

# **A Crash Course in Business Writing**

## **Basic Rules, Challenges and Pitfalls**



**ANTONIA ENACHE**

**A Crash Course in Business Writing**  
**Basic Rules, Challenges and Pitfalls**



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## Foreword

In today's fast-paced and interconnected business world, effective communication is the cornerstone of success. Whether you're an aspiring professional or a seasoned executive, the ability to convey your thoughts, ideas, and intentions clearly and persuasively is paramount. *"A Crash Course in Business Writing"* is your indispensable guide to mastering the art of communication in the corporate realm.

In this comprehensive and insightful book, the author delves into the intricate world of business writing with clarity and precision. As you embark on this journey, you'll discover that business writing is not just about crafting words on paper; it's about forging connections, building relationships, and driving results.

The book begins by dissecting the nuances of formal versus informal language, a fundamental distinction that sets the tone for your communications. From there, it navigates through the intricacies of crafting business letters and emails, teaching you how to structure your messages, strike the right tone, and convey your intentions effectively.

With chapters dedicated to enquiries, replies, quotations, orders, complaints, and adjustments, *"A Crash Course in Business Writing"* equips you with the skills to handle a myriad of business scenarios. Whether you're seeking information, negotiating terms, or resolving issues, this book provides you with the tools to articulate your thoughts with finesse.

In today's digital age, the importance of writing for the internet cannot be overstated. The author guides you through the art of creating compelling content for websites, blogs, and social media platforms, enabling you to engage and captivate your online audience effectively. Furthermore, the

book explores the world of press releases and advertorials, unveiling the secrets to crafting attention-grabbing publicity materials that demand attention and drive results.

Perhaps one of the most valuable aspects of this book is its focus on reports and proposals. These documents play a pivotal role in decision-making within organizations, and "*A Crash Course in Business Writing*" demystifies the process of creating impactful reports and persuasive proposals that can influence key stakeholders.

Throughout this journey, you will find practical tips and real-world examples that reinforce your learning. As you immerse yourself in the world of business writing, you'll gain the confidence and expertise needed to excel in your professional endeavours.

In closing, "*A Crash Course in Business Writing*" is not just a book; it is a roadmap to becoming a more effective and persuasive communicator in the world of business. I encourage you to absorb its wisdom, put its principles into practice, and watch as your written communication skills transform, opening new doors and opportunities in your career.

Prepare to embark on a transformative journey through the pages of this book. Your destination? The mastery of business writing and the power to influence, inform, and inspire.

Associate Professor Marina Militaru, PhD

## **Part 1**

### **A Few General Remarks on Business Writing Nowadays**

#### **1. Introductory remarks**

Nowadays, good communication skills represent the backbone of any business. They are of crucial importance both for the employee and for the company overall. In today's world, in the knowledge-based society, where life unfolds at an ever more powerful rhythm, where a fiercely competitive environment shapes our lives from kindergarten to the age of retirement, communication in general and written communication in particular have acquired new dimensions to which we must adjust as a student, as an employer, as an employee etc.

Communication represents both the way in which we convey and receive information, and our ability to position ourselves against the world, against the others, having a significant impact on the way we are perceived, on how we come across before others, on how we achieve our professional goals as well as our general goals. Communication efficient both in terms of informativity and in terms of its emotional impact helps build our own personal brand, consolidates professional relationships and partnerships and successfully capitalizes on our limited time resources, having a long-lasting effect upon our professional evolution and ensuring a safe, steady road to success.

#### **2. What is “good” business writing?**

When writing in a professional context, our purpose should be clear and the document should have a positive effect on the reader. We are emotional

beings and we react in unpredictable ways, that oftentimes have more to do with how we feel, with the emotions aroused in us, than with a rational interpretation of the written message. Therefore, when writing, it is important to see things from the reader's perspective and foresee the way in which they might be likely to react.

The main aspects we must keep in mind when crafting a text include assessing and understanding the target audience, organizing ideas in a fluent and coherent way, choosing the adequate register and style, and not forgetting to revise the text one last time before sending it. One of the most common mistakes we make when writing, especially when there is much at stake from a professional perspective, is to rush towards sending the text without going through it one last time.

It is important to not fall into the trap of impatience and to not skip the final revision – some mistakes may become visible only at that point and, even if we can find no actual mistake, we can feel more insightful as to the content, we may add something important or rearrange ideas in a way that makes more sense.

Unlike verbal interactions, where participants gain insights and draw conclusions based on a number of factors that transcend the actual words (let us not forget that an important part of spoken communication is non-verbal, hence we have things like facial expressions and body language to help us assess people and situations), when we communicate in writing, the information is conveyed exclusively by means of words. There is nothing beyond them, so their impact is decisive and may sometimes irreversibly affect a business situation. It is for this reason that appropriate writing is a skill to be reckoned with – it is considered a “soft skill”, a skill that is not characteristic of a certain profession, such as the knowledge of a language, but has to do with bonding with the interlocutor, with building up rapport, with empathy and emotional intelligence.

For a long time, hard skills, such as skills in technical subjects, were considered the most important thing not only in business, but in other lines of work as well. However, in recent years, people have become increasingly

aware of the importance of soft skills, namely “the skills you need to work with other people” and, in the case of managers, “the ability to manage people in tactful and non-dictatorial ways” (Mascull, B., 2008:26). In fact, one of the most important traits of good leaders has to do with emotional intelligence and a high EQ (emotional quotient), while a lack thereof may result in “increased staff turnover, low creativity, poached talent.”<sup>1</sup> In today’s fiercely competitive environment, you cannot attract and retain top talent without handling these people in a flexible and empathetic way – emotional intelligence is not about being soft or cuddly, it is about being aware of the emotional needs of the person in front of you and about seeing things from a perspective other than your own.

If emotional intelligence is a powerful asset in a person’s life, encompassing all the dimensions of their existence, in the business world, successfully writing documents establishes your own personal brand not just as an individual, but also on behalf of the company you represent. Efficient mastery of this skill may result in lasting professional success, in fruitful business partnerships and in a steady, sustainable increase in profit, which may also translate into better pay for the employees.

One other aspect that people sometimes fail to remember reflects the fact that, in good business writing, no word is unnecessary. This particular type of writing is devoid of any fluff, both in terms of language and in terms of content. Ideally, we should only write what is necessary and eliminate both non-contributing words and the rendering of facts that are not relevant for the issue at stake. Striking just the right balance between avoiding both a shortage of information and information overload may turn out to be an unusually difficult challenge, especially for young people who grew up learning that more text means better text and that quantity overrides quality. In business writing, you have to do away with everything you have learned so far and acquire a new and completely different writing style, which upends your previous understanding of language and communication altogether.

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<sup>1</sup> Pickles, Helen, 2000: *You’ve got the brains but have you got the touch?* Retrieved from <https://www.theguardian.com/theobserver/2000/jan/09/newyou3>, accessed on June 21, 2023.

Furthermore, business writing always has a goal, otherwise you would not go to the trouble of interacting; the underlying intention behind any text is to obtain something, even if the writer may only pursue the consolidation of a partnership; that may be a goal in itself. Naturally, the goals may be more concrete, such as closing a sale or chasing payment; either way, business writing is always a teleological undertaking. In this respect, any text incorporates both an informative dimension and as a persuasive one.

Appropriate writing is different in meaning from correct writing. Thus, while the latter refers to mastery of the language (the accurate use of grammar and vocabulary), the former transcends the borders of correctness into realms that pertain to domains adjacent to linguistics, like sociolinguistics, rhetoric and psychology. If we start from George Yule's definition of communicative competence as "the general ability to use language accurately, appropriately and flexibly" (Yule, G., 2020:227), we can accurately state that a person's sociolinguistic competence includes *appropriate use*, *strategic competence* and *flexible use*. None of these dimensions have to do exclusively with grammar and vocabulary, but with features therebeyond. It is for this reason that sometimes people who display perfect mastery of a language may stumble upon difficulties stemming from appropriate writing.

In the knowledge-based society, which is technologically advanced and highly competitive, communication has to keep up with the alert rhythm of life, therefore mutates continually to adjust to the shifts in society, in the workplace and to changing mentalities. Language is known to reflect the mentalities, attitudes, beliefs and lifestyle of an era; moreover, with the advent of the internet and the shift of communication towards the online environment, life has come to unfold at an unprecedented rhythm, and communication has to keep up.

As has been mentioned above, as an employee, you do not write in your own name as a natural entity, you write on behalf of your company; hence, inadequate communication and faulty writing can translate into face loss, bad reputation, loss of contracts and eventually profit loss, an outcome that

will negatively impact all the company's stakeholders. By contrast, in order to build and maintain a fruitful business relationship, the ability to write a document correctly, adequately and efficiently represents a fundamental business skill nowadays, a skill that gives a significant edge to your employer in the local, national and international business environment. Amongst the benefits deriving from mastering this skill, we can think of increased efficiency, profitable relations with stakeholders, credibility, a good public image, all providing irreplaceable advantages in the modern business arena.

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\*   \*   \*

Broadly speaking, good writing translates into three main dimensions:

1. ***Correctness / accuracy***, meaning that you know the language in terms of grammar and vocabulary and will not make mistakes;
2. ***Adequacy***, meaning that you are deferent to the interlocutor and you know how to approach them depending on who they are (age, position in the company, culture) and also on the setting, the purpose and the interpersonal relationship – it is at this point that emotional intelligence prevails;
3. ***Efficiency*** pertains to the results, showing whether you attain them or not. If you manage to obtain that discount, that money owed to you or that order you were aiming for, that is the ultimate proof your writing has been successful.

To accomplish that, there are several aspects to be taken into account.

Firstly, ***the content*** of a document is of the utmost importance. In other words, the information conveyed must be carefully screened: none of the relevant points should be omitted while, at the same time, avoiding information overload is equally important, as it has an effect opposite to the one intended. If the text is too long, if the writer loses themselves in a cluster of unimportant facts, the recipient might not only overlook crucial

points, they might also get irritated and discard the text altogether, or respond negatively to it.

Secondly, *the structure* defines the way in which the points are organized, the order of the main ideas, as well as the connections therebetween. Ideas must flow coherently from one another, there should be logic and coherence to the text and you should beware of putting together paragraphs that have no logical connection to one another – if ideas seem to be randomly amassed, the text will come across as sloppy and the overpowering impression will be that the writer could not be bothered to make the slightest effort to draft a coherent document.

Thirdly, *the register* is important – you must be aware of the differences between various language registers and choose the appropriate one. Here, we must point out that business writing is traditionally carried out in the *formal* register, although more recent textbooks increasingly recommend a shift towards the *semi-formal* one, for reasons we shall explain later on in our research.

Another very important aspect to take into account is *the target audience*, or the reader(s) of your text. Significantly, there is no ideal reader that ideally responds to a text; thus, if not very experienced, a person tends to make two main errors in judgement:

1. The first one is to treat the target audience as a homogeneous group with predictable reactions; in reality, audiences are not homogeneous, nor can reactions be infallibly predicted; written correspondence must be carefully tailored in order to cater for the expectations of one specific reader / group of readers, while writing for the internet should start from the opposite assumption: that anyone can get to your text;
2. The second mistake a writer can make, is to treat the audience as a passive entity; this, again, is wrong. Recipients are never passive; even if their response is not instantly visible, there is bound to be one; some form of feedback always exists, even in the absence of a concrete reply to a document. Hence, a letter inappropriately drafted can result in the ending of the business relationship, while a memorandum that is written without any



empathy towards the staff may result in the latter's low productivity, low morale and even resignation. Similarly, a badly written social media post may directly lead to a decrease in sales and a damaged reputation. The kind of reactions one is to gauge in advance stems from the type of document transmitted, the purpose of writing and who the expected reader is.

Every time a text is read, the response arises pursuant to two dimensions: a *rational* one, triggered by the actual information conveyed, and an *emotional* one, triggered by the way in which the text is organised and drafted – this will convey an impression of trustworthiness, empathy and respect, or, respectively, a lack thereof. The ability to convey this impression, which transcends pure linguistics, pertains to *emotional intelligence*: the more we try to understand the others and to structure our actions to allow for their perspective, the more attention we pay to their needs, the easier our own lives will be. Every time we address someone, we should remember the unwritten sentence that exists on everyone's forehead – *What's in it for me?* If we focus on the interlocutor's goal instead of on our own, our chances of success increase dramatically, and this investment of time and effort that we make in keeping our professional contacts may turn out to be one of the most profitable we have ever made.

As far as *the coherent organisation of ideas* is concerned, although it varies depending on the type of text we are writing, there are some general criteria that apply in most cases. Thus, the most important ideas, facts and information ought to appear in the main body of the text, while the introduction and conclusions ought not to present anything new or heavy, since their role is mainly that of providing a socially acceptable form for the document. Each idea must be fully developed, using a variety of grammar and vocabulary structures in the case of more complex ideas, and, as we have said before, special attention must be paid to striking the right balance between insufficient information and information overload. Another delicate challenge stems from the fact that sentences must be complex, but not convoluted, and this is often a fine line to consider.

While the fact that linking words and phrases are important is generally accepted, as they provide coherence and make ideas flow logically from one

another, we must point out that they are not equally important in all documents. Naturally, they are of utmost importance in documents that have no other means of ensuring structure (except paragraphing) and present themselves as just a chunk of text (such as letters); by contrast, in reports or proposals, the heading / subheadings / sections / subsections structure inherently supplies coherence and linking words become less important. For this reason, they are more rarely used in reports and proposals, if at all.

### **3. Levels of formality – registers**

Users of English, even proficient ones, oftentimes find it very difficult to differentiate between various levels of formality, or registers. Since their knowledge of the language primarily stems from communication on the internet, which is mostly informal, and from watching American movies, a common tendency they slip towards is incorporating informal elements into documents that are supposed to be formal, or at least semi-formal.

To clarify this issue, we need to point out that language theorists generally agree on the existence of several registers, as follows (Nordquist, R., 2019):

- *the frozen or static register* – generally refers to historic language or communication that is intended to remain unchanged, like a constitution or prayer;
- *the formal register* (less rigid but still constrained, used in professional, academic or legal settings where communication is expected to be deferent) – this is the register that traditional-minded linguists recommend for business writing; however, as we shall see below, not all authors recommend this register, especially in recent years;
- *the consultative register* (used in conversation, mainly when asking from advice from someone with specialized knowledge) – since this register pertains to spoken language, we shall not dwell thereupon, as it transcends the purpose of our research;

- *the casual or informal register* (used when interacting with people we know well, such as co-workers, friends and family) – this, again, goes beyond the scope of our research;
- *the intimate register* (used only with those we are extremely close to) – this, again, goes beyond the scope of our research.

There are other theorists who agree on the existence of a *familiar register*, which would be just another way of referring to the informal register – hence, this is used by people who know each other well and it translates into bending the rules of grammar, spelling and punctuation up to the point where it identifies with slang. Conversely, there exists a *ceremonial register*<sup>2</sup>, similar to the frozen one, rarely used these days and usually encountered in transcripts of speeches or historical documents.

While, out of the registers mentioned above, the only one that concerns us directly is the *formal register*, we will also look into the advent of that has been called the *semi-formal register* (Marinescu, R.E., Nicolae, M. and Şerban-Oprescu, A.T., 2019: 233), a relatively new style that can be placed in-between the formal and the informal ones. In lay terms, we could say that the semi-formal register is the formal register with some transgressions – for instance, verb contractions, phrasal verbs and some less formal verbs and nouns can be used; nevertheless, a significant number of formal elements are preserved, one needs to remain deferent towards the interlocutor, and all the constraints deriving from distance (the respect we owe strangers) and power (the respect we owe our superiors) still stand. The objectivity and neutrality required in professional settings also remain important. If we were to look into the causes of this shift, we could conclude that “the semi-formal register has emerged in response to both the requirements of popular culture and to the increased interactivity of human relations in the online world” (Enache, A., Militaru, M. and Dima, V.V., 2021: 184), as online communication is inherently less formal and language just had to keep up. In *Part 8* of our research, we will look into the reasons why the internet is by definition a less formal channel of communication and has therefore

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.awelu.lu.se/language/register-and-style/register-types/>, accessed on September 18, 2023.

morphed the 21<sup>st</sup> century communication paradigm into a more casual one altogether.

It is not difficult to see that, lately, professional communication across the board has shifted from a very academic style to a more casual one, as this change occurs in all major domains: in journalism, academia, politics, etc. As we have said already, we believe that the modern lifestyle, where our existence unfolds within a multiscreen universe, is responsible for this to a large extent. Life in this day and age is based upon globalization, interconnectivity, interdisciplinarity, multiculturalism, alongside the advent of the internet and the rise of the email and of social networks as the main channels of communication, which have all contributed to the increased informality of language. Physical and social distance shrink through the screen, everyone is increasingly more familiar with everyone else, hence the informality of language, a trend not likely to go away; if anything, it has only grown more stronger in, and due to the Covid-10 pandemic.

While everyone agrees that good writing is essential for the success of a business, differences of opinion emerge as to what exactly good writing is. Thus, while older, more traditionally-minded theorists advocate for a formal, highly deferent style, newer authors strongly recommend a shift towards the semi-formal register. “In the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, business was conducted in a much more impassive, formal way than it is today. (...) The writing that evolved then became very formal, using long-winded, quite overbearing language.” (Taylor, S., 2012: 29). The latter category of authors contend that business nowadays is carried out in a less formal manner, and that the way in which long-lasting partnerships emerge has to do more with friendliness and a casual style than with distance and deference. Naturally, that is not to say that parties can be disrespectful to one another; rather, what is meant is that the concept of respect itself has shifted in meaning, morphing into a more casual approach to communication. This, we believe, is due not only to the advent of the internet, but also to cultural aspects, such as the influence of the American business style, which is more open and relaxed.