BUSINESS WRITING: LETTERS, E-MAILS, REPORTS, CASES, AND PRESENTATIONS

WHY IS EXCELLENT PROFESSIONAL WRITING SO IMPORTANT TO YOU?

Hiring a new employee is expensive, and companies often evaluate their recruiters by the career success of the selected candidates, so advancing in your career is good for the recruiter.

One measurable variable for employee promotion is facility with communication skills: listening, talking, and writing.

Specifically, employers know that the further you advance in your career, the more you will write, and they know that you will not advance in your career if you cannot write well.

Thus, a critical qualification which recruiters use in culling good candidates from poor is the ability to communicate well in writing.

English, spoken by 700 million people around the world, is the language of diplomacy, business, finance, science, and technology. In the business world, the bottom line is money; writing well saves money.

Poor business writing costs the company:

- in wasted time and lost effort: if the reader is confused and unresponsive, then someone must clear up misunderstandings and eventually oversee the process of rewriting.
- in ill will: if the reader is irritated, angered, or insulted, the assessment of the entire company suffers by association.

When was the last time you took a basic writing course: high school or your first year of college?

The task of writing a cover letter, a professional e-mail, a report for a client, or a case for a strategy course can be daunting under the best of circumstances. Written documents, after all, can be permanent reminders of your abilities to think, to articulate, and to be effective.

Business communication means delivering your message to an audience you have researched, in the appropriate format, with a compelling organization, an exact choice of words, and an engaging style.

Excellent writing takes a lot of effort and persistence. You can succeed in writing well if you are patient and realize that mastery comes with practice over time. Finding a trustworthy colleague who is willing to critique your work in a constructive manner will be of great benefit to you. And develop the pride in your growing expertise that should come with any difficult achievement.

WHAT IS THE PROCESS YOU NEED TO FOLLOW TO SUCCEED?

Business writing informs, persuades, or builds goodwill.

Before you even begin to write, ask yourself two questions:

- Do I know the content of my message?
- Do I know who makes up my audience?

Your final document is the result of a process, whether a brief e-mail, a one-page memo, a cover letter, a report, or a client presentation.

When you go over this list, see the logic of the process and then give yourself time to manage each step. Of course, the time you allot is never enough!

Remember, if you skip any steps, as you might in a quick e-mail to a colleague, choose to do so intentionally:

- Know your own company culture, made up of history, tradition, values, and style. Know the company culture of your audience.
- Plan your strategy: define your reason for writing and your goals, select the topic, analyze your audience, determine any special circumstances and choose the correct channel of communication, decide the tasks of the job, and figure out your schedule.
- Engage in creative activities to generate ideas: try brainstorming, free association, and visual maps or charts to expand your possibilities.
- Gather information through research: use a critical eye in judging your sources for accuracy and bias. Figure out a note-taking system which both help you organized your thoughts and will allow for flexibility in writing the document.
- Organize your ideas and shape your document: choose your message strategy, use your organization's models or templates for format, and establish your tone (formal for outside the organization and to superiors and informal for inside the organization to those on your level or below). Focus the message: think efficiency and impact.
- Draft: compose the document, not worrying about the final order of sentences, paragraphs, and sections; avoid editing.
- Allow a realistic amount of time for rethinking and revisions which involves cutting, replacing, adding, and rearranging material; solicit feedback from interested parties whose opinions you value and be open to their remarks.
- Proofread and edit for strategy, for design, for style and structure, for logic, brevity, flow, tone, grammar, punctuation, and spelling.

HOW DO I APPROACH AUDIENCE ANALYSIS AND STRATEGY?

A thorough discussion of Audience Strategy is in this section of Career-Management Resource Materials; however a quick review follows:

- 1. Who will read my document? How will they use this document?
- 2. What do they need to know about me? Do I need to establish credibility and trust?
- 3. What do the readers already know about this topic? What is their level of expertise? What additional information should I include to get across my message? Will my message be clear?

- 4. What is the likely attitude of my readers? Are my tone, my diction, and my choice of words appropriate? Am I using a voice of goodwill throughout the document?
- 5. Are my writing style and my document design appropriate both for my organization's culture and for the culture of my audience? Are my points logical and organized? Is the message concise and efficient? Have I used headings and titles to make key points stand out?
- 6. If my message is negative, have I assessed the reader's level of tolerance to absorb the news? If I am making a request, is my intention clear to the reader? If I am asking for a response or action, have I set a realistic timetable?

WHAT ARE THE "FACCCCCETS" OF EXCELLENT WRITING?

- Focused
- Accurate
- Concrete, Clear, Concise, Coherent, Correct
- Efficient
- Thorough
- Specific

HOW DO YOU BUILD GOODWILL?

Throughout your communication, your goal is for your audience to understand and respond to your message. Underlying your words, style, and format must be an attitude that reflects your appreciation and respect for the perspective of the reader, a "you-message."

You cannot predict exactly how a reader will feel or react to your message. Keep your language neutral, professional, and polite. Make every word count; do not waste the reader's time or squander your good association.

In general, emphasize the positive. When you have to deliver bad news, begin with a buffer statement, use the least negative choice of words possible, deliver a clear, straightforward message with your reasons in the middle of the document, try to seek a compromise, and end on a positive note.

Give special considerations in communicating with an international audience:

- Are you paying attention to the reader's cultural values and beliefs?
- Are you sensitive to cultural differences in word choice and approach?
- Do you have an open, non-judgmental attitude?

WHAT ARE TIPS FOR EFFECTIVE DOCUMENT DESIGN?

1. Can the reader skim the document?

- Understand that business writing avoids dense narrative paragraphs, wordiness, and overlong sentences. To create emphasis and levels of importance, use headings and subheadings which are conceptually and grammatically parallel.
- Manage white space by writing mixing short, medium, and longer blocks of text, using indentations to show relationships, and using ragged right-hand margins. Good design takes up space but is effective in delivering your message.

- Use lists to showcase key elements, choosing numbers to show priority and bullets to show items whose ranking is not important.
- 2. Is the document easy to read and sensible?
 - Choose typography cautiously and consistently.
 - Use, in general, one font for each document, a standard serif font, with "extenders" on the end of most letters for ease of reading. If you must use two fonts, use one serif and one *sans serif*.
 - Use 10-12 point type, nothing lower than 8-point; remember, the bad reputation of "read the small print."
 - Limit your use of capitals.
 - Use **boldface** rather than *italics*.
 - Use proportional type in which more white space appears between words than letters.
 - Select visuals, clip art, and color carefully; make sure they are relevant, clear, and easy-to-read.
 - Choose a manageable size for your document.
- 3. Can the reader understand the document?
- Use businesslike diction, not bureaucratic, unless tradition and circumstance require the formal language.
- Check for inflated language, inappropriate jargon and buzzwords, slang, and bias.
- 4. Can the reader follow your message?
 - Your opening should explain your purpose in writing, build reader interest, and provide a preview.
 - Your ending should reinforce your objective and leave a positive impression.

WHAT IS AN EFFECTIVE ORGANIZATION TO PRESENT A BUSINESS CASE?

Generally in business problems, follow this standard pattern:

- 1. State the situation/case.
- 2. State the problem.
- 3. State your recommendation: use the direct, straightforward approach with a neutral or favorable audience and use the indirect, argument-building approach with a hostile audience. Refer to **AUDIENCE STRATEGY** for a detailed explanation.
- 4. Explain your analysis of the problem, your alternative, but rejected, solutions, and your rationale for your final recommendation decision.
- 5. Repeat your recommendation/problem-solution.
- 6. Give instructions to put the recommendation into action.
- 7. State your suggested evaluation plan.

WHAT ARE SUGGESTIONS FOR BUSINESS EMAIL?

E-mail is easy and fast, a great boon to communication; however, we often forget that in the business world e-mail is a professional document.

So you must not give in to the temptation of the informal writing style you use with family and friends. Incorrect grammar and punctuation, irrelevant information, stream-of-

consciousness and rambling thoughts, sloppy organization, and slang all project a careless, frivolous attitude and make a poor impression.

While a more conversational tone may be appropriate, many of the formalities of conventional business writing still hold; for instance, you should include the standard greeting and salutation, just as you do in a business letter.

E-mail is a microcosm of all business communication: think out the content of your message and analyze your audience before you begin writing. Be choosy with your subject line: you need to entice the reader to open your message, especially in light of the amount of annoying Spam.

Organizations spend a lot of money on their image and presentation to the outside world. Your writing represents how you think and make the decisions that can define you, your company, your colleagues, and your clients in the eyes of strangers. E-mail can be forwarded around the world and can last forever.