

6: Business Writing Style

Chapter Objectives

The purpose of this chapter is to:

- Explain the concept of plain language
- Discuss strategies to improve clarity in writing
- Highlight the difference between active and passive voice
- Emphasize the importance of positive tone
- Present ways to write inclusively

Plain Language in Business Writing

Business is about people. Business writers facilitate sales of products and services, purchases of supplies and merchandise, management and operations of units and departments, and communication with clients and customers. To be in business is to be surrounded by people who interact with you, who require something from you.

Communication is the connection between people. As long as one person is sending a message and another person is understanding it, communication is happening. A successful professional builds and maintains relationships, completes tasks, directs teams, and expresses ideas by communicating effectively. To be successful, you will need to be an effective communicator: you need to be understood.

A key skill in any professional setting is the ability to use **plain language**. Plain language writing--and speaking--will help you to get your message across clearly and concisely. This chapter will introduce you to the principles of plain language.



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Clarity and Conciseness

Word selection and phrasing leads to successfully transferring meaning from the sender to the receiver. Careful word selection enhances the writer's reputation and reflects the business's reputation. Think of the advice a home seller receives before an open house. They will often have bread baking or apple cider simmering to create an aroma that makes the house feel like a home. This small step might help a potential buyer appreciate the house more. Solid writing skills can have the same effect for the employee. The employee gains respect and appreciation because of writing skills that project credibility and confidence.

When trying to enhance your reputation, it is tempting to want to use complex words in order to sound sophisticated. Unfortunately, using complex vocabulary may obscure your ideas and potentially damage your credibility. Remember the focus of

your writing should be on the reader who needs to understand your message (**the "you-attitude"**). Instead of focusing on complex words, concentrate on expressing accurate content with precise, unambiguous words so that the message is transmitted clearly. Be precise while understandable.

Avoid	Use Instead
The lawyer was trying to obfuscate details during his opening speech.	The lawyer was trying to confuse the details during his opening speech.
The remuneration the contractor receives is commensurate with the time and materials used.	The pay the contractor receives is equal to the time and materials used.

Choose common words instead of difficult and complicated words to make your message accessible to your audience. Inappropriate word choices will get in the way of your message. For this reason, use language that is accurate and appropriate for the writing situation. Omit **jargon** (technical words and phrases common to a specific profession or discipline) and **slang** (invented words and phrases specific to a certain group of people) unless your audience and purpose call for such language. For example, sometimes using jargon is fine as long as you can safely assume your readers also know the jargon. If you are a paralegal writing to others in the legal profession, using legal jargon is perfectly fine. On the other hand, if you are writing for people outside the legal profession, using legal jargon would most likely be confusing. Although lawyers must use legal jargon in papers they prepare for customers, those papers are designed to navigate within the legal system and may not be clear to readers outside of this demographic. Therefore, when communicating with the customer, such language should be avoided.

Also avoid using outdated words and phrases, such as "dial the number" and be straightforward in your writing rather than using **euphemisms** (a gentler but sometimes inaccurate way of saying something). Be clear about the level of formality each piece of writing needs and adhere to that level.

At the heart of business is the idea that "time is money." This may lead you to believe that shorter message are always better; however, concise writing is not just fast or short. Your writing must always balance the clarity of the message with efficiency. In order to write straight forward sentences that are appropriate and effective in business communication, there are a few things to keep in mind.

Rule	Example and Explanation	Revision and Explanation
Be careful not to string together too many ideas in the same sentence. A sentence like this is not only confusing but can also become boring or confusing to read.	<p>Michael copy edited the report, and the data tables were compiled, and the graphics looked wonderful.</p> <p>All three of these activities are part of the completion of a report, but they don't really belong in the same sentence.</p>	<p>Michael copy edited the report while the rest of the team compiled the data tables. The graphics looked wonderful.</p> <p>By using a connector other than "and," the sentences actually gives more information: that the copy editing and compiling happened at the same time. Note that if we replace "while" with "after which," for example, we would be telling a somewhat different story.</p> <p>Also, it is great that the graphics are impressive, but that idea does not belong in the same sentence.</p>

Starting a sentence with a dependent clause can sometimes bury the important news at the back of the sentence.	<p>Think about the emotions a reader goes through when faced with a sentence like this:</p> <p>While we suffered a dismal first quarter because of supply-chain issues, and our stock prices wobbled a lot thanks to fluctuations in the Japanese market that caused the company to begin targeting employees for layoffs, the executive team is happy to report that we are on track for a profitable year.</p>	<p>The executive team is happy to report that we are on track for a profitable year even though we suffered a dismal first quarter because of supply chain issues...</p> <p>Notice the difference when the sentence tells the important news first.</p>
Clear is good; simple can be mind-numbing, so vary your sentence structures.	<p>Imagine an entire report full of this:</p> <p>Profits were up. This is good. Production increased by six percent. Employees received bonuses in two of our quarters. The stock split.</p> <p>Even though you are reading excellent news, you are about to keel over from the monotony, aren't you? Writing cleanly and concisely doesn't mean writing like a robot. Think about how the small nuggets of information relate to one another, and combine them in sentences that make sense, put the important news first, and show that you take pride in writing well.</p>	<p>We are happy to report that profits are up, and our shares have split because of a six-percent increase in production. As a result, our hard-working employees were rewarded with bonuses in two of four quarters.</p> <p>Not only is it possible to read this passage without dozing off, it also gives more information by showing the relationship among the pieces of information given.</p>

Finally, watch for wordiness. As you write and edit, ask yourself whether you are using several words when there's one perfectly good one that would suffice.

Type of Redundancy	Example	Revision
Redundant pairs	each and every first and foremost full and complete	each first complete
Redundant expressions	the month of July fellow colleagues personal opinion past memories	July colleagues opinion memories
Wordy Phrases	at a later time on a daily basis due to the fact that in reference to	later daily because about
Nominalizations	take into consideration make a recommendation make an effort perform a review	consider recommend try review

Positive Tone

As we already stated, business writing should be clear and concise. Take care, however, that your document does not turn out as an endless series of short, choppy sentences. Keep in mind also that "concise" does not have to mean "blunt" – you still need to think

about your tone and the audience for whom you are writing. Consider the following examples:

After carefully reviewing this proposal, we have decided to prioritize other projects this quarter.

Nobody liked your project idea, so we are not going to give you any funding.

The first version is a weaker statement, emphasizing facts not directly relevant to its point. The second version provides the information in a simple and direct manner. But you don't need to be an expert on style to know that the first phrasing is diplomatic and respectful (even though it's less concise) as compared with the second version, which is unnecessarily harsh and likely to provoke a negative reaction.

Unless there is a specific reason not to, use positive language wherever you can. **Positive language** benefits your writing in two ways. First, it creates a positive **tone**, and your writing is more likely to be well-received. Second, it clarifies your meaning, as positive statements are more concise. Take a look at the following negatively worded sentences and then their positive counterparts, below.

Examples of Negative and Positive Sentences

- Negative: Your car will not be ready for pick up until Friday.
- Positive: Your car will be ready for pick up on Friday.
- Negative: Your vacation is not approved until the manager clears it.
- Positive: Your vacation will be approved when the manager clears it.
- Negative: Don't forget to turn in your request for reimbursement.
- Positive: Remember to turn in your request for reimbursement.



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Pronouns

Personal pronouns (like I, we, and you) are important in letters and memos. In such documents, it is perfectly appropriate to refer to yourself as I and to the reader as you. Be careful, however, when you use the pronoun we in a business letter that is written on company stationery since it commits your company to what you have written. When stating your opinion, use I; when presenting company policy, use we.

Active and Passive Voice

The best writers strive to achieve a style that is so clear that their messages cannot be misunderstood. One way to achieve a clear style is to minimize your use of the passive voice because it not only makes your writing dull but also can be ambiguous or overly

impersonal. To communicate professionally, you need to know when and how to use either active or passive voice. Although most contexts prefer the **active voice**, the passive voice may be the best choice in certain situations. Generally, though, passive voice tends to be awkward, vague, and wordy.

To use active voice, make the **noun** that performs the action the **subject** of the sentence and pair it directly with an **action verb**.

Read these two sentences:

1. The administrative assistant provided copies of the contract for everyone present.
2. Everyone present was provided with a copy of the contract by the administrative assistant.

In the first sentence, *provided* is an action verb that is paired with the subject, *the administrative assistant*. If you ask yourself, “Who provided the copies?” the answer is *the administrative assistant*. The other noun in the sentence—*everyone*—did not provide anything.

Now look at the second sentence. The action verb is *provided*. If you ask yourself, “Who provided the copies?” the answer, again, is *the administrative assistant*. But, in this sentence, the writer placed *everyone*—not *the administrative assistant*—in the subject position. When the doer of the action is not the subject, the sentence is in passive voice. In passive voice constructions, the doer of the action usually follows the word *by* as the indirect object of a prepositional phrase, and the action verb is typically partnered with a version of the verb *to be*.

Examples

Example 1: The timing and allocation of resources will be determined by the project manager.

- The nouns in the subject position are "timing and allocation."
- The form of the verb to be is the word "will be."
- The action verb is the word "determined."
- The doer of the action is "the project manager."

Example 2: More opportunities as well as challenges are created for members of the accounting profession by growing globalization.

- The nouns in the subject position are "opportunities and challenges."
- The form of the verb to be is the word "are."
- The action verb is "created."
- The doer of the action is "growing globalization."

Now, try to convert these sentences into active voice.

Generally, use active voice as much as you can. Sometimes, however, passive voice is the best option. Consider the following situations when it is acceptable to use passive voice:

- When you do not know who or what is responsible for the action.

- Example: Our front-door lock was picked.
- Rationale: If you do not know who picked the lock on your front door, you cannot say who did it. You could say a thief broke in, but that would be an assumption; you could, theoretically, find out that the lock was picked by a family member who had forgotten to take a key.
- When the person or thing that performed the action is not important.
 - Example: The park was flooded all week.
 - Rationale: Although you know that the rainwater flooded the park, saying so would not be important.
- When you do not want to place credit, responsibility, or blame.
 - Example: A mistake was made in the investigation that resulted in the wrong person being on trial.
 - Rationale: Even if you think you know who is responsible for the problem, you might not want to expose the person.
- When you want to maintain the impression of objectivity.
 - Example: It was noted that only first-grades chose to eat the fruit.
 - Rationale: Research reports in certain academic disciplines attempt to remove the researcher from the results to avoid saying, for example, "I noted that only first graders..."

Active or Passive?

- The Human Resource Director was hired last week.
- All employees are required to submit their timesheets this Friday.
- Key stakeholders need to attend the meeting in Philadelphia next month.
- The presenter has explained the theory clearly and thoroughly.

Hint: You can figure this out by asking yourself, "Is the doer in the subject position paired with an action verb?" If you answer yes, the sentence uses active voice.

Lists

Lists can consist of words, phrases, or even sentences. Lists are useful in business writing because they are a fast way to draw attention to several items. They can be found embedded in sentences or arranged vertically. In business documents, we should always try to arrange lists vertically because the vertical arrangement adds emphasis and makes the information stand out. They also add white space, which helps the reader locate the list easily in the document and to focus on the information.

Horizontal (Embedded List) vs. Vertical List

The store needs several items to process the refund for the incorrect billing. If you have the receipt, we'll need that. After you find the receipt, circle the incorrect payment and add the voided check to the envelope. Remember that a stamped return envelope will get your money back more quickly. Please be sure to add that.

OR

To process your refund, the store needs several pieces of documentation. Please do the following:

1. Circle the incorrect items on the original receipt.
2. Prepare a voided check.
3. Provide a self-addressed, stamped envelope.
4. Mail all of these items to this address: ACMT Products, PO Box 145, Shippensburg, PA 17257.

Note that a vertical list must be properly introduced with a sentence so that the context of the list would be clear to the reader. Depending on the nature of the items listed, you will need to decide between a **bulleted list** and a **numbered list**. Bullets are usually used when the order or sequence does not matter. Numbers are used when we wish to emphasize the order, sequence, or quantity of listed items. Instructions, for example, must use numbered lists to clearly indicate the sequence of the steps.

Bulleted List vs. Numbered List

Follow these tips for effective time management:

- Use a planner or calendar to be mindful of deadlines.
- Divide big projects into smaller sections.
- Set a time limit to complete a task.

OR

Follow these three tips for effective time management:

1. Use a planner or calendar to be mindful of deadlines.
2. Divide big projects into smaller sections.
3. Set a time limit to complete a task.

Remember that we use a period at the end of each listed item only when we are listing complete sentences.

Parallelism

Parallel construction of sentences, lists, and even headings makes messages much easier for the reader to absorb. Sometimes, for the newer writer, it might be easier to think of a predictable rhythm or format when working on how to achieve parallelism. Think of the beat of poetry or songs and how it makes the words easy to remember and predict. As a writer, you can use that same structure to your advantage.

Compare the following sentences:

- Yara loves running, to swim, and biking.
- Yara loves running, swimming, and biking.

Was the second sentence easier to comprehend than the first? The second sentence uses parallelism. All three verbs end in "ing," whereas in the first sentence, two of the action words end in "ing" and one does not. While the meaning of the first sentence comes through, it's easy to trip up over the mismatched action words (or verbs).

The application of parallelism improves writing style and readability, and it makes sentences easier to process.

Compare the following examples:

- Lacking parallelism: "She likes cooking, jogging, and to read."
 - Parallel: "She likes cooking, jogging, and reading."
 - Parallel: "She likes to cook, jog, and read."
- Lacking parallelism: "He likes to swim and running."

- Parallel: "He likes to swim and to run."
- Parallel: "He likes swimming and running."

Once again, the examples above combine different action words. To make them parallel, the sentences are rewritten using the same types of action word. You could argue that the first sentence is correct in that "cooking," jogging," and "to read" are all grammatically valid conclusions to "She likes." However, when you put them together, the lack of parallelism leads to a sentence that is hard to follow.

Here are a few more examples of parallelism in which the elements are all different lengths and types:

- Jackson and Krista are cooking dinner, David and Rogelio are setting the table, and Ollie and Ron are picking up dessert. **(The parallel elements in this sentence are independent clauses that could stand alone. We could make sentences out of each clause before the comma.)**
- Juana looked for her phone under the table, on top of the bookcase, and inside the cupboard. **(The parallel elements are prepositional phrases, or words that indicate location, in this sentence.)**
- Mandy and Torrence watched *The Godfather*, *Mary Poppins*, and a PBS documentary about pelicans. **(The parallel elements in this sentences are nouns, or things.)**

Bias-Free Language

Business writers work to be clear and direct in meaning, and drawing attention to details about race, age, country of origin, disability, and gender in the workplace might cause conscious or unconscious bias.

Let's look at some examples and ways to fix them. A simple rule for **bias-free writing** is to consider whether personal details need to be included to get the point across.

Avoid	Try Instead
Franklin is the new African-American accountant.	Franklin is the new accountant.
For someone nearing retirement, she caught on to that new software quickly.	She caught on to that new software quickly.
Abdul has some of the highest call center ratings even though his Saudi accent is strong.	Abdul has some of the highest call center ratings.
John is one of our most active employees even though he must use a wheelchair.	John is one of our most active employees.
Did the cleaning woman bring new trash bags?	Did the cleaner bring new trash bags?
Do we have enough manpower to finish this project?	Do we have enough workforce to finish this project?

Gender Bias

Writing in a non-sexist way requires the ability to recognize sexism in the first place. The next hurdle is to figure out a way to eliminate any inherent sexism without disrupting the flow of the piece. Here are a few techniques to help avoid bias.

The first way to avoid gender bias in your writing is to use gender-neutral words when referring to individuals in various positions:

Avoid	Try Instead
businessman, businesswoman	business executive
chairman, chairwoman	chairperson
the common man	the average person
salesman, saleswoman	salesperson, sales clerk, marketer

The next thing to be aware of is the use of gendered pronouns. While some still use *he* as a generic pronoun, this shows a strong bias towards male individuals. Instead you can use "he or she" ("his or her," etc) as the pronoun for a generic noun. This is an okay

solution, but it can get clunky in large doses: "Every employee should check with his or her supervisor that his or her report was properly filed." Or, you can try to make the subject plural, using "they" instead.

While *they* is typically treated as a plural pronoun, when an individual has expressed a desire to be identified with gender-neutral pronouns (*they/their/theirs*), it is grammatically correct to use *they* as a singular pronoun. In fact, [American Psychological Association](#) (APA) now recognizes "they" as a generic third-person pronoun in English. Using this pronoun helps us avoid gender assumptions and become inclusive writers.

Avoid	Try Instead
Every employee should file his report by the end of the day.	All employees should file their reports by the end of the day. OR Every employee should file their report by the end of the day.
When filing the report, each employee should make sure he or she included yesterday's data.	When filing the report, employees should make sure they included yesterday's data. OR When filing the report, each employee should make sure they included yesterday's data.
Any author knows that his first draft won't be good.	All authors know that their first drafts won't be good. OR Any author knows that their first draft won't be good.

Race and Ethnicity Bias

When speaking about a racial or ethnic group, deciding which term to use can be a tricky subject because the ascribed meaning to particular terms and labels can frequently change. When choosing between terms to refer to a group, it is best to ask a member of that group what they prefer.

As a general rule in a business setting, do not mention a person's race or ethnicity unless it is directly relevant to the situation.

Disability Bias

As a general rule, avoid using labeled nouns when talking about people with disabilities. Try to use emotionally neutral expressions rather than ones that assign a role, such as *victim*.

Avoid	Try Instead
the disabled	the people with disabilities
the schizophrenic	the person diagnosed with schizophrenia
an AIDS victim	a person with AIDS
a person suffering from epilepsy	a person with epilepsy

General Business Writing Style Tips

- When revising and editing a document, evaluate it for the quality of its content, organization, style and readability. Then add to it, reorganize, and trim as necessary to meet the needs of the target audience. Always think of the audience.
- Determine the level of formality based on the audience and the situation.
- Express your ideas in a positive manner.
- Avoid big words and lengthy, complicated sentences.
- Use lists to emphasize and to make navigation easier.
- Use active voice often; use passive voice only when the situation requires it.
- Check that your writing is free of bias.

All links live as of July 2021.

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