

## Essentials of good business writing

Central to all good business writing are clarity of purpose, audience awareness and choice of language.

Clarity of purpose: the process of producing good business writing starts by clarifying the purpose of a communication.

Audience awareness: many people are painfully subconscious when they write. The focus, however, needs to move from the writer to the reader.

Choice of language: 'Clarity is achieved by using words that are current and ordinary.' *Aristotle*

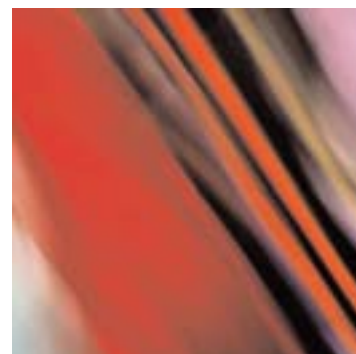
George Orwell first published *Politics and the English Language* in 1946, laying down some simple ground rules for good writing that still hold true today, including:

- ◆ Never use a long word where a short word will do
- ◆ If it is possible to cut out a word, always cut it out
- ◆ Never use a foreign phrase, a scientific word or jargon if you can think of an everyday English equivalent
- ◆ Never use the passive when you can use the active

### Three basic elements

The clarity and conviction with which you express yourself are determined by your ability to use the three basic elements of writing, which are:

- ◆ Words, which combine to form
- ◆ Sentences, which combine to form
- ◆ Paragraphs



*We need to be clear why we are writing, aware of whom we are writing for and use words that can be understood. We also need to use headings, a layout and punctuation that helps the reader. Start to look at your writing from a reader's perspective and you're probably writing well!*

---

## *Words*

- ◆ Use frequently used words and phrases: this avoids potentially creating a barrier for the reader and a sense of unnecessary formality.
- ◆ Use neutral as opposed to emotive words except on rare occasions.
- ◆ Choose words with a precise meaning: this helps the reader to understand what you mean.
- ◆ Avoid woolly or meaningless phrases such 'past history', 'important essentials', and 'collaborate together'.
- ◆ Pay attention to spelling: while incorrect spelling rarely creates a problem with meaning, it can cause the reader to doubt your competence.

## *Sentences*

Avoid using too many long sentences. What's long? 25 words or more. Long sentences with several clauses are confusing for the reader, and also contribute to a 'grey' appearance of the document. However, it is a case of moderation rather than abstinence as longer sentences provide variation for the reader, a 'flow' to the document.

Variety is important in engaging the reader so equally avoid a document made up of entirely short sentences of about 12 words. The document will fail to 'flow' for the reader and may suggest to the reader that the subject has been treated in a simplistic fashion. Use short sentences to convey meaning forcefully and economically.

## *Paragraphs*

Begin each paragraph with a sentence that indicates the content of that paragraph. Each paragraph should contain one main idea only. There is no set length for a paragraph but short paragraphs are usually most helpful to the reader.

*Spell correctly to convey competence*

---

## Signposts

### *Headings*

Use headings to convey the content of your document. Ask yourself, could a reader read the headings and sub headings in your document to understand the coverage?

Use heading levels to convey the main sections and sub sections in your document. Clearly differentiate between main headings and sub-headings by using different size fonts and attributes. Although considered highly formal, numbering headings also helps to indicate main headings and sub-headings.

*Use headings to give the reader an overview*

### *Layout*

- ◆ Build in enough white space on a page. White space actually aids a reader's concentration.
- ◆ Avoid a long line length. The eye does not read individual words but scans a line pausing momentarily to read groups of three or four words.
- ◆ Keep it simple! Black type on white reads 40% more rapidly than type reversed out from black or grey.
- ◆ Italics should be used sparingly as it slows down the reading process.
- ◆ Avoid giving text several attributes e.g. capitals, underlined, *and* bold. Text given one or two attributes is usually more effective.
- ◆ Use a font size of between 10 and 12 pt for the body of the text.
- ◆ Text ranged left is generally easier to read because it creates more white space on the page. Justified text usually creates a 'greyer' page.

---

## *Punctuation*

Punctuation in writing corresponds to pauses, inflexion and emphases in the spoken word. Both the written and spoken word shares the same aim of making the sense clear.

**Apostrophe** An apostrophe can be used to show that letter/s are omitted:

- ◆ It's instead of It is
- ◆ She'll instead of she will
- ◆ '50s instead of 1950s

Apostrophes are also used to form possessive nouns i.e. something belonging to someone or something:

- ◆ The department's coffee machine is out of order.  
(The coffee machine belonging to the department is out of order.)

**Comma** Think of commas as the least emphatic of the separating marks. Use commas sparingly. If a sentence has a lot of commas try breaking it up into two sentences.

**Colon** Colons can be used to introduce a list where this is a list of bullet points or a list within a sentence:

- ◆ The training was rewarding: highly interactive, thought provoking and timely.

They are also used to lead from introduction to main theme, from cause to effect or from premise to conclusion:

- ◆ Working life is hectic: it is there that pressures are amplified.

*Punctuation is about helping the reader*

---

**Dash** A dash or en rule (see symbols, special characters, in Word) is used to join pairs such as the London–Brighton bike ride.

Dashes are also used in everyday writing to add emphasis and include detail:

- ◆ The filing cabinet – the one next to Bill’s desk – fell over with a crash.

In business writing, dashes are best avoided.

**Hyphen** Think of hyphens as making links to improve clarity. Take care to use hyphens correctly as incorrect use can confuse or convey a different meaning altogether:

- ◆ Teacher to be fined for speeding.
- ◆ Teacher-to-be fined for speeding.

They frequently add understanding when a compound adjective appears before a noun:

- ◆ An eleven-year-old girl
- ◆ Computer-based training

**Semi-colon** Semi-colons are ideally used where there are separate clauses or phrases of equal importance:

- ◆ To err is human; to forgive, divine.

In general, they are not used extensively in business writing.

*Hyphens make links to improve clarity*

---

## Self-editing checklist

Work to develop the skill of look at your writing from the reader's perspective. Achieving this is as much an attitude as it is a skill. This checklist will help you reflect on your writing:

Purpose	Dealt with the issues? Answered questions that may be in the reader's mind? Enough or too much depth? Repeated myself unnecessarily?
Content	Information accurate? Relevant?
Structure	Sentences short enough? Order of sentences and paragraphs make sense? Only one main idea per paragraph? Link between each main idea and the next?
Language	Avoided jargon and technical terms that might not be known? Any remaining long-winded section? Any irrelevant or vague parts? Checked grammar, spelling and punctuation?
Layout	Appropriate for the purpose and content?

*Look at your writing  
from a reader's  
perspective*