



# The Basic of Business Writing

## Learning Outcomes

**By the end of this unit the learner will be able to:**

- ✓ Review your work so that it is clear, concise, complete, and correct.

## The Basic of Business Writing

### Why Write?

Whether we want to or not, most of us must write. We write to explain things, to smooth relationships, and/or to convince others of the value of some course of action. Such writing must be clear, concise, complete, and correct. In some instances you will want to express yourself in very concrete terms using indirect language, but **your work will always be courteous**. This unit will help to identify the forms that are used in business and the techniques that good writing requires.

**Many writers are defeated by the attitude that writing is an awesome task**, so they do whatever they can to avoid it. These people do not have confidence in their skills and have not learned to trust themselves with language. Sometimes they go to their files to see what has been done in the past. To overcome their insecurity, they may try to write to impress. They hunt for big words to sound like an authority on the subject. They pad their reports to indicate thoroughness. But they leave their readers wanting for more: readers want meaning.

**Our aim is to teach the habits of good writing.** With the proper attitude, a respect for how words work together, and knowledge of usage conventions, your writing can be clear, concise, complete, and correct, *and* easy to read.

**Trust yourself.** Say what you mean in the simple language you would use with a friend. Make adjustments in your wording until you are sure you are saying what you want to say, and then read it again to make a reader will understand what you are saying.

If you want to be a better writer, there are four things you can do to help yourself.

1. You must **read**. If the only writing you ever read is your own, you will have no standards to judge your writing against. Read like a spectator, if you must, but try to read like an apprentice.
2. You must **write**. No matter how many rules you know, it takes practice to write well. Your tenth letter to a disgruntled client will be easier to write than the first one, and believe it or not, the tenth report will be easier to write too.
3. You should **want to write**. Find personal reasons for wanting to write well and for wanting to communicate with others. Then, turn off the language cop that's slowing you down and get writing.
4. You need a **feedback** system to tell you how you're doing. You need to know if your writing works. People don't learn to write well from being corrected; they learn not to write. Look at feedback as an opportunity to find better solutions, not as an opportunity to correct errors.

You are already very familiar with the English language. You already talk easily and well. People generally understand you. So the leap from talking to writing doesn't need to be difficult if we think about what we're writing and what kind of message that we want to share in those terms.

However, before putting pen to paper, or turning on the computer, there are several things to think about; things we think about whether we are talking or writing. They are what we call the **four C's of communication and writing**: clear, concise, complete, and correct.

### Be Clear

#### Writing Clearly

Writing is like other forms of communication. You want people who receive your letters, e-mails, reports, memos, or proposals to understand what you are saying.

People are inundated with things to read. If you tend to pad your writing with extra words and fluff, they will probably feel that their time is being wasted. Poorly written documents will go to the bottom of the pile and may not be read at all.

#### The Power of the Human Mind

According to research at Cambridge University, it doesn't matter what order the letters in a word are. The only important thing is that the first and last letter be in the right place. The rest can be a total mess and you can still read it without a problem. This is because the human mind does not read every letter by itself, but the word as a whole.

Amazing huh?

### Test your knowledge

#### Why Write Well?

When we write well, we are saying that we have thought about our message, we have taken the time to understand the reader, and we want to send a positive image of ourselves.

Finally, when we write well, we improve the bottom line. Why? We save time, frustration, and inconvenience; all of which represent costs.

#### Out of these pairs, which word will be more likely understood?

- Elected or decided? \_\_\_\_\_
- Imbined or drank? \_\_\_\_\_

What are some words you use in your workplace that would be considered jargon elsewhere?

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As words like “imbibe” leave our common usage, other words enter. How can we keep knowledgeable about changes to language, and the ways that we write?

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### Choosing What to Say

People who think that it’s easy to select words that sound natural are mistaken. Good writing, just like good anything, is hard work, and the better you want to be, the harder it is. Good writers labor over word choice, sentence creation, and paragraphing, even such seemingly simple considerations as the word “up.”

### Avoiding *Up*

- She was chosen to **head up** the department.
- The perpetrator must **face up** to the situation.
- The police must **rise up** to the occasion.

None of these sentences need the word “up,” which is a preposition. Up doesn’t add meaning to these verbs; it takes away from their sharpness. While this may seem like a small point, it is where the basics of good writing begin. To strengthen those sentences, you can remove the word up.

- She was chosen to head the department.
- The perpetrator must face the situation.
- The police must rise to the occasion.

In business writing, the words we choose have to communicate exactly what we mean, and with maximum power. Resist the urge to have your writing sound the way you speak. When we talk, we often insert meaningless noise to fill in a silence or to give us time to think of the right word. If you use phrases like *a kind of*, *in terms of*, *a type of*, or repeatedly use the word *like*, make sure they do not make it into your writing! The solution is to edit, edit, edit.

Can you create a sentence with the phrases *a kind of*, *in terms of*, *a type of*, and *like*?

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Rewrite the following sentences so they are clearer to a reader.

| Original                                                                             | Rewritten |
|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------|
| Theo Walters is the only assistant to Jean Rushmore.                                 |           |
| Report any other defects or mechanical damage to the supervisor in finished product. |           |
| Arriving early for my interview the human resources office was not open.             |           |
| Kaye's job does not, because it causes great stress, seem worth keeping.             |           |
| Driving cautiously, the dangerous intersection was approached.                       |           |

## Test your knowledge

### Individual Exercise

Rewrite these sentences to make them more readable.

#### Sentence One

Regardless of their seniority or union affiliation, all employees who hope to be promoted are expected to continue their education either by enrolling in the special courses to be offered by the department, which are scheduled to be given after working hours beginning next Wednesday, or by taking approved correspondence courses selected from a list which may be seen in the Human Resources office.

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#### Sentence Two

This policy does not appear to be well understood by departmental management in the region even though this group has a prime responsibility for implementing the policy.

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## Be Concise

### Test your knowledge

#### Writing Concisely

Before you start writing, ask yourself a few questions to help you focus your writing on what's important.

Consider that **we read most information on a computer screen**. Many people use an even smaller screen like a smart phone or e-reader. The more scrolling you make your reader do, the less likely they will read your entire e-mail or letter or report.

For people reading on a regular computer screen or paper, they will naturally want to read things that are attractive. Think about having a blend of white space and text, using easily readable fonts in a reasonable size, and making your work look good.

#### Ask yourself:

- Who is your reader?
- What do they already know?
- What do they need to know?
- What do they not need to know?
- How and where will they read this?
- What results do I want?
- What can I put in an appendix for people who want more detail?

**Can you think of other ways to make your writing more concise?**

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**“There really are no true synonyms.”**

Do you agree with that statement or not? Is there a difference between “daring” and “reckless”? Between “famous” and “notorious”? While we do want to use words that others understand, if the word you want to use is more precise, your writing might be clearer if you choose to use that word. It might be better than substituting something more readily understood but less precise.

Concise writing strikes a balance between:

- **Abstract words** that imply qualities (like beauty and inflation)
- **General words** (like management, team, and culture)
- **Concrete words** (such as duck, lamp, lightning, and water, which we know by our five senses)
- **Specific words** that limit a general class (**building** is a general word while a **skyscraper** is a specific type of building)

**Tightening Sentences**

**Replace the wordy phrase with a more concise word or sentence.**

| Wordy Phrase                                      | Better Phrase |
|---------------------------------------------------|---------------|
| At this point in time                             |               |
| In the near future                                |               |
| In the event that                                 |               |
| For the purpose of                                |               |
| With regard to                                    |               |
| I am of the opinion that                          |               |
| Please do not hesitate to let me know             |               |
| I wish to take this occasion to express my thanks |               |
| The early part of next week                       |               |
| Your check in the amount of                       |               |
| It is quite probable that                         |               |
| A large number of                                 |               |
| At the present time                               |               |

| Wordy Phrase             | Better Phrase |
|--------------------------|---------------|
| There is no doubt that   |               |
| Most of the time         |               |
| In the same way          |               |
| During the time that     |               |
| Remember the fact that   |               |
| Not in a position        |               |
| In view of the fact that |               |
| Until such time          |               |
| Due to the fact that     |               |

### Updating Language

Replace these phrases with up-to-date phrases. (Write "omit" if you believe there is no appropriate substitute.)

| Outdated Phrase                       | Better Phrase |
|---------------------------------------|---------------|
| As per your instruction               |               |
| At an early date                      |               |
| Attached herewith                     |               |
| In lieu of                            |               |
| In reply I wish to state              |               |
| In response to same                   |               |
| Kindly note same                      |               |
| Please be advised that/I would advise |               |
| Pursuant to our agreement             |               |

|                                              |                                  |
|----------------------------------------------|----------------------------------|
| Refer back to                                |                                  |
| Take the liberty of                          |                                  |
| Thanking you in advance                      |                                  |
| This will acknowledge                        |                                  |
| We wish to advise that/ We deem it advisable |                                  |
| Allow me to express                          | I feel                           |
| According to our records                     | Omit                             |
| Hoping to hear from you soon, we remain      | Sincerely                        |
| In response to yours of the 12th             | In response to your letter of... |
| Awaiting your reply, we are in due course    | We await your reply              |

**Practicing Conciseness**

Re-write the following sentences so that they are more concise.

| Wordy Phrase                                                                      | Better Phrase |
|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------|
| In the event that payment is not made by January, your license will be suspended. |               |
| The invoice was in the amount of \$50,000.                                        |               |
| He ordered desks which are of the executive type.                                 |               |
| There are four rules which should be observed.                                    |               |

The department budget can be observed to be decreasing each new year.

## Be Complete

### Making Your Writing Complete

The third C in this series is Complete. Your message is **complete** when all the information needed for a receiver to understand is included. While the writing situation and knowing your audience will help you decide what information to include, you can also refer to the following list.

- **Use the 5 W's and an H.** Answer the questions: Who? What? Where? When? Why? How?
- **Make a checklist** of all the important points you want to cover, and then check them off when the letter/memo/e-mail is done.
- **Empathize** with the reader. Ask yourself if you have told him/her everything he/she needs to know.
- **Restate** for effectiveness. You will state the problem or objective clearly at the beginning of your writing, so that your reader understands what is important. Since readers are most likely to remember what is at the beginning and at the end, you will need to restate it using slightly different wording to add emphasis.
- Give something **extra** when appropriate, such as an example, a visual, or a supporting reference.

Try to put yourself in your reader's shoes (applying **empathy**), and ask yourself if your writing is going to appeal to your reader. Sometimes in our efforts to get everything into a document, we create something that is too long, too dry, too wordy, or too complicated. Put on your **flexibility hat** and ask yourself:

- Does the reader need all of this information?
- Are there things that I can edit out of the document, still giving enough?

Always try to give your reader what they need and want, while being flexible in the way that you organize that information. One technique is to pretend that you are a news editor preparing this piece for two different audiences. One audience wants every scrap of detail, as if they would be getting the information in a 90 minute conference session. The second audience needs all the important elements, but is going to read your document within a blog post, where the maximum length allowed is 500 words.

### Test your knowledge

#### Interview Exercise

#### Topic

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#### Interview Notes

[illegible]

## Learning Points

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## Be Correct

**Let's talk about some common errors in writing and how you can correct them.**

Subjects and verbs should agree in number. For example, if the subject (noun or pronoun) is singular, the verb should be singular too. Most of the time we will have no trouble, but occasionally things get a bit sticky.

Allow meaning to determine whether collective nouns(jury, team, family, etc.) are singular or plural. **When they function as a unit**, as is usually the case, treat them as singular.

- The Board is pleased to announce the promotion of Ashley Smith to Acting Manager.

- The committee made the decision to move forward.
- The jury has reached its decision.

However, **if the members of the group function individually**, treat the collective noun as plural. “The Board was split on the need for budget cuts,” is an instance of a plural collective noun. The Board represents several voices or points of view, so a plural verb was needed.

Don’t let **additional words in a sentence** muddy the waters when they come between a subject and its verb.

- The documents need shredding.
- The documents in the brown box in the filing room need shredding.

Words such as athletes, economics, scissors, statistics, and news are usually **considered singular despite their plural form**.

## Word Agreement

### Making Words Agree

“**Which**” and “**that**” are relative pronouns that refer to other nouns or pronouns (antecedents) and the verb should agree with the noun or pronoun it refers to. For example, in the sentence, “Take a suit that travels well,” “that” refers to the suit and since “suit” is considered one outfit, the verb is the singular verb “travels.”

Make pronouns and their antecedents (the word the pronoun refers to) agree.

- The doctor finished her rounds.
- The doctors finished their rounds.

Anybody, anyone, each, either, everybody, everything, none, no one, someone, and something are all considered singular. In a sentence using both “neither” and “nor,” the verb agrees with the final noun as in, “Neither Roger nor the twins are here today.”

Place **modifiers or describers** as close to the word they modify as possible, so the relationship is clear to the reader. Putting modifiers in their proper place is not always easy, especially if you like to squeeze as many words as you can into a sentence. The mistakes can be funny for everyone except the poor writer.

For example, in the sentence, “Opening the presentation with a request for a large donation, the first slide had misspelled the executive director’s name,” the sentence falsely suggests that the slide had created the misspelling. (A slide cannot write itself; the presenter made the error.)

To repair the sentence, it can be revised like this, “As the presenter displayed the first slide, a request for large donations, I noticed that the executive director’s name was misspelled,” OR “When I displayed the first slide, a request for large donations, I realized that I had misspelled my executive director’s name.”

Another example: “While reading the executive director’s report, John’s phone rang,” can be changed to, “While John was reading the executive director’s report, his phone rang.”

## Test Your Knowledge

### Making Words Agree

Rewrite these sentences so that subjects and verbs, and nouns and pronouns, agree.

| Original                                                                                                             | Rewritten |
|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------|
| Everyone was there, and I was glad to see him.                                                                       |           |
| Effective presentation of the competitive advantages of these products require increased television and advertising. |           |
| If any one of the garages are picketed, that section of the city will be without public transportation.              |           |
| Some of these problems looks challenging.                                                                            |           |
| Neither the doctor nor the nurses knows the whereabouts of the patient.                                              |           |

### Moving Modifiers

Rewrite the following sentences so that modifiers are in their proper places.

| Original                                                                                                                                         | Rewritten |
|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------|
| The only other zoo animals that tried the crackers were the raccoons. Hanging upside down from their cage, Lund fed them biscuits from his hand. |           |
| I have discussed with my colleagues the possibility of stocking the proposed poultry plant.                                                      |           |

|                                                                         |  |
|-------------------------------------------------------------------------|--|
| He has one of the lowest mortality rates anywhere of any heart surgeon. |  |
| Dr. Coleridge has nearly performed ninety-one heart transplants.        |  |

## Active and Passive Voice

Most people prefer to read writing that is in the active voice, especially when you are writing about people. It is easier to read, “Robert Green developed a process for constructing new solar homes,” than it is to read, “A new process for developing solar homes was developed by Robert Green.”

In the active voice, the subject of a sentence is the doer of the action. For active sentences, follow the usual word order in your sentences: subject, verb, object. Your sentences will be more interesting and easier to understand.

### Examples

| Passive                                                                 | Active                                                               |
|-------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------|
| The exam was thought to be unfair.                                      | We thought the exam was unfair.                                      |
| Every shred of evidence to be found was investigated by the detectives. | The detectives investigated every shred of evidence they could find. |
| The ground was littered after the concert.                              | Garbage littered the grounds after the concert.                      |

Many government documents and large organizations use the passive voice, which sounds quite impersonal. Talking directly to your readers with words like, “I, you, we, us, our,” makes your document more personal.

For example, rather than write: “The client can make applications to the Department of Motor Vehicles for licensing before June 1,” try, “You can apply to the Department of Motor Vehicles for your license before June 1.”

### Passive Voice

There are times when the passive voice is useful. Some scenarios include:

- When you must deliver bad news. “The decision to terminate your lease was agreed upon by all members of the committee.”
- When the subject is not important or you don’t know the subject. “The children were delighted by the sudden appearance of a clown.”

- When you aren't sure who or what is responsible for an action. "Their house was broken into last night."
- When you want to focus attention on the action, not the doer of the action. "When harvest time approaches, the potato plants are sprayed with a chemical to keep them from sprouting."

**Re-write each of the following sentences using the active voice.**

| Original                                                                   | Rewritten |
|----------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------|
| The new process is believed to be superior by the investigators.           |           |
| The office will be inspected by John Rhodes from NYC.                      |           |
| It is desired by this office that the problem be brought before the board. |           |
| A complete renovation was required by the new owners.                      |           |
| The letter was typed by Brian, the new assistant.                          |           |

## Sentences and Sentence Types

### Sentences and Paragraphs

#### The Sentence

**A sentence is a complete unit of thought.** Sentences can be classified by their structure.

A **simple sentence** has one idea expressed by one subject and one verb: "Billy ran." Adding additional descriptors to those two words does not change the main idea: "Billy ran into the schoolyard."

A **compound sentence** has at least two main ideas or clauses joined together. "Billy ran into the schoolyard and started crying for his mother."

A **complex sentence** has one main idea and a second idea that is subordinate but tied to it. "Billy ran into the schoolyard when the school bus pulled away."

A **compound-complex sentence** has two main ideas and at least one subordinate or secondary clause with it. "Billy ran into the schoolyard when the school bus pulled away, and began crying for his mother, who was nowhere to be seen."

#### The Paragraph

**A paragraph is defined as a collection of sentences** that may introduce, conclude, connect, and develop some part of an idea. Paragraphs have a beginning (a statement of the theme), a middle (clearly and logically develops the theme), and an end (concludes the discussion and sometimes provides a link to the next paragraph).

**Limit each paragraph to one idea**, unless you are linking related thoughts. If you are comparing the old and the new, for example, it makes sense to bring them together in one paragraph.

Ordering the middle of a paragraph is a challenge for many writers. However, **ordering** may be chronological, in order of importance, move from general to specific (or vice versa), move from simple to complex, from pro to con, or from question to answer.

Complicated information, or a discussion of several ideas, generally needs to be broken up into separate paragraphs to be easily understood.

To **avoid choppy paragraphs**, use a variety of sentence types and sentence lengths. While the average sentence should be about 17 words, vary the length of your sentences to make your writing more interesting.

**Keep paragraphs short** when possible. While the length will vary depending on content, remember that the rules of being concise while you write do apply. Paragraph length, of course, depends on content. Some topics are short, some are long, and others are in between. A good rule to follow is to question the sensibility of paragraphs over 12 lines. An average length of nine lines makes for good readability.

## Test your knowledge

### Individual Exercise

**In the following paragraph, find at least one simple sentence, one compound sentence, one complex sentence, and one compound-complex sentence. Then identify one way you might organize the information in the paragraph.**

A woman and a man, both carrying baskets and pushing old bicycles, were just coming into the clearing, carrying baskets full of dry pine cones. A tall young man was frying bacon on a propane stove. When a well-known naturalist walked into the campground, he could see signs of early morning activity. There were several people in the clearing. The youngest member of the group squatted on the ground and tried to start a campfire with wet kindling. Nobody ran away and yet nobody spoke to the man. A woman who appeared to be the grandmother of the group sat off to the side reading stories to a group of very small children. They all stopped what they were doing to watch the stranger approach.

### Simple Sentence

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### Compound Sentence

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**Complex Sentence**

Compound-Complex Sentence

One way to organize the information in the paragraph:

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[illegible]

## Readability Index

## About the Index

## Calculating the Index

Sometimes we make writing difficult for our readers. That may not be our intention, but if we use unfamiliar words, use jargon or terms they don't understand, and write long, complicated sentences, the reader must work harder to understand your message—and sometimes they just don't bother.

To figure out how readable your writing is, apply the readability test, sometimes called the **Gunning Fog Index**, to a sample of your own writing.

1. Count out a sample of 100 words. Count to the end of the sentence nearest to the 100-word total. Record that number. (Example: 104 words.)
2. Count the number of sentences in your sample. Record that number. (Example: 7 sentences.)
3. Divide the number of words in the sample by the number of sentences. This will give you the average sentence length. (Example: 104 divided by 7 gives an average sentence length of approximately 15 words.)
4. Go back through this sample and count/circle all words of three or more syllables (polysyllabic words). Do not include proper nouns, compound words made up of short, easy words (like “bookkeeper”) or words that made polysyllabic by an “es”, “ed,” or “ing” added to the end of the word (such as “adapted”). (Example: 14 words of three syllables or more.)
5. Divide the number of polysyllabic words by the total words in the sample, and then multiply the answer by 100 to find the percentage of words that are polysyllabic. (Example: 14 divided by 104 multiplied by 100 equals approximately 13.5% of the words are polysyllabic.)
6. Add the average sentence length (15) and the number of polysyllabic or “hard words” per hundred (14) together. (Example: 14 plus 15 equals 29.)
7. Multiply this by the Fog Factor (0.4) to learn your Readability or Fog Index. (Example: 29 multiplied by 0.4 equals 11.6.)

### About Your Score

What does this mean? Very approximately, it means the number of years of schooling people would need in order to read your writing. For most instances, a score between 8 and 12 is good. For some readers you will want to have a lower readability index. Occasionally you may be writing for readers who will be comfortable with a higher readability index.

As a point of comparison, here is how some well-known publications stack up against the readability index.

- The Economist: 13 (difficult)
- The Wall Street Journal: 11
- The New York Times: 10
- MacLean’s: 10
- Reader’s Digest: 8
- USA Today: 7
- People Magazine: 6
- Tabloid Newspapers: 6 (easy)

Robert Gunning, who designed this popular test, has said, “The Fog Index is a handy means for judging readability. It is not a formula for how to write.”

### Calculating the Index Automatically

When you are using Microsoft Word, you can set it to measure your readability score with an easy to use and straightforward tool. Here is how you would set it up. (These steps may be slightly different depending on the version you are using.)

- Click the Office button or File menu (top left-hand corner)
- Click Options
- Select the Proofing category
- Under the “When correcting spelling and grammar in Word” section, check the box “Show readability statistics”
- Click OK

You can then go through your document and not only check spelling and grammar, but at the conclusion of the document, you can get a readability score. For example, this document scores at a 7.5 level.

### Using the Index Ichabod Crane

The Cognoman of Crane was not inapplicable to this person. He was tall but exceedingly lank with narrow shoulders, long arms and legs, hands that dangled a mile out of his sleeves, feet that might have served for shovels, and his whole frame hung most loosely together. His head was small and flat at the top, with huge ears, green glassy eyes, and a long snipe nose, so that it looked like a weather-cock placed on his spindle neck, to tell which way the wind blew. To see him striding along the profile of a hill on a windy day, with his clothes bagging and fluttering about him, one might have mistaken him for the genius of famine, descending upon the earth, or some scarecrow, eloped from a cornfield.

- Washington Irving, “The Legend of Sleepy Hollow”

|                                                                       |  |
|-----------------------------------------------------------------------|--|
| Number of words in sample                                             |  |
| Number of sentences in your sample                                    |  |
| Number of words divided by number of Sentences                        |  |
| Number of polysyllabic words                                          |  |
| Number of polysyllabic words divided by total words multiplied by 100 |  |
| Average Sentence Length multiplied by number of polysyllabic words    |  |
| Figure above multiplied by 0.4                                        |  |

### My Writing

|                                                                       |  |
|-----------------------------------------------------------------------|--|
| Number of words in sample                                             |  |
| Number of sentences in your sample                                    |  |
| Number of words divided by number of Sentences                        |  |
| Number of polysyllabic words                                          |  |
| Number of polysyllabic words divided by total words multiplied by 100 |  |
| Average Sentence Length multiplied by number of polysyllabic words    |  |
| Figure above multiplied by 0.4                                        |  |

## Manners and Courtesy

### Test your knowledge

#### Courtesy

If we step back and think about it, it can seem odd to have to remind people to be polite. However, we know that people can struggle with making their mark while trying to be recognized as serious within the business environment. We also know that some people are arrogant or rude, and that they could probably achieve much better results (and certainly develop more trusting relationships) if they would apply good manners to their work.

When you consider what you write, **these principles of courtesy will help you to respect, appreciate, and acknowledge** others:

- Be sincerely tactful, thoughtful, and appreciative.
- Don't use words that could irritate, hurt, or belittle.
- Apologize with a good nature when required.
- Answer your mail promptly.
- Use a writing style that fits the topic you are writing about and your audience.
- Be aware of culturally sensitive issues, such as how you address mail to other countries, or how you end your letters and e-mails, to have the greatest regard given to your work.

**What other tips do you have?**

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**When writing letters,** you should also make sure you:

- Use the appropriate company name.
- Address the letter correctly.
- Spell the person's name correctly.
- Use the proper form of address. If you are unsure, use Mr. or Mrs. If you are unsure of gender, simply use the person's name.

## What's My Style?

### Sample One



Acme Solutions Inc.  
21 George Street  
Anywhere, NV 45678

March 29

REGISTERED MAIL

Ms. Jane Doe  
California Sports  
1 Maple Lane  
Anywhere, CA 12345  
Attention: Jane Doe

RE: Information Request

Dear Ms. Doe:

Thank you for choosing Acme Solutions for your sports equipment needs. We are confident that you will be very satisfied with the services that we offer.

The literature we have enclosed will assist you in making the most of our services. If you have any questions, please feel free to contact us. Your account manager, Mary Brand, can be reached at (123) 456-7890. Your account number is 5556. When you call, please have it on hand so that we can expedite your requests.

As your needs change, we will be happy to help you evaluate those needs and offer you the services that will help you achieve your new goals. Again, thank you for choosing Acme Solutions Inc.

Sincerely,

*J Smith*

John Smith  
CEO

Enclosures (2)  
JS/mb  
cc: Mary Smith

Rating: \_\_\_\_\_

## Sample Two

Sam Smith  
421 Baker Street  
London, England  
August 3

Acme Widgets  
21 Widget Lane  
Alamo, ID, 12345

Dear Mr. President:

During the past three months I have placed two sizable orders for your desk companion, specifying the new spiral binding that you have been advertising. Both times you sent me the hard-cover binding because you were out of stock on the spiral.

Fortunately, I am still selling quite a few of the hard covers, but more and more customers ask for the new spiral-bound book (at least two of your competitors have similar reference books in this easy-to-use binding).

I'm frankly concerned that unless you solve this out-of-stock problem, we're both going to be hurt. Up to now I have stocked only this book—my customers tell me it is the best of its kind on the market—but I may have to change my policy in self-defense. It may sound a little foolish that people will choose a book because it's easier to use rather than on the merits of the content, but it really seems to be happening.

Enclosed is my order for 75 copies of the desk companion in spiral binding. Please do not, under any circumstances, send me anything else. I have plenty of the hard-cover copies in stock.

Sincerely,

Sam Smith  
President  
Smith Solutions Inc.

Enclosure

Rating: \_\_\_\_\_

### Sample Three



Rating: \_\_\_\_\_

### Practical Language

When you are writing, always use language and punctuation in a practical manner. Remember that the intent of your writing is to send a message to your reader. As your writing evolves, you will see that **breaking a rule** from time to time can add emphasis or impact to your message.

If necessary, you may:

- Begin sentences with “and” or “but”
- End sentences with prepositions (the most frequent prepositions we use are: at, by, for, from, in, of, on, to, with)

- Use the same terms consistently

You can also use fewer **punctuation marks**, as long as the writing remains clear.

You should try not to start sentences with “**it**,” because there can be confusion about what “it” refers to. Reread any sentences that you are inclined to start with the word “it” and see if there is a stronger word that you can use.

Our lives are filled with **jargon**, and it is tempting to let acronyms and jargon fill our documents. Remember to spell out **acronyms** the first time you use them in any document.

### Word Usage

**Fewer** refers to number but **less** modifies a singular noun. “There were fewer volunteers and they were less eager to work.”

**Anxious** means worried. **Eager** means desirous. “I am anxious about the interview tomorrow but I am eager to begin earning some money.”

**Almost** means nearly. **Most** is the superlative form of much. “I have almost finished lunch. This was the most delicious salad I’ve eaten in days.”

**Numerous** refers to a large but unknown number. **Many** is a large, indefinite number. “There are numerous sales positions advertised but many of them are for jobs in manufacturing.”

**Who** and **whoever** are always subjects of a clause. **Whom** and **whomever** are always objects of verbs or prepositions.

- “The man who wanted to buy the miracle window cleaner stood in line for an hour.”
- “The firefighters rescued the children whom the police had been unable to reach.”

### That and Which

“**That**” is used almost exclusively with restrictive clauses; those that limit or narrow the definition of an item. The clause cannot be moved or changed without affecting the meaning of the sentence. For example, “The clothes that Jamie wore to the party reeked of cigarette smoke.” The only clothes being talked about here are those Jamie wore to the party.

“**Which**,” on the other hand, is used in a non-restrictive clause. It neither limits nor narrows meaning, but tells more about an item. Example: “The Statue of Liberty, which is in New York, welcomed many, many immigrants at the turn of the century.”

### Playing with Language

Sometimes you have to read these statements two or three times to sort out what they are trying to say!

- The bandage was wound around the wound.
- The farm was used to produce produce.

- The dump was so full that it had to refuse more refuse.
- We must polish the Polish furniture.
- He could lead if he would get the lead out.
- The soldier decided to desert his dessert in the desert.
- Since there is no time like the present, he thought it was time to present the present.
- At the Army base, a bass was painted on the head of a bass drum.
- When shot at, the dove dove into the bushes.
- I did not object to the object, nor could I be objective about the objective.
- The insurance was invalid for the invalid.
- There was a row among the oarsmen about how to row.
- They were too close to the door to close it.
- The buck does funny things when the does are present.
- A seamstress and a sewer fell down into a sewer line.
- To help with planting, the farmer taught his sow to sow.
- The wind was too strong to wind the sail.
- After a number of Novocain injections, my jaw got number.
- Upon seeing the tear in the painting I shed a tear.
- I had to subject the subject to a series of tests.
- How can I intimate this to my most intimate friend?
- I spent last evening evening out a pile of dirt.
- If you have a rough cough, climbing can be tough when going through the bough on a tree!
- There is no egg in eggplant.

Some food for thought:

- Is it weird that when the stars are out, it means you can see them, but when the lights are out, they are off?
- Does it make sense that boxing rings are really square?
- Am I the only one that laughs because people have noses that run and feet that smell?

## Inclusive Language

**Inclusive language is really about opening our minds and messages to the realities of life.** We work, live, and play among men and women of all ages and backgrounds. Our writing needs to reflect reality, so we should ensure that our language is inclusive rather than restrictive; open rather than closed.

Don't make all nurses and administrative professionals "she," nor all doctors and senior executives "he." We can get very tangled up in gender and slow down reading when we write "he/she, s/he, he and/or she" but we do need a way to reflect we are making a conscious decision to use language that is inclusive.

One straightforward way to eliminate gender bias is to **recast the sentence in the plural**. Rather than, "Each employee should shut off his computer before leaving," write, "Employees should shut off their computers before leaving." Another possibility is to **delete the personal pronoun**. "If an employee is late, notify his immediate supervisor," becomes, "If an employee is late, notify the immediate supervisor."

Here are some common terms and their inclusive alternatives.

| Original Word/Phrase | Alternative                 |
|----------------------|-----------------------------|
| Mankind              | Humankind, people           |
| Man on the street    | People on the street        |
| Manpower             | People power                |
| Chairman             | Chair                       |
| Spokesman            | Spokesperson                |
| Policeman            | Police officer              |
| Stewardess           | Attendant                   |
| Salesman             | Salesperson or professional |
| Fisherman            | Fisher*                     |
| Fireman              | Firefighter                 |

## Sentence Construction

The two basic rules for constructing sentences are: **use construction that makes meaning clear** and **keep construction parallel**.

**Parallel construction** means that parts of a sentence that are parallel or balanced in meaning should be parallel or balanced in structure. For example, if you write, “She likes swimming, running, and to play the piano,” to play the piano is a different construction from swimming and running. Write “She likes swimming, running, and playing the piano,” to make the activities parallel in structure.

When Shakespeare has Hamlet say, “To die, to sleep, perchance to dream,” he is using parallel structure. **Parallelism** refers to a series of like grammatical structures (words, phrases, and clauses) expressed in repeated grammatical construction.

### Test your knowledge

Change the following sentences to the correct parallel structure.

Running, walking, and a swim are all good forms of exercise.

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To get to the store, you walked down to the corner, take the path through the park, and cut across the square.

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To run for office, you may have to join a party, have to sell your independent views, and raffle tickets.

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Roseanne Barr battled her network, will fight with her husband publicly, and sings the American national anthem with an equal dose of enthusiasm.

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Three reasons why manufacturing companies are losing money is that their plants are inefficient, high labor costs, and increasing foreign competition.

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## Punctuation

### Introduction

#### The Comma

Commas are the **most common punctuation mark** inside a sentence. However, the trend today is to use them only when absolutely necessary, or when omitting the comma would cause confusion.

Use a comma after a **long introductory phrase or clause**: "After working all day at the office, I went home for dinner." If the introductory material is short, forget the comma: "After work I went home for dinner."

Use a comma **if the sentence would be confusing without it**, like this: "The day before, I borrowed my boss's calculator."

Use a comma to **separate elements in a series**, including numbers in a list: "I enjoy drinking orange juice, tea, milk, and coffee." You also use it with **numbers**: "5, 7, and 9." (There are some style guides that omit the comma before "and," but you'll notice that we like it. The important thing is to make sure that you are being consistent, and that you use what your organization is using.)

Use a comma to separate **independent clauses that are joined** by and, but, or, nor, for, or yet. "We shopped for three hours, but we didn't make a single purchase."

Use a comma(s) to **set off nonessential elements in a sentence**. Compare these two sentences:

- In this sentence: "At the podium stood a man wearing a green suit," the phrase "wearing a green suit" is essential to identify which man.
- However, in this sentence: "At the podium stood Frank, wearing a green suit," the phrase "wearing a green suit," adds nonessential information about Frank.

**You can also use a comma to:**

- Separate a city or town from a state or province, as in Sarasota, Florida and Ferntree Gully, Victoria.
- Set off the name in a direct address. "Jane, can I see you in my office please."
- After dates, when day, month and year are used. "He was born August 12th, 1975."
- Before degrees that come after a name, as in Joan Walker, PhD.
- Set off an informal quotation, as in: Robert remarked, "My investment counselor is very good."
- After linking adverbs such as however, therefore, etc. "The hike was several miles long; however, the path was a good one."
- Separate thousands in numbers for clarification, as in 18,239.

NOTE: Not all countries use commas and periods in the same way or for numbers over a thousand or decimals. Make sure you know your audience!

**When shouldn't we use commas?**

- Do not use commas between two independent sentences.
- Do not use commas after titles like Jr. or Sr.
- Do not use a comma after a month when only the month and the year are used.

Note: If you use words like however, moreover, therefore, consequently, nevertheless, or then between two independent clauses (i.e., sentences by themselves), you must use one of the following:

- A period
- A semicolon
- A comma plus a conjunction between the two clauses

**NOT, "It looked difficult, therefore, we did not try."**

- BUT, "It looked difficult. Therefore, we did not try."

- OR, "It looked difficult; therefore, we did not try."
- OR, "It looked difficult, and therefore we did not try."

## The Semi-Colon

The semi-colon sometimes raises people's blood pressure, but it is a very useful punctuation mark. A semi-colon has **three important features**:

- It is considered a more defined pause than the pause required by a comma.
- It is used to separate major sentence elements of equal grammatical rank.
- It is used to separate sentences joined by logical conjunctions such as however, therefore, thus, and nevertheless.

Example: "I learned all the rules and regulations; however, I never really learned to control the ball."

It can also be used to **separate two closely related sentences not joined by a conjunction**. The semi-colon in this instance is useful for showing contrast or balance.

Example: "Having more work to do is relatively easy to bear; what stings is having more to do than everyone else."

It should also be used to **separate a series** that is complicated or whose items contain internal punctuation (such as commas).

Example: "Please direct your comments to one of these individuals: Pat Warner, chair of the committee; Ross Ingram, public affairs; or Calvin Jenkins, promotions."

## The Colon

This punctuation mark is used primarily to **call attention to the words that follow it**. Here are some common examples.

- Use a colon after the formal salutation in a business letter. (Dear Dr. Pomeroy:)
- Use a colon before a list. Example: Bring this equipment with you: a knapsack, thick socks, gloves, etc.
- Use a colon to separate hours and minutes, as in 2:25. (This can differ by culture.)

## The Apostrophe

**Use an apostrophe when the meaning of "it's" is "it is."** (Using it's when the word does not mean "it is" is one of the most common mistakes in the English language!)

Note that it's never correct to use an apostrophe in a possessive version of its. This means that anytime you see "its" with an apostrophe after the s, it is incorrect.



Use an apostrophe to show **singular possession** (“The doctor’s office was always busy”) and **plural possession** (“The doctors’ offices were always busy”).

Note: The use of an apostrophe can be determined by inserting an of phrase, as in “The offices of the doctors were busy.”

Use an apostrophe to show **possession of two objects by two people**. “Hilda’s and Janet’s cars were crushed by the falling tree.”

Use only one apostrophe when a **possession is shared by two people**. “Robert and Susan’s house sold in five hours.”

Use an apostrophe to show **possession in words that are already plural**. “The women’s changing room at the gym was being renovated.” Or, “The men’s changing room had been renovated last year.”

Use an apostrophe to show **contractions**. “They’re on vacation and can’t get back in time for the meeting.”

Use an apostrophe to show **plural of lower case letters**. “I made sure that I dotted all my i’s and crossed all my t’s before I signed the contract.”

Use an apostrophe to show **possession in a single compound noun**. “We are living in my mother-in-law’s house until ours is finished.”

Use an apostrophe to form the **possessive case of indefinite pronouns**. “This election could be anyone’s win.”

Use an apostrophe in **expressions of time or value**: two weeks’ notice, two dollars’ worth of nuts.

### Test Preparation

#### Sample Sentences

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This image shows a single sheet of white paper with horizontal blue ruling lines. The lines are evenly spaced and run across the width of the page. There are no margins, text, or other markings on the paper.