

Bite-Sized Training™

Written Communication



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1. Introduction

Think about how much time you spend writing, formally and informally, every day. You may have to write reports for clients, emails to colleagues, presentations for the board, or even blog posts for your company's intranet.

Each piece of writing is an opportunity to make an impression; and that impression can be positive or negative, depending on how well you write.

Two main elements determine the effectiveness of your written communications: the quality of your message and the standard of your writing. When you present a well-crafted argument, your ideas will be received more positively. And, the more skilled you are at writing, the clearer your message will be. Because these two elements work in unison, when you neglect one, you give a poor impression of both.

For example, a sales letter with a persuasive message will lose impact if it's riddled with grammatical mistakes. Likewise, a report written by an English professor will fail to impress anyone if it has little substance.

This **Bite-Sized Training™** session gives you the tools you need to improve your written communications. In it, you'll:

- Find out how to construct an effective message.
- Learn about the most common mistakes that people make in written communication.
- Hone your own writing skills with some practice exercises.

By the end of the session, you'll have more confidence in your ability to prepare high-quality written documents. As a result, you'll be able to write more persuasively, and convey your message in a way that allows the reader to focus on your argument, without being sidetracked by poor style or grammar.

2. Writing Isn't Just a School Exercise

Writing is an important skill in today's workplace. From presentations and emails to sales letters and reports, good writing translates to good business. When you write well, you can persuade others, and you can make a great positive impact.

Poor writing, on the other hand, creates a negative impression, and it means that people need to ask you for clarification. A badly written piece screams "unprofessional," and, even if you have great ideas, readers will either misunderstand them or dismiss them.

One way or another, ideas drive business success, and being able to communicate these through writing is a critical skill. Also, with the technology we have today, we increasingly communicate in writing. Our organizations are more complex, and our work relationships are increasingly interdependent. We have to keep many people informed, and the most efficient way of doing this is to write reports. Add this to the writing that we do for sales purposes, and you quickly see the importance of written communication.

With effective writing, you can produce:

- Technical reports that are clear and easy to understand.
- Emails and memos that are concise, and that motivate readers to take action without the need for further explanation.
- Sales and customer service copy that strengthens and builds relationships.

As we mentioned earlier, written communication has two key components: the message and the writing. We'll look at both of these in this session.

Note:

Some people don't prioritize correct punctuation or perfect spelling. If you're one of these people, getting this right is likely to be a challenge. Don't ever assume that others have the same attitude – this matters a lot for many people. Always aim to present work of a quality that will satisfy your fussiest reader. That way you can communicate effectively with the widest possible audience.

3. Crafting the Message

Your thoughts and ideas are the backbone of your writing, and they provide its substance.

To get your message right, you first need to analyze what you are writing about, and then plan the most effective way to present your information or argument. To do this you need to:

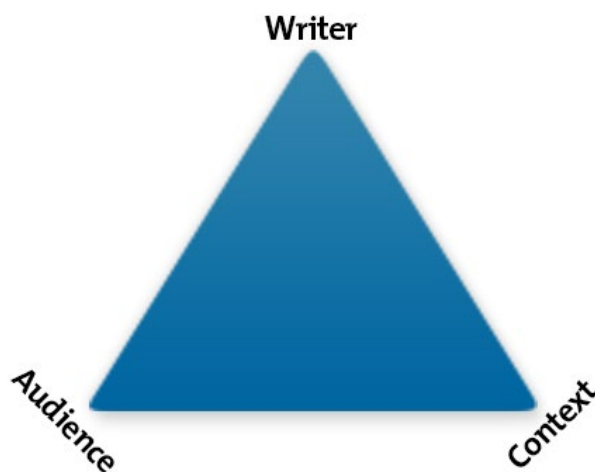
- Be clear about your reason for writing.
- Understand your audience's needs.
- Analyze and organize the context of the message.
- Write a great introduction to hook the reader.
- Organize the body of the document.

When you put your thoughts and ideas in writing, you have one chance to capture your reader's attention. Your words need to move them to action, or convince them that your argument is worth listening to.

To help you do this, we'll look at an approach based on the "[Rhetorical Triangle](#)." This is a tool that applies the principles of rhetoric to help you structure an argument. According to the Rhetorical Triangle (see figure 1, below), there are three areas that you need to consider:

1. The writer's purpose.
2. The audience's needs.
3. The context of the message.

Figure 1 – The Rhetorical Triangle



Step One: Understanding Your Purpose

To write effectively, you need to understand why you're communicating in the first place.

When you know your purpose, this will come across to your audience. This means that they won't be suspicious of your motivations, and they'll be able to concentrate on your content.

As an example, you're now going to prepare a short report that informs your team, peers, or co-workers about a project that you're currently working on. The objective is to follow the steps below to create a powerful, clear, and well-written message.

Note:

For the purposes of this exercise, we won't include all the components of a full report, such as an executive summary or an appendix. For more on this, read our article on [writing reports](#).

Action:

Choose a project that you're working on to use as an example, and describe it briefly in the box below.



The next step is to communicate your purpose. Some common purposes include:

- Asking for action.
- Providing information.
- Educating.
- Persuading.
- Entertaining.

When you're 100 percent clear about your purpose, you'll stay on track when you write your report.

For example, if your audience expects to read about a certain topic, but you suddenly start writing about something else, your credibility can sink. You lose your readers' trust, and the body of your message becomes irrelevant.



Action:

Determine the purpose for writing your report, and briefly outline it below.

Report purpose:

Step Two: Identifying Your Audience

Now you know why you are communicating, you need to think about your audience. Different audiences have different needs, wants, and expectations. When you match your message to their needs, you improve your overall communication.



Action:

To connect with your audience, think about the report you're creating, and answer the following questions.

Audience Questions
Who are the members of my audience?
What are their expectations, and how can I meet these?

Why are they reading? How interested are they in the topic? What does this tell me about how I should structure my message?

--

How will they use this report? What does this tell me about my message?

--

What do I want them to take away? How should I emphasize this?

--

How can I connect with them emotionally?

--

Step Three: Thinking About Your Context

The context of your message is what makes it logical and reasonable. Your readers will ask themselves, “Why should I believe what she says, or do what she suggests?”

Before you start writing, you need to be clear about your context. This way, you can proactively counter your audiences’ arguments and objections, and strengthen your position.

When writing, the most effective way to present information is to state your conclusion upfront. Then, you support your position with the detailed arguments that lead up to this. If you start with the detail, you risk losing the reader’s attention before you’ve got your final message across.

Action:



Think about the context of your message, and answer the following questions.

Context Questions
What is my position? (What am I concluding, suggesting, or requiring?)
How will I support my position? (Statistics, observations, opinions?)
Will I use a formal or informal tone?
What background information is necessary?
What counterarguments do I need to address?

Step Four: Writing a Powerful Introduction

By this stage, you've planned the body of your message. Next, you need to capture the reader's attention, and hold it long enough to get your message across. You can do this with a powerful introduction.

Writing a good introduction is one of the hardest aspects of writing well. Your writing needs to be interesting, you need to persuade readers that your message is important, and you must convince them of the benefits of reading further.

Therefore, your introduction should clarify what you are discussing, and outline your recommendations or conclusions without going into too much detail. You also need to let your audience know what they're about to read, so that you can get their attention.

When you do this, they can put all the information that they receive in the right context. And, as you've told them the conclusion, they can relate everything after the introduction to your main point.

Before you write your introduction, it's helpful to list the information that you need to include. The following questions will help you think about this.

Action:

Answer each of the questions below, and then write your introduction for the report that you're preparing.



Introduction Questions
Assume that you have 15 seconds to explain the content of your document. What do you say?
If you know that the reader will only read the introduction, what is the minimum that they must know or learn?

Write your introduction below:

Step Five: Structuring the Body

Once you've completed your introduction, you can formulate the body of your document. First, create an outline of what you want to say, in what order. When you take an organized approach like this, you won't go off topic, you won't forget important points, and you won't have to spend a long time editing and rearranging your existing content.

When you create an outline, keep these tips in mind:

- State your main ideas upfront.
- Keep arguments clear, and include supporting details.
- Provide only as much information as is necessary.
- Rely on facts, rather than personal opinions.

Action:

On the next page, prepare an outline for the body of your report. Include one idea per numbered item, and note supporting facts and arguments underneath.



Outline:
1. Introduction
2.
•
•
3.
•
•
•
4.
•
•
•

When you've finished your outline, use the following checklist to make sure that you have covered the essentials:

- Have I addressed all of the points in the introduction?
- Is the sequence logical and easy to follow?
- Have I presented the conclusions upfront?
- Are there places where ideas overlap, or where they should be combined?
- Is there sufficient detail and supporting evidence for each conclusion?
- Does the conclusion relate back to the ideas I presented in the introduction?

Action:

You're now ready to write your full report. If you have the time do this, re-read our [article](#), and write your report in a separate document.



4. The Writing

Now that you've written your draft document, you need to make sure that your style of writing doesn't detract from your message. In this session, we'll look at some of the more common mistakes that people make with their writing.

Once you've read through this section, go back to your draft and make changes where necessary.

Tone

If your writing is misunderstood, you don't have the luxury of explaining yourself further. This means that you must be cautious about the words and phrases you use. It's good practice to go back and read your document out loud without using any tone or inflection. "Hear" how the words sound, and then make adjustments accordingly.

Jargon

Avoid jargon whenever possible. Assume that your audience does not know the meaning of highly specific or technical terms. If you have to use complicated terms, ensure that you define them upfront.

Coherence

Aim for clarity in your writing. Think about what you want to say, and then let the words flow naturally.

Aim to present your main idea first. Package your thoughts into paragraphs, each with a main idea, and starting with a sentence to describe what it's about. (Make sure that your paragraphs are similar in length and are not too long.)

Sentence Structure

Sentences should have a single topic. Although you can put together longer sentences using commas and semicolons, your aim is to maximize readability. Readers shouldn't have to think too hard about how a sentence fits together. Again, read your sentences out loud. If you run out of breath, or get tangled up in words, it's time to shorten and simplify your text.

Readability

The key to good writing is clarity. So, aim to make your points clear and easily digestible.

For example, you could use:

- Headings and subheadings.
- Bullet points and lists, where appropriate.
- Tables, charts, and graphs to present information visually.

Punctuation

There are a few common punctuation errors to watch out for. These include:

- Too many commas – use them only when you need to make a sentence clear. People naturally put in pauses when they read, so avoid breaking up sentences into smaller sections unnecessarily.
- Semicolons – use them to separate independent clauses, or a series of items that have commas in them.

Male/Female Terminology

Consistency is the key here. Try, whenever possible, to use non-gender terms such as chairperson, police officer, or salesperson.

Using “he/she” and “his/her” breaks up the flow of your text, although it does eliminate gender bias and is sometimes unavoidable.

Often, you can avoid this by putting your point into the plural and using “they” and “their.” For example, rather than saying “Each manager should explain the new product features to his/her sales staff”, say “Managers should explain the new features to their sales staff.”

Word Usage

This is perhaps the most difficult area to correct. The English language is full of words that are commonly misused, and many of these sound the same but are spelled differently. Here is a list of the most troublesome:

Its/it's:

- “It’s” is a contraction for “it is” (“It’s a dog”).
- “Its” is used to indicate possession (“Where is its collar?”).

Their/there/they're:

- “Their” is possessive (“What is their final offer?”).
- “There” indicates placement (“I put the file there yesterday”).
- “They’re” is a contraction for “they are” (“They’re very nice people”).

Your/you're:

- "Your" is possessive ("Is that your file?").
- "You're" is a contraction of "you are" ("You're going to see the accounts department at 2 p.m.").

Company's/companies:

- "Company's" indicates possession ("The company's employees went on strike").
- "Companies" is plural ("The companies in this industry are suffering").

Affect/effect:

- "Affect" is typically a verb meaning to influence ("The economic forecast will affect our projected income").
- "Effect" is typically a noun meaning the result or outcome ("What is the effect of this action?").

Then/than:

- "Then" is an adjective indicating a time ("We went to dinner, and then saw a movie").
- "Than" is a conjunction used for comparison ("The dinner was more expensive than the movie").

Of/have:

- "Of" is a preposition, which is a word that shows a relationship between a noun or pronoun and another word ("What is the meaning of this?").
- "Have" implies an obligation ("I must have forgotten to set my alarm").

Many people write "of" when they mean "have" because they sound similar when spoken aloud ("I would've dealt with that customer differently").

Accept/Except:

- "Accept" is a verb meaning to receive ("I accept your apology").
- "Except" is a preposition meaning other than, or with exception ("We like your proposal, except the part about working overtime").

Complement/compliment:

- "Complement" is a verb meaning to add value ("Sally is a great complement to the team"). It is related to the word "complete."
- "Compliment" is a noun meaning a receipt of praise ("I want to compliment you on your great presentation"). Tip: it has an "i" in the middle, like "polite."

Regardless/irregardless:

- "Regardless" means without regard and is often substituted for "anyway."
- "Irregardless" is not a real word but is used to mean the same thing.

Lose/loose:

- “Lose” is a verb meaning unable to find (“Did you lose your glove?”).
- “Loose” is a verb meaning to free, or untie (Why did you let your anger loose on me?). It can also be an adjective (“This screw is loose”).

Personal/personnel:

- “Personal” is an adjective meaning private or involving one person (“The memo was marked ‘personal’”).
- “Personnel” is a noun referring to employees of a company. (“We can’t find enough personnel to operate the store”).

5. Key Learning Points

The ability to write effectively is an important skill in business. When you write well, your message will be received clearly and favorably. When you write badly, you won't get your message across, and you'll look unprofessional.

There are two areas that you need to consider to write effectively. The first is creating a strong message that's tailored to your audience, with a strong introduction, body, and conclusion. The second is developing the writing skills needed to communicate your message clearly and correctly.

It does take time and effort to plan and write an effective communication. However, this is time well spent, because you increase your credibility, project a more professional image, and persuade people to accept your thoughts and ideas.