
A GUIDE TO
**GOOD
BUSINESS**
COMMUNICATION

5TH EDITION



HOW TO WRITE
AND SPEAK ENGLISH
WELL...



... IN EVERY BUSINESS
SITUATION

MICHAEL BENNIE

A GUIDE TO
GOOD
BUSINESS
COMMUNICATION

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Introduction

Communication is the key to success in any business. Whether you are trying to sell a product, answer a query or complaint or convince your colleagues to adopt a certain course of action, good communication often means the difference between success and failure. At best, imprecise language, clumsy sentences or long-winded ‘waffle’, whether in speech or writing, will give a poor impression of you or your business; at worst, what you are trying to say will be misunderstood or ignored. In contrast, clear, precise English will be enjoyable to read or listen to, and is likely to evoke the response you want.

This book is written for everyone who wants to develop the skill of good communication in the workplace – from business students to managers, voluntary workers to government officials. Moreover, because of the globalisation of trade and the use of the Internet, the position of English as the international language of business is stronger than ever. I hope, therefore, that those who do not have English as their first language but need to use it for business communication will also find this a useful guide.

The aim is to give you a good grounding in writing and speaking style, which you can then apply to any situation. It shows what is good and bad style, what you should avoid and why. What it does not do is provide a set of model documents for particular situations. You should think about what you want to say, not just copy someone else’s models. So although you will find a great many examples of documents throughout the book, they are just that – examples to illustrate particular points and techniques, not models to be copied.

The book is arranged in such a way as to be easy to use, whether you are following it from start to finish or dipping into it. It starts with a general discussion of business communication and then goes on to planning, layout, construction and style. There are chapters on grammar, punctuation and spelling, but I have put them towards the end. This is not because they are unimportant – far from it – but so that you can refer to them if you need to without them getting in the way of the discussion of style and construction. They contain the minimum of theory; the emphasis is on practical application, and on mistakes to avoid.

Throughout the book there are exercises in which you can put the techniques discussed into practice. Answers are provided at the back. In many cases (for example, when an exercise involves writing a letter or memo) there will be several possible options, depending on your own personal style, and the samples shown are just suggestions. In other instances, especially when it comes to grammar or spelling, there will clearly be only one answer, and in these cases that is made clear.

As you improve your communication skills, you will find it very satisfying to be able to express yourself clearly and succinctly, and to get your *precise* meaning across to your audience. Not only will you have the satisfaction of a job well done, but you will know that there is a greater chance that people will react in the way you want them to.

All the characters and organisations in the examples and exercises are purely fictional, and any resemblance to real individuals or organisations is purely coincidental.

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CHAPTER 1

Communicating in business

Communication

The definition of communication is: The process by which information is exchanged. It can take place in a number of ways:

- through the written word
- through the spoken word
- through pictures and diagrams
- through facial expressions, behaviour and posture
- through non-verbal sounds

In business the most common forms of communication are spoken and written, although visual forms can play a part, as we shall see in Chapter 3.

The Functions of Business Communication

We communicate in business for a number of different reasons, and the methods we use will depend on the reasons, the circumstances, and perhaps the people with whom we are communicating. These are some of the reasons why we may need to communicate with others in a business setting:

- to pass on information
- to persuade people to buy a product or use a service
- to discuss an issue
- to recommend a course of action
- to make or answer a request
- to make or answer a complaint
- to keep a record of something that has happened or been agreed
- to explain or clarify a situation
- to give an instruction

Clearly, to cover such a variety of situations, you will need to be able to use a range of different methods and styles. Your style and tone are unlikely to be the same if you are making a request, for example, as if you are making a complaint. You are also more likely to speak to someone than to write to them if you want to discuss an issue, whereas a record of something that has happened would need to be in writing.

Written and Spoken Communication in Business

Whether you communicate in writing or orally will depend on the circumstances, and to some extent on the person or people you are addressing. The main reasons for communicating orally are:

- **To have a discussion.** It is very difficult to hold a meaningful discussion by letter, memo or e-mail.
- **To receive instant feedback from your audience.** Speaking to someone means that you do not have to wait for their response. However, this can sometimes be a disadvantage; in some circumstances, a considered response might be better.
- **To be able to judge your audience's reaction to what you are saying.** This usually only applies in face-to-face communication, but it can sometimes be useful to be able to judge from your audience's comments, expressions or body language what they think of what you are saying and perhaps adapt your style or tone accordingly.
- **For speed.** Even the fastest typist or writer cannot match the speed at which we speak, so if you want to communicate something quickly, it might be better to do so orally.
- **If the person with whom you are communicating has initiated the conversation.** If you are responding to an oral request, for example, you are likely to do so orally, unless your response is so complex that it would be better explained in writing (see below).

The main reasons for communicating in writing are:

- **To retain a permanent record.** A conversation can be forgotten, misunderstood or even deliberately twisted. But if something is in writing (and if it is well written), everyone who reads it will be sure to get the right information. It also provides something to refer to if there is any dispute in the future. This is particularly important if the document constitutes a form of agreement, but it can also be useful in the case of a complaint.
- **To provide a basis for discussion.** We saw above that a discussion is usually best conducted orally, but it can be very useful for a discussion document to be available beforehand, setting out the facts of the case and perhaps giving the writer's own views and recommendations. This saves time, as it means that the meeting itself can discuss the implications and people's opinions, instead of having to go over the facts before any useful discussion can begin.
- **To clarify a complex subject.** Some subjects do not lend themselves easily to spoken communication. A graph or bar chart, for example, may be a better way of presenting figures, as you will see in Chapter 3, and it is easier to explain a confused situation in writing than orally (see Chapter 6).
- **To send the same message to a number of people.** If you want to give a number of people the same information (perhaps the date and venue of a meeting), then an e-mail or a circular memo or letter would be quicker and cheaper than speaking to each person individually.
- **To be able to think carefully about what you want to say.** You can plan your document and correct any errors before sending it out. It is easier to make a mistake when you are speaking spontaneously.

The differences between written and spoken English

There are, of course, significant differences between written and spoken English. Let us look at an example. Jane Lee, the Export Manager of John Smith & Sons Ltd, has had a meeting with a prospective agent in South America, Carlos Rodriguez. Below is a transcript of her verbal report on the meeting.

Jane Lee: I must say, I had a really good meeting with Mr Rodriguez. I think he might be the man for us. He seems to know the market very well, and he already does business all over South America.

Peter Morgan (Managing Director): Which countries exactly?

JL: Argentina, Venezuela, Chile, Colombia, Ecuador and Brazil mainly. He knows the import regulations for the different countries, but I would expect that – we wouldn't be considering him if he didn't! But he also seems to know things like who matters in each country, how they do business there, how we can avoid giving offence without knowing it, any problems there may be about payment, all that kind of thing. He is already agent for quite a few companies – Wilson Fabrics, Richmond Consumer Products and Simon Black Ltd – but they're all in competition with us, so it doesn't matter – sorry, I mean *none* of them is in competition with us. Oh by the way, I forgot to mention that he's based in Argentina, which is our fastest-expanding market in the area.

Sarah Brown (Financial Director): This all sounds too good to be true. Will he accept our usual commission?

JL: Yes, initially, but instead of being paid a fixed percentage, he would want to be able to negotiate his commission on a sliding scale eventually.

James Robinson (Operations Director): Sorry, Jane, what do you mean 'negotiate his commission on a sliding scale'?

JL: He would like his percentage commission to rise as our turnover in his territory increases. Now I know what some of you may be thinking – why pay him more than our other agents? Well, perhaps we should be paying them in the same way. After all, if Rodriguez increases our turnover significantly, then he probably *deserves* more.

Now look at what Jane might have *written*.

On 25 July I met Mr Carlos Rodriguez of Carlos Rodriguez Import SA, Buenos Aires, who has expressed an interest in becoming our agent in South America. I found the meeting both informative and productive. The main points we discussed are as follows.

Market penetration. He seems to know the South American market well, and he already does business in many of the countries there, in particular Argentina, Venezuela, Colombia, Ecuador and Brazil. He appears to have a sound knowledge of the business climate of each country. He is based in Argentina, which is our fastest-expanding market in the area.

Existing agencies. His existing agencies include Wilson Fabrics, Richmond Consumer Products and Simon Black Ltd. None of these companies is in competition with us; indeed their products complement ours, and no other agent has as good a track record as he does.

Commission. The commission arrangements he wants, however, are slightly different from our usual ones. Although he is prepared to accept our standard commission initially, he would like the percentage to rise as he increases our turnover in his territory – the details would have to be negotiated, but that is the principle behind his request. And as long as the turnover levels at which the new rates would operate are set at a sensible level, I believe the system would work to our advantage – he would have an additional incentive to work hard for us, and if the turnover does increase we could afford to pay him more. Of course, we might receive complaints from some of our other agents if they were to learn that we were paying him at a higher level, but it would be worth considering giving all our agents a similar incentive.

Can you see the differences between the two versions?

- **Spoken English uses unnecessary words and phrases.** When we speak, we generally use more words than we need to. Even when speaking, we should always try to be as concise as possible, but it is inevitable, unless we have gone to extremes in planning what we want to say, that we will introduce unnecessary and generally meaningless phrases such as:

- ‘I must say’ – which adds nothing to the sense of the report.
- ‘Oh, by the way’ – which means much the same as ‘I forgot to mention’.
- ‘Really’ – which is too vague to add anything to the word it goes with (what is the difference between a good meeting and a really good one?).

These words and phrases do not matter in spoken English – indeed, they give us an opportunity to gather our thoughts, so they serve a useful purpose – but in writing they look sloppy and add to the length of the document.

- **Spoken English can be vague.** Jane talks about:

- ‘A really good meeting’. What does this mean? Was it productive, informative, enjoyable? Was the food good? She could mean any of these things.
- ‘All over South America’. In fact, as she indicates in her reply to Peter Morgan’s question, she means ‘in a number of the major countries’, not ‘all over’.
- ‘Things like who matters in each country, how they do business there ...’ etc. This is a round about way of saying ‘the business climate’.

This vagueness does not matter when you are speaking, because your tone or gestures will indicate to your audience what you actually mean, or they can ask if anything is unclear. But when you are writing in business you need to be precise. Since your readers cannot ask you to clarify anything that is unclear, they will either make their own interpretations, which may be wrong, or ignore points they do not understand, which may give them an incomplete picture.

- **In spoken English you can go back and correct what you have said.** When you are speaking you can stop in midstream and correct yourself if you have said something wrong, or add in something you have forgotten. So Jane says:
 - ‘Sorry, I mean’ – when she realises she has said the opposite of what she means.
 - ‘Oh, by the way, I forgot to mention’ – when something occurs to her that she should have said earlier in the report.

When you are writing you should not have to go back and correct yourself. This kind of afterthought is fine in spoken English, but in written form it gives the document a disjointed appearance, making it difficult to follow.

- **When speaking you can respond to feedback from your audience.** As we have seen, this is one of the main reasons why you may decide to communicate orally rather than in writing. You can then explain things or amend your presentation accordingly.
 - When Peter Morgan asks Jane where Rodriguez does business, she clarifies her vague ‘all over South America’ statement.
 - In response to Sarah Brown’s scepticism about his willingness to accept the company’s usual terms, she is quick to point out that he will probably agree to them initially.
 - She explains the concept of a sliding scale of commission in response to James Robinson’s question.
 - She sees from some people’s reaction that they are still not convinced (‘Now I know what some of you may be thinking’), so she introduces the point about the increase in turnover.
- **Spoken English often uses colloquialisms.** Slang is seldom acceptable in business English, unless you are speaking to a close friend, but using the odd colloquialism makes your speech sound less formal and constrained. So Jane says:
 - ‘He might be the man for us’.
 - ‘All that kind of thing’.

Colloquialisms are out of place in business documents, however. They look lazy, and they seldom have the precision of meaning that is needed.

Remember that, although a certain amount of informality is permissible when speaking, one general rule applies in all business communication, spoken and written: you should always be clear and precise.

EXERCISE 1

You work in the publicity office of a market town. You receive a phone call from Mr Lyndon Charles, who is thinking of visiting the town, but who wants to know what attractions you can offer. This is what you say in reply.

It really depends on what you’re interested in and when you want to come. We’ve got a very good theatre, which usually has variety shows in summer and plays in winter. And if you’re interested in cultural things, there’s also a good museum and the church is famous for its carvings. And just outside town there’s a medieval castle.

Oh, you’ve got young children, have you? Yes they may not be interested in the church and the museum. But they may like the castle, because it’s supposed to be haunted. There’s also a super play park, with a water feature. And within fairly easy driving distance there are two theme parks. The play park in town, by the way, is free, but you’d obviously have to pay at the theme parks. Of course, they would also have fun on the beaches nearby – the nearest is about ten minutes’ drive. Yes it’s sandy, not pebbly.

And do you like walking? You do? Well the countryside around here is beautiful, and there are some lovely walks through the woods – and also along the coast, of course, although there’s a lot of up and down along this stretch of the Coast Path.

Mr Charles asks if you can put all this information in writing. Write him a letter summarising your telephone conversation.

Business and Other Styles of Communication

Not all styles of communication are the same; a style that suits one set of circumstances might be totally wrong for another. The way you communicate, even the language you use, will be very different, for example, if you are writing a novel, or e-mailing or speaking to a friend, from the style you would adopt for business.

Business and literary styles

There are three main differences in style between a business document and a work of literature.

- **Literary writing is usually descriptive.** A novel writer would spend some time creating an atmosphere, giving some background detail. If the account of Jane Lee's meeting with Carlos Rodriguez were part of a novel, for example, there would almost certainly be a description of the restaurant where they met, and of Rodriguez himself. This kind of description is out of place in business writing. Your readers do not have time to read descriptions which have no real bearing on the subject. Where description is necessary, it should be factual and objective, not flowery and subjective.
- **Literary writing uses direct speech.** In a novel, the author will describe what people say in the exact words they used – direct speech. This is another way of involving the reader. But you would very seldom use direct speech in business writing – it tends to be too long-winded. People want to absorb the information you are giving as quickly and easily as possible, so give them a summary of what was said, not the actual words.
- **Literary writing introduces personal feelings.** A work of literature will describe the characters' feelings about others and their surroundings – that is part of the skill of telling a story. So a novel might describe how Jane reacted to Rodriguez on a personal level, what she thought of the meal, etc. These feelings have no place in business writing; they simply clutter up the document unnecessarily. Your opinions might be important, depending on the nature of your document, but your feelings are irrelevant.

What this means is that business communication should be as brief and uncluttered as possible while still getting across the information you want to impart.

Business and personal styles

Although business English is much less formal and more conversational than it used to be, it is still different from the language you might use in personal communication. There are four main differences.

- **Personal communication uses slang.** As we have seen, a bit of colloquial language is quite acceptable when speaking in a business context, but outright slang is not. So, for example, Jane Lee says of Carlos Rodriguez, 'He might be the man for us', which is acceptable, although it is something of a colloquialism. In a personal letter, she might have said, 'He's got what it takes' or 'He's the guy for the job'; neither of these expressions would be acceptable in business, even when speaking – unless, of course, the person you are speaking or writing to is a personal friend with whom you have a very informal business relationship.

- **Personal communication is subjective.** When you are writing or speaking to a friend, you are talking about what *you* have been doing and thinking – that is the main reason for writing. So your letter is likely to be full of references to your own actions, feelings and reactions. Therefore in a personal letter or conversation, Jane might say, ‘I could find it very easy to work with him’, or ‘I was really pleased when he agreed to our terms’, etc. But business communication should be more objective – the only relevance your actions or feelings have is their impact on your business and the person you are addressing.
- **Business correspondence is not read for pleasure.** Very often when writing personal letters or e-mails, our aim is to give pleasure to the recipient. So we might introduce funny or interesting anecdotes. In business correspondence you should not try to entertain your audience. People read business documents to gain information as quickly and easily as possible; they read other things for pleasure.
- **Personal communication sometimes exaggerates or uses euphemisms.** It is not uncommon for statements in personal letters or conversations to stretch the truth a little, in order to show someone in a good light, or perhaps to spare the feelings of the audience. Most of us do it at some time: we might say for example, ‘I have left my job’ rather than ‘I have been made redundant’. So in a personal letter, Jane might try to give the impression that she charmed Rodriguez into accepting the company’s usual commission when in fact he agreed very reluctantly to do so, and only on certain conditions. In business, you should give the facts objectively.

The Three Rules of Business Communication

Business communication should be:

- clear and precise
- brief and uncluttered
- direct and to the point

EXERCISE 2

Below is the text of an e-mail to a friend about a business trip to Germany. What would you need to change in order to make it acceptable as a brief business report?

I had a fantastic trip to Berlin last week. Horst Kuhn, the guy I was doing business with, was great, and we got on really well. He took me to this amazing restaurant one evening for dinner, and then on to a club, where we met up with some of his friends.

The business side went well, too. His company is very interested in a joint venture with us, to supply financial software to banks and other financial institutions across Europe. Horst reckons that with our complementary markets (they do a lot in Eastern Europe, while we’re particularly strong in Scandinavia, France and Holland) we could clean up if we joined forces. The terms he suggested were a bit tricky (he’s a persuasive guy, and was trying to get me to agree to them having a 60 per cent share) but I stuck to my guns and managed to persuade him to ask his Board to consider equal shares.

There’s still a lot of work to do, but I think we’ll get a really good deal out of this. At the risk of blowing my own trumpet, I reckon I’m capable of getting our Board to take the idea seriously.

CHAPTER 2

Planning what you are going to say

Whatever the form of your communication, it is important to plan what you are going to say in advance. Of course, when you are speaking your plan cannot be too detailed, as you do not know how the conversation is going to develop – you should certainly not try to plan everything you are going to say. You have probably come across telesales staff who have been told exactly what to say in any given circumstances; the conversation becomes rather stilted and they are at a bit of a loss if it deviates from their script. But you should nevertheless have a good general idea of what you want to say and how you will express it. And in written communication, you need not spend a great deal of time on a very routine letter, but even that will need *some* planning.

There will, of course, be times when you cannot plan ahead – when answering the telephone, for example. If you are not able to find the information you need immediately, then it might be better to promise to phone the other person back, and then plan what you want to say once you have it to hand.

Why Plan?

You should plan what you are going to say to ensure that:

- you say everything that has to be said
- the information you give is correct
- your arguments are logically expressed
- you use the right language to suit your purpose
- you are not emotional

It is just possible that you might achieve what you want without proper planning, but it is highly unlikely, and you would certainly not achieve this every time if you always came to the subject 'cold'.

Your Reasons for Writing or Speaking

Before you plan what you are going to say, you should ask yourself the following questions:

- Should you be writing or speaking to the person concerned?
- Are you addressing the right person? You can waste a lot of time being passed from one person in the organisation to another if you address the wrong person initially, and in the case of a written document it could be lost or ignored in the process.

Once you have satisfied yourself on these points, you should ask yourself two further questions.

- Should anyone else be aware of what you want to say? All your planning can come to nothing if you do not address everyone who needs the information you are giving.
- Do you need a reply? If you do, and you do not let the other person know, you will have failed to achieve your purpose. (See Chapter 3 for more on how to ensure that a correspondent knows what you expect him or her to do.)

Finally, there are two more questions.

- What is your purpose in writing or speaking?
- What do you want to achieve?

Let us look at these two in more detail.

What is your purpose?

This might seem an unnecessary question. After all, you would not be getting in touch with the other person if you did not have a reason. But it is important to clarify in your own mind just what your purpose is, and to bear it in mind as you write or speak. Look at the letter below. Can you see what is wrong with it?

JAMES LONG & CO
Furniture Manufacturers and Suppliers
125 Broadlands Road
Valley Industrial Estate
Storton
ST4 5UV
Tel. 01234 567890

12 December 20XX

Mrs J. Brown
Cliff Hotel
Marine Drive
Oldport

Dear Mrs Brown

I was very sorry to see from your letter of 3 December that the legs of one of the occasional tables supplied to you recently are coming off.

I have undertaken a thorough investigation of the problem, and I have discovered what went wrong. It appears that a batch of the fixing brackets we use for that particular range was faulty. Our quality control procedures picked up the fault soon after we took delivery, and that batch was put to one side for return to the manufacturer.

Unfortunately, we have recently taken on a new member of staff, and he mistook the faulty brackets for the batch that had been laid out for him to use. Our quality control procedures at the end of the production process are only designed to find faults in our own workmanship, assuming that the pre-production checks will have picked up faults in bought-in components. ►

As a result of your letter I have changed our procedures, and we now check all our finished products for faults both in our own workmanship and in bought-in components. We now also ensure that any items to be returned to our suppliers are kept well away from the production line.

Yours sincerely

Donald Benson
Production Manager

It is a good letter, but it is not suitable for the purpose for which it was written. Donald Benson obviously knew why he was writing to Mrs Brown – to answer her complaint. But he did not have that thought clearly in his mind when he planned his letter. The result is that he gives a full explanation of how the problem arose, but he does not actually answer her complaint. Mrs Brown is not likely to be interested in the details of how her table came to be faulty. What she wants to know is what the company is going to do about it – and Donald does not tell her.

Only by keeping in mind *why* you are writing or speaking to someone can you be sure that what you say is relevant both to the subject matter and to the person you are addressing. What Donald says is relevant to the subject, but not to the person. He should have kept the explanation to the minimum, apologised for the error and offered some remedy. This underlines the importance of planning when you are about to speak to someone; it can be very easy to be side-tracked, and to forget your purpose.

This is not to say that the sort of detail Donald gives here would never be appropriate. If he had been asked by the Managing Director to explain how the table came to be faulty and how he intended to ensure that a similar problem did not occur again, he might have sent him a memo or e-mail exactly along the lines of the last three paragraphs of his letter. In this case, his purpose would be to explain the problem and his solution, so the detail would be extremely relevant, both to the subject and to the person he is addressing.

It is easier to plan what you are going to say if you only have one purpose. You can concentrate on getting your content, style, tone and wording right for that purpose. But there will be times – usually when writing letters, but occasionally when speaking on the telephone – when you might have to cover two subjects in the same document or conversation. You might, for example, need to explain a change in distribution arrangements to a customer, but also to chase an overdue payment. It would be silly to write two letters or make two calls, so you would cover both subjects in one. The best way to handle this situation is to separate the two subjects, and to deal completely with one before introducing the other. There will need to be some device to link the two subjects, but otherwise they are best planned separately. The letter below shows how this is done. The two subjects are dealt with in two separate sections, separately planned, and linked with the phrase ‘While I am writing’. Exactly the same principle applies to a conversation: you should plan the two subjects separately, then deal with one (including any queries that arise) before moving on to the next, linking the two with a phrase like ‘While I am on the phone’.

COLOURSCHEME PAINTS LTD
53 King's Way, Topperton, AB23 4CD
Tel. 01678 901234 Fax 01678 9013435

12 March 20XX

Mr Patrick Swan
Proprietor
The Paint and Paper Shop
4 Queen Street
Winterborough
ST12 3UV

Dear Mr Swan

You will be pleased to know that, as from 1 April, we will be instituting a new, improved distribution service.

The first change is in our own internal systems. We are now able to turn your orders around on the day they are received, so that the goods are ready for despatch the following morning. The second is in our carriers. We will be using XYZ Haulage Ltd, who offer a guaranteed 24-hour delivery service. The combination of these two changes means that you should in future receive delivery of your goods no later than 48 hours after we receive your order.

While I am writing, perhaps I could mention that there is an amount of £156.79 overdue on your account. We do not appear to have received payment of our invoice No. 09876 of 20 January. As you know, our terms are 30 days from the date of invoice, so this payment is now well overdue. I would be grateful if you would let me have your cheque for this amount by return of post.

Yours sincerely

Michael Milton
Sales Manager

What do you want to achieve?

Do not confuse your purpose with what you want to achieve; the two are related but different. For example, Donald Benson wrote to Mrs Brown to answer her complaint – that was his purpose, although as we have seen the letter he wrote was not right for that purpose. What he wanted to achieve was to satisfy her, and to make her feel better about the company. So your purpose will dictate what goes into your letter, while the outcome you want will dictate the style and tone you use.

So in addition to keeping your purpose in mind while you are planning what you are going to say, you should also keep in mind what you want to achieve. Look at the e-mail below sent by a company's Accountant to the Purchase Ledger Clerk.