Writing for Your Reader

Learning Objectives

By the end of this chapter, you should be able to:

• Name three major categories of criteria for good business writing.
• Ask the central question you need to answer before you begin writing.
• List the three levels of potential readers within an organization.
• Name three ways of applying basic psychology to encourage readers to read your message.
• List five elements that contribute to an appropriate tone in most business writing.

Some people like to write. They feel creative and energized when faced with a blank computer screen or fresh sheet of paper. They put their thoughts down easily and need to do only a minimum of rewriting and reorganizing. Then there's everybody else. This second group—by far the larger—stares into space, sharpens every pencil within a five-mile radius, writes a sentence and then crosses it out, gets a cup of coffee, tries another sentence, rejects it, and finally picks up the phone and attempts to take care of business without having to write at all.

The problem with this solution is that not all business can be transacted by phone or in person. Even with the advances in communication technology over the past two decades, the ability to express oneself in writing remains an essential part of doing business. Fortunately, there are practical, concrete ways to sharpen your writing skills so that you can join the ranks of proficient writers. That's the point of this course: to learn to use the written word for
communicating information, presenting and defending your ideas, and persuading others to adopt your point of view.

Writing is a process of communication in which words, ideas, information, and emotions are conveyed in print from one mind—the writer's—to another—the reader's. As the writer, you can control your words and influence your readers' reactions. If you can get people to read, understand, and respond to your memos, letters, e-mail messages, proposals, and reports, you can be more effective in your job and more successful in your career.

It may surprise you to learn that a major portion of the writing process occurs before you put one finger on the keyboard. Savvy business writers begin, not by writing, but by thinking: thinking about why they are writing and about the needs, concerns, and psychology of the people who will read what they write. In this chapter, we will look at that prewriting stage. You will increase your understanding of good communication by learning criteria for clear, readable writing, as well as techniques for analyzing your readers and adapting your writing to their needs and interests.

ESTABLISHING CRITERIA

What constitutes good writing? It's a topic of considerable debate, especially when it comes to creative work, such as fiction and poetry, where taste and fashion play a large part in judgments of quality. Luckily for us, the basic criteria for good business writing are easier to define.

Good business writing achieves its purpose efficiently. That means it speaks directly to the subject under consideration in terms that readers can understand without undue effort, such as looking up words in a dictionary or rereading a sentence several times. Beyond this central characteristic, the quality of business writing can be judged within three broad categories: (1) content and purpose, (2) organization, and (3) style.

In Exercise 1-1, list what you think are the characteristics of good writing for each of these three categories.

Exercise 1-1: What Is Good Writing?

INSTRUCTIONS: ✤ On a separate piece of paper, jot down attributes that you think are important to good writing. Don't worry about what your English teacher told you, but instead think about what impresses or annoys you in the writing you read. After you've made your list, write each item under the appropriate category. When you have finished your list, compare it with the one in Exhibit 1-1.

Content and Purpose

______________________________________________________________

______________________________________________________________
We will discuss the attributes of good writing throughout this course. The criteria in your list and those in Exhibit 1-1 should be helpful in setting goals for yourself. They can also serve as a checklist for evaluating your writing after you have finished the course.
KNOWING WHY YOU WRITE

The point of business writing is communication, that is, the passing of information or perspective from one person to another. There are three elements in this equation: a writer, who conveys something about a subject to a reader, who, at the very least, understands what is being said.

Let's begin with you, the writer, and examine your reasons for writing in the first place. All writing has a purpose. Obvious as that is, people often sit down to write without having a clue why they're doing it or what they hope to accomplish. Nearly all business writing is done for one or more of three main purposes:

- To present ideas, recommendations, or decisions
- To explain something
- To persuade someone to agree with you or to join you in taking some action

A piece of writing may have multiple purposes, but usually one predominates. Sometimes your purpose will change in the course of your writing (writers frequently find out what they want to say as they write), so you may have to go back and rewrite certain sections. Nonetheless, it is crucial to think about your purpose before you begin.

To identify your purpose and make it explicit, ask yourself the central question: What do I hope to achieve, and why? That someone asked you to write something isn't a good enough reason; you need to go further in establishing your rationale. For instance, if your company is considering switching to a new public relations firm and you've been asked to put your thoughts about it in writing, your purpose could be to make something happen or to prevent it from happening, to position yourself if something does happen, to impress someone with your good sense, knowledge, or contacts, to support or thwart a co-worker, to lay the groundwork for launching a new advertising campaign, or to achieve some other goal. Each of these purposes would influence what you write and how you write it.

Once you've determined your main reason for writing, you can address other purposes by asking yourself journalist questions: who, what, when, where, why, and how. To whom am I writing and about what? What times and places matter? Why do I think this is a good or bad idea, and how can I make it happen or prevent it? You need to answer these kinds of questions as specifically as you can, and then you're ready to consider the other human element in the writing equation: the reader.

KNOWING YOUR AUDIENCE

Good writing is always appropriate writing. Of course, what is appropriate depends on context and readers, so good business writers think about their
audience early on. They ask themselves the basic question, Who are my readers? Usually there are several. Even if you name only one primary reader at the top of a memo, other people are likely to read it: for instance, people to whom you or the primary reader send copies, or people who look up the memo in a file five years from now. Sometimes these secondary readers are less familiar than your primary reader with the situation, terminology, or background, or they are at a physical distance. If these additional readers are important, you may decide to include more information, detail, or explanation.

After you have identified your primary and secondary readers, it is useful to analyze them further in terms of three variables: their position in the organization, their knowledge of the topic, and their personal characteristics.

**Position in the Organization**

Look at each reader's position within the structure of your organization. A standard organizational chart lays out hierarchies and lines of supervision and reporting. From these, you can infer a lot about the social and political relationships among people—who has power and authority over whom; who eats lunch and trades gossip with whom; who listens to whom; who promotes, rewards, or fires whom.

Some of your readers—your boss, for example—are above you in the organization. Some readers are your peers. If you are a department head, another department head would fall into this category. Other readers are below you, including the employees you supervise. Still other readers are completely outside your organization: for example, customers, clients, suppliers, government officials, consultants, and employees of other companies.

Exercise 1-2 is a model of relationships among different readers. Before we talk about how status and relationships affect your writing, complete the exercise by filling in each box with the name or title of a person to whom you write in the course of your work. Then think of the differences among the four types of readers in terms of these specific people. Finally, consider your social and political relationships with each of them and how all of that may influence your writing. Are you trying to impress or influence some of them? Who controls your ability to advance within the organization? Do you direct someone? How will the answers to these questions affect the style and content of a particular memo, letter, e-mail, or proposal you write?

**Exercise 1-2: Paths of Communication Based on Social and Political Relationships**

**INSTRUCTIONS:** Think of specific people to whom you write, then write their name or title in the appropriate box. Make sure you have at least one person in each box. Then, consider your social and political relationships with each of them and think about concrete ways in which those relationships affect your communication.
Higher-Level Readers
You're likely to want to impress readers at a higher level because they influence your work assignments and control your advancement in the organization. In addition, they probably use the messages you send as a basis for their own writing, recommendations, and decisions. For these reasons, and because protocol and courtesy demand it, you will probably use a fairly formal writing style. Formality is not the same as stuffiness, though, so the criteria of good writing apply here as elsewhere.

Lower-Level Readers
When you're writing instructions or reprimands to readers at a lower level, you may need to use an authoritative tone. For other messages, you may be friendly and casual, though you won't want to assume a false familiarity just because you are above them in the hierarchy. An error in tone in either direction—too austere or too familiar—may give the impression that you are uncomfortable with your position of authority or may offend people whose good will is important to getting a job done.

Peer Level Readers
The majority of written communication flows up or down in an organization, so you probably write to readers at a level comparable to yours only occa-
sionally. When you do write to your peers, you can't assume that they know everything you do; however, you must be careful to use a tone that acknowledges their expertise and status in the organization.

External Readers
For external readers, you want to promote a positive image of your organization, as well as of yourself. You may present a very different face to these readers than to your co-workers. It is especially important to avoid using organizational jargon, the technical or specialized language that members of the same profession or group share. It has its uses as a kind of shorthand, but it can be off-putting to people who aren't a part of the in-group. Unless you're certain that external readers will understand specialized terminology, explain it or stick to commonly understood words.

Knowledge of the Topic
Once you've analyzed the structural relationships between you and your readers, you need to ascertain your readers' level of knowledge about the topic at hand so that you can determine what they need to know.

Usually you're writing because you are knowledgeable about a question, issue, procedure, or plan. You have technical expertise and day-to-day familiarity with the subject, or you have the special background necessary for analyzing the situation. Knowing more about the topic than your readers means you will need to explain your ideas clearly. These readers lack the background that would allow them to read between the lines, and they shouldn't have to waste time guessing what you mean. This is another reason why it's important to avoid jargon and to define terms readers may not understand.

Because of the way responsibility is divided in most organizations, people superior to you in the hierarchy aren't necessarily superior to you in specific knowledge or expertise. Imagine an engineer who has been asked by a vice president in charge of planning to write a memo evaluating a proposed change in a manufacturing process. The vice president is probably relying on the engineer's technical expertise to help make a decision, so before writing the memo, the engineer must assess the vice president's level of knowledge to determine how much explanation or background information is needed. The engineer would do the same assessment when writing to someone else within the business.

Sometimes you do have to write to people who know more about the topic than you do. You may feel intimidated, incompetent, or unprepared, especially if you're worried that the reader will find fault with what you write. Even professional writers feel that anxiety at times; entrusting your thoughts to others to evaluate can be daunting, and putting them on paper even more so. One way past your fears is to concentrate on the purpose of your writing. Figure out what is required, and perhaps acknowledge your level of expertise. Then write what you need to say, clearly, simply, and thoughtfully. Writing, after all, is a task to be accomplished, not a test of character.
Exercise 1-3 is a model of your relationships with readers in terms of their comparative levels of knowledge. This exercise will help you pin down, in concrete terms, how your readers vary in their knowledge and expertise.

Exercise 1-3: Paths of Communication Based on Level of Knowledge

INSTRUCTIONS: Think of a specific topic you write about often. Then fill in the names or titles of people in the appropriate boxes, so that you have at least one name in each box. Finally, consider how these readers vary in their knowledge and expertise; that is, in which areas do you share a level of knowledge, and in which would you need to inform or educate each reader?

Personal Characteristics

In thinking about a reader's response to your writing, consider personal factors or frames of reference. Everyone processes information differently, depending on his or her culture, age, intelligence, gender, race, nationality, education, class, and the like. We are more than the sum of our socioeconomic profiles, but our values and attitudes are shaped by these variables as well as by our personal history.

With that in mind, here are a few more questions to ask yourself before you begin writing: Does the reader have preconceived ideas about my topic? What motivates her? What turns him off? Will age, gender, sexual orientation, or race influence this reader's response? The point isn't to pander to
your readers or to fashion your ideas to please them but to communicate with them in the most effective way. By considering each reader's frame of reference and adapting your communication accordingly, you increase the likelihood that your message will be understood, which is a critical step in the communication process.

Exercise 1-4 provides a checklist to help you assess the variables we've discussed: the reader's position in the organization, level of relevant knowledge, and personal characteristics.

Exercise 1-4: Consider the Reader

INSTRUCTIONS: Think of a topic you might write about and select someone who is likely to get a written message from you about that topic. Then answer the following questions.

Topic: _______________________

Name of reader: ________________

1. What is this reader's position in the organization?
2. How is this person related to you in the organization?
3. How will the subject of your message affect this reader's work or performance?
4. How much does this reader know about the specific topic in your message?
5. What action would you like this reader to take after reading your message?
6. What would motivate this reader to take the action proposed in your message?
7. What benefits can you point out to this reader?
8. Why might this reader resist taking the action you desire?
9. How can you reduce that resistance?
10. What personal or professional traits might affect this reader's response to your message?

Multiple Readers

If your audience is made up of several readers, they may well have different needs. In that case, focus primarily on the person who will make a decision or take an action based on your message. You can add any explanations or definitions that might be necessary for other readers without shifting the focus from your primary reader; similarly, you can add an attachment or other optional reading. If none of these techniques is appropriate, consider adding a personal note or talking to the secondary readers. In any case, in the body of the piece, avoid adding so much information for your secondary readers that the communication becomes cumbersome for the primary reader. A long memo or letter often goes unread. This is particularly true when the primary reader wants the big picture, not the details.
APPLYING BASIC PSYCHOLOGY

Along with adopting practical methods to ensure that your readers understand what you write, using some basic psychology in your writing increases its chance of being read and heeded. This involves being sensitive to your readers, both as individuals and as members of an organization.

Point Out Benefits to the Reader

If you want to convince readers to accept your ideas, one excellent technique is to describe how accepting those ideas will benefit them. What's in it for me? is a more powerful motivator than we may like to admit. Say you want to add an office manager to your staff in order to relieve you of some administrative work. Your motive centers on you, but if you justify your request to your boss in those terms, you're not making psychology work for you. If, instead, you point out that a manager would make your office more productive, thereby reducing your boss's work load and increasing the department's performance, then you're more likely to enlist your boss as an ally in promoting your idea. By thinking about your readers' motivations, you can choose appeals that gratify their needs as well as yours.

Consider the strategy a bank used to encourage people to have their government checks deposited directly. The following letter was sent to Social Security recipients:

Direct deposit of your Social Security check into your account at First National Bank can be a great convenience for you. It saves you a trip to the bank every month, especially in bad weather, and it ensures that your money will be available to you without delays.

Rain, snow, or cold weather won't stop your deposits. If you should be out of town or away from home for any reason, you can trust that your Social Security check will be in your account ready for you to draw on when you want it. What's more, you are freed from the usual inconveniences, such as getting a ride to the bank or standing in line on busy days. To sign up, just call our Senior Service representatives, Ms. Thelma Kwame or Mr. Donald McMahon. They are on hand during business hours to help you fill out the form and to answer any questions you have about our service.

This appeal is crafted for a specific audience: people who receive Social Security checks, most of whom are over 65 or are disabled. The message is crafted to reassure these readers about their likely concerns. Getting a ride to the bank, going out in bad weather, and even standing in line may be hardships for them, which the message acknowledges. They may be anxious about checks getting lost in the mail or stolen from mailboxes, so the message emphasizes the reliability of the service. Finally, it includes the names of bank employees whose job it is to help the reader fill out the necessary forms. This is intended to give a human face to the message as a way to assure those people who fear red tape, are intimidated by new technology (note there is no mention of Web sites, e-mail, or bank machines, though they are probably available to bank customers), and may not trust banks much to begin with.
To top it off, the heading on the letter reads, "Uncle Sam will be happy to deposit your Social Security check directly into your account at First National Bank." Instead of the impersonal federal government, a picture of a smiling and benevolent Uncle Sam appears at the top of the page. The appeal is well aimed and well written.

The bank does not mention the benefits it receives from direct deposits, though it undoubtedly wants to promote electronic transfer of funds to cut down on its own expenses. But the message would have been much less persuasive if the bank had stressed the benefits for itself rather than for its readers.

Consider the Reader's Point of View

Your first piece of psychology involves identifying the benefits to your readers. Your second is to present your message with their perspective clearly in mind. Focus on readers' concerns rather than on your own, and make your language reflect that focus. A good place to start is with the word you. Advertisers and salespeople have long understood the value of writing in the second person (you and your). They aim their pitches not at any old person out there but at you, the individual whose every need and desire will be met by buying their product, using their service, or patronizing their establishment.

As another example of an appeal focused on the readers' concerns, here is the opening paragraph of a memo sent by an insurance company to its employees, announcing an experiment involving a new, flexible summer schedule:

More leisure time ... working hours to suit your own lifestyle ... less congestion during rush hours ... your participation in helping to determine a company practice. Sound like a good thing? Well, it's here in our special Summer Hours program, and it may continue after this summer's experiment, depending on your reaction to it and your interest in helping the company maintain its high production level.

Notice how the writer of this memo stresses the benefits to the employees and includes the reader by using the second person. The need for a continued high production level, probably the major concern of management, is not denied, but neither is it emphasized.

Use an Appropriate Tone

Tone is the writer's attitude toward the reader and subject matter as expressed-intentionally or unintentionally-in the way a message is written. Chances are, you've received memos or letters that annoyed or angered you by their tone. They may have been patronizing, intrusive, snobbish, demanding, or too familiar, and your response may well have been to crumple them up and toss them out.

Since an appropriate tone depends on an appropriate attitude, the psychology of persuasive writing begins at home. The key to controlling the
tone of your writing is to imagine how the reader will respond and to choose words that will create the mood you desire. Words committed to paper carry more weight than spoken words, in part because they take on a life of their own once you send them off. Therefore, keep the following points in mind whenever you write for work.

1. When you're angry-about a slight, an unfair criticism, or a mistake that has harmed you, for instance—you probably shouldn't write at all. You may need to release your anger on paper or computer screen, but wait a while before you send what you've written. Chances are, when you calm down, you'll get rid of your first response anyway; then you can begin again more productively. You don't want to read a memo that opens You people are totally inept! and neither does anyone else. A hostile tone seldom gets you anywhere—even when it's justified.

2. It's always wise to avoid curtness, even if it springs from the laudable attempt to be concise and direct. Readers are human beings with feelings, and we don't like to be treated like a machine or an account number, as in this example:

This is to inform you that your application has been received. We are considering it and will let you know our decision soon. Please do not call to inquire.

3. Similarly, it is a good idea to phrase your message in positive terms whenever possible. People tend to respond better to positive words than to negative ones. Unless you have a specific reason for using negative language (writing an official reprimand, for instance), be positive. Also avoid words with negative associations. Even if you are negating negative words, your reader may retain a negative impression. Compare the following examples:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Negative</th>
<th>Positive</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>You won't be displeased with our chemical-free jam, which contains no harmful chemicals. Don't hesitate to call.</td>
<td>You're sure to be happy with our jam, which contains all natural ingredients. Please call today.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

4. In addition to choosing positive words, try to say what you can or will do, not what you can't or won't. Compare these approaches:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Negative</th>
<th>Positive</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Without your number, there is no way we can trace the record.</td>
<td>Please include your order number so that we can trace the record.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

5. Finally, let your readers know that you appreciate their cooperation or help by thanking them when it's appropriate. Though an obsequious tone is annoying, a simple thank you is always appreciated.
To see how tone can affect a longer message, look at this notice, which was sent to all the blue-collar workers at a large manufacturing plant:

The Company posted a Vacation Shutdown bulletin in March. This posting was designed to give employees ample notice to plan vacations accordingly. In that bulletin, the Company also stated that employees would be expected to take their vacations during the Vacation Shutdown period unless they were specifically requested to work.

The Company recognizes that there may be a few special situations that make it impractical for vacations to be taken during the Vacation Shutdown period. In such cases, the Company will endeavor to grant vacations in accordance with the employee's request. However, the number of such exceptions will be limited by the number of work assignments available during the Vacation Shutdown period.

If an employee fails to return the attached vacation request form by April 15, or if it is impossible for the Company to accommodate all of the employees' requests, those employees will automatically have their vacations assigned in the Vacation Shutdown period.

The manager who wrote this message probably saw it as clear, reasonable, and neutral: just the facts, and fair warning to the workers if they didn't get the vacation times they wanted. It's likely that he didn't intend to offend his readers, and it may never have occurred to him that he would. Imagine yourself as the reader, however—as one of those workers—and think about its tone. It sounds like the Company (with a capital C no less!) is a feudal lord passing down an edict to the peasants. You wouldn't be unreasonable in assuming that the tone reflects the writer's attitude toward you, or in resenting being treated like a serf.

Let's look at how the language in the notice creates this gap between the perceptions of writer and reader. In the first paragraph, the writer stresses how much foresight the company had. The phrases posting was designed, ample notice, employees are expected, unless requested create a big distance between the company (the writer) and the employee (the reader). It doesn't help that the message is written wholly in the third person (the Company, the employee). That makes the writer seem like a faceless bureaucrat and casts the reader in the role of someone trying to get away with something. Overall, the tone is self-righteous and defensive, with the writer putting himself in the right before anyone says otherwise.

Particularly in the second paragraph, the company sounds like that lord who will endeavor to grant requests from his humble petitioners. Finally, in the last paragraph, notice the negative words (fails, unable, impossible) and the negative assumption that the readers won't return the request. Not the best way to enlist cooperation, is it?

Looking at this message from the readers' point of view helps you understand the importance of tone. If the writer had looked at the message this way before sending it, he could have rewritten it with more sensitivity to the workers' feelings. As it was, it created quite a flap in employee relations.

Exercise 1-5 lets you practice using the five elements of an appropriate tone discussed earlier to rewrite this notice more effectively.
Exercise 1-5: Writing with an Appropriate Tone

INSTRUCTIONS: Rewrite the three-paragraph memo on page 13 using an appropriately positive tone that takes into account the needs and motivations of its readers.

Your version:

Here is one possible revision written with a more positive, less haughty tone. Though there are many good ways to write the same message, compare this with the one you wrote and see how you did.

You will recall that we posted a Vacation Bulletin in March to provide you with time to plan your vacation schedule for this year. As we noted then, we would appreciate it if you would take your vacation during this shutdown period, unless you have been asked specifically to work then.

If special circumstances make it inconvenient for you to take your vacation during the shutdown period, please discuss this with your manager. In any case, we need you to return the attached request form by April 15. Your cooperation will help us in our planning and scheduling. Thank you.

This first chapter has focused on four activities that are central to the beginning of the writing process: identifying the criteria of good writing, which are listed in Exhibit 1-1; knowing why you're writing before you begin; understanding your readers; and adapting your writing to their needs. Understanding your readers includes considering their position in the organization, their level of relevant knowledge, their frame of reference, and other variables that shape their motivations and attitudes as they apprehend and respond to your writing. Adapting your writing to your readers' needs involves pointing out the benefits to them of your proposal or idea, considering the reader's point of view, and using an appropriate and preferably positive tone.
This is just the beginning. As you continue reading, you’ll learn other techniques to ensure that the reader understands your message and responds positively to it. You will also learn additional ways to adapt your writing to your readers' needs and purposes, and you'll practice making language work for you to accomplish clear and compelling written communication.
1. What are the major categories of criteria for good business writing?
   (a) content, grammar, and style
   (b) purpose and direction, clarity, and conciseness
   (c) accuracy, efficiency, and content
   (d) content and purpose, organization; and style

2. Why is the following sentence poorly phrased?
   It gives us great pleasure to announce that we have just gotten our Web site up and running, which will make it easier for us to do business.
   (a) It is too long.
   (b) It focuses on the writer, not the reader.
   (c) It doesn't mention any drawbacks.
   (d) It is too informal.

3. In identifying your purpose in writing, which question is useful to ask yourself?
   (a) What do I hope to achieve?
   (b) How can I avoid criticism of my writing?
   (c) What did my boss praise in my last piece of writing?
   (d) Who is a better writer than I am?
4. Choose the best revision of the following sentence:

If you fail to provide the specifications by the May 1 deadline, the project will fail.

(a) If, for whatever reason, you cannot get us the specifications by May 1, we will all be in trouble.
(b) By providing the specification by May 1, you can help assure that the project will go ahead as scheduled.
(c) Please don't fail to provide the specifications by the May 1 deadline.
(d) In order to avoid failure, be sure not to miss the May 1 deadline.

5. Which of these appeals is most likely to convince your boss to approve your request to attend a professional conference in Phoenix?

(a) I wasn't able to take a vacation this summer, so I deserve to go to this conference.
(b) I'll learn a lot by visiting a city I've never been to before.
(c) I've been asked to give a presentation, which will bring attention to our work here.
(d) Everyone else in the office has traveled for work this year, so it's my turn.