

Business Writing in the 21st Century

*S*ocial media in the modern era has certainly affected the way people communicate in everyday life. But there's still a place for formal and professional communication in the business world. This issue of **Frontline Supervision** offers a basic review of business writing for you—and maybe more importantly, for the younger generations in your workplace.

Whether you are composing reports, memos, letters, e-mails, job procedures, job descriptions, or performance reviews, you need to be able to write clearly and correctly. Also keep in mind that much of your writing could have legal ramifications. If job descriptions aren't precise regarding essential job functions, for example, or job performance documentation is not specific with dates and facts, you or your organization could face lawsuits.

Characteristics

Good business writing is clear, concise, accurate, complete, and coherent. It gets to the point right away, sticks to the facts, and says what you have to say in as few words as possible.

Its grammar, spelling, punctuation, and information are all correct and accurate. It includes all necessary information, answers any potential questions that readers may have, and makes recommendations where applicable.

It follows a logical progression from the opening sentence to the final paragraph, keeping your ideas on track and leading the reader to a conclusion consistent with your purpose for writing.

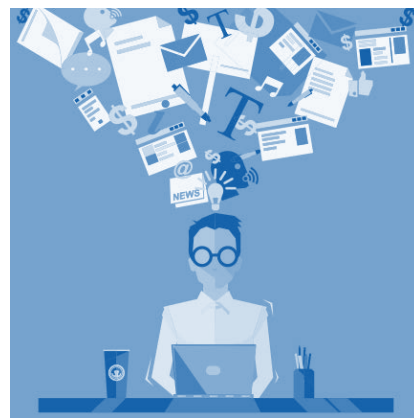
Effective business writing must also set the right tone, meaning it must always be professional. For example, it never blames, accuses, or insults. It is never defensive.

Mechanics

Keep sentences simple, expressing only one idea in each sentence. Divide very long sentences into two or more simpler, but still complete sentences. Use a

combination of short and longer sentences to give your writing better flow and pace.

Begin each paragraph with a topic sentence that describes what that paragraph is about. Make sure the sentences that follow support and expand upon the topic sentence. Keep paragraphs short—generally between two and five sentences. Use transitions between paragraphs to guide the reader from one topic to another.



Three-Point Format

Most written communications are composed of three basic parts—an opening, a body, and a closing. Even short communications such as e-mails should follow this format.

1. **The opening introduces the purpose of the communication.** It spells out the topic(s) that will be covered and lets the reader know from the first sentence what this letter, memo, report, or e-mail is about.
2. **The body develops the main points you want to make,** fills in the details, and gives your reasons and recommendations, etc.
3. **The closing reminds the reader of your purpose for writing** and briefly summarizes the main points you have made in the body. It leads

Tip

Follow this six-step process for effective written communication: Define your reason for writing. Research and gather your content. Outline your message. Write a first draft. Review and revise. Send.



Millennials May Need Training on Business Communication

Like previous generations, Millennials enter the workforce with different assumptions from the generation before them, says Laura Brown, PhD, a communications and writing consultant. However, the “degree of differentiation is larger [now] than in previous generational shifts,” due in large part to technology and the Internet.

For example, while previous generations were accustomed to writing formal business letters, most Millennials are used to texting and e-mailing their friends. And some use the same informal

tone when texting and e-mailing clients and colleagues, explains Brown, who is the author of *How to Write Anything: Practical Guidance for Everything You’ll Ever Have to Write*.

Training can help address workers’ assumptions and help avoid potential problems with customer service, productivity, and retention, she says. That is why Brown recommends that all new employees receive communications training during onboarding and then a few times per year after that, followed by ongoing efforts to create an awareness of

the topic via e-mails, newsletter articles, and online interviews.

Brown says training should include:

- ♦ Writing professional e-mails,
- ♦ When to send an e-mail versus making a phone call or walking into someone’s office,
- ♦ What should—and should not—be put into writing, *and*
- ♦ Understanding that what an employee tweets and posts online can be misinterpreted as representing a company’s position—and what the consequences are for that.

the reader to a natural conclusion and tells what action you expect from the reader or what action your reader can expect from you.

Maximum Impact

Be specific and use facts and figures to back up your conclusions. Avoid vague language that doesn’t tell the reader exactly what you want them to know. Avoid technical jargon that could confuse or mislead your reader. Don’t use slang—it’s too informal and some readers might misunderstand your meaning.

Always try to link abstract ideas or concepts to concrete, practical examples. Use positive language—you’ll sound more confident and the reader will be more likely to agree with your point of view. Use

active verbs to give your writing vitality and strength, for example, “I plan” rather than “It is planned,” or “We completed the project” rather than “The project was completed.”

Review

Read over all communications carefully before sending. Perform a spell check and grammar check on all documents written on the computer. But remember, these won’t pick up errors involving sound-alike words such as “to,” “too,” and “two,” or “there,” “their,” and “they’re,” so proofread as well.

Make certain all your facts and figures are accurate. Double check your sources.

Read communications for content, making sure they say exactly what you want to say. Think about tone and about how readers might perceive your words. In other words, read your message and ask if it would make the desired impression on you.

Prune your communications to ensure they are as short and concise as possible. Delete unnecessary words and superfluous information.

Tip

- Follow any guidelines or preformatted templates your organization may have for letters, memos, and e-mail, and train employees how to do so as well.



This issue of FRONTLINE SUPERVISION is written by Heather Hunt. FRONTLINE SUPERVISION (ISSN 1550-9699) is published every month by M. Lee Smith Publishers®, a division of BLR®—Business & Legal Resources, 100 Winners Circle, Suite 300, P.O. Box 5094, Brentwood, TN 37024-5094, 800-274-6774 or custserv@blr.com. © 2015 BLR®—Business & Legal Resources. Photocopying or reproducing in any form in whole or in part is a violation of federal copyright law and is strictly prohibited without the publisher’s consent. This publication provides practical information concerning the subject matters covered. It is provided with the understanding that neither the publisher nor the writer is rendering legal advice or other professional service. Some of the information provided in this publication contains a broad overview of federal law. The law changes regularly, and the law may vary from state to state and from one locality to another. You should consult a competent attorney in your state if you are in need of specific legal advice concerning any of the subjects addressed in this publication.