

BUSINESS WRITING BASICS

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PREFACE

Years ago when I decided to become a professional trainer in the field of business writing, I did so with the thought that there seemed to be a small, consistent need for information in this area, and that I could fill it while balancing work and home.

This plan would certainly have surprised my high school teachers and university professors who had to deal with my misguided attempts to put my thoughts on paper. Writing was an area I dreaded. Ironically, my first job was in communications and required the writing of news releases, articles, and briefing notes. With the help and patience of my manager and colleagues, I developed a clear business writing style. In fact, I soon learned to love organizing ideas in a written format.

When my children came along, it made sense for me to work part time, and offering workshops in business writing was a perfect fit.

After doing this for a number of months, I found that at the end of a session, participants often asked where they could get more information to stay on track in improving their writing. After all, in a one- or two-day workshop, you cannot possibly

learn all the tips that can make a major difference in your writing style. However, I could not locate an easy-to-read, high-content book to recommend.

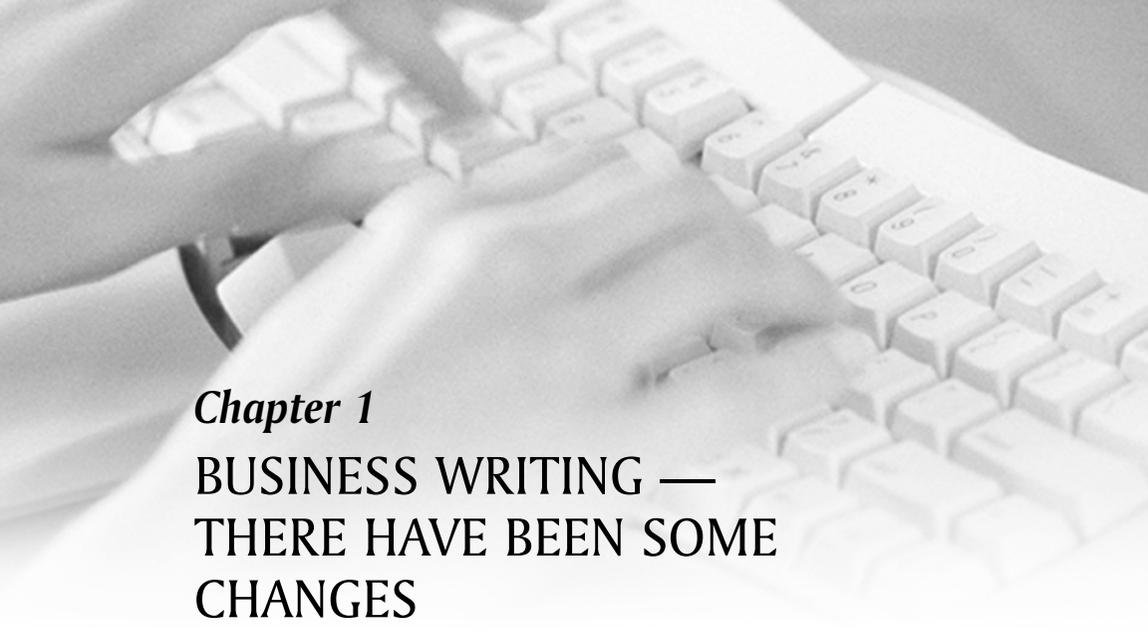
We all have busy lives. I wanted a book that someone could pick up at any page and quickly get a tip that would help them — hence, *Business Writing Basics* (originally called *Write On!: Business Writing Basics*). Although it would be useful, there is no need to read the book from cover to cover.

This is the third edition of *Business Writing Basics*, and it is interesting to note the changes that have occurred over the past few years in both my business life and in the book. From conducting a few workshops a month, I now deliver over 100 days of training a year across the country and have become involved in personalized coaching for senior executives.

The content of the book has also grown. Initially, it focused on writing clearly and concisely and on business correspondence. The second edition included material on email messages and a chapter on writing for the World Wide Web.

This version strengthens the email section and also provides information on PowerPoint slides and on business case studies — increasingly important tools today.

I hope that by reading this book, you'll share my enjoyment of the world of writing and pick up suggestions to help you become a more powerful communicator when using the written word.



Chapter 1

BUSINESS WRITING — THERE HAVE BEEN SOME CHANGES

As a trainer and consultant in business writing for almost two decades, I have seen a number of things changing in the field as well as a number of things staying the same.

What has stayed the same? The three ingredients for successful writing — whether you are writing a letter, an email, a report, or a business case — remain the same:

- A strong reader focus
- A clear, concise writing style
- Attention to grammar and spelling

What has changed is the addition of three more areas now considered essential for effective writing:

- A strong organizational pattern
- A tone that is appropriate for the reader and the message
- A visually appealing page

Let's look at all these areas in more detail.

READER FOCUS

This is still an important concept that many writers fail to grasp. Everyone knows the adage “write to the reader.” However, many give it lip service. They claim that they adjust their messages to the reader, but they often fail. They get too excited about what interests them personally, or by areas that have taken them a long time to research. They emphasize the wrong points and fail to answer readers’ questions.

In addition, I believe many business writers are not sure who today’s readers really are. Generally, business readers are busy, overworked, stressed, overly sensitive, easily distracted, and overwhelmed with the amount of reading they have to do. As a result, they skim documents, get their feelings hurt when they believe a message is too abrupt or dictatorial, and lose their focus when they see spelling or grammar errors.

All successful business documents are the ones that answer the reader’s questions. Readers live by the law of easiest decision. If they are quickly able to obtain the information they need, they are more likely to take positive action. If they feel the need to think about your request, or they think they need more details, or — worse still — they believe they should refer the document to a committee for more investigation, you will rarely get the response you want.

CLEAR, CONCISE WRITING

Over the years, people have finally begun to recognize that clarity and conciseness are the way to go in business writing. The number of workshop participants who fight me on this has diminished greatly.

Writers are finally becoming aware that long, complicated sentences and a reliance on outdated expressions are no longer considered professional in the business world. Whether a reader is high on the corporate ladder or nearer to the bottom, he or she wants and needs a document that can be read and understood quickly. In today’s business world, no one has the time to try to interpret another’s message.

GRAMMAR AND SPELLING

This is a strange area. When asked, writers often tell me that spelling and grammar are not as important as they once were. However, upon reflection they usually change their minds and give examples of their pet peeves when reading other people's messages.

In other words, spelling and grammar matter to readers, not to writers. To me, poor spelling and faulty grammar are like having bad breath. Few people will tell you directly that it bothers them, but it sure stands out. And it is a sure way to ruin a professional image.

Too often writers depend solely on their computer software packages to point out errors. Be careful. Software packages are a mixed blessing. Nowadays, you can use your computers to check spelling, grammar, and readability levels. However, you can't rely on software exclusively. Documents must still be proofread manually as well as electronically because spell checkers don't always catch words that are spelled correctly but are misused, such as *its* versus *it's* and *deer* instead of *dear*.

Similarly, they don't point out all grammar errors, as the computer cannot determine what you actually meant to say. They may even draw your attention to punctuation or phrases that are correct. It is up to you to make the final decision.

In addition, grammar packages can indicate errors, and readability indexes can point out the difficulty of the reading level of your documents, but the packages don't provide enough information on how to fix the problems they catch. It is up to you to look up any grammar or style points you don't understand — check your grammar book or speak with your English guru. Don't ignore the problem just because you don't understand it. The software package has pointed it out for a reason.

ORGANIZATION

Organization is an area that is gaining more and more importance in business writing. In fact, I would say it is being given

even more emphasis than clarity and conciseness. I am now getting calls asking for business writing workshops that don't focus on the writing aspect at all. The required emphasis is on the arrangement of ideas.

Today's readers tend to want the bottom line first, and then the supporting details. They want to know in the opening paragraph why they should spend their valuable time on your document. They also want to see how the ideas relate to each other. And they don't want to hunt for the answers to their questions.

TONE

Tone is another area that is gaining in importance, particularly when sending emails. In the past, writers used very formal words and phrases. This was the normal language of the day. People tended to — and were expected to — speak formally. If you use these same words and tone in talking with a client or customer today, you are regarded as dated and pompous.

The same is true for your writing. Whether you are communicating internally with staff or externally with customers, you should write in a friendly, courteous fashion, using the same words and tone you would use if you were meeting the reader face to face.

Tell the reader what you can do, rather than what you can't. If you are listing features, include benefits. Use the active voice. Include the reader's name. And use words that are common to your normal conversation. For example, I doubt that if a human resources person would ever say, "A prompt reply will expedite consideration of the student's application." If you wouldn't say it, don't write it.

Today, write as though you are speaking — assuming you speak in a grammatically correct fashion.

VISUAL APPEAL

In the past, the look of a written document would not normally be connected to business writing. However, I now place a great deal of emphasis on this area. Why?

Business readers are extremely busy, and they are easily intimidated. If they receive a print or screen document that looks difficult to digest, they put it aside until later — and later seldom comes.

If you don't focus on the visual appeal of your message, your readers may not get around to reading it. They may not take the time to discover that you have written clear, concise sentences, that your thoughts are organized, that your spelling and grammar are perfect, and that your tone is correct.

IN SUMMARY

Reader focus, clarity and conciseness, and good grammar and spelling have always been characteristics of effective business writing. Over the last decade, we have added organization, tone, and visual appeal. These three additional concepts are essential in meeting the reading needs of today's business people.

The following chapters are designed to provide you with practical guidelines for incorporating these characteristics into your letters, emails, reports, and business cases.