

1.4.12: Writing in Business

Learning Objectives

- Identify key features of effective writing in business
- Discuss the overlap between professional and personal communication

Just like having a face-to-face discussion, effective business writing should rely on the seven principles of business communication:

- Clear
- Concise
- Objective
- Consistent
- Complete
- Relevant
- Considerate of Audience Knowledge

When you put pen to paper, you should be considering every principle. We've looked at these principles before, but now let's take a deep dive into how they might impact your writing.

Phone System Outage

Let's assume that you're writing a communication to let everyone know that the corporate office phone system will be down for a certain period of time next Friday morning. Let's take a look at how each of the principles of business communication figure into that written message.

- **Clear:** When you craft the message, you should make sure that it's clear to your readers. In this case, you want the entire company to know that the corporate office phone systems will be down between 9 and noon. Being clear means that you add *a.m.* and *p.m.*, even if you think it might be obvious. You should indicate that you're talking about Pacific Standard Time, and so on.
- **Concise:** Since it's a message about the phone system, it should be a message only about the phone system. And then, a message only about the outage. If you're inspired to include, "Tom broke the phone system last week and now it needs to be repaired," resist this urge. Even if Tom is responsible for the outage, it may be appropriate to joke with Tom about it if he's a personal friend, but this is not the kind of messaging that should go out to the whole office.
- **Objective:** Your own personal feelings and comments do not need to be a part of the phone communication. For instance, "Even though the timing is poor for those working on the polling project, we intend to repair our phone system on Friday" is a great example of *not* being objective.
- **Consistent:** If the phone system has been out three or four times before, your message should be similar in nature to those that came before it. If one of the details of the phone system is that it's being upgraded so we can add a new satellite office to the trunk line, don't include information contrary to this fact unless it is explained. Consistent means that the details are the same each time—that the communication looks the same, sounds the same; and that any new details are called out.
- **Complete:** If you set out to tell the company that the phone system is going to be out at 9:00 a.m. on Friday morning and then fail to tell them when it will be back up, then your message is incomplete. Strive to be complete in your written communication by anticipating any question a reader might ask: "Is the phone system going down this Friday or next Friday?" "How long will it be down?" "Is the whole corporate office affected or just a portion?"
- **Relevant:** When considering whether a message is relevant, you can ask yourself, "Are these readers affected by this information?" "Does it matter that the phones will be out on Friday if the office is closed for the holiday?" It also means not including information that isn't relevant to the reader, such as, "The repair people think that, by replacing the left widget on the main switchboard, they may solve the problem, but it could also be the right widget, in which case they'll need to order a part." This is *not* relevant.
- **Considerate of Audience Knowledge:** Always keep in mind the knowledge your audience brings to the message. If you're communicating the details of nuclear fission to a group, you would talk to them differently depending on how much they knew about science. In this case, everyone understands what a phone is. (Though those two extraterrestrials just hired in real estate may need to know it's the black thing on their desk with the handset you can put up to your ear.)

It's incredibly important to measure your written communication against the seven principles of business communication because in written communication, the "feedback" portion of that social communication model isn't always accessible. When noise enters your written communication, you often don't immediately know that your audience doesn't understand, sometimes until it's too late. Make sure you measure your message against the seven principles to stay ahead of any misunderstandings.

Personal and Professional Communication

When you consider the difference between communication on a personal level and communication on a professional level, the first thing that comes to mind is the level of formality. In personal communication, you typically use relaxed language, and the level of knowledge your audience brings into the communication is usually significant and personal. The need to be clear and concise, to be objective, is thrown aside. Personal communications are often meant only for a single audience and are oftentimes understandable only to that audience.

Professional communication, on the other hand, is read by an audience that you don't know as well. You find you need to make an effort to be clear, concise, relevant and objective. You make an effort to appeal to and be understood by a more diverse group.

However, with the advent of technology and social media, the lines between personal and professional communication are becoming blurred. Your customers are looking to connect with your company on a deeper, more personal level. Technology has turned the 9–5 worker into an always-accessible team member, and because of it, professional relationships are evolving into something that straddles the line between formal and informal. Customers, vendors, and even co-workers want to deal with a human being, not someone hiding behind the curtain and operating the great and powerful talking head that runs the company. Add to that myriad methods of informal communication platforms like texting and social media, and you can see there's a revolution going on here.

Your business communications are destined to be affected by this shifting tide. If companies with strong brands are going out of their way to connect with their customers on social media and share the "human side" of their businesses, then there's no reason why you shouldn't follow suit as long as you feel comfortable doing so.

Some things to keep in mind if you're going to give it a try:

- **Don't give up the seven principles of business communication:** No matter how personal you get, those principles are still the hallmark of a successful message. Your wider audience still needs clarity, uniformity, and so on. Your goal is to be understood, to yield a particular business result, and that doesn't change.
- **Don't get personal to the point of irrelevance:** Your co-workers and vendors might enjoy knowing that you're a huge football fan, but they don't need to know what you had for lunch today.
- **Don't share details that might not be easily embraced:** People don't always receive the message well if you express strong political beliefs that don't fit with theirs. Be careful about sharing your "ideals." GoDaddy.com CEO Bob Parsons got called out in 2011 when he made a video of his exploits hunting elephants and posted it to his company's site so he could "share" himself with the world. The attention he got for his moment of personal sharing wasn't good.

Even though professional communication and personal communication are quickly becoming just "communication," your success still hinges on being successful at it. Strengthen your command of the seven communication principles and move forward bravely with your list of shareable personality traits.

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