Module 8

Read Ahead

Professional Written Communication
Module 8: Professional Written Communication

Objectives

After attending the training in Module 8, participants will be able to:

- understand the importance of written communication.
- recognize the seriousness of the permanence of written communication.
- demonstrate techniques for writing improvement.

Introduction

Module 7 mentioned that there are various forms of communication—written, vocal, visual, and nonverbal. Module 8 refers to any written communication developed by us for others to read, review, and/or use in any way.

As with all communication, what you write or type begins with the “receiver” or “listener.” Effective written communication happens when the recipient reads and hopefully understands the message. Forms of written communication include emails, memos, letters, notes, articles, newsletters, technical reports, texts, posts, written comments (formal and informal), and even infographics and online. This Module discusses best practices, techniques, and effective applications of business writing—formal or informal.

Written Media

As mentioned, communication is typically about the listener. It is about getting our intended message to be understood by an intended audience. That fact does not change depending on the manner or means of communication. With written communication, the listener is simply reading or observing the written word or an image of some sort.

Today, perhaps the most frequently used form of written communication in a business setting is email. Texting is gaining ground, so it may seem that we are moving more toward a less formal style of written communication. However, letters and memos continue to carry the most official written information, even if they are often distributed as email attachments. Articles, reports, and technical papers remain widely used and are an effective means of communicating technical information.

Style

While we will not address style and format directly during this Module, there are a number of resources and examples of effective ways to share written information. Again, we are encouraged to choose a format and style based on what we think would carry our message most effectively to the audience. This chosen style should vary based on what we know about our audience.
A technical paper with reference citations is not necessary to invite stakeholders to a public involvement meeting. A handwritten note jotted onto a napkin is not appropriate for a congressional inquiry. Privileged attorney communication could be compromised if we are not intentional about the form and language used. Finally, some communication is simply best conducted verbally, in person, to avoid misunderstandings.

There is no correct style for ALDOT as a whole, but style does matter. Our choices can affect our message, our brand, and our intent.

**Written Communication Considerations**

Seth Godin is an author, writer, entrepreneur, marketing expert, and modern thought leader. He has written thousands of blog posts, publishing one per day for the last several years. Below are some of his thoughts related to improving our writing skills. This advice is applicable, no matter the message or audience.

*Have you ever met someone in industry who talks like he writes? You visit a store and the person says, “Effective January 1, 2015, we have ceased operations at this location. For further information, correspondence should be addressed to our headquarters.” Of course not. That would be awkward. Write like you talk instead. “We closed this store last year. Sorry for the hassle, please call us if you have any questions.”*

With effort and practice, it is possible to speak with respect, precision, and energy. After you speak that way, write down what you said. That’s effective business writing.

Here are some simple questions for us to think about as we write:

**1. What is it for?**

If this piece of writing works, what will change? What action will be taken? The more specific we are in stating our intent, the easier it is for people to understand our intent. And, magically, the more specific we are in stating our intent, the more likely it is to succeed.

**2. Who are you?**

Writing comes from someone. Are you writing as a scientist, reporting the facts? Are you an angry op-ed writer seeking political action? Or are you perhaps the voice of an institution, putting up an official warning sign in an official place? Our writing needs to verify not only our position but also our part in the message, our place in the situation about which we are writing, and how we are involved.
3. Who is it for?

It is almost impossible for a piece of writing to change someone. It is definitely impossible for it to change everyone. So...who is this designed to reach? What do they believe? Do they trust us? Are they inclined to take action? What is their personality? What is their interest level? In other words, keep the audience in mind.

4. Will it spread?

After the person we seek to reach reads this, will it be shared with others? Shared action is amplified action.

It cannot be stated enough that how well we write will be a contributing factor to our effective communication. Good writing leads to successful or unsuccessful leadership. Writing can make a difference. Write to make a difference.

Email Standards in General

Guy Kawasaki is a marketing specialist, author, and venture capitalist. He was one of the Apple employees originally responsible for marketing their Macintosh computer line in 1984, and he popularized the word “evangelist” in marketing. In his book, Enchantment, he suggests that emails should be no more than six sentences long and should contain no more than the following information:

- Why are you contacting the person?
- Why should the recipient help you?
- Who are you?
- What is your cause or reason for writing?
- What do you want?
- What is the next step?

Ten Tips for Better Business Writing

An article from www.lifehack.org, provides several tips for professional writing. These tips are paraphrased below, along with additional information:

1. Less is more.

In business writing, as in virtually every other kind of writing, concision matters. Ironically, as written information becomes more and more important to the smooth functioning of businesses, people are less and less willing to read. Increasingly, magazines and other outlets that used to run 2,000-word features are cutting back to 500-word sketches.

Use words sparingly, cut out the florid prose, and avoid long, meandering sentences. As Zorro taught his son, “Get in, make your Z, and get out!” Get straight to the point, say what you want to say, and be done with it.
Your first sentence should tell the reader what the entire document/information concerns. Each following paragraph should begin with a sentence that concisely speaks to the content.

2. Avoid jargon.

Everyone in business dislikes business writing. Documents or emails that use terms like “blue-sky solutioneering” and “strategically reengineering” ultimately mean nothing and do not help your message. “Brainstorming” and “opportunities to create new organizational structures” are more meaningful phrases without sounding ridiculous. While jargon is sometimes unavoidable, use the plainest language that works in a business document or technical specification. Even for people in the same field as you, jargon is often inefficient because it is so familiar that the eye slides right past it without catching the meaning.

3. Write once, check twice.

Proofread immediately after you write, and then again hours, or better yet, days later. *Nothing is more embarrassing than a stupid typo in an otherwise fine document.* Typos happen. It is hardly fair, but unfortunately, people judge you for those mistakes—and harshly. Except in an emergency, always give yourself time to set your writing aside and come back to it later. The brain is tricky and will ignore errors it has just made. Spending some time working on something else gives you the detachment you need to catch those errors before anyone else reads them.

In addition to catching typos and other errors, putting some time between writing and re-reading your work can help you catch errors of tone that might otherwise escape you and cause trouble. For instance, when we’re upset or angry, we often write things we would normally not want to convey. Even the FBI advises waiting at least 72 hours before sending something if it was written with emotion. Make sure your work says what you want it to say in the tone you want to use before letting it reach its audience.

4. Pay special attention to names, titles, and gender.

There is one thing more embarrassing than a typo: calling Mr. Smith “Ms. Smith” consistently throughout a document. If you’re not positive about the spelling of someone’s name, the correct job title (and what it means), or the gender, do one of the following:

- Check with someone who does know.
- Locate the correct information on a website or social media.
- Use gender-neutral language.
5. Save templates.

Whenever you write an especially good letter, email, memo, or other document, if there’s the chance you’ll be writing a similar document in the future, save it as a template for future use. Because rushing through writing is one of the main causes of typos and other errors, using a pre-written document can save not only time but also the embarrassment of such errors. Just make sure to remove any specific information when you create the template—e.g. people’s names or company names. You don’t want to send a letter to Mr. Sharif that is still addressed to Mrs. O’Toole!

6. Be professional, but not necessarily formal.

There’s a tendency to think of all business communication as formal, which isn’t necessary or even very productive. Formal language is fine for legal documents and job applications, but formalities often make communication invisible, obscuring rather than revealing meaning.

At the same time, remember that informal should not mean unprofessional—keep the personal information, jokes, and snarky comments out of your business communications. Remember that many businesses are required by law to keep copies of all correspondence. Do not email, mail, or circulate anything you would not feel comfortable having read into the record in a public trial.

7. Remember the 5 W’s plus H.

Just like a journalist’s news story, your communications should answer all the questions relevant to your audience: Who? What? When? Where? Why? and How? For example, who is this memo relevant to, exactly what should they know, when and where will it apply, why is it important, and how should they use this information? Use of the 5W+H formula also anticipates any questions your readers might ask.

8. Make sure you have a “call to action.”

The content of a document that is simply informative is rarely retained very well. Most business communication is meant to achieve a purpose, so make sure you include a call to action—something the reader is expected to do after reading the document. Even better, include the timeliness of what you want the reader to do. Do not leave it to your readers to decide what to do (and when) with whatever information you have provided. Some will not bother with action; a few might get the action wrong. We need readers to know exactly why the information was sent to them and what is expected in return. If no action is needed, then simply state that fact.
9. Do not offer too many choices.

Ideally, do not offer any choices. Know what you need and state it. If you are looking to set a time for a meeting, give a single time and ask them to confirm or suggest a different time. At most, offer two options and ask them to pick one. Too many choices can lead to decision paralysis.

Additionally, place choices or decisions in a bullet format when writing. This makes it easier and clearer for the reader to identify and compare. End your correspondence with “I await your response to the question.”

10. Keep a reference card nearby for confusing words. Here are some examples:

1. There and Their—**There** refers to a place (over **there**). It is also used as a “place holder” at the beginning of a sentence. **Their** is a possessive word, showing that something belongs to **them**.
   - Your copy is over **there** on the desk. **There** is a message for you on your desk.
   - The team members have finished **their** review.

2. Affect and Effect—**Affect** is almost always a verb. **Effect** is almost always a noun.
   - How will this new policy **affect** the community?
   - Will this new policy have an **effect** on the community?

3. Assume and Presume—Both of these words mean “suppose” or “take for granted.” However, **assume** refers to supposing something to be true without any proof, while **presume** refers to supposing with probability, reason, or evidence.
   - They just **assume** the bridge is safe because it always has been.
   - The pilot has been missing for five days and is **presumed** dead.

4. Capitol and Capital—**Capitol** (with an O) has only one meaning: the building in a center of government where the legislative body meets. **Capital** (with an A) has several meanings: the city center of government for a state or a country; money raised and invested in a project; description of a letter of the alphabet in upper case (as for a proper name); description of an offense that carries the death penalty.
   - Statuary Hall is in the United States **Capitol**.
   - Montgomery is the **capital** of Alabama.
   - He is raising **capital** for his third business venture.
   - Always begin a proper name with a **capital** letter.
   - I believe that type of murder is a **capital** offense.
5. Continual and Continuous—Continual describes events that occur often or recur off and on. Continuous describes an event that is ongoing without interruption.

- That country has experienced five years of continuous warfare.
- This airline is known for continual breakdowns.

6. Farther and Further—Farther refers to a measurable physical distance. Further refers to figurative or abstract distance.

- John lives much farther from the office than I do.
- There will be no further discussion of this topic until next week.

7. That, Which, or Whom—The easiest choice is to use who or whom when referring to people, that for necessary information or things NOT set off by commas, and which for “nice to know” information set off by commas and not necessary to the meaning of the sentence.

- Paul Cane is the supervisor who handles those complaints.
- To whom was he addressing his remarks?
- This is a statute that has been on the books for twenty years.
- This statute, which has been on the books for twenty years, makes no mention of drones.

Quotes

“If you have to explain it, you’ve already lost.” --Jon Gray, Strategy Public Relations

“Wise men speak because they have something to say. Fools speak because they have to say something.” --Plato

“Either write something worth reading or do something worth writing.” --Benjamin Franklin

“Your grammar is a reflection of your image. Good or bad, you have made an impression. And like all impressions, you are in total control.” --Jeffrey Gitomer

“Texting has reduced the number of waste words, but it has also exposed a black hole of ignorance about traditional—what a cranky guy would call correct—grammar.” --Richard Corliss
References


Seth Godin advice on improving writing skills: http://www.sethgodin.com/


Lifehack Tips: http://www.lifehack.org/articles/communication/12-tips-for-better-business-writing.html