

HOW TO COMMUNICATE IN WRITING

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BUSINESS WRITING TODAY—AND YOU

LEARN HOW TO . . .

- 1.1 Define the value of good business writing to your career and to employers
- 1.2 Understand core principles common to all business writing that help equip you to handle all platforms
- 1.3 Choose the best communication channel for your purpose
- 1.4 Use this book for maximum benefit

As you begin this book, you may wonder why you should learn to write at this point in your education—or how much energy you should put into it. You may even be unclear on what business writing is.

Surprisingly, there is no simple definition. One way to describe business writing is by how we use it. Whether you work at a company, not-for-profit, or government agency—or work for yourself—you must write to...

- Accomplish your everyday work. To get things done and connect with other people, including bosses, coworkers, clients, and customers, you need to use email, memos, chat messaging, customer correspondence, social media posts, and more.
- Create “important” materials. Reports and proposals, profiles and résumés, blogs and publications are essential for achieving longer-range goals and succeeding in competitive situations.
- Develop spoken and visual communications: Speeches and PowerPoint-style presentations must be written, video other than the most minimal needs scripting, and websites deliver their message through the written word.

Writing, in short, is the heart of all business communication and this book covers all these aspects.

Business writing can also be defined as a collection of techniques and practices—a toolkit that includes both high-order planning strategies and practical guidelines for the

mechanics of writing. This too is a valid definition. *Business Writing Today* offers you the tools you need for knowing *what* to say and *how* to say it.

One more definition: We can see business writing as a set of ideal characteristics. When I ask people who have worked in a wide range of capacities to identify “good business writing,” they always come up with the same list, quickly:

- clear
- concise
- easy to understand
- conversational
- to the point
- obvious in purpose
- reader-oriented
- jargon-free
- appropriate level of detail

This is a valid definition too! Although it does raise a question: If everyone intuitively knows how to describe skillful writing, why do so few people write that way? Common experience tells us that most business writing is exactly the opposite: unclear, wordy, stilted, unfocused, full of jargon and not geared to reader interest.

Here are a few speculations. First, few of us learn practical writing in school. The academic writing we practice typically aims to demonstrate what we know, and its audience is usually the instructor. While it’s changing, this writing traditionally valued erudite language, abstract thought, and precision grammar—all of which are contrary to most good business writing.

Second, many people think if they didn’t master academic writing, they lack natural talent and are unable to learn business writing. This is untrue: I know first-hand that just about everyone can learn to express themselves clearly and effectively once they know what good business writing looks like and absorb the ideas and techniques to make it happen. This is the core subject of this book.

A third reason people hesitate to develop their writing skills: They expect it to be a dull grind of mastering grammar rules and spelling. Did you notice that neither of these qualities showed up on the “skillful writing” list? It’s not because “correctness” doesn’t matter. We need other people to read our messages quickly, understand them, and respond in the way we’d like. Boggling readers down with clumsy sentences and mistakes annoys them and clouds comprehension. But grammar and punctuation are secondary—they serve to deliver content rather than being important in themselves. Business writing can and should take a lot of liberties with grammar, depending on the platform, and I’ll show you how to draw the lines.

WRITING AND YOUR CAREER, NOW AND TOMORROW

If you're not yet convinced that writing is important, let's look at how it relates to the career journey you may have already begun, or plan to. Those who study the future say that if you're now a student, you may over the course of your work life take on 20 or more roles for various organizations in different industries, some of which do not yet exist. Straight-line career paths are increasingly rare. You will probably bounce back and forth between life as an entrepreneur and as an employee, switch specializations, and work at different points for companies, not-for-profits and government agencies.

Writing gives you a practical tool that works for you everywhere. It will smooth your way as you maneuver to new directions along your individual journey. It will show you how to use writing to win the opportunities you want, perform well in your roles, and accomplish your own goals. The business writing it guides you toward is part craft, part psychology, and part management strategy. Add a little detective work and a dash of imagination and poof! You own an almost magical tool for standing out. You know how to plan your message content in every situation for every platform, including those not yet invented. You know how to express yourself, present your ideas persuasively, get your needs answered and contribute to the arenas you choose.

Is that more than you expected? I hope it sounds like more fun than you thought, as well as worth close attention.

How Employers Value Writing

Employers across the board have learned over the years, the hard way, that bad communication is expensive. If you Google “cost of bad communication for companies,” you'll find estimates that losses in the United States range from \$26 billion to \$400 billion annually; and per employee, from \$5,200 to \$26,000. Whichever staggering figures you believe, they're attributed to communication mistakes, misunderstandings, inefficiencies and barriers between people and groups. Results include a loss of trust; alienated customers; unmotivated staff, and project failure, for starters. The spotlight began focusing on this enormous problem before the COVID-19 pandemic, which makes all enterprises even more dependent on effective communication, especially writing.

A recent report documents both the employers' new view of essential skills and the impact this shift has on those entering the career place. It's titled “The Power of Transportable Skills: Assessing the Demand and Value of the Skills of the Future.”

The researchers analyzed 150 million unique online job postings. They found that employers in a wide range of industries allocate a lot more importance to what they call “transportable skills” rather than the traditionally valued “hard skills”—technical expertise and content knowledge. ***The skill identified as by far the most in demand is communication.*** The data hold true across the board to jobs in management, marketing, public relations and communication, but also, more surprisingly, diverse careers and industries including the STEM professions (science, technology, engineering and mathematics).

In the report's words:

Transportable skills are valued at every stage of a career: They are critical to career entry, advancement and future-proofing... recent scholarship strongly suggests that they are essential to the success of individual workers and teams, employers and industries, and even entire economies.

The intriguing term “future-proofing” means that people armed with transportable skills are protected from dislocation that emerging technology may produce, such as robotics and artificial intelligence (AI). Who doesn't want to be future proof?

The top four transportable skills, in order of employer demand are:

1. communication
2. problem-solving
3. collaboration
4. creative and critical thinking

Especially valued and actively sought by most organizations are people who own more than one of these skills.

Here is where I make you a rash promise: ***Develop your writing skills and besides empowering yourself to use all communication platforms to your advantage, you will grow your facility with the other three transportable skills.*** And you will know how to communicate that you own them.

For more detail on transportable skills and how they enhance your employability, see the report: <https://www.burning-glass.com/wp-content/uploads/ThePowerOfTransportableSkills.pdf>.

The View From the Field: Why Good Writing Gets You Hired provides a more personal testimony to the importance of writing across industries.

VIEW FROM THE FIELD: WHY GOOD WRITING GETS YOU HIRED

The shift to a knowledge-based economy meant it was only a matter of time before people recognized that writing matters a lot, that strong clear compelling content affects the bottom line. But now they do. The realization is dawning at a time when even in communication firms, the number of people who can write is dwindling. —*Dan Gerstein, president of Gotham Ghostwriters and political consultant*

When someone is interviewing for a job, representing another organization or coming from a consulting firm, I judge them on their writing because it will affect me. If they can't write well, I'm stuck. In my job and others I work with, writing is so much of what you do that if you can't do it well you can't do your job well.—*Alicia Phillips Mandaville, vice president Millennium Challenge Corp.*

When I'm interviewing people, I like to give them a writing test. . . . I find that you can tell a lot more about a person's personality from a few paragraphs of their writing than from a lengthy verbal interview. Many people can pretend to be something they're not in person, but very few people can do so in writing.—*Phil Libin, Founder/CEO of mmhmm, cofounder EverNote*

The organizations I've worked with have made writing a much bigger part of their focus and screening process because if people can't learn to write they're relegated to a lesser role.—*Erin Mathews, consultant, international relations*

A nonprofit's messaging is critical to success. You need support from the community, donors, funders—and the only way you can get that word out is through writing: websites, brochures, appeal letters, reports to funders. Writing is even more important today because everyone is seeking the same amount of money from a more limited pool. Someone who can communicate powerfully and effectively will always go straight to the top.—*Ann Marie Thigpen, philanthropy consultant, founding director Center for Nonprofit Leadership at Adelphi University*

APPLYING GOOD WRITING PRINCIPLES ACROSS PLATFORMS

As you see, I am overly ambitious on your behalf. Have I promised you a lot? Will the same principles really work across platforms, current and future? Here's why I'm able to say so: *All business writing shares some commonalities*. If you learn to draft a great email, you're well on your way to drafting strong reports and proposals and even websites and speeches, to name a few channels. If you can create a good “elevator speech” to introduce yourself, you have a head start on developing good PowerPoint presentations. If you practice handling the materials covered in the chapters that follow, you can adapt the techniques to new and unfamiliar platforms.

How about my other rash promise: Why do I claim your problem-solving skills, creative thinking, and collaborative abilities will improve? Because learning how to use a step-by-step process for determining the content of each message gives you a solid structure to solve problems. It leads you to see the big picture, think systematically and come up with ideas. And because the way this book teaches writing orients you to see inside other people's perspectives, you know how to collaborate better and work with teams. You know how to create good relationships. All this makes you more valuable.

Here are some major factors common to all business formats. This rundown will also give you a preview of what's to come in subsequent chapters.

1. ***Good business writing is purposeful.*** When you write to anyone in a work context, from email to proposal, it's always an “ask.” It may be as simple as “read this message,” but in our information-overload world, even this can be a challenge because we're always so eager to hit *delete*. Scaling up, you may want someone to come to a meeting, send you information, adopt a recommendation, change their mind about something, or buy a product or service.

Such objectives are usually clear to you as the writer. But think past the obvious and discover a complete set of additional purposes. Beyond asking for an immediate result, *every* message should take account of your own set of below-the-surface goals. The challenge is to recognize and pay attention to them in creating both everyday messages and significant communications.

Do you want other people to perceive you as professional, capable, trustworthy, resourceful, and so on? Remember to promote this image of yourself by writing every message thoughtfully. People will accept your authority and reliability, typically without knowing why. To be heard, respected and liked, use every message to actively build relationships. Treat every message you send as an opportunity to move your career forward and you underwrite your success.

I don't claim that all these good things will happen overnight. *Big-picture goals are achieved incrementally.* Act on them in everything you write. This orientation helps you recognize opportunities you might overlook, like the chance to make a valuable connection, or take on an extra assignment to help someone out or stretch your abilities. Awareness of your goals helps you sidestep mistakes, too, like offending a client or coworker to gain a fleeting satisfaction.

This book will help you identify your own goals and build them into all your communication. It also keys you to understand the goals of people you work for, which makes you more valuable to them.

2. ***Good business writing is “you” not “me” directed.*** If you accept that everything you write for work purposes is an “ask,” it follows that in addition to knowing your in-depth goals, you must understand your readers. It's not that different from your personal life. When you ask anyone for anything, unless it's your kind grandmother, their response will be based on their own viewpoint, not your own. Marketers call this the WIIFM principle—what's in it for me. We vastly differ from each other in our life experience, what we value, how we make decisions, our priorities and worries. Always reason out *why* your target audience should give you what you want, and build the answer into the message, whether it's a request to postpone a deadline or work at home every day or buy your freelance service.

Communicating successfully with the people you work with and for rests on your willingness to decode their perspective. Increasingly, we need writing built on empathy to bridge between us and build relationships. Communicating feelings of respect, understanding and warmth helps counter the isolation that many people feel if they work remotely most of the time. Moreover, workplace diversification gives all of us more responsibility for extending ourselves beyond our own background, experience and beliefs. For these reasons and more, you'll find tools and techniques for characterizing your audiences and building empathy in the chapters that follow.

3. ***Good business writing is clear, concise, and reader-relevant.*** A successful business writer never counts on a captive audience: Every message must earn its readers. Even an email from the CEO may be happily ignored unless it says something like, “How the downsizing will affect you.” Scientists claim that the human attention span is

shorter than a goldfish’s—just eight seconds. This means that everything you write must immediately relate to its target audience, and once captured, readers must find the material easy to understand, to the point, and written in a straightforward way. Writing “simply” doesn’t mean producing simplistic material—it means being able to express even a profound or innovative idea in language other people can understand and relate to.

The good news is that clarity is basically accomplished by using short familiar words of everyday conversation, simply constructed sentences, and short paragraphs. This may mean you need to unlearn some elements of the style you’re accustomed to. But once you’ve done that and learn how to adopt a conversational tone, choose language that resonates with readers and build in a fluid cadence, you may like writing a lot more.

Note that I will not *tell* you how to write: I’ll *show* you, with demonstrations of how to think through every challenge, and how to identify your own writing glitches and fix them so your writing is as correct as it needs to be.

Communicating Your Own Value

Does so much emphasis on understanding other people’s perspectives mean you must submerge or even betray your own viewpoint, beliefs and values? Absolutely not! Consider selling something to a customer who speaks French, or Japanese, or any language you don’t know. You’d have to use gestures rather than words to pitch your product. Seeing into someone else’s perspective is much like that—it enables you to talk their language. That doesn’t mean you forget your own.

In fact, this book shows you how to use writing to understand your own strengths, skills, and uniqueness. This awareness—which few people have—enables you to outshine the competition for jobs and many other things. You know how to draw on your best strengths on the job and choose the opportunities that are best for you. Deep self-knowledge makes you a better advocate for your own ideas and values, as well as causes you believe in. Not least, when you know who you are and your value, you are more confident, more able to present yourself effectively in person as well as in writing. In all, you are a happier person, and it will show.

HOW TO CHOOSE THE RIGHT COMMUNICATION PLATFORM

Business communication offers many channels for delivering messages, and often it’s up to you to decide which is best. This book is about writing, but it’s not always your best option. Let’s start with that.

Don’t Choose Writing When...

The Subject Is Personal or You’re Negotiating. When it’s “how am I doing on the job,” “I have a problem with...” and “I’d like an opportunity to...” or “I want a promotion,” face-to-face discussion is best. If that’s not possible, try for conversation via telephone or Zoom. Advocacy, negotiation and problem-solving are best done face-to-face so you can see and respond to the

other person's expression and body language. And vice-versa. A useful tactic, however, is to ask for the conversation in writing. You can prepare for a confrontation with writing, too, as you'll see in a later chapter.

You're Complaining or Criticizing. Hesitate to criticize a coworker in writing; the relationship will never recover, and if you're sending the message to a boss, they won't much like having to deal with it. This is especially the case when the problem is interpersonal. Always try to resolve the issue with that person face-to-face. If that fails, and the matter is interfering with your own work, talk to your supervisor privately and use a neutral tone of voice.

What if you have a complaint about the organization, or how something is done? You can offer your thoughts to the boss but be sure you have a solid case and not just an opinion. And best to have a suggestion about how to improve something rather than attack what is. If you go over a direct supervisor's head, don't expect to be forgiven during your lifetime.

You're New on the Job or in the Role. When you're a newbie working in an office-type setting part of the time, take every opportunity to interact face-to-face with your boss and coworkers. Resist depending on written messages too much. Build a habit of interacting with people live. Walk around, introduce yourself, and look for chances to follow up with one-on-one conversations. You'll be seen as a people person. Colleagues will react more positively to your ideas and requests. You'll learn more and collaborate better. And you'll find it easier to write good messages because you know your readers.

More reasons: If the people you report to prefer another channel, like telephone or in-person meeting, don't ply them with written messages for day-to-day or important matters. It won't benefit you. Make the effort to be comfortable face-to-face. If a message creates a record whose permanence you may regret, don't write unless directly told to by a valid authority, and then be cautious... and never write when you're angry, frustrated, or exhausted. The results may haunt you.

Do Depend on Writing When...

You Work Remotely. For all the reasons already mentioned in this chapter, from everyday requests to reports and presentations and pitching for opportunities, writing is indispensable. But the role of writing when you work remotely is critical to success though rarely mentioned. This workstyle was already trending when the COVID-19 pandemic accelerated it hugely. In its wake, as I'm sure you know, many people decided they liked working not-at-the-office, and companies found that disinvesting in so much real estate was quite attractive. So now we have a whole new vocabulary: distributed workforce, hot desk, WFH, digital nomad, asynchronous communication, telecommute, hybrid team and so on.

Chances are good that by choice or not, you will sooner or later be hired for a job—or a project—without meeting anyone in the organization, even if you live nearby. Then you'll be onboarded remotely, which deprives a new hire of the chance to absorb how the organization functions or know their boss and coworkers. It works the other way around, too: it's hard for

them to know you. What can you accomplish without active communication? I can't think of anything. What's to be done?

Writing to the rescue! You will probably participate in teleconferences and phone calls, but writing is your best all-around communication staple. Consciously wield this skill as a remote worker to give yourself the best chance to succeed. Managers recognize this new preeminence of writing. More work is accomplished by hybrid teams, which must function across all boundaries of time and place. The system won't work without asynchronous communication—which spells “writing.”

To conduct everyday business, you must be able to use email well and often chat systems like Slack. You must draft good reports because it's the only way people can assess and coordinate with what you're doing. If you have an idea to contribute, a question to ask, or a problem to solve, it helps to write persuasively and tactfully.

Even more important, writing is your tool for building and nurturing your work relationships. It's a key way to demonstrate your value to those in charge so you can advance and grow. Therefore, create messages that align with all the principles of skillful writing mentioned in this chapter so far and explored throughout the book. But even more: Use your writing skills to deliberately counter the isolation so many people experience in being part of the remote workforce. Humanize what you write. Build respect and warmth and caring into your messages. See everyone as an individual and help them know you. Write as your best self to create trust, positive interactions, and friendships.

Business Writing Today offers a wealth of tools, techniques and strategies to make the most of the remote-work future that will probably be part of your career journey. I hope you will take advantage of your opportunity to develop this invaluable skill.

USING THE BEST CHANNEL FOR WRITTEN MESSAGES

To decide on the best communication tool, consider the enterprise you're working for and in each case, your purpose and the audience you want to reach. Take time when you're a newcomer to analyze the company's dominant communication systems, protocols and style. Does the organization function via email? Snapchat? Zoom? Phone calls? Is the tone generally formal, or friendly? If you're building your own business, think about what media your target audience will research to verify you and where they spend their time.

Here are some options you are likely to have.

Slack and Similar Workplace Messaging Systems: Choose this when you need to communicate something urgent and need a quick response—and on the other hand, when the matter is not that important. Generally, organizations use business communication platforms like Slack to connect staff on and off premises, and to centralize messaging, and files. It's the most informal business format and engenders chattiness. But don't become a nuisance by bombarding everyone with random thoughts, especially if they don't relate to their interests.

Email: This remains the central communication mode—the nervous system—for many organizations. Use it when the subject is important but doesn't demand an instant response,

and when you're communicating something complex (though it's geared to short form, so use attachments when you need more than a few paragraphs). Remember that emails are infinitely forwardable and can almost always be unearthed, so exercise reasonable caution.

Reports and proposals: Will typically be dictated by your situation and are important to the impression you make on bosses and clients. They are worth trouble, including your self-reports on how you invest your time. Use the techniques of persuasion in writing both kinds of material. And think “proposal” even when you're pitching a small idea to your boss.

Résumés and profiles: Given the probable twists and turns your career path will take, keep them up to date and high-energy at all points, even when you're not actively scouting. People in the market for help, whether for staff or freelance work, may want to find you, and you may want to be found!

Letters and personal notes: An overlooked practice and huge opportunity: Write letters of appreciation, congratulation, or just “hello” as often as you can find an occasion. No one thanks the boss, so try it. And thank coworkers, clients, customers, suppliers and so on. It pays to personalize. Handwritten notes are especially treasured and have helped build many notable careers.

Online media: Choices here are more complicated, and preferences change often. If you're working for an organization, find out which platforms it uses and other relevant facts: What is considered appropriate to post—does the company want you to post in its name? Or never? One absolute: Never criticize your employer or voice dissatisfaction with your job online! If you're marketing your own goods or services, go where your prospects are and use the platform with sensitivity to its audience's expectations and the platform's best practice guidelines.

Video, PowerPoint: Typically, it will be clear if you should use these media for specific occasions. But don't go out of your way to misuse them. For example, it is in exceedingly bad taste to post videos online announcing, gloatingly, that you're departing from a job. The shock value to your employer will not benefit you overall, starting tomorrow. If you value your reputation, resign the job in person and follow up with a very courteous confirming letter or memo.

HOW TO USE THIS BOOK

Preferably, work with this book in the sequence presented. The chapters lead you through a natural learning progression. Once you've practiced a systematic structure for strategizing all your writing, you'll learn practical, grammar-light techniques for sharpening your own writing. Subsequent chapters cover the various major areas of writing with a focus on how to apply the basic process you're mastering and adapt to the idiosyncrasies of each platform.

Starting with everyday messages, you build the capacity to handle more complex documents as well as visual, online and spoken media for which writing plays a significant role.

Each chapter includes a **View From the Field** with practical tips and guidance from practicing specialists: professional communicators, psychologists, businesspeople, graphic designers, and experts on specific kinds of writing.

Read with an open mind and absorb the strategies, consider the ideas, and experiment with the tips on how to improve your writing technically. Adopt what resonates for you. Engage in the **Practice Opportunities** at each chapter's end. Many of the examples and activities are drawn from real-world situations like those you are likely to encounter on the job. And you may enjoy the fact that many of the “how-to-improve” examples I use are drawn from my own first drafts.

A single book cannot, of course, cover every writing format. But the ideas and techniques offered in the following chapters give you the foundation for all business writing, even for platforms not yet predicted. The strategizing process will not fail you even faced with a platform you've never used. Know your audience and what you want. Put the techniques of persuasion to work. Build a repertoire of self-editing tools to help craft *how* you say it. Use writing to affirm your value and build your reputation, credibility, and authority. Remember that everything you write matters.

And commit to improve your writing skills as you move forward and sideways along your own path. Every professional writer I know works to keep getting better and amplifies their toolkits with techniques from fiction, scripting, poetry, essays and other forms. Every second you invest in writing will enrich your ability to express yourself and communicate on both the professional and personal level.

Giving yourself the gift of better writing always rewards, because *when your writing succeeds, you succeed.*

SUMMARY CHECKLIST: PLANNING YOUR BUSINESS WRITING EXPERIENCE

Do

- Believe that whatever your experience with writing, you can learn to be a good business writer
- Plan to develop your skills for everyday messaging and important materials, plus online, spoken, and visual communication
- View writing as a takeaway tool that smooths career transitions and helps you succeed in all roles
- Recognize the terrific value employers in every field and industry place on writing skills
- Understand the unique qualities of effective business writing
- Choose the right platforms for communicating your messages
- Interact with coworkers in person as much as possible
- Use this book's ideas, strategies and techniques to build your own writing toolkit

Do Not

- Assume that you cannot become an effective business writer
- Overlook incorporating your own professional goals into all your messaging
- Overdepend on writing when face-to-face interaction serves you better
- Criticize a person, or aspect of your organization, in writing
- Use any writing channel inappropriately or shortsightedly

And never

- Undermine yourself by writing thoughtlessly or disrespectfully to anyone

PRACTICE OPPORTUNITIES

I. Write a Memo to Yourself

Think about the career path you're preparing for. What written materials do you anticipate being called on to write? List them, including both the everyday kinds of communication (perhaps emails, tweets and social media posts) and formal business documents (such as reports, proposals and website material). For each entry on your list, think about what a well-written message might gain you and write that down.

II. Start a Personal Reference Resource of Good Writing

Collect at least three examples of writing you like from any arena such as newspapers, magazines, online articles, blogs and book excerpts. For each one, write a paragraph explaining why you chose it. Start a file for the examples and organize it however you like. Plan to add at least one example per week on an ongoing basis. The goal is to own a resource for your own inspiration and techniques you can adapt to your own use.

III. Hold a Group Discussion

In small groups, share one or more of the examples you collected for Activity II. Discuss: Does everyone agree on the quality of each example? If not, what are the reasons for disagreement? What generalizations can you make as a group about the characteristics of skillful writing? Does this give you any ideas about the ways you'd like to improve your own writing and what you want to learn from your class and this book?

IV. Begin a Personal Writing Improvement Plan

Collect some of your recent writing, for any purpose, including messages from your personal life. Also recollect any writing challenges you've found difficult to handle, whether at school or work or personally. Can you identify specific ways you'd like to improve your writing? Pinpoint your challenges with grammar, content, presentation and anything else. Write down your ideas as a starting point for what you want to learn about writing well.

V. Write About Your Needs as an Oral Communicator

Identify any elements of your in-person speaking skills that create uncertainty and worry. Many people find it difficult to handle confrontational conversations as well as presentations. Think through the value of gaining more confidence and what would help. *Business Writing Today* includes specific guidance for creating speeches and preparing for personal interactions, and many of the writing techniques throughout also apply. Write down what you'd like to accomplish in advancing your oral skills to help use the book's ideas.

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