



# Fundamentals of Business Writing

A training manual designed to enhance the skills of writers working within the corporate and/or academic environments.

## **FUNDAMENTALS OF BUSINESS WRITING**

### **Introduction**

Most organisations, if not all, have a department tasked with making sure that all the communication needs of the organisation are met. As the world has evolved, organisational structures and roles have also evolved. In today's business world, most people need to write for some reason or other, often to communicate with colleagues within their department or the organisation as a whole. The idea that internal communication does not need to be done as efficiently and excellently as external communication is at its core very wrong. It is important that everything we write whether for internal or external purposes, be written in such a way that it speaks of the quality of the organisation. Our writing either communicates that we are sloppy, unskilled or egocentric, or it tells the reader that we care about our work, pay attention to detail and have the recipient at heart.

For those seasoned practitioners whose work consists mostly of writing, this course is meant to enhance the skills that you already possess, and for those just beginning, this course is designed to equip you with tools that will help you write well.

**At the end of this course you will be able to:**

- **identify common writing mistakes in your own work;**
- **identify and use the right style and tone for particular audiences;**
- **use punctuation in appropriate places;**
- **do away with unnecessary words and excessive use of jargon;**
- **edit your document to ensure that it is grammatically correct and clear and**
- **Present a concisely-written document which is clearly-organised.**

**ICE BREAKER ACTIVITY : FREEWRITE EXERCISE**

Write a short note to your work desk/laptop or office chair.

Five minutes to complete exercise. Volunteers to read what they wrote.

## Part I: The Basics

Example 1: An internal email

*Dear Colleagues*

*I trust that you are all well and enjoying our anniversary month. This email serves as a reminder for those of you who had not diarised our coming fun day. As was communicated previously, we will be having a fun day at the Parliament Gardens on Saturday 20 February. The fun day will include ball games such as volley ball and mini football. There will be other activities for those that are not into running around. Every department is required to participate in at least one of the activities. Once again, remember it will be on Saturday February 20 from 0900 until 1400. Please bring your families along as there will also be activities for children. This fun day is one of a series of events we will be hosting in the next few months to mark our 50th anniversary. Remember to dress appropriately and also bring hats as we expect the day to be quite sunny and hot. Food and refreshments will be provided. See you there!*

### 1. Structure

You are expected to express yourself in a clear, accurate, objective and coherent manner, using a layout that is approved and appropriate for whatever document you are writing.

Most pieces of writing, regardless of their length, have:

- an introduction;
- a main body;
- a conclusion.

There may be several paragraphs/chapters in the main body, each of which adds to the objectives of the piece of writing. The structure of your document must be clear, with headings and subheadings for the different chapters and sections where necessary (this is especially for reports).

#### 1a. Introduction

The introduction catches the reader's attention and gives a preview of what is to follow in the main body.

The introduction generally highlights the purpose of the piece of writing.

#### 1b. Main Body

The main body carries the bulk of the material/message intended for the audience so it is important to make sure that all sections are linked and that there is coherence.

When writing long documents such as reports, always ensure that there is clarity regarding the purpose of the report as you go along. This allows the reader to follow the progression of your document.

### **Body Paragraphs**

In essence, a paragraph is a group of sentences which deal with an idea or an aspect of a topic. The paragraphs in your document must be related. There should always be a connection between the sentences in your paragraphs and these should develop the main idea and move it to the next stage. Avoid using one or two sentences as paragraphs as one sentence does not make a paragraph.

### **1c. Conclusion**

The conclusion summarises the the main points and highlights the importance of the document. The conclusion varies depending on what kind of document you are writing. An internal email may conclude in an informal way whilst an external email may not. This is also dependent on the audience.

### **ACTIVITY**

1. Rewrite the email read at the beginning of this section (Example 1).
2. Feedback Session – Each participant is to read their version of the Example 1 email and other members of the group are to give feedback.

## **Part II : Keys for effective business writing**

Example 2: Consider the example below as an excerpt from an annual report.

*In the past financial year ending April 2015 it was clearly evident that the political situation in South Africa had a degenerative effect on our economy leading to exponential losses in investment portfolios with shareholders cashing in on their shares in culculated efforts to minimize the inevitable depreciation of the value of their shares due to the rapid drop of the South African Rand in the global economy. Furthermore it is manifestly clear that the intrinsic value of the Namibian Dollar cannot be separated from the Rand, thus the previous financial year strongly illuminated the fact that organisations in Namibia need to invest in systems that will enable efficient leveraging of resources to eventually enable the severing of the nation's dependency on the South African Rand's global position for the Namibian Dollar's validation. Past History has shown numerous times, over and over again that when a nation is not economically independent it always bends to the whims of those*

*who are. It is obvious that South Africa is bringing Namibia down and future relations need to be approached cautiously.*

### **Debunking the business writing myth:**

It is a myth that business writing requires long sentences, complex expressions and excessive technical jargon.

An effective piece of writing is:

- concise;
- clearly organised;
- brief in its presentation and
- skilful in its use of jargon.

### **The Keys:**

#### 1. Know your audience

Often our writing fails to achieve its goals because it is inappropriately or thoughtlessly written. Often people assume the same tone, style and format of writing for everything, paying no attention to the audience. It is important to know and understand your audience because that knowledge is what will enable you to write an effective piece of communication. Internal emails are not the same as external email. The format of an annual report tends to differ from the format of an activity report. Knowing the purpose, a piece of writing gives you a sense of direction. The style, tone and vocabulary used should be in line with the intended audience.

#### 2. Have clearly-defined objectives

Know why you are writing. Be clear about your objectives and goal you want to achieve.

Imagine reading a letter, proposal or report and you get to the end of it wondering what exactly it is the writer wants. It is important to be clear from the start so that the reader is with you from the outset.

#### 3. Focus on Content & Style

Avoid Jargon and unnecessary words. Your aim is to communicate clearly (and be understood). **IT SHOULD NOT BE TO WOW THE READER WITH YOUR KNOWLEDGE OF BIG WORDS.** Often people who pepper their conversation/communication with unnecessary words don't sound smart –

they sound like they are trying to sound smart. Writing simpler does not make your work less intelligent. As a business writer, you are not trying to oversimplify ideas behind the words, but present the ideas in the simplest, most direct language possible.

Be concise and brief. Respect people's TIME.

Find the right tone for your audience. The tone in a piece of writing is created by the way you express yourself. Tone is influenced by syntax (in linguistics this is the study of the structure of phrases, sentences and language), choice of words, your point of view and level of formality in your writing.

It is also important in your content to clearly indicate the difference between opinions and fact. In business writing these two aspects should be clearly separated. , This way you will avoid misunderstandings and your writing will not be ambiguous.

4. Use formatting efficiently

Formatting features such as headlines, bullet points, numbering among others, enable the reader to scan through your text easily, identifying relevant/necessary information. A note of caution: Don't overdo it with the formatting features because they can become distractions for the reader.

It is also advisable to replace text with visual aids wherever possible.

5. Revise/ edit & proofread thoroughly

Your first draft shouldn't be your final product. Write and rewrite until you have a document worthy to share. Check for syntactical, grammatical and typographical errors. If you cannot proofread your own work have it proofread by someone else. Use spell checker and other grammar tools, but remember spell checker cannot detect contextual errors such as hear/here, their/they're, etc.

6. Watch your attitude.

Have you ever read an email and thought that the person who wrote it must have been irritated or angry? Always be conscious of the different layers of meaning your writing conveys. Word choice, sentence structure and expressions all reveal more than you think about your attitude and view of what you are writing about. Remember that all the reader has is your piece of writing. You cannot defend any misunderstanding created by your word choice or tone, so write as though you are speaking to the reader face to face.

Though mentioned under Content & Style, the tone created in a piece of writing is often indicative of the writer's attitude. The tone can change several times in a piece of writing or remain the same. In business writing it is important to convey the right message and maintain the appropriate tone for any given audience.

You would not start an email to your boss or the CEO of your organisation by say "hey" just as you would not write an email to a friend who is also a colleague by saying , "Good afternoon/ Good day/Dear"

#### 7. Active VS Passive Voice

In the active voice, the subject of the sentence does the action and in the passive voice, the object becomes the subject and the action is done to it.

*e.g. The marketing manager wrote the press release. Vs the press release was written by the marketing manager.*

It is always best to use the active voice when writing. Though the passive voice may not be wrong grammatically, it is less effective.

#### ACTIVITY

1. Based on the keys given in this section, take Example 2 and identify mistakes in the piece.
2. In pairs discuss your findings.
3. Feedback Session – each pair to share findings

### Part III : The Writing Process

#### EXAMPLE 3:

*The reseracher finds out that most of the people in community X are not aware of the benefits of drinking water. 58 % of the people surveyed said they do not drink tap water of the 58%, 35% buy bottled water and the rest hardly drink any water at all. Most of the respondents indicate that they drink at least 3 cups of tea or coffee during the day which serves almost ass a replacement for water. The tea or coffee are not good substitutes for water as water has a particular function it performs in the human body. An additional 58% percent of the survey respondents said that they finds water tasteless, supported by a further 12%. The purpose of the research was to establish the water drinking habits of the X community and create awareness regarding the importance of drinking water. Maybe 2 litres a day would be sufficient. While the*

*survey was taking place, the researcher. The researcher took part in the distribution of water bottles to houses in the community. The water distribution two weeks and at the end the survey respondents from the community said that the water was not enough and a more sustainable solution needed to be sought out. Pure water is a problem in the community. 100% of the survey respondents said they would consider drinking more water if the government provided clean water, 5% said they would not be changing their water drinking habits. One of the respondents (Mr X) said they would rather be given juice or coke.*

## ACTIVITY

Group discussion: Example 3 above.

### A. Cohesion and Coherence

Just having information is not enough; you need to ensure that whatever you have written makes sense:

- Cohesion: grammatical relationship between different parts of the same text
- Coherence: a logical arrangement of parts. In language this is the relationship between different parts of the same text. (semantics – relating to meaning)

Do the ideas in your work relate to each other and does what you have written make sense to the reader?

### B. Make the Connection (between ideas, sentences and paragraphs)

When you make clear connections between your ideas, then your writing will be cohesive and coherent. You need to ask yourself the following questions:

1. Is each sentence complete and correct?

Subjects and verbs in sentences must agree with each other.

Take particular note of instances where the mother tongue (in cases where English is not the first language) might influence the way you write. Often with second or third language English speakers, their everyday speech might have an adverse effect on writing.

E.g. *my hairs are growing* is grammatically wrong.

Hair is an uncountable noun which means it takes the singular form. The correct statement would be – *My hair is growing*.

E.g. *they gave us plenty of informations to read through.*

Information is an uncountable noun so it takes the singular form. *They gave us plenty of information to read through.*

2. Are punctuation marks used correctly?

Do the punctuation marks make it easier or harder to understand the text?

If you have any doubt about punctuation, don't get creative; use as little as possible and write short, clear sentences. Some examples of punctuation marks are listed below.

- **Commas:** Commas are used to denote a pause in a sentence or to separate phrases and lists. Commas are also used before and after words such as "however" and "nevertheless". If you find that you write in long sentences, check whether it might be better to create several short sentences replacing commas with full stops.

*E.g. The CEO would like to see the heads of departments from Marketing, Research, Accounting, IT and HR.*

- **Parentheses/Brackets:** are used to enclose additional information which may not be necessary (a side note) or an explanation in a sentence.

*E.g. Sossusvlei (with its dry landscape and scorching temperatures) is still one of the most popular tourist destinations in Namibia.*

- **Colons:** The colon is used to introduce a list, an explanation, a long quotation or an idea. The colon also serves as a strong/definite pause within a sentence.

*E.g. The Church needs to buy the following items for the new building: microphones, speakers, window frames, chairs and fans.*

- **Semi-colons**
  - a. The semi colon represents a pause that is longer than a comma, but shorter than a full stop, balancing two equally important, related ideas.  
*E.g. they practised for the games every day; they were not afraid of losing.*
  - b. The semi-colon can also indicate opposite ideas.  
*E.g. in England the summers are very short; in Namibia it is summer almost all year round.*
  - c. A semi-colon can also be used to mark off a series of phrases or clauses which contain commas.

*E.g. The results of the research were very enlightening; 15% of respondents did not know the answer, 20% said maybe, 40% gave a definitive yes and the remainder said no.*

- d. A semi-colon can be replaced by a full stop and conjunctions; but, so, although, and.

*E.g. they practised for the games every day so they were not afraid of losing.*

3. Are the sentences too long, presenting too many ideas? (Should they be shortened?)

Short, clear sentences are usually more effective than those which are long and complex. Try to split up any overly long sentences into two or three shorter ones. Short sentences will help you avoid grammatical mistakes and make it easy for the reader to follow your line of argument. Each sentence that you write should make sense as an independent sentence. Avoid rambling sentences.

*e.g. As part of the strategy to clamp down on illegal immigrants in the country, the ministry of Home affairs has created a department that deals primarily with chasing down immigrants with expired travel documents and dubious visa endorsements in the case of those with legal travel documents, this department was established following the recent increase in reports that immigrants were bribing their way into the country and the subsequent undercover operation that took place to identify the culprits within the ministry who were lining their pockets and allowing people to enter the country when they were not properly vetted or had no valid reasons to enter to be allowed entry.*

4. Is there unnecessary jargon in the text?

Use the jargon of your subject area in an accurate and adequate manner. There is no need to litter your paper with jargon when it does not add value to your work. In business, as a communications specialist or any communicator for that matter, your goal is to include not exclude.

In law, medicine and financial services jargon can be justifiable as often you're dealing with complex ideas. , many originally written/rendered in Latin. In business, however, there is no such excuse.

*e.g. "This year we intend to maximise our earnings potential and ensure high ROI with best-in-class scalability levels" essentially what's being said here is, "This year we intend to grow our business and make more money"*

e.g. *“With this collaborative agreement, our companies have a great opportunity for bubble gum-hard candy synergy”* essentially what’s being said here is, *“Together, we can create a product better than anything we could on our own.”*

(Examples taken from Brand Journalists 2016)

5. Are words used sparingly and efficiently? (Verbosity)

- Verbosity is using too many words when a few would do the job and often this goes hand in hand with excessive jargon.

e.g. *The emperor of the moving kingdom visualised the overcast sky, sensed the tempest in-the-make and sighed dejectedly. This man who found at his fingertips, making the mighty iron vessel slip on the huge blue mat of the nature, now felt like a helpless soul and ultimately allowed the vehicle of bout thousand travellers on board to dance to the whim of the waves.*

Simple meaning: *The captain lost control of the ship.*

(Example taken from Rajesh Chandra Pandey-hub pages)

- Avoid tautology/redundant use of words - using two or more words with the same meaning.

E.g. *past history, I went there personally, it cost N\$10000 dollars*

Use consistent spelling conventions, either British English or American English e.g. *generalise/generalize, behaviour/behaviour – this may depend on your company’s regulations.*

6. Is everything included in the document necessary/adding value?

Avoid unnecessary repetition. Though repetition can be used for effect in certain contexts, it does not necessarily make your message any clearer. To the contrary it can be quite irritating to the reader. When using words like aforementioned and phrases such as “as previously stated”, make sure you are not just repeating what was already stated but are linking ideas or points.

E.g. *The Company will be closing its doors for the duration of the move and all requests are to be presented through our website. We apologise for any inconvenience this may cause and assure you that we will respond to your queries and requests as soon as possible. As previously stated, we will be*

*closing our doors to move to our new building on Independence Avenue and thus we will not be able to receive any physical visits until we have completed our move. We understand that this may be an inconvenience and as aforementioned, our website will be accessible for all requests which we will endeavour to respond to as soon as possible.*

7. Are ideas linked and sentences connected?

Does each sentence connect with the sentence before and the one after it?  
How are ideas linked throughout the document?

**Useful linking devices:**

The following linking words and phrases are useful in ensuring that work is coherent:

- a) When adding ideas:  
And, also, as well as, besides, finally, first, furthermore, in addition, similarly
- b) When emphasising ideas:  
Above all, after all, especially, indeed, in fact, in particular, it is true, most important.
- c) When illustrating ideas:  
For example, for instance, in other words, in particular, namely, specifically, such as, that is
- d) Comparing ideas:  
In the same way, similarly
- e) Contrasting ideas:  
But, yet, at the same time, however, nevertheless, on the contrary, on the other hand, rather, conversely, in contrast
- f) Summarising ideas:  
As has been mentioned, in summary, to summarise, in conclusion, to conclude, finally, in brief

**ACTIVITY**

Write any two of the following: maximum 1 page each.

1. An email communication/memo to your colleagues telling them that the bathroom/toilet facilities on three out of four floors in your building are not working
2. A brief report of a workshop you attended: Write the report for your supervisor (You can use this workshop or any other).
3. An external communication to the media or a recipient of your choice, offering new product information (This can be the launch of a new product or an

upgrade of an already existing product of your choosing. The product does not have to be real.)

### **C. Revision and Editing**

Editing will make your writing more precise and easier to understand. When editing, you critically read every sentence and ask yourself if it is clear and concise and if it is necessary. It is strongly advised to use a grammar resource and an approved English dictionary as you write.

Below are a number of steps to follow while you are revising and editing your work. These steps will ensure that anything you write and present is of high quality:

1. Print out a hard copy of your paper. You will find that when you read from a hardcopy you are less likely to miss errors than if you just read from the computer.
2. Read what you have written out aloud; this will help you hear where sentences don't sound right. When you stumble over a sentence, it means the sentence needs changing/editing for smoother reading.
3. Rewrite where necessary: add words, rephrase, re-structure sentences until they are concise.
4. Read every sentence and ask yourself if it is useful. (Does it support the objective of the communication/document? If not remove it.)
5. Though spell check and the grammar function on your computer are useful tools, remember that they may not find everything so do not use them as your only tools for editing. Remember also that spell checker will not identify contextual errors such as hear/here, they're/ their.
6. Find the unnecessarily long words and ask yourself if they can be replaced by shorter, simpler words.
7. As you read, check for coherence. Make sure that your sentences and paragraphs flow and that what you are saying is clear.
8. Cross-check all your references (especially for reports)
9. Make sure that your font and letter size are consistent throughout your document.

### **ACTIVITY**

1. In pairs exchange the previous exercises and discuss. Give constructive criticism.
2. Volunteers to read for the group. Further feedback.

#### **D. Proofreading**

Leave your work for some time, for a couple of days or longer if possible and then go back to it. Proofreading means reading to check for mistakes. Often documents can be full of small errors that create an impression of a sloppy worker/writer who does not pay attention to detail. It is important to proofread to eliminate any careless errors left in the editing process. Once again, print your edited piece of writing and read through it with a pen in hand to mark any errors.

It is also advisable at this stage to get someone else to read what you've written, especially if you've been working on it for a long time. Mistakes become invisible after reading something several times and often the mind reads what is not there because it intended for it to be there. A "fresh" pair of eyes is handy in these instances. However, if it's an email, short report or any other short document, you can proofread that yourself, but make sure that you print a hard copy and read from there.

#### **ACTIVITY**

1. Participants must exchange any one piece of writing from the workshop and proofread.
2. Feedback Session

#### **Part IV : Common Mistakes in Business Writing**

1. Subject-Verb agreement

This is the most common problem in Namibian writing. If a subject is singular then its verb must also be singular; if the subject is plural then the verb must also be plural.

E.g. the list of items is on the desk vs the list of items are on the desk

In this case the list is the subject, so the verb must be singular.

2. Missing apostrophes.

When people use contractions they often put the apostrophe in the wrong place or leave it out completely.

E.g. I will - I'll, cannot - can't, let us - let's vs I will – ill, cannot – cant, let us – lets.

Often people confuse possessive pronouns with contracted words.

e.g. your with you're (you are) - Your supervisor is coming to give a talk on tardiness and you're expected to be there.

e.g. his with he's - My boss left his car keys in the office so he's going back to get them.

Possessive pronouns never need an apostrophe.

3. Wrong comma usage.

The idea that you should place a comma anywhere you would pause when reading is wrong. The rules for commas have changed over the years, adapting to evolution in writing forms.

e.g. "Let's eat Susan" implies something sinister. The correct statement should read; "Let's eat, Susan." e.g. the workshop we attended, was interesting though, I wish it could have gone on longer. The correct sentence would be, the workshop we attended was interesting though I wish it could have gone on longer.

4. Confused and misused words.

E.g. affect vs effect, their vs there and they're.

'Their' is a possessive pronoun indicating ownership; 'there' is a location and 'they're' is the abbreviated form of they are.

Affect is to influence or alter, effect is the result or outcome of a cause.

E.g. they're behaviour warrants a disciplinary hearing as it has effected other members of staff.

## ACTIVITY

1. RECAP – Each participant is expected to pick one aspect of the workshop they found significant and give reasons for their choice.
2. Workshop Assessment- Participants are expected to complete a workshop assessment form.

Finally, ***Good writing** is not purely about being technically correct and following conventions. It is also about robust form, completeness and coherence, excitement and originality, scholarship and insight.*” Dr Anne Murphy (Dublin Institute of Technology)