinational companies in the U.S. write poorly and are in need of remedial writing instruction (Dillion, 2004).

It is typical for businesspeople to establish business relationships with customers and suppliers that are maintained exclusively through the use of written communications. In the same manner, people in non-business fields also need to communicate through writing to establish or maintain relationships with those from other organizations. In such an environment, the words they write are actual representations of their organizations and themselves. Writers must be sure and confident that they send the most effective messages to the receivers in order to convey the main purpose of communication while maintaining goodwill. One important aspect of communication is to express meaning in such an accurate and concise way as modern readers tend to be too busy to read longer messages. In addition, business messages are not usually written for reading pleasure but are created to give information or instructions on which crucial decisions will be made or important action will be taken. In the modern context, a message with a straightforward but courteous tone is preferable, and extensive practice will be needed.

Advantages and Disadvantages of Written Communication

One main advantage to using written forms of communication is that such messages are normally prepared rather than spontaneous. They can undergo revision and editing before being delivered so that the content

can be organized and presented to maximum effect. Another major advantage is that written messages can usually be used as a permanent record and therefore can be saved for future investigation. Since they will remain on hard copies or online, written forms of communication allow recipients to spend more time perusing the message so that they can provide appropriate feedback or take proper action. Thus, complex business messages that include important facts and figures should be presented or delivered in written forms of communication. Other advantages to using written messages include successful business through increased customer satisfaction, enhanced inter-organizational or intercultural efficiency, and improved professionalism in the business community and industry.

However, several disadvantages exist with regard to written communication. First, unlike oral communication, during which reactions can be exchanged instantly, written communication normally receives no immediate feedback from the receiver of the message. Such a constraint may bring about uncertainty and confusion in work-related situations in which a prompt or timely response is needed. Another disadvantage is that written messages often take more time to prepare due to complexity, the need for effectiveness and professionalism, and an individual's writing skills.

Types of Written Communications

One of the most common types of written communication today is electronic mail. It has altered the way traditional written communication was implemented, capable of conveying important corporate messages rapidly and easily among enterprises of all sizes and industries.

More traditional types of business documents are memos and letters. Memos are relatively short and informal documents that circulate within organizations, addressing internal decisions and operations. Letters are usually written to individuals outside the writer's organization, but they can be used as official documents within an organization as well. Both memos and letters can be sent as email attachments.

Today, business writers still need skills essential for creating effective email messages. If writers do not pay enough attention to how email messages should be developed, the messages will look sloppy and unprofessional with ineffective content, organization, and style. This will in turn impair the image of the organization or company from which poor emails are sent.

As a result, strategies and steps for creating effective emails are needed by business writers. The ability to create correspondence using appropriate language, style, and format should be hallmarks of electronic mail as well as regular mail, particularly when the communication is directed at the receiver of a message outside the organization or company.

Strategies for communicating through writing

As the meaning of communication is the feedback received in response to a message, writers need to be very careful when crafting a written message. Business communicators have to take responsibility for the effectiveness of their written communication and should not blame their readership for any misunderstanding. If the message does not get across as intended, writers might need to re-examine their ways of communicating. Quite often, the response or feedback writers receive does not depend on what they write, but how they write it.

Below are some strategies to effective written communication in the workplace.

First of all, writers should understand or identify their audience. Where possible, they should have all necessary information about their readership including age, gender, education levels, and cultural backgrounds. It will also be useful if writers know their readers' mindset or attitude towards them, their organization or company, and the nature of information they plan to send.

Next, writers should prepare and plan what to write and how to write it. Because the verbal part of communication is the major element in

written messages, and the nonverbal part of communication, i.e. the vocal and the visual, is not available in such messages, writers must take special care in the words (verbal); the style, tone, and register (vocal); and the layout or structure (visual) when crafting a written message.

Then writers should select the most appropriate communication channels. Choices for common written communication include emails, memos, letters, reports, proposals, websites, and news releases. Which channel should be selected would depend on the objective of the communication, the level of formality for the message, the genre needed for the communication, the type of feedback anticipated, as well as the audience of the message.

Writers should also consider the written communication styles of their workplaces. Some organizations or companies are more formal or direct in their written communications than others. Although writers usually have to follow the written communication conventions determined by their workplaces, they should also keep in mind how they can craft an effective email message using various useful strategies and techniques.

Finally, writers should be able to handle cultural and linguistic differences in their multinational organization or company or when dealing with other organizations from diverse cultural backgrounds. Cultural awareness needs to be developed so that writers can understand how they should communicate cross-culturally with success.

It should be noted that linguistic barriers are not restricted to different cultures. Differences in expression, perception, and reception also occur within the same language and culture. Thus, when crafting a written message for any reader, writers should mainly

1. use “Plain English”, i.e. keep the language and style short and simple
2. avoid jargon or complex and ambiguous language that may confuse the reader in any way, particularly when the receiver of the message is from a different educational background from the writer

3. use more verbs than nouns, and favor the active over the passive voice
4. make the language personal by using personal pronouns
5. keep the tone friendly and conversational but always polite.

Word Choice

The main function of written business communication is for the writer or sender of the message to convey his/her message or thoughts effectively to the reader or receiver of the message, who should be able to understand the message immediately. This will be possible only when a message is created with appropriate word choice. It should also be noted that effective writing involves making conscious choices with words. Following are guidelines that can be helpful in choosing suitable words for clear and effective business writing.

A. Use familiar words

Using familiar words is very useful business writing as words of everyday use can usually make a message easily readable and comprehensible. Familiar words are those that the readers easily recognize and understand because they are used on a regular basis. Creating a sense of commonality with a reader, or “homophily” is an efficient language use (Chung, Wedel and Rust, 2014), while using words which look foreign and unfamiliar to the reader tends to emphasize the differences between the writer and the reader, making the message unavoidably more difficult to understand. In addition, by using familiar language or word choice, the writer can make a message more impactful.

Examples of “unfamiliar” and “familiar” words used in written communication

Unfamiliar Words	More Familiar Words
ameliorate	improve
denounce	criticize
clandestine	secret, hidden
comprehend	understand
inexorable	determined, unstoppable

These unfamiliar words may be more commonly used in other genres of writing such as academic textbooks, technical reports, or formal research articles. They should be avoided in general written business messages.

Task 1: Find more familiar word(s) for the unfamiliar words given. Complete the following chart.

Unfamiliar Words	More Familiar Words
address (a problem)	
amongst	
attain	
disseminate	
endeavor (as a verb)	
expedite	
hereinafter	
heretofore	
herewith	
impact (as a verb)	
implement (as a verb)	
inordinately	
optimum	

Unfamiliar Words	More Familiar Words
per annum [Latin]	
per capita [Latin]	
per diem [Latin]	
peruse	
prioritize	
shall	
strategize	
terminate	
therein	
utilize	
wherein	

B. Use concrete and specific words

Using concrete and specific words instead of abstract and general words in a business message can help the reader understand the message more clearly. Concrete and specific words can appeal to senses and enable the reader to form vivid mental images; however, abstract and general words normally convey vague and fuzzy meanings. Following are explanations and tables showing comparisons between these types of words.

Abstract v.s. Concrete Words

Abstract words associated with *concepts, beliefs, emotions, and character traits* are intangible, unlikely to appeal to the physical senses, and harder to understand. On the other hand, concrete words associated with *animals, people, places, nature, colors, clothes, man-made objects, sounds, tastes, and smells* are tangible, can appeal to the physical senses and then are easier to understand.

Abstract Words	Concrete Words
brightness	red, yellow
death	a corpse
disapproval	frown
education	students, teachers, classrooms
elegance	a dress, an armchair, a dining hall
honesty	a dog, telling the truth
joy	smile, laugh, jump

General v.s. Specific Words

General words are words referring to things, people, or ideas as a whole, whereas specific words are those that, through the use of modifiers, refer to things, people, or ideas in a more particular way. General words or phrases usually convey vague ideas to the reader because they do not provide precise information. Specific words or phrases, on the contrary, are precise and accurately mirror what the reader is expected to understand.

General Words	Specific Words
some, many	10 or 20 or 30 ... 500 or 1,000
early	6 a.m.
cold	2 degrees Celsius
most	96 percent
furniture	a wooden rocking chair, an oak dining table
equipment	a computer, a printer, a mouse
money	100 USD, 500 GBP

The choice of more specific words is necessary when writers need to limit their discussion to a particular idea. However, the degree on how specific they can be on certain terms usually varies. For example, although “a computer” is already specific regarding what kind of equipment it is, writers can still be more specific and describe it in more detail using various modifiers (e.g. Fujitsu’s ICL VME mainframe computers).

When used in a sentence, abstract and general words can be rather vague and imprecise. For example, in the sentence

The report was amazing.

the reader can imagine that an amazing report is good. Nevertheless, the use of the abstract/general word “amazing” to describe the report simply limits the reader’s experience. If writers need to appeal to the reader’s senses and ease his/her understanding, they should use more concrete/specific words to describe the report. Then the reader should be able to understand that the report “was useful”, “was full of relevant details”, or “provided findings that could help the company reduce unnecessary costs.”

Below is another example of the use of abstract and general words:

The issue in relation to the interest rates is that it will negatively affect consumers.

In the sentence above, it is not clear enough what ‘the issue’ refers to and how it is related to interest rates. Also, the meaning of a negative impact in the modifying clause is unclear.

With more concrete/specific words, the sentence will become clearer.

If interest rates are raised to 0.7%, clients will have to increase their average mortgage repayments by \$12,000 a year.

Task 2: *Identify abstract and concrete words. Complete the table using the words given in the box.*

beauty	competitor	condominium	hamburger	panther
pride	relationship	storm	talent	truth