

**SOCIAL AND EDUCATIONAL
ENVIRONMENT**

GUIDELINES FOR BUSINESS CORRESPONDENCE

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Abstract: *The paper focuses on some aspects of writing letters, and e-mails for business purposes. Some general rules are listed in order to create clear and effective letters or e-mails so that the writer may achieve their purpose: to be understood by the reader and to have the reader do the required tasks.*

Key words: *letters, e-mails, effective writing*

The world of business has always been based on up-to-date information put to good use with the help of excellent communication. Nowadays, more than ever, business communication is definitely related to information due to the massive invasion of technology in all aspects of life in the 21st century. Each and every type of business depends on communication, which is done most often in writing, as the 24-hour day is no longer enough to allow for conversations with all your (possible) business partners. From hierarchical organizations to flat entrepreneurial ones and to the most recent information-age organizations, written communication plays a major role, as most business people need to deal with writing traditional business letters, e-mails, reports, memos, promotional materials and different other documents.

From my experience, the majority of business people have not been trained to write for business, as verbal communication seems more appropriate when teaching/ learning Business English. Learning how to write is not one of the major preoccupations of business students as they do not see the immediate result, especially if they are not faced with those situations during their studies. In the end, when it comes to writing for business, many business people resort to teachers, trainers or their assistants, instead of doing it themselves.

However, with the ever-increasing use of technology, writing (especially effective writing) has become a major concern for business people who want to improve their business skills. In order to present your products or services, to request materials and information, to maintain

contact or to look for new business partners, you are faced with the single possibility of writing. Oral communication may not be as effective as the written one, words may be misunderstood, and communication may be hindered due to external factors. People may not have the time to answer to your questions over the telephone, but they will find a moment to deal with your e-mail. Face-to-face communication remains essential in business, but written communication is a major issue to consider in the long term. That is why I have chosen to identify some “golden rules” for busy students and business people preparing to write in English. The tips you are going to read are followed by distinctive chapters on writing business letters, e-mails, memos, reports, proposals, CVs and press releases with clear examples to be followed. They are aimed at intermediate to advanced business English students, either at the beginning of their career or already in business who would like to write their own compositions rather than to have it done by somebody else. What and how you write represents you as much as your physical appearance and helps you build good relationships. Remember that the written word is part of a company’s permanent record, while verbal agreements may be broken.

Although practice makes perfect here are a few suggestions to keep in mind when you begin to write.

Less is more

In one word: concision. Express what you want to say in fewer words than you would be tempted to do. Consider the fact that people have short attention span both as listeners and as readers, so get to the point. Make your writing clear, brief and easy to read; get your ideas flowing towards a conclusion. Think about what you would like to read and write as you would be one of the readers. Avoid lengthy sentences, especially those Romanian-like sentences which are more than 3 lines long. In today’s Business English the paragraph tends to be short. Consider the following:

In response to your letter of the 8th September 2011, relating in part to the printers and copy-machines you have ordered from us in August 2011 and also to the question of our possible meeting in connection with a discount for a bulk purchase, concerning the latter I would say that I could arrange a meeting with our manager on the 9th of October so that you could discuss further details.

Why not make it simpler and write:

In response to your letter of 8th September 2011, I would like to inform you that our manager could meet you on 9th October to discuss a possible discount for a bulk purchase.

Avoid specialized or technical language

Unless both you and your readers are used to such language belonging to your trade or profession, do not resort to terms that are difficult to understand without a dictionary. Try using simple words and phrases that can be understood without any efforts. Remember, you want to get your ideas across and not necessarily impress the reader with the amount of words that are similar to their Romanian correspondents. One of the reasons people are afraid of writing for business is that they have to use words like “synergy” or “pervasive”, to give just two examples, that ultimately, mean the same as “interaction” or “widespread”. While sometimes business documents or technical specifications require specialized words, most of the times it is sufficient to use plain language.

Pay attention to names, titles, and genders

It is embarrassing to call Mr. Jones “Ms. Jones” throughout a document. Or, to mistake the first name for the surname: Ivana Mihai, for example (how should you call him/her: *Dear Ms. Mihai* or *Dear Mr. Ivana*?). If you’re not sure about the spelling of someone’s name, about their job title, or their gender you can:

- ask someone who does know (their assistant, for example);
- in the case of gender, use the full name (*Dear Ivana Mihai*) and gender-neutral language, such as *you*, *your*, *they* and *their*. *He* and *she* have lately been replaced with the third plural pronoun (*they*) which is becoming an acceptable gender-neutral pronoun: *Every manager hopes that their project will go as planned.*

Take into consideration the Wh-questions

Remember the 5 Wh- interrogative words (and don’t forget the *How*): *Who? What? When? Where? Why?* and *How?* Before you write you should answer all the questions relevant to your audience. Who is going to read, what should they know, when and where will it apply,

why is it important to offer some information, and how will this information be put into practice? These six interrogative words will help you identify any questions raised by whatever you have written.

Consider your readers

Effective writing is more about what readers understand and use after you have given them some information and less about lists of product characteristics. Your product features should be replaced with the benefits a buyer may obtain from such a product. For example, a new machine that can “print up to 9 high quality color pages a minute, copy up to 6 photo quality A4 images a minute and scan 6 full color A4 documents a minute” is more likely to be described in terms of benefits for the potential buyer: that is, their work is done more rapidly. Remember that your readers would also like to do everything easier and better.

Proofread twice

There are two reasons why you should check your writing immediately after you have finished and a couple of hours (or even days) later. First, turn on the ‘spell-check’ on your computer. And even with this help, a second reading will point out that there are some mistakes that have skipped your attention. Remember that more often than not, people are harshly judged for their mistakes.

Second, typing errors and grammar mistakes are nothing compared to things said in anger. Re-reading the second day may offer you the opportunity to reconsider the emotions you want to transmit, especially in letters of complaint.

Formal or informal, be as professional as you can

Although most people tend to think that business writing is formal, the truth is that there are many informal pieces of writing in business communication, as you will see in the following chapters. However, informal is not a synonym of ‘rude’, ‘too familiar’ or ‘offending’. Keep in mind that everything you send may be used in public and goes to a certain record. The same goes for things you say on your blog or your Facebook page, so think twice about what a certain piece of writing would make you look like in a couple of years, or even less.

Ask for feedback or (re)action

Remember that the purpose you want to achieve is to get some feedback or (re)action from your readers, so let them know exactly what you expect from them. If you want to offer information or price lists, they can all be enclosed with your letter and not described in the letter. If you offer people plenty of time to decide, or lots of things to choose from, they will postpone the action, or even worse, choose nothing. So always use endings such as: *I'll call you... to discuss this matter. Please let me know if I can be of any further assistance. Once I have your approval, I will proceed with...*

Save a copy

Always save the document for future reference or even for future use, because there is a great chance that you will need it especially after it has gone into the recycle bin. However, don't forget to modify it before resending it to somebody else (names, personal details).

Pay attention to the introduction and to the conclusion

State a purpose and write towards a conclusion. The first paragraph should state the reason for writing. Do not get tangled in tedious personal details. An effective introduction aims to build readers' interest, to explain the purpose, and to provide a preview of the document. The conclusion should not introduce a new topic and it should not restate your ideas in other words (especially for short documents). It should, however, refer to future contact or require the receiver to take some action (see rule number 8).

Ask for help

If you know your writing should be more formal, and you are not sure about the style, always check with a professional to proofread it. Nevertheless, PRACTICE will help you improve both your business writing skills and your communication skills.

There is a difference between writing in school and the world of work

Remember that a teacher may assess your writing as being good even if your letter has a sloppy format. Teachers and trainers usually

appreciate the content and give you guidelines on letter format and appearance. However, in the world of business, one mistake may cost you the job you want or the order you are trying to get because your readers may consider you careless.

References

Luiza Caraivan. 2011. *Writing for Business*. Timișoara: Editura Eurostampa.

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