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Chapter 1
Plain Language

In this chapter you will learn about
• The difference between academic and business writing and
• The importance of writing in plain language.

BUSINESS COMMUNICATION VERSUS ACADEMIC WRITING

The Preface briefly discussed the formats we will learn in this book—correspondence, report formats, and the like—but also the importance of good writing within each format. If the writing in a report, say, is inferior, that report will fail no matter how well it's formatted. So in Chapters 1 and 2 we'll discuss how to develop strong writing, and Chapter 3 will be all about grammar.

To be a good communicator in business and the professions, you may have to unlearn some of the techniques that might have made you a good academic writer. Here is what you are likely to find in good academic writing.

• The information is often highly complex.
• The language is often highly specialized.
• Sentences tend to be long and complex, in keeping with the complex subject matter.
• Paragraphs are long enough to explore each complex idea deeply.
• The style is formal—it avoids "I" and "you," although "we" is sometimes acceptable, and it doesn't use contractions (e.g., you will write "does not" instead of "doesn't").
Academic citation and works-cited styles, like APA, MLA, or other academic formats, are highly detailed and strictly followed.

Grammar rules are strictly followed (e.g., the "Oxford" comma is preferred, colons are used after full sentences and before lists, and so on). We'll discuss these rules in Chapter 3.

Most professional, non-academic writing, on the other hand, is very different.

- Ideas are expressed as simply and concisely as possible.
- Specialized words and jargon are avoided if possible (it's not always possible, and specialized language may be necessary for some audiences).
- Sentences have one main idea, with perhaps one or at most two supporting ideas.
- Paragraphs are short—four to eight lines would be typical.
- The style is more informal than in academic writing; first ("I," "me," "we"), second ("you"), and third person ("he," "her," "they," etc.) are all allowed, as are contractions ("don't" rather than "do not" is acceptable).
- Grammar rules are (slightly!) relaxed (for example, sentence fragments are sometimes allowed for rhetorical effect, but in moderation, comma use is not rigid, and so on).

Academic and business writing styles are different because they have different audiences. The academic writer and reader is a specialist in a particular discipline, and specialized language is part of that discipline. The audience for a business or professional document is more often a generalist one, and this audience calls for a less specialized vocabulary and less complex set of concepts.

But, more importantly, the business or professional audience doesn't want to spend a lot of time figuring out what the wording in a particular report or memo is trying to say—time is money! The meaning of professional writing should be immediately clear, unlike academic writing, which is sometimes obscure.

On the page, too, academic writing looks different from business and professional writing. An academic essay or published article may consist of page after page of print, in long, gray paragraphs, perhaps broken by the occasional picture, chart, or diagram. As a visual experience, an academic essay can be hard going; however, the hard going is, the academic writer hopes, rewarded by the essay's stimulating intellectual content. That said, academic writing in some disciplines is moving toward a plainer style!

A business or professional document aims to be much more attractive, visually speaking. That means using white space, lists, pictures, charts and graphics, headings and subheadings, and many other techniques for easy readability that we will be discussing below in this chapter on plain language and in Chapter 5 on document design.

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**PLAIN LANGUAGE**

Business, legal, government, and professional writing can, over time, sink into a morass of technical jargon and convoluted syntax that is almost unintelligible to the general public. In other words, this writing has become the communication of experts for other experts. This bureaucratese wouldn't be a problem if these documents didn't have to be read by non-experts, but that is often not the case.

For example, legal documents such as contracts, mortgages, and wills need to be both read and understood by people who aren't lawyers. Government communications often contain important information about laws and regulations on everything from legal business practices to the size and type of pipe fittings in a new house. If the business owners and tradespeople who have to follow building regulations, for example, can't understand the regulations—and they often can't—then there's a problem.

In short, hard-to-read texts cause more

- misunderstandings
- errors
- complaints
- inquiries
- staff time lost to problem solving.

Therefore, many businesses and governments around the world are moving to put their communications into what is called plain language or plain English.

**Features of Plain Language**

What is plain English? It has a number of features:

- It uses concrete and specific examples rather than abstractions to be as clear as possible.

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2. Center for Plain Language: [https://centerforplainlanguage.org/learning-training/five-steps-plain-language/](https://centerforplainlanguage.org/learning-training/five-steps-plain-language/)
3. George Orwell's essay "Politics and the English Language" on the need for plain language: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Politics_and_the_English_Language](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Politics_and_the_English_Language)
4. Daily Writing Tips: [https://www.dailywritingtips.com](https://www.dailywritingtips.com)
It avoids unfamiliar words and technical jargon. For example, it prefers "know" to the jargonistic "fully cognizant."

It uses active rather than passive verbs for clarity, directness, and conciseness. Active verbs use fewer words: "The man ate the sandwich" (five words) versus "The sandwich was eaten by the man" (seven words).

It avoids wordy expressions ("in order to do business" = "to do business"; "at the present time" = "now").

It avoids repetitiveness ("please return my stapler back to me" = "please return my stapler").

It avoids nominalizations—verbs used as nouns. So, instead of "He gave an introduction to the next speaker," you would write "He introduced the next speaker." In the first example sentence, "introduction" is a nominalization. Chapter 2 has more on nominalizations.

Plain language also aims to make text as easy to read as possible by

- using white space to make documents more readable;
- making document-design elements easy to read;
- using headings and well-labeled graphics, if appropriate; and
- using easy-to-read lists, tables, and indexes whenever possible.

In the next section we'll look at examples of how plain language can make communication clearer.

Examples of Plain Language

In recent years governments across North America have been rewriting cumbrously worded and sometimes incomprehensible legislation into language the average person can understand. The result? The government saves time and money because civil servants don't have to field so many calls and letters asking what the laws and regulations mean.

Here's how one government has described this effort:

Why is it important to use plain language?... It is more efficient, more effective, and leads to better public relations. Less time is needed to find and understand the information, less time is needed to deal with people who did not understand the information, and fewer errors are made.

Plain language

- Improves compliance, which reduces enforcement costs.
- Expresses thoughts clearly, which reduces the likelihood of a legal challenge.
- Responds to the needs of the audience—people don't feel their time is unnecessarily wasted.
- Ultimately reduces costs for the public.²

The government's website on plain language, www.plainlanguage.gov, states the benefits of plain language as follows:

- fewer calls from customers (by about 80%),
- less time for users to solve a problem (about half the time),
- fewer errors by customers (from 40% to 20%), and
- higher rates of compliance with government regulations (more than twice as high).³

For example, a 1992 report originally read like this:

Economic espionage may be defined as the illegal or clandestine acquisition of critical economic information and technology by foreign governments or their surrogates.

Here is this sentence rewritten in plain English:

Economic espionage means foreign governments or their agents illegally obtaining critical economic and technological secrets.⁴

⁴ Plain Language Online Training Program. "Using appropriate words," PlainTrain.
Here is another example, from a last will and testament. The first version is in legal-se; the second version is in plain language. Which is easier to understand?

**Version 1**

(d) if my spouse should predecease me or should survive me but die within a period of thirty days after my death:

(i) subject to the rights under the *Exemptions Act*, to pay out of the capital of my general estate my legally enforceable debts, funeral and all expenses in connection with the administration of my estate and the trusts created by my Will charging first the residue, then specific bequests, then devises. My Trustee shall also pay all estate, income, inheritance and succession duties or taxes whether imposed by [the laws of the local or national government] or by any other jurisdiction that may be payable in connection with any property passing or deemed to pass by any governing law on my death or in connection with any insurance of my life or any gift or benefit given or created by my Will conferred by me either during my lifetime or by survivorship or by this Will and whether such duties or taxes be payable in respect of estates or interests which fall into possession at my death or at any subsequent time. Such payments shall be made at such time and in such manner and subject to such security as my Trustee in my Trustee's discretion determines.

**Version 2**

If Mary dies before or within 30 days after I do, I want John to

(a) pay out of the capital of my general estate

(i) my legally enforceable debts,
(ii) my funeral expenses,
(iii) the expenses incurred in administering my estate,
(iv) the trusts created by this Will (charging first the residue, then specific bequests, then devises) and

(b) pay any tax or duties which my estate is liable to pay.

Businesses, too, are finding that contracts and documents in plain English save them time and money and their customers and clients time and hassle. For example, an insurance company announcement used to read as follows:

We have recently implemented an enhancement to our computer system that will enable us to provide better service to our valued customers. This has resulted in a slight delay in the processing of your renewal. The difference you will notice is in the payment schedule. Your annual policy premium has been divided over 11 (eleven) months, and as a result your monthly payment will have increased due to the reduced number of monthly instalments.

Here it is in plain language:

We are a little late in sending your renewal documents because we have made a change in our computer system in order to provide better service. Your annual premium will now be divided over 11 months instead of 12, so the monthly payment will increase slightly.

The first sentence of the announcement could be even more concise: "Your renewal documents are slightly delayed because we have changed our computer system to provide better service." In this example, we have removed a nominalization: from "made a change" to "changed."

As you can see, in all cases the plain language version is both more concise and much more readable. All of these elements of plain language—both the writing and the presentation—should be part of any business or professional communicator's toolkit. How to employ this toolkit is discussed further in Chapter 2 on the seven Cs.

Meanwhile, here's a rule of thumb for plain language: If your reader has to read what you've written more than once to get the meaning, it's not plain language.

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5 Adapted slightly from David C. Elliott, "Writing Wills in Plain Language" (paper, Canadian Bar Association, Alberta Branch, Wills and Trusts Section, June 1990).

Exercises

1. Look at the example of the will, above. What are the key differences between the original will and the rewritten version? (See page 391 for the answer.)

2. Rewrite the following paragraphs into plain English. Rewritten versions are available in "Appendix: Answers," page 391, but don't peek until you've tried the exercise.

   a. When in the process of freeing a vehicle that has been stuck results in ruts or holes, the operator will fill the rut or hole created by such activity before removing the vehicle from the immediate area.

   b. After notification of NMFS, this final rule requires all CA/OR DGN vessel operators to have attended one Skipper Education Workshop after all workshops have been convened by NMFS in September 1997. CA/OR DGN vessel operators are required to attend Skipper Education Workshops at annual intervals thereafter, unless that requirement is waived by NMFS. NMFS will provide sufficient advance notice to vessel operators by mail prior to convening workshops.

   c. Investigators at the contractor will review the facts in your case and decide the most appropriate course of action. The first step taken with most Medicare health care providers is to re-educate them about Medicare regulations and policies. If the practice continues, the contractor may conduct special audits of the provider's medical records. Often, the contractor recovers overpayments to health care providers this way. If there is sufficient evidence to show that the provider is consistently violating Medicare policies, the contractor will document the violations and ask the Office of the Inspector General to prosecute the case. This can lead to expulsion from the Medicare program, civil monetary penalties, and imprisonment.


Chapter 2
The Seven Cs of Good Professional Communication

In this chapter you will learn to
- Write clearly,
- Write concisely,
- Write concretely and specifically,
- Write completely (include all necessary information),
- Write with courtesy (including gender neutrality),
- Write coherently,
- Write constructively,
- Identify four types of sentence structure,
- Join sentences correctly for variety, and
- Use punctuation correctly.

INTRODUCTION

The eight Cs are a checklist of the qualities of good professional and business communication that you should apply to your writing. They are another, more detailed way of approaching plain English.

In this chapter we will look at seven of the eight Cs: how to write in a way that is

1. clear,
2. concise,
3. concrete and specific,
4. complete,
5. courteous,
6. coherent, and
7. constructive.

The eighth C, grammatically correct, is discussed in Chapter 3. One thing to notice from the start: the Cs overlap. Writing that is clear is also coherent and concrete and specific, and vice versa. The rest of this chapter describes the seven Cs in detail.¹

1. CLEAR

Another word for "clear" is "transparent." Good writing is transparent: the audience never, ever, has to go back over a sentence or paragraph to puzzle out what the writer meant because the material is always clearly and logically (i.e., coherently) presented (see "Coherent" below). How do we do this? There are six basic ways:

I. Avoid jargon and technical or obscure words.
II. Make your writing concrete and specific.
III. Use active rather than passive verbs.
IV. Avoid long strings of prepositional phrases ("word salads").
V. Make pronoun references crystal clear.
VI. Avoid dangling and misplaced modifiers.

I. Avoid Jargon and Technical or Obscure Words

Do you know what "alembic" means? Probably not, and few readers will have this word in their vocabulary. Yet "alembic" appears in the novel Charlie Johnson in the Flames, a thriller written for general readers by Harvard University professor Michael Ignatieff. "Alembic" refers to the tube between two retorts in a chemistry experiment, although Ignatieff was using the word in a more metaphorical sense.

How about "eponymous," a word that occasionally appears in writing for the general public? Is "eponymous" part of most readers' vocabularies? Likely not. An eponymous hero is one whose name is also the title of a work, such as Tom Sawyer.

There was a time when parents and teachers would say, "Look it up in the dictionary" if you asked the meaning of a word. However, as popular culture moves away from print toward visual media, many readers of today have smaller vocabularies than their better-educated grandparents, and business and professional writers today must accept this limitation. Most readers don't want to consult the dictionary every few paragraphs just because a fancy word (like "alembic" or "eponymous") makes the writer appear intelligent.

As for jargon, technical terms, and the like, if you must use them then you must also define them, unless you are sure your audience is completely familiar with these terms. Never assume your readers know what an unusual word means—chances are, they don't. Keep it simple.

II. Make Your Writing Concrete and Specific

No writing technique is more powerful than being concrete and specific. For example, look at this sentence:

Congressman George Smith made an exciting speech in The House of Representatives yesterday.

What does this tell us, concretely and specifically, about Smith's speech? Nothing. We don't even know what he was speaking about.

If Smith made an exciting speech, then the writer should be concrete and specific about what Smith said and what made his speech exciting. How about this:

Slamming his fist on his desk, face red with outrage, Congressman George Smith accused the government of covering up allegations that Afghani prisoners of American forces were abused while in custody.

There's more on concrete and specific writing in Section 3 of this chapter. Meanwhile, note that the more concrete and specific a piece of writing is, the clearer it is as well.

III. Use Active Verbs

Active verbs have the subject of the sentence doing the action, as in "The rabbit [subject] ate [action] five carrots [object]." Passive verbs have the doer of the action as the object of the sentence: "Five carrots [subject] were eaten [action] by the rabbit [object, but doer of the action]."

The "natural" or default order for English sentence structure is doer (subject) and what he/she/it did (verb), then the object (what the rabbit ate, in this example). So, the natural order for an English sentence uses an active verb.

¹ Much of the material in this chapter is adapted from APT to Do Anything: Workplace Communication, 2014, by Norma Depledge, Claire McKenzie, and Paul MacRae, a course pack prepared for business-communication classes at the University of Victoria.
Note that the active verb structure also uses fewer words than the passive structure (which includes added words, usually a form of the verb "to be"). In the carrot example above, the active sentence has five words; the passive sentence has seven. Active verbs are, therefore, not only clearer than passive verbs but also more concise.

In karate training, students are told that their fists must be tightly clenched when they throw a punch; if the fist isn't tight, the bones of the hand will break. The same is true of writing: tight, concise writing is punchy, powerful writing. That means most of your verbs should be active except when

- you want to introduce variety in sentence structure;
- the doer of the action isn't precisely known (e.g., "Three people were admitted to hospital yesterday with severe burns"); and
- the doer of the action isn't as important as the action itself (e.g., "Interest rates were raised half a point yesterday").

While we're on the subject of active verbs, your verbs should also be active in the sense of colorful, exciting, and appealing to the senses whenever possible. "He ate the orange" is correct as a sentence, but "ate" is a pretty boring verb. How about "He devoured the orange"?

If you can find a more colorful form of a familiar verb, while keeping it active, your writing will be stronger and more interesting. That said, don't go so overboard

- • Interest rates the doer of the action isn't as important as the action itself (e.g., "Interest rates were raised half a point yesterday").

IV. Avoid Strings of Prepositional Phrases (the "Word Salad")

Prepositions are short (usually) linking words, such as "in," "on," "with," "over," and so on, that begin a prepositional phrase. The following sentence has four prepositional phrases (in italics with prepositions underlined):

*The results of the chemistry tests of the students at the University of Vermont were excellent.*

Any sentence with a long string of prepositional phrases could be called a word salad; the sentence's meaning gets buried in a jumble of unnecessary words.

The sentence can be rewritten to reduce the number of prepositional phrases from four to two:

*Student chemistry test results at the University of Vermont were excellent.*

V. Make Pronoun References Crystal Clear

Look at this sentence: "The manager asked her executive assistant to finish the report before she left for the day." To whom does the pronoun "she" refer? Is the report needed before the manager leaves for the day, or before the executive assistant leaves for the day? The sentence's meaning is not clear because the pronoun reference "she" is not clear.

Pronouns are place-keeper words; they stand in for (the Latin "pro" means "for") a noun. As such, they are generic but often very convenient. For example, "it" could refer to literally any single thing, from a nation to an atom. "They" could refer to literally any number of things (as long as that number is more than one), from the three people in a musical trio to all the soldiers in a nation's army. And so on.

As a writer, you must make sure that, if you use a pronoun as a place keeper, readers never, ever have to puzzle about who or what that pronoun refers to. If in doubt, repeat the noun: "The manager asked her executive assistant to finish the report before the assistant left for the day." The grammar language term for this problem, by the way, is unclear pronoun reference.

Similarly, what's wrong with the following sentence? "Each cabinet member must be responsible for the security of their briefcase." This construction is used so often that it's come to be considered correct grammar by many people—but not by everyone.

Those who reject this usage, called the singular "they," argue that the pronoun ("their") is plural, but the noun the pronoun refers to ("member") is singular. In grammar language, this problem is called faulty noun-pronoun number agreement, abbreviated as NPNA.

The rule is that pronouns must always agree in number—singular or plural—with the nouns they refer to. Advocates of the singular "they" argue that the phrasing is natural to English speakers and that it makes sense to use it wherever attempts to
avoid it would make your sentence needlessly complicated. That said, because some consider the singular “they” unprofessional, you may want to avoid it altogether in professional contexts.

What about this fix? “Each cabinet member must be responsible for the security of his briefcase.” It’s got the correct pronoun number, but many cabinet members these days are women (five of fifteen, as of 2016), so using “he” is not gender neutral (something we’ll discuss in detail in the “Courteous” section).

To avoid using the singular “they,” you have three options:

• make the noun plural (“Cabinet members must be responsible for the security of their briefcases”)
• make the pronoun singular (“Each cabinet member must be responsible for the security of his or her briefcase”), or
• take out the pronoun entirely (“Briefcase security is every cabinet member’s responsibility”).

VI. Avoid Dangling and Misplaced Modifiers

A dangling modifier is a word or phrase that modifies (gives additional information about) a subject that doesn’t exist in the sentence, as in “Flying into Seattle, the mountains were beautiful.” As written, the sentence implies it is the mountains that are flying into Seattle!

What the sentence intends to mean is that “we” thought the mountains were beautiful as we flew into Seattle, but it’s missing the “we,” the subject, who is “flying into Seattle.” The fix for a dangling modifier is to add the proper subject, a noun that could be in an airplane admiring the view: “Flying into Seattle, we/simon/the passengers thought the mountains were beautiful.”

A misplaced modifier is a word or phrase that, because it is poorly placed in the sentence, appears to modify the wrong noun.

An example: “I have a treaty signed by Napoleon in my office.” Obviously, because he’s long dead, Napoleon didn’t sign the treaty in the speaker’s office (unless it’s an office from the early 1800s, when Napoleon was alive, which is unlikely). Therefore, “in my office” is a misplaced modifier.

To avoid sounding ridiculous, the sentence should read, “In my office, I have a treaty signed by Napoleon” or “I have in my office a treaty signed by Napoleon.” The fix for a misplaced modifier is to move it closer to, and preferably next to, the noun or pronoun it actually modifies.

Dangling and misplaced modifiers are often amusing, and sometimes laugh-out-loud funny (“I came across a family of raccoons in my pajamas”). But in a business or professional context, a misplaced or dangling modifier may not be so funny, and it will cost you credibility if you’re trying to be serious.

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This sentence has two "isy's": "is" and "to be." How about this: "Economics students will attend the meeting next week." On the conciseness index, that's eight words compared to 15, one "isy" ("will") instead of two.

That said, even active sentences can fall into the "isy" trap, as in "The gardener is of the opinion that we should prune the roses." Better: "The gardener thinks we should prune the roses." That's eight words instead of 12. The wordy construction in this example, by the way, is called a "nominalization"—which means a verb (or other part of speech) turned into a noun—and how to avoid nominalizations is discussed in the next section.

"To be" verbs are sometimes called "helping verbs" or "auxiliary verbs" because they help change the tense of a verb from, say, present to past or present to future, and so on. For example, "I went" is past tense because I did that some time in the past. "I am going" is present tense. Even better: "I am going right now." "I was going" is the past progressive tense.

The helping verbs, including "to be" and "to have," are used to create gradations in time, so they can't and shouldn't be eliminated when they are doing this job. These verbs should, however, be used only when necessary.

"To be" constructions such as "there is," "there are," and "it is" can also almost always be trimmed. "There are five ducks in the pond" = "Five ducks are in the pond." Even better: "Five ducks splashed in the pond." (a more dynamic active verb.)

Similarly, "It is easy to jump rope" is less concise and punchy than "Jumping rope is easy." Sometimes, however, "there is," "there are," and "it is" are unavoidable, as in, "There are five ways to peel an apple."

The second sentence means exactly the same thing, and you've gotten rid of two words—"in order"—that do no useful work whatsoever.

"Because we were hungry, we ate" becomes the much more concise "We ate because we were hungry." Similarly, do you really need to "join together" something? Doesn't "join" imply putting together? Can you "return back" an unwanted purchase? Or would "return" alone do?

"The cat was colored brown," do we need to say "colored"? Isn't "brown" by definition a color?

Worth Remembering:

Sentences beginning with "it is," "there is," and "there are" can almost always be rewritten to eliminate the "isy's." Note, however, that, for some audiences, a writer might use the occasional "isy" to create a conversational style. (See if you can find a few of these in this section.)

III. Don't Turn Verbs into Nouns (Nominalizations)

Nominalizations occur when you use a verb or other part of speech as a noun, and they have the effect of making your sentences less concise. They often involve "isy's"—the "to be" helping verbs that you usually want to avoid if possible. Nominalizations weaken your writing.

Here's an example: "The teacher made the comment that the class was sleepy." "The comment" is the noun form of the verb "comment." So why not cut to the chase and use the verb alone for a much more concise and punchy sentence? "The teacher commented that the class was sleepy." That's eight words instead of ten.

Another example: "Morgan asked the managers to make a decision about the new sales strategy." More concise: "Morgan asked the managers to decide on a new sales strategy."

Incidentally, there's a nominalization (italicized below) in the first sentence of this section: "They have the effect of making your sentences less concise." How about this: "They make your sentences less concise." Same meaning, but in six words instead of ten!

IV. Avoid Long Strings of Prepositional Phrases ("Word Salads")

We discussed avoiding prepositional word salads in "1. Clear," Section IV.

V. Avoid Repetition, Redundancy, and GWS

One of the most overused and unnecessary phrases in the English language is "in order to," as in "In order to finish this job, we need to work overtime." How about the simpler "To finish this job, we need to work overtime"?

The second sentence means exactly the same thing, and you've gotten rid of two words—"in order"—that do no useful work whatsoever.

Other wordy phrases you don't need are "due to" (= "because"), "the fact that" (= "because"), and many others. So, "Due to the fact that we were hungry, we ate" becomes the much more concise "Because we were hungry, we ate."

Similarly, do you really need to "join together" something? Doesn't "join" imply putting together? Can you "return back" an unwanted purchase? Or would "return" alone do?

If the cat was "colored brown," do we need to say "colored"? Isn't "brown" by definition a color? "The use of photos and graphics made the website very attractive"—do we need to say "The use of"? Why not the more concise "Photos and graphics made the website very attractive"?

A variation of redundancy is "goes without saying," or GWS. GWS refers to words, phrases, or sentences that are so obvious they don't need to be said.

Here is an example of GWS: "Pictures and graphics make the website attractive for the viewer." If the website is attractive, that implies a viewer, so you don't need to say "viewer."
Similarly, "In addition, the website is free of jargon, allowing the average reader to clearly understand the information presented." If the website is free of jargon, then it's GWS that the average reader can clearly understand the information.

So, keep an eye out for words that do no work (i.e., are redundant or repetitious or GWS) and—unless you are using the longer construction for rhetorical effect—eliminate them for more concise, punchier writing.

**Review**

Concise writing

i. uses active verbs,
ii. avoids "to be" and similar constructions,
iii. avoids nominalizations,
iv. avoids long strings of prepositions, and
v. avoids repetition and redundancy.

### 3. CONCRETE AND SPECIFIC

Concrete words appeal to the senses—they describe things we can see or hear or feel or smell or touch, thereby painting a vivid mental picture (e.g., "sports car" as opposed to "transportation"). Specific words are more limited and defined than more general terms (e.g., "Aston Martin DB5" as opposed to "sports car"). Your writing should be concrete and specific whenever possible.

For example, "This is a lot of fun!" doesn't tell us anything—"this" could be a million activities that are fun. "Riding a zip line in the rainforest is a lot of fun!" allows us to see the activity. Why? The description is concrete.

And we can make the description more specific, too. Where is the rainforest? What sort of feeling do we mean by "a lot of fun"? Better: "Riding a zip line in the Ecuadorian rainforest is exhilarating."

Another example: "small town" isn't very specific. The mental picture of a "small town" in America will be different from the mental picture of a "small town" in, say, China, so "small town" by itself really doesn't tell us anything useful. "A rural prairie town of 2,000 people" is specific—you've now defined and limited the term "small town." This version is also more concrete—it creates more of a mental picture.

How old is an "old man"? For a 20-year-old, 50 seems "old." For a 50-year-old, 70 seems "old." For someone in his 70s, 90 is "old." The phrase "old man" doesn't mean much unless you make it more specific: "a 60-year-old man."

Concrete and specific go together, and, as the painter Salvador Dali put it, "We are all hungry and thirsty for concrete images." If you examine your own reactions to writing and speech, you will discover this is true. The communication most of us prefer—that we are "hungry and thirsty for"—is filled with concrete and specific detail.

So "The fire was huge" doesn't appeal to the senses as much as "Towers of flame rose 60 feet above the treetops, throwing off vast billows of smoke and ash." The first sentence presents an abstract idea of the fire (huge); the second appeals to the senses by being concrete and specific. It creates a vivid mental picture.

Another example: "On long car trips with my parents, I spent most of my time reading comics" isn't as concrete or specific as "On long car trips with my parents, I spent most of my time with Archie and Jughead." Written the second way, the reader should get an instant mental picture of the comic book characters, not just an image of a generic comic book.

How about this one: "He boarded the aircraft." An "aircraft" could be anything from a fighter jet to a passenger liner. "He boarded the stretch Boeing 737" gives a more specific and vivid mental picture of the plane (assuming you know what a Boeing 737 looks like).

"Nitrogen is the most common gas in Earth's atmosphere" doesn't give us much information as "At 78 percent of the air by volume, nitrogen is the most common gas in the Earth's atmosphere."

Here are the first two paragraphs of an article from *The Economist,* "What if they really were set free?". Note how concrete and specific details are used to create a mental picture of an Ethiopian restaurant that seems utterly real.

THE Ben Abeba restaurant is a spiral-shaped concrete confection perched on a mountain ridge near Lalibela, an Ethiopian town known for its labyrinth of 12th-century churches hewn out of solid rock. The view is breathtaking; as the sun goes down, a spur of the Great Rift Valley stretches out seemingly miles below in subtly changing hues of green and brown, rolling away, fold after fold, as far as the eye can see. An immense lammergeyer, or bearded vulture, floats past, showing off its russet trousers.

The staff, chivied jovially along by an intrepid retired Scottish schoolmarm who created the restaurant a few years ago with an Ethiopian business partner, wrap yellow and white shawls around the guests against the sudden evening chill. The most popular dish is a spicy Ethiopian version of that old...
British staple, shepherd’s pie, with minced goat’s meat sometimes replacing lamb. Ben Abeba, whose name is a fusion of Scots and Amharic, Ethiopia’s main language, is widely considered the best eatery in the highlands surrounding Lalibela, nearly 700 km (435 miles) north of Addis Ababa, the capital, by bumpy road.²

You probably won’t need this level of concrete and specific detail in your business writing. But in all your writing you should remember that humans are sensory beings first, thinking beings second. Most of us are more interested in concrete, specific description that appeals to the senses than in abstract, intellectualized generalizations that appeal only to the mind.

**Review**

Concrete and specific writing

i. uses concrete terms that appeal to the senses and

ii. uses terms that are limited and defined.

**4. COMPLETE**

In writing for the news media, the classic news “lead” paragraph answers most or all of the following six questions: who, what, where, when, why, and sometimes how (the “Five Ws plus H”). In other words, the lead paragraph is complete, or almost. It gives readers all the necessary information about what to expect; they aren’t left wondering what the piece is about. If they have any unanswered questions (and they usually do), a complete lead paragraph promises that all questions will be answered as the reader goes along.

The same is true of professional communication. Writing or speaking that leaves readers wanting more information is not complete. Communication that isn’t complete wastes everyone’s time because the reader has to ask supplementary questions and the writer has to answer them. It just makes sense to put all the necessary information in your writing right from the start. Incidentally, complete communication is also clearer communication.

Suppose your company sends out this memo: “The finance committee will meet at 10 a.m.” What’s missing here?

Well, for a start, the memo doesn’t say where the committee is meeting, nor is the date of the meeting clear. Now, in practice, everyone may know the finance committee always meets in Room 232 at 10 a.m. on Tuesdays. But, just to be complete

² Excerpt from “What if they were really set free?,” The Economist, 2 Jan. 2016. Article can be found online using search terms “Economist” and “what if they were really set free.”

**5. COURTEOUS**

Courteous communication, as one of the seven Cs, is about being polite in the social sense (“yes, Sir,” “thank you very much,” that sort of thing). But courteous in the context of business and professional writing is much more than that. Writing courteously means following these guidelines:

I. Be gender neutral.

II. Put the audience first (“you” rather than “we”).

III. Be tactful.

IV. Follow the traditional forms of courtesy.

V. Use a reader-friendly format.
Let's look at these five in detail.

I. Be Gender Neutral

Good writing today is gender neutral, but even fairly recently that wasn't always the case. In the not-so-distant past, university anthropology courses were sometimes called "The Study of Man" or "The Study of Mankind." Similarly, a professional-communications textbook used to be called Technically Write: Communication for the Technical Man. The text is now entitled Technically Write, period.

The person who ran a meeting used to be the "chairman" or "chairwoman"; today that will usually be written as "chair" or "chairperson." Of course, if the gender of the chairperson is known, then "chairman" or "chairwoman" is acceptable. But "chair" or the slightly more awkward "chairperson" is now preferred in almost all cases as the most gender-neutral title.

In other words, given that humanity includes more than just men, communicators must be courteous and inclusive in their writing and speech.

Avoiding this mistake can be tricky for writers in some situations:

"A good military officer never forgets his duty to the nation."

Until a few decades ago, military officers (and most other professionals) were almost invariably male. Today, in this more enlightened age, military officers, cabinet members, company officers, postal workers, police officers, doctors, nurses, firefighters, and even heavy-construction workers can be either gender.

Therefore—and just to repeat what we studied in being clear—you are better to rewrite the military duty sentence (and all others of its kind) in one of four ways:

1. Use "his or her": "A good officer never forgets his or her duty to the nation."
   However, this solution often sounds awkward (it certainly does in this example).
2. Make the singular noun plural: "Good officers never forget their duty to the nation." In most cases, this solution is best.
3. Take the gender reference out entirely: "An officer never forgets the importance of duty to the nation."
4. Use the singular "they": "A good officer never forgets their duty to the nation."
   This choice is grammatically controversial and is considered an error by many readers, so it is probably best to avoid in professional writing.

Another acceptable way to get gender balance without the awkward "he or she" or "he/she" construction ("he/she" is not yet fully accepted in formal writing but is becoming increasingly common) is to alternate "she" and "he" in your text, as you will sometimes find in this book.

II. Put the Audience First—"You" not "We"

Courteous, in the business-communication sense, also means focusing all of your attention on the client or customer. To say, "We will send your shipment of pencils to arrive on November 25" puts the emphasis on "we," the company's agents, rather than the customer. A "you" or customer-centered letter would read: "You will receive your shipment of pencils on November 25."

Another example: "We have scheduled your appointment for August 3 at 2 p.m." This is a more "you"-centered sentence: "Your appointment is scheduled for August 3 at 2 p.m." "You did fine work today" is more "you" oriented than "We really appreciate the fine work you did today."

Whenever possible (and it often isn't possible, of course, but when it is), keep the "we" out of your professional communication and focus on "you"—the client, customer, or audience.

That said, there are times when you want to put the emphasis on "we" rather than "you."

Here's a "you" message that is not courteous: "You forgot to include your check with your order, so we can't send you the merchandise." It suggests blame and is bound to get the customer's back up. In this case, you should use the "we" form: "We will be happy to send the merchandise when we receive your check."

It's the same message—we didn't get your check—but stated in a more courteous, positive, and tactful way, without implying or outright stating the customer did something wrong. It's possible the customer did send the check! Accounting may have lost it, or perhaps the postal system delivered the letter to the wrong address. So to avoid blaming or angering the client, focus the message on "we" rather than "you." In most other cases, put the other person ("you") first.

III. Be Tactful

Part of putting the audience first is being tactful, which means considering the other person's feelings. If you have a negative message to deliver, find the most courteous and tactful way of expressing it.

We do this all the time in social life. "How do you like my new hat?" Instead of "It makes you look like a drunken moose," you say, "Um, it's lovely, although perhaps a more neutral color would better complement your skin tone."
Instead of criticizing an employee directly—"You were incredibly rude to that customer"—the supervisor might shift the focus to the company and its policies: "We try to be courteous to even the most difficult customer." In this case, the boss should use the "we" approach to avoid openly suggesting blame.

Have you ever thanked a sales person and been told, "No problem!" The implication here is that you could have been a problem—which, when you think about it, isn't very tactful or polite. A more courteous and tactful response is a simple "You're very welcome" or "It was a pleasure serving you."

IV. Follow the Traditional Forms of Courtesy

Courteous also, of course, means courteous in the traditionally accepted sense of polite and respectful, avoiding the use of coarse language and the like. For example, business letters invariably begin "Dear Sir:" or "Dear Ms. Okimora:" or something similar, and they end with "Yours sincerely," or "Yours truly," or something similar. These traditional forms of greeting and closing are part of courtesy in professional communication. Chapter 5 on document design discusses the traditional forms of courtesy used in a business letter.

V. Make Formats Reader Friendly

A major part of being courteous is writing and speaking clearly, coherently, and concisely—to do so is reader friendly, i.e., courteous. In other words, all of the seven Cs are courteous because they make communication clear, more concise, and so on and therefore easier to read.

It is also courteous, in the reader-friendly sense, to format documents so they are easy to read and understand. You'll find details on creating reader-friendly, and therefore courteous, documents in Chapter 5.

These five types of courtesy might seem like small things, but they add up and make it more likely that your customer or client or audience will respond positively to your communication.

Review

Courteous writing

i. is gender neutral,
ii. is "you" or audience centered,
iii. is tactful,
iv. follows the traditional forms of courtesy, and
v. is reader friendly.

6. COHERENT

Coherent writing is writing that hangs together—the order of the words and the argument make logical sense, and each sentence and paragraph flows easily into the next. How can you make your writing coherent? Follow these guidelines:

I. Construct paragraphs carefully about one topic.
II. Write sentences with one main idea.
III. Use transitional words to unite sentences and paragraphs into a logical and coherent whole.
IV. Be consistent in formatting numbers.
V. Begin lists with the same grammatical construction.

I. Construct Paragraphs Carefully

In all good writing, paragraphs develop one topic, and this topic is clearly signaled by a topic sentence.

Imagine a piece of writing as a train and each paragraph as a boxcar on the train. Boxcars are labeled with what's inside—grain, oil, coal, chemicals, and so on—so that oil and grain, say, aren't put into the same boxcar. Similarly, in business and professional writing, you don't want to put two key ideas in the same paragraph. The topic sentence, usually the first sentence, is the label stating what the paragraph is about. For example, the first sentence of this paragraph is the topic sentence for the paragraph; the topic is that paragraphs are like labeled boxcars.

As mentioned in Chapter 1, in academic writing, paragraphs tend to be long—perhaps ten sentences or even more. There's a topic sentence with the main idea of the paragraph, but there can be many supporting subtopics and examples in an academic paragraph.

In business writing, if you've got a paragraph like that—long, with lots of ideas and examples—then you should break that long paragraph down into two or more shorter paragraphs. The topic sentence for the first, shortened paragraph will serve as the topic sentence for the shorter, following paragraphs as well.

II. Write Sentences that Express One Main Idea

Just as paragraphs develop one topic, signaled by the topic sentence, so business sentences also present one idea within that topic—they don't veer off into tangled webs of related ideas as academic sentences sometimes do.

This doesn't mean that business sentences are all short, as in "I went for a walk on the beach. I saw a dog. The dog was black and white. It was chasing sticks in the water." A series of short, simple sentences like this would be incredibly boring. Sentence
variety is important (see Chapter 3 for ways to create sentence variety). But within that variety, each sentence develops one main idea, not two or three. Here's a sentence that has too many ideas:

Miriam Parker was planning to write about her recent trip to Beijing, where she saw many examples of Chinese painting through the centuries, examples that, she felt, reflected the changing social conditions in China over time.

This sentence would be acceptable in academic writing, but there are two ideas here:

1. Ms. Parker planning to write about her trip to Beijing to look at Chinese art and
2. her observations about how Chinese art reflected historical periods in China.

For business-writing purposes, we should break the longer sentence into two sentences, reflecting two ideas:

Miriam Parker was planning to write about her recent trip to Beijing, where she saw many examples of Chinese painting through the centuries. These paintings, she felt, reflected the changing social conditions in China over time.

In other words, for business and professional writing, aim for several short sentences, with one idea per sentence (with variety of sentence structure!), rather than long, complex, rambling sentences.

III. Use Transitional Words to Unite Sentences and Paragraphs

Transitional words are the glue that joins sentences and paragraphs into a pleasing, logical, and coherent unity. Here's a paragraph without transitions:

Our company's sales have gone down 30 percent. Our cash flow situation has become critical. This loss of profits could threaten our company's future. We need to take action to prevent bankruptcy. We need to work harder to get sales. We need to cut our production costs.

As you can see, the writing is choppy and, although it makes its point, could be more coherent. We get this coherence by adding transitions (in italics):

In the past month, our company's sales have gone down 30 percent. As a result, our cash flow situation has become critical. Worse, this loss of revenue could even threaten our company's future. Therefore, we need to take action to prevent bankruptcy, including working harder to get sales and cutting our production costs.

Sentences, too, need transitions, for example: "Jorge spent 12 hours last night watching a Big Bang Theory marathon. He failed his English exam." We can, sort of, see the connection between these two sentences, but basically they are not coherent.

The fix? Add a transition: "Jorge spent 12 hours last night watching a Big Bang Theory marathon. Therefore, he failed his English exam." "Therefore" is a transitional word showing causality, which is discussed just below.

In other words ("in other words," incidentally, is a transitional phrase), coherent writing needs transitions linking its sentences and paragraphs.

Transitions can be classified into seven logical types: illustration, addition, contrast, similarity, causation, showing time, and showing space.

- Illustration transitions are words and phrases such as "for example," "first of all," "such as," and so on. Illustration transitions show how X is an example of or similar to Y.
- Addition transitions are words and phrases such as "also," "furthermore," "secondly," "in addition," and so on. Addition transitions show how X and Y are linked or add something to each other.
- Contrast transitions are words and phrases such as "although," "however," "on the contrary," "on the one hand...on the other hand," and so on. Contrast transitions highlight how X is different from Y.
- Similarity transitions are words and phrases such as "in the same way," "similarly," "just as," and so on. Similarity transitions highlight how X is similar to Y.
- Causation transitions are words and phrases such as "because," "consequently," "as a result," "therefore," and so on. Causation transitions show that X caused Y or Y resulted from X.
- Transitions showing time include "after," "later," "while," "since then," and so on. Time transitions highlight how X and Y are related in time.
- Finally, transitions showing space include "above," "in front of," "next to," and so on. Space transitions emphasize how X and Y are related in space.

Exercise: Identifying Transitions

The example paragraph above about a company's poor sales, which is reprinted below, uses several types of transitions. For example, "in the past month" is a transition showing time. Can you identify the types of transitions for the other bolded words or phrases in the example? You'll find the answers in the Appendix, page 391.
In the past month, our company's sales have gone down 30 percent. As a result, our cash flow situation has become critical. Worse, this loss of revenue could even threaten our company's future. Therefore, we need to take action to prevent bankruptcy, including working harder to get sales and cutting our production costs.

IV. Formatting Numbers

A big part of coherence is consistency—doing the same thing in the same way throughout a written document, whether it's the writing or the page layout. When the elements on a page are consistent, readers know what to expect and sense your writing has been carefully thought out.

As part of coherence, how numbers are presented in business and professional writing needs to be consistent. For example, do you spell numbers out (four, thirty-six) or use numerals (4, 36)? This section outlines some widely accepted guidelines for numbers in professional and business writing.

- Spell out the numbers one to ten; use numerals for numbers 11 and above. "We ordered four large dinners from takeout." "He has 23 books on loan from the library." Some style guides suggest using numerals for 10 and above and spelling out the single-digit numbers (one to nine), as in "She has 10 cats." Whichever rule you follow—"ten" (the style used in this book) or "10"—be consistent.

- In general, for technical documents such as engineering, scientific, or economic reports, feel free to break the above rule. "For this project, you will need 6 two-by-fours and 8 #6 screws."

- Never start a sentence with a numeral. Either write the number out or rewrite the sentence to start with some other word. For example, "33 people applied for the job" should be written "Thirty-three people applied for the job." Similarly, "2012 sales figures indicate a sharp decline in the third quarter" should be rewritten "Sales figures for 2012 indicate a sharp decline in the third quarter."

- Don't start a sentence with a large, written-out number. "Three thousand two hundred and thirty-four people applied for the job" follows the previous rule (never start a sentence with a number in figures) but is hard to read. In this case it's better to recast the sentence so the number isn't at the beginning: "The job attracted 3,234 applicants." Highly technical, number-intensive documents, e.g., engineering reports, can be an exception to this rule.

- Spell out numbers that aren't precise figures. "I've told you a thousand times not to exagerate." "He always has a hundred projects on the go." In addition, you would usually spell out numbers before terms such as "dozen," "hundred," and "thousand": "We ordered four dozen eggs." "He has four hundred chickens." But for more complex or large, precise numbers, use numerals: "The battalion ate 325 dozen eggs while on maneuvers." That said, this rule is flexible depending on what looks reasonable in context.

- Use figures for currency. "I had only $4 in the bank." "The Smiths spent $360,000 renovating their new house." Non-precise numbers in the millions and higher are usually expressed by a mixture of numerals and spelled out numbers: "Civil servants spent $3 million on lattes last year." Currency figures in the thousands and above can be clearer if you use a hyphen, although this is an option for business writing depending on an organization's style. Why a hyphen? If a line ends with $3 and the next line begins "million," the reader might first assume the cost is only $3. The hyphen signals that the figure is more than $3. Note that if the number is not a money unit, you should spell out the number if it is ten or below, unless it is a decimal fraction: "The United States sent three million cases of milk to Zimbabwe" but "The United States sent 3.5 million cases of milk to Zimbabwe."

For large numbers, million and trillion are usually spelled out—"The government spent $3.2 million on plastic figurines"—unless an exact figure is needed: $3,256,383.

- Use numerals for ages, years, dates, percentages, and addresses. "My son, aged 5, won the race." "This man is 73 years old." "Millie lives at 12 Elderberry Street." "I was born in 1974." "The range was from 2 to 6 percent." Use hyphens if the number is part of a compound adjective (see Chapter 3 on grammar): "The 73-year-old man retired after 50 years as a carpenter."

- Use decimals if fractions are hard to read in print. "The shed is 10.5 feet wide" rather than "The shed is 10 1/2 feet." Most word processors will automatically convert, say, 1/2 into 0.5. For large numbers, million and trillion are usually spelled out—"The government spent $3.2 million on plastic figurines"—unless an exact figure is needed: $3,256,383.

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V. Begin Lists with the Same Grammatical Construction

As part of coherent communication, all items in a list must have the same grammatical structure. That is, all items must begin with a noun, a verb, an adjective, a participle, or some other part of speech. Another word for this type of coherence is parallelism.

Why parallelism? Even if readers aren't grammarians, they can sense when coherence is missing; the list just seems wonky, somehow. Also, not using parallel structure
often creates a break in logic or at least a shift in focus. If nothing else, parallelism in lists is a sign of elegant, carefully thought-out writing.

For example, is the following list parallel?

When using your coloring book and crayons,

• stay within the lines,
• don’t break the crayons, and
• colors should be vivid.

This list isn’t parallel because the first two bulleted items begin with a verb (“stay” and “don’t break”), and the third begins with a noun (“colors”). This lack of parallel structure creates an illogical and grammatically incorrect sentence: the noun “colors” can’t be “using your coloring book”—that’s a dangling modifier (see “1. Clear,” above). The list is parallel if written this way:

When using your coloring book and crayons,

• stay within the lines,
• don’t break the crayons, and
• choose only vivid colors.

In this case, the first word in each item is a verb (although the verb “break” has the negative “don’t” initially), the subject of the sentence (which is implied by the three commands but not stated) is “you,” and the items all have the same grammatical structure.

To start your list with nouns, say, write it this way (although it’s clumsier than the verb version):

When you use your coloring book and crayons,

• colors shouldn’t cross the lines;
• crayons should be handled carefully, so they don’t break; and
• vivid colors should be preferred. [In this case, the first part of the list item is still a noun, even if it has an adjective, “vivid,” as well.]

The seventh of the Cs is constructive. Constructive writing avoids unnecessary negativity. In your professional writing, whenever possible, you want to emphasize the positive, not the negative. You want to put forward what you can do, not what you can’t do. Similarly, you want to tell customers and clients what they can do, not what they can’t do.

For example, a sign outside an apartment building reads: NO CHILDREN, NO PETS. This building sounds pretty unwelcoming, doesn’t it? But suppose the sign is rewritten to read: “This building welcomes adults without pets.” Oh, you think, if I’m an adult and I don’t own a pet, I’d be welcome here. It conveys the same message as the first sign, but without the negative connotation. It is, in other words, constructive.

How about this: NO SMOKING. We see a lot of this wording because it is direct, even blunt: it says, “We don’t want you smoking.” And fair enough. A lot of people are bothered by second-hand smoke.

Worth Remembering
Never, ever (unless absolutely unavoidable) say what you can’t do; say what you can do.
But if you are running, say, a hotel, and you want to emphasize the positive to keep your guests' good will (remember, some of your clients will be smokers), a better notice is this: "All of our rooms are smoke free." Similarly, the sign to the right (on the previous page), which thanks customers, is more constructive than the one on the left, which issues an order.

If you operate a delivery company, do you really want to present this negative image to your customers: "We do not offer next-day delivery"? It's far better to advertise what you can do: "We can deliver your package within two days." Or, if the delivery is running late, don't tell the customer "Sorry, but your package won't arrive until Wednesday." Say, "Your package will be delivered on Wednesday!"

Constructive writing also avoids words such as "sorry," "regretfully," "unfortunately," and the like. These negative words all imply that you have either failed or cannot offer a service customers might like, even if what you do offer is excellent.

For example, you'll often hear this negative wording in automated phone messages: "We're sorry, but all our operators are busy." Haven't you often thought, "Well, if you were really sorry, you'd have more operators!"

In the same way, you may have been passed over by a bus with a sign saying, "Sorry, this bus is out of service." Again, haven't you thought, "If you were really sorry, you'd pick me up and I wouldn't have to wait another 15 minutes."

These "sorry" messages remind you of what the company can't do for you: provide a telephone operator when you want one or offer a bus that picks you up when you need a ride. Surely it's better for the company to say, much more honestly (because, again, if it was truly sorry it would hire more staff or put on more buses) what it can do: "All our operators are busy. We will be with you as soon as possible." Or just, "This bus is out of service."

Have you ever had someone say to you, "Sorry for putting you to all this hassle." The message is that helping that person was an arduous chore that would have been better avoided. He could have said, instead, "I really appreciated your help." The tone is much more positive and much more welcome: you are being thanked sincerely.

Similarly, in discussing courteous communication, we mentioned the case of thanking a sales person and being told, "No problem!" This form, although very common and intended to be polite, is neither courteous nor constructive. The courteous and constructive response is, again, "You're welcome!" or "It was a pleasure serving you."

Constructive writing is also used in the sense of "constructive criticism," which means criticism that identifies problems and proposes solutions rather than blindly judging, blaming, or condemning.

Saying to someone "You are a terrible writer" or "Your handling of the Higgins account was dreadful" doesn't help that person to become a better writer or account manager. The criticism is not constructive. Constructive criticism would be something such as this: "If you used fewer passive verbs, your writing would be stronger" or "Spending more time with Higgins will give you a better idea of what he is looking for." In both cases, you tell the person what can be done to improve.

Just to repeat, here is the basic rule for constructive communication: Say what you can do, not what you can't.

Sometimes You Have to Say "Sorry"

Being constructive—avoiding words such as "unfortunately" and the like—doesn't mean that you shouldn't apologize if you have genuinely made a mistake. For example, in 2008 Michael McCain was the president of a meat-packing company that was the source of an outbreak of listeriosis that killed 22 people.

McCain was upfront about his company's role in the outbreak, rather than trying to minimize the responsibility or cover it up. McCain said, "It's our best efforts that failed, not the regulators or the food safety system. I emphasize: this is our accountability and it's ours to fix, which we are taking on fully. We have and we continue to improve on our action plans." With this admission, the company was able to restore some of its good reputation.

When a company or individual genuinely makes a mistake, the best course of action—the most constructive course of action!—is to admit the mistake, take responsibility, and vow to do better next time.

Review

Constructive writing

i. emphasizes the positive,
ii. states what you can do, not what you can't do,
iii. avoids negative words such as "unfortunately," "sorry," and the like,
iv. focuses on how to improve when delivering criticism, and
v. says sorry when necessary!
CONCLUSION

Good business and professional writing is clear, concise, concrete and specific, complete, courteous, and constructive. Although we’ve summed these up as the "seven Cs," in fact, these seven principles overlap quite a bit. A sentence that is not complete will also be less clear, coherent, and courteous. In Chapter 3, we’ll look at the eighth—and perhaps most important—C, grammatically correct.

Meanwhile, here is a checklist of the seven Cs to consult before sending your writing out into the world:

1. Clear Writing
   i. avoids jargon and technical or obscure words,
   ii. is concrete and specific,
   iii. uses active rather than passive verbs,
   iv. avoids long strings of prepositional phrases ("word salads"),
   v. makes pronoun references crystal clear, and
   vi. avoids dangling and misplaced modifiers.

2. Concise Writing
   i. uses active verbs,
   ii. avoids the verb "to be" (and similar constructions) whenever possible,
   iii. avoids turning verbs (and adjectives and adverbs) into nouns ("nominalizations"),
   iv. avoids long strings of prepositions (those "word salads" again), and
   v. avoids repetition and redundancy.

3. Concrete and Specific Writing
   i. uses concrete terms that appeal to the senses ("horse" rather than "transportation") and
   ii. limits and defines terms by using specific words ("Clydesdale" rather than "horse").

4. Complete Writing
   answers all reasonable questions, including who, what, where, when, why, and how.

5. Courteous Writing
   i. is gender neutral,
   ii. puts the audience first ("you" rather than "we" or "I"),
   iii. is tactful,
   iv. follows the traditional forms of courtesy ("Dear Sir" and the like), and
   v. uses a reader-friendly format.

6. Coherent Writing
   i. constructs paragraphs carefully around one topic,
   ii. has sentences with one main idea,
   iii. uses transitional words to unite sentences and paragraphs into a logical and coherent whole,
   iv. is consistent in formatting numbers and in spelling, and
   v. makes list items parallel in grammatical structure.

7. Constructive Writing
   i. emphasizes the positive,
   ii. states what you can do, not what you can’t do,
   iii. avoids negative words such as “unfortunately,” “sorry,” and the like,
   iv. focuses on how to improve when delivering criticism, and
   v. says sorry when necessary.

On the next page, you’ll find a quiz on the seven Cs.
Quiz on the Seven Cs

The sentences below contain errors in terms of the seven Cs. That is, they may not be clear, concise, concrete and specific, complete, courteous, coherent, or constructive. Find the errors and correct them. If you can explain why the sentence is wrong, that’s even better. The answers are on page 391 in the Appendix at the end of the book, but don’t peek until you’ve tried the quiz on your own.

1. She decided to evaluate the program, which would take five months.
2. The entrance exam was failed by two-thirds of the applicants.
3. We will re-evaluate our marketing strategy after the new chairman is hired.
4. There is a steady flow of people crossing back and forth across the road while the cars are waiting in lines up to 300 yards.
5. A fair percentage of the company’s tool-and-die stampers have developed mechanical problems.
6. If you can’t use the new iPod, please return it back to me.
7. Checkout procedures at the Luxor Hotel chain are especially designed for the businessman in a hurry.
8. In order to provide a mechanism by which customers may air their problems concerning product quality, the company has established the following procedure for registering grievances for all purchasers.
9. There was a traffic accident at Bay and Main streets yesterday.
10. Springfield, Ohio, is a small city.
11. Children under 42 inches tall cannot go on this ride.
12. Many English majors are skilled at reading and writing; however, commerce majors enjoy impressive salaries after graduation.
13. Your speech shouldn’t be too long.
14. The owner’s manual for your new Excelsior clock radio is enclosed herein to assist you in utilizing all the convenient and useful features of your new device.
15. The debate between the senator and his political opponent was about the merits of sweater vests.
16. We are pleased to inform you that we have selected you for an interview for the sales associate position.
17. Alicia’s pet fish died yesterday. She went shopping.
18. Unfortunately, your order of plastic marmot figurines cannot be delivered before August 14.
19. He distributed annual reports to the audience bound in red and green covers.
20. A new photocopier is needed by the employees in our office.

Chapter 3
The Eighth C: Learning Grammar Language

In this chapter you will learn to

- Understand the importance of correct grammar,
- Identify the eight parts of speech,
- Understand sentence structure,
- Identify three types of clauses,
- Identify four ways of joining clauses, and
- Use punctuation correctly.

INTRODUCTION

Anyone taking a course in business and professional communication should already be a grammatically correct writer—correctness is the eighth C, and all the Cs are essential for good communication. But just to review: Why is grammar so important?

The short answer is that grammar makes communication clearer. Consider the following well-known example of bad grammar: “The panda eats, roots, shoots, and leaves.” Is this what the writer was trying to convey—a panda that munches something, then roots around in the ground, shoots at something, and finally departs?

The writer was trying to describe the panda’s diet: “The panda eats roots, shoots, and leaves.” But the writer broke a simple grammatical rule, and therefore the sentence lost its clarity. What grammatical rule? Never put one comma between a subject and its verb or between a verb and its object.