

# ***Business Writing***

*Creating a message—Important points to consider:*

## **a) Who is the reader?**

- A document is only useful if the reader finds it useful. There may be more than one intended reader.
- What does your reader need to know? What does s/he want to hear? These may not be the same thing!
- What do they already know? Repeating known information wastes time and effort.

## **b) What readers don't want:**

- Remember—they probably don't want to read anything! Construct your message so they want to continue reading it.
- They don't want lots of information. Give the reader just enough information to do the job.
- They don't want a history lesson or a story. Very few managers read business documents from beginning to end. They want **USEFUL INFORMATION**. Stories are history lessons about the past; a useful business document will probably be about what to do in the future.

## **c) What do you want your reader to do?**

- e.g. After reading the document I want my reader to:
- Attend a meeting/Give me answers/Buy my product
- Stop complaining/Give me an opinion
- Investigate a problem/Put the problem right
- Agree with me/Finish the job/Gather information
- Prepare a presentation... etc.

After considering points a), b) and c) above:

**PREPARE A DRAFT MESSAGE**

# ***Business Writing***

*Editing your message—Some points to consider:*

## **a) Check for Plain English**

- Make your average sentence 15 – 20 words in length.
- Use only words that your reader is likely to understand.
- Use only as many words as you need.

## **b) How long should a paragraph be?**

- There is no iron rule—but as a rough guide:
- Have at least 3 paragraphs per each page of text.
- Vary the length of paragraphs on a page as much as possible.
- Aim for paragraphs of between 3 – 6 sentences.
- Use a short paragraph at the beginning of the document as a summary or introduction.

## **c) Use a Topic Sentence in every paragraph**

This is the first sentence and should summarize the information in the paragraph. Thinking about your topic sentence will help you decide what to include in the paragraph. All the material in the topic sentence should support the topic sentence. A topic sentence should:

- be a fully grammatical sentence
- make a single point
- be no longer than 15 – 20 words
- say something new

# *Business Writing*

*Editing your message—Some more points to consider:*

## **Sentence Length**

Sentences that are **TOO LONG** are difficult to understand. Aim to make your average sentence 15 – 20 words in length. Your word processor application should be able to calculate the average length of the sentences in your document. Try for a **MAXIMUM** sentence length of 25 words.

### **Some ways to shorten a long sentence:**

a) Cut down on conjunctions—Use a period and capital (upper-case) letter instead. Conjunctions join words, ideas or sentences together. Some of the more common are:

- and/or/but/neither
- before/after/until/when
- although/as/since
- so/that/because/though
- if/while/yet

e.g. (In a letter from a financial controller) Conjunctions are in **bold** (Strike Through)

**X**— “I am under strict orders to collect all outstanding payments **and** under the terms of the contract we have the authority to suspend your credit facility”—**X** (26 words)

**O**— “I am under strict orders to collect all outstanding payments. Under the terms of the contract we have the authority to suspend your credit facility.”—**O** (10+15 words)

e.g. (In an e-mail message from a Systems Analyst)

**X**— “There is no space on the G:drive to open a file **so** we have had to temporarily suspend all file creations.” —**X** (21 words)

**O**— “There is no space on the G:drive to open a file. We have, therefore, temporarily suspended all file creations.”—**O** (11+8 words)

## b) Take out prepositions

Prepositions come before nouns or pronouns. Some of the most common are:

- at/to/of
- in/with/by
- since/from/for
- during/near/off

If you can identify the prepositions in your sentences you can find ways to move them or remove them. This will help to make your sentences more 'reader-friendly'. In the examples below, the prepositions are in **bold** (Strike Through) and the improved versions take out as many as possible.

e.g.

**X**—“The purpose **of** the headings is to enable the reader to scan the report very quickly, **with** a view **to** getting an overview **of** the issues which are being raised.”—**X (30 words)**

**O**—“The headings enable the reader to scan the report very quickly so that they can see the issues which are being raised.”—**O**

**(22 words)**

e.g.

**X**—“This approach, if implemented correctly, will allow the company to invest capital more efficiently or better utilize capital already set aside **by** allocating large amounts **of** capital **to** high-risk business areas and smaller amounts **to** lower-risk business areas.”—**X (40 words)**

**O**—“This approach, if implemented correctly, will allow the company to invest capital more efficiently or better utilize capital already set aside. We will be able to allocate more capital to high-risk business areas and less to lower-risk business areas.”—**O**

**(21 + 20 words)**

# ***Business Writing***

*Editing your message—A final point to consider:*

## **Total Sentence Rebuild (TSR)**

Sometimes a sentence has too many ideas thrown together. This can be seen when:

- the meaning is not clear
- the sentence has too many words (25+)
- there are very few verbs
- the verbs are weak

e.g. (From a local government report)

**X**—*“The costs to be taken into account are the costs of mains, sewers, treatment works and other capital works including costs directly incurred by water or sewerage companies in developing supply sources in environmentally sensitive ways and in minimizing the pollution caused by waste water disposal.”*—**X**

### **This Sentence Needs Rebuilding!**

- the meaning is unclear
- it is far too long (46 words)
- there is only one main verb : *are*. The sentence contains an infinitive—*to be*— and a lot of words that look like verbs (*taken, including, incurred, developing, minimizing and caused*) but are, in fact, participles. This fact alone (excessive participles) indicates that TSR is needed.
- The main verb is weak and does little to show what the sentence is doing

### **1) Identify the ideas in the sentence. Make a list in the right logical order.**

- Costs to be taken into account.
- Costs of mains, sewers, treatment works and other capital works.
- Other capital works:
  - a) developing supply sources in environmentally sensitive ways.
  - b) minimizing pollution caused by waste water disposal.

**2) Rewrite each idea as a separate sentence. Forget the original version.**

- A number of costs need to be taken into account.
- These include the costs of mains, sewers, treatment works and other capital works.
- Capital works include:
  - a) developing supply sources in environmentally sensitive ways.
  - b) minimizing the pollution caused by waste water disposal.

**3) Connect the sentences into continuous prose. Use link words or phrases to clarify the connections.**

**0**—*A number of costs need to be taken into account. These include the costs of mains, sewers, treatment works and other capital works. Capital works include:  
a) developing supply sources in environmentally sensitive ways  
b) minimizing the pollution caused by waste water disposal.*—**0**

**4) Check your new version for accuracy, brevity and clarity. Cut down lengthy expressions and replace long words with shorter ones.**

**00**—*We must take a number of capital costs into account. These include the costs of mains, sewers, treatment and other investment, such as:  
a) developing supply sources in environmentally sensitive ways  
b) minimizing pollution from waste water disposal.*—**00**

# ***Business Writing***

## **Words Sometimes Confused**

The following examples show common confusions with similar-sounding words. ALWAYS USE A DICTIONARY WHEN IN DOUBT!

### **Accept / Except**

To *accept* is to receive something with thanks or assent. To *except* is to leave out or exclude something. Of course, *except* can also mean 'not including'.

e.g.

*I accept that you may not be able to finish this project by April.*

*Nobody can be excepted from this general rule.*

*Everybody except Mr Jones has met their sales target.*

### **Affect / Effect**

*Affect* is normally a verb, meaning 'to influence'.

*Effect* is usually a noun, meaning 'the result of an action'.

*Effect* can also be a verb, meaning 'to bring into being'.

e.g.

*This decision will affect all subsequent policy plans.*

*The economic situation has had a bad effect on our business.*

*We have not been able to effect an improvement in product quality.*

### **Complement / Compliment**

*Complement* is a noun meaning 'that which makes up or completes' OR a verb meaning 'to complete or form a suitable companion to'.

*Compliment* is a noun meaning 'praise' OR a verb meaning 'to praise'.

e.g.

*The rugby team now has a full complement of fit players.*

*Giving someone a compliment costs nothing.*

### **Disinterested / Uninterested**

To be *disinterested* is to be unbiased about something.

To be *uninterested* is to take no interest in something.

e.g.

*My boss gave a disinterested opinion on the proposed new office layout.*

*My son is usually uninterested in doing his homework.*

### **Ensure/Insure**

To *ensure* is to make sure; to *insure* is to pay money to protect something.

e.g.

*I always ensure the doors are locked before I go home.*

*It is a good idea to insure your valuables against loss or damage.*

### **Imply/Infer**

To *imply* is to suggest indirectly. To *infer* is to understand or derive.

e.g.

He *implied* that women were unsuitable for this kind of work.

We *infer* from what he said that he feels women are inferior.

### **Practice/Practise**

*Practice* is a noun; to *practise* is the verb. Unfortunately, American English spells both noun and verb as *practice*. Know your audience!

e.g.

*The doctor's practice was full.*

*My saxophone teacher told me to practise every day.*

*(My neighbours hate my saxophone teacher).*

### **Principal/Principle**

*Principal* can be an adjective, meaning 'first in importance' OR a noun meaning 'a person first in importance' often the head teacher in a school or college. *Principle* is a noun, meaning 'a fundamental truth or reality'.

e.g.

*The principal item on the agenda is the extension to the office building.*

*The principal welcomed all the new students on the first day of term.*

*One of the guiding principles of democracy is respect for human rights.*

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