

A close-up, shallow depth-of-field photograph of a person's hand holding a silver pen, poised to write on a document. The document's text is heavily blurred, creating a sense of focus on the act of writing. In the background, another hand is visible, holding a stack of papers. The overall tone is professional and focused.

Key Steps to Professional Business Writing

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Module 1: Modern Business English Skills

Objectives

After completing this module, you will be able to:

1. Define and discern effective writing.
2. Understand the principle of chunking information.
3. Use clear, concise language and short sentences to achieve a “positive unloading rate.”
4. Avoid old-fashioned convoluted language.
5. Engage your reader and get your message across.
6. Use English in a grammatically correct way.
7. Communicate more effectively.

Lesson 1: Define Good Writing

Important facts about the use of English

An estimated 1.8 billion people speak English. While only 400 million people are native English speakers. Therefore, the majority who speak English speak it as a second language. In South Africa, about 90% of the population have other native tongues. We must therefore write in a way that is simple and easy to understand.

Fortunately, the written and the spoken languages are coming closer together. In addition, technology (email, smses and social media) has contributed to the less formal structure of language. We need to have a more user-friendly style. Our language should not be old-fashioned and pompous.

INTERESTING FACT: There are 500,000 English words but the average working vocabulary only needs 5,000 to 6,000 words. Isn't it a relief to know that that is all you need for good, clear communication?

Three main principles of good communication

1. **The purpose is clear.** Good writing can inform, persuade, inspire or reinforce. It is essential to start with the goal in mind.
2. **Your style must suit your reader.** Good writing focuses on the reader first. Good writers know the response they want to achieve and use words to get that response. They ask< "What do I want my reader to KNOW, THINK, FEEL and DO, after reading my writing?"
3. **The document has 'flow'.** You know when you see good writing and you cannot put it down. When writing has flow, each sentence leads to the next.

The unloading rate of written language

The unloading rate is the ease and speed with which the reader can read what you have written.

Positive unloading rate is when the reader can read your document straight through.

Negative unloading rate is when the reader has to stop and re-read because of something in the way that the document was written.

The unloading rate is affected by:

1. Subject (familiar or unfamiliar)
2. Vocabulary (the smaller the words, the wider the audience)
3. Style (active or passive)
4. Sentence length and construction
5. Punctuation and grammar
6. Layout (it must be inviting, easy to read, must contribute to giving meaning and structure to the information)
7. Thought sequence (it must be logical for the reader)

Lesson 2: Chunk Information

Did you know that the average person encounters more information in a single issue of the New York Times than someone from the 18th Century encountered in an entire lifetime? No wonder we all have information overload. If you want your writing read, understood and/or actioned, keep it short and simple. Today's busy reader needs writing that gets to the point. Writing must clearly convey the details and quickly state the desired result. A practiced writer can usually present the necessary information in a one-page business letter or memo that is both courteous and respects the reader's time.

What is chunking?

When you have a lengthy, complex message to convey, using the chunking principle makes it easier for readers to digest and interpret. Chunking is the concept of breaking a lengthy topic into bite-sized chunks and presenting each chunk according to some hierarchy. For example, instead of sending someone a solid page of text, reorganise the information and present it using bullet points or table format.

Reading a list of important points summarises what you want the reader to remember and reduces the chance of the reader tiring or losing interest in your document before reaching the most important piece of information.

How does it work?

Chunking is a learning principle identified by behavioural scientists and instructional designers. It seems like common sense but it takes a little practise to get adept at chunking information correctly. To chunk information effectively, remember the basic learning principle of **7 (±2)** — educational research has shown that human beings can remember no more than seven things at one time, sometimes being able to add on up to two more things. If you have written a complex memo full of instructions and details, first organise the details into "like groups," such as **Employee Information**, **Accounting Guidelines** and **Meeting Protocol**. Then pick out the seven most important points under each topic heading. List the key points starting with the most important point first.

What if you have more than seven chunks?

If you are chunking a large topic area and find that you come up with more than seven (nine at the very most) important points then your topic is too broad and needs to be broken down again. For example, instead of **Employee Information**, which might have 13 important points, break this topic down into **Office Hours** and **Overtime Guidelines**. Now sort each point under the appropriate heading. Chances are this trick will get your chunks below the **7 (±2)**.

Proof that it works

To convince yourself that it works, see the website offered by Information Mapping:

<http://www.informationmapping.com/demo/>

You will notice a remarkable difference between the reports that are chunked and those that are not.

Ways to Chunk Information

1. Structure sentences correctly

When reading, we process info when we reach the full stop. Therefore, reading is easier when very long sentences are broken up. Clear writing should have an **average sentence length of 15 to 20 words**. This does not mean making every sentence the same length. Be punchy. Vary your writing by mixing short sentences (like the last one) with longer ones (like this one). Stick to **one main thought per sentence**, plus perhaps one related point. Aim to structure your sentences: **subject, verb** and then **object**. If you don't, it can result in illogical or ludicrous statements. For example:

Illogical: This monument has been erected in memory of Peter Smith, who was killed at The Hill, as a mark of affection by his comrades, in 1996.

Corrected: In 1996, Peter Smith was killed at The Hill. His comrades have erected a monument in his honour.

2. Write good paragraphs

It is important that you only cover **one idea (or theme) per paragraph** and each paragraph should contain a logical and necessary part of your message. Present the main idea and then support it with sentences that relate to that idea. Aim for paragraphs that are approximately the same length (a **five to six-line paragraph** is the easiest to read).

3. Use headings

Headings are used as **signposts to guide your reader** through the document and draw attention to important sections or to information that matters the most to them. Sometimes **label headings** are the most suitable (e.g., Overview, Methodology, Findings, Recommendations and Conclusion) while, at other times, **descriptive headings** are better (e.g. Chunk Information Correctly, Implement a Management Development Program). In modern business writing it is wise to engage your reader and write headings that either: ask questions, create curiosity or offer solutions.

4. Use bullet points effectively

Lists can help **organise** and **emphasise** info effectively. However, when overused, they can detract from your goal and your audience may not understand which info is most important. To write good bullet points, apply the following:

1. Make sure all items in the list relate to each other.
2. Keep formatting and margin width consistent.
3. Use 'parallel form' when constructing bullet lists:
 - 3.1. Begin all items with the same part of speech (active verbs work well).
 - 3.2. Make all bullet points approximately the same length.
 - 3.3. Don't mix complete sentences with fragments.
 - 3.4. Don't mix statements with questions.
4. Emphasise the beginning of each bullet point to make the list skim-friendly.
5. Avoid using commas or semi-colons at the end of list item..
6. Use full stops at the end of each point only if they are complete sentences.

NOTE: Tables, charts, diagrams, sidebars and table of contents are all additional tools you can use to chunk info.

Lesson 3: Use Clear Simple Language

Start by asking how clear, courteous, concise, friendly and specific your writing is and then notice that this largely depends on your word choice. Here are some guidelines to help you succeed:

1. Avoid buzzwords in favour of plain English.
2. Favour simple words.
3. Use “modern” English phrases.
4. Avoid nominalisations.
5. Avoid repetition by using synonyms.
6. Avoid redundancy.
7. Watch “sound-alike” words.
8. Give instructions.

Lesson 4: Engage Your Reader

1. Avoid jargon (especially if you are writing for a global audience).
2. Use the active voice.
3. Use ‘you’ and ‘we’.
4. Write powerful and persuasive headings.

Lesson 5: Use Appropriate Business Tone

1. Be conversational.
2. Be tactful and courteous.
3. Use gender neutral language.
4. Use constructive language, words and phrases.
5. Apply the seven C’s of effective writing:
Clear, Concise, Correct, Courteous, Conversational, Convincing, Complete.

IMPORTANT NOTE: In essence, effective writing is knowing why you are writing, understanding your reader’s needs and then clearly writing what you need to say. Every piece of writing should be clear, human, helpful and as friendly as the topic allows. The best writing has a conversational tone and reads as if you were talking to your reader.

Your Turn: Post-Assessment



Exercise 1

Rewrite the following sentence in 12 words or less:

It is an often repeated phrase that beggars can't, at the same time, be choosers. In the current circumstances, with dedication and forethought, we must bring ourselves to decide whether we want to be beggars or whether we want to be choosers. I, for one, want history to portray my part in the direction of this company as the man who chose to be a chooser.

Exercise 2

Provide the preferred modern phrase for each old-fashioned phrase:

Old-fashioned	Modern
Trusting you are well	
Herewith, please find / see attached	
We beg to call your attention to	
Owing to the fact that	
At your earliest convenience	
We trust this is satisfactory but should you have any further questions please do not hesitate to contact us.	
Further to your communication, please find enclosed the requested quotation.	
If you don't correct this error, we will no longer do business with you.	
We can't give cost estimates telephonically.	
The documentation shall be completed by our team.	
Certificates have been issued as requested.	
We have a number of aims: <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. keeping costs down; 2. find savings; 3. efficiency gains. 	

Lesson 6: Get Good at Grammar

This is a quick refresher on the various parts of speech and the common mistakes seen in business writing.

1. Nouns

A noun is the name of a person, place, thing, quality or action. It is a vital part of a sentence as it tells who or what the sentence is about. Proper nouns must always begin with a capital letter while common nouns do not. For example, 'all sales managers' is correct as collective nouns should NOT be written with capitals.

2. Pronouns

Pronouns are used in the place of nouns in sentences. For example, "she, he, they, them" can be used instead of proper or collective nouns. Tips when working with pronouns:

1. Don't create confusion by using them too early in an email or by using them incorrectly. For example, "Angela knew that Donna got the promotion because she was listening on the intercom" or "In the sales department, they gave them seven paid holidays" creates confusion for the reader.
2. Always use a singular pronoun with the following words: each, every, each one, everyone, neither. For example, "Everyone should keep his filing up to date" or "Employees should keep their filing up to date".
3. Be careful of gender, if English is not your first language, you might not be used to using gender specific pronouns.

3. Plurals

The plural is the form of a part of speech, such as a verb, pronoun, used when talking or writing about something of which there are more than one. Not all plurals involve adding an "s" at the end of the word. For example, lady is made plural by writing ladies not ladys. If English isn't your first language, it is important to consult your spell check.

4. Verbs

Every sentence must have a verb, since a verb is an action word; it tells us what the subject is doing. Sometimes a verb does not express action, instead, it tells about something that "is". This is called **state of being**. For example, "am, was, are, were, is, will be". Tips when working with verbs:

1. Use the same number as the subject, this is because verbs can be singular and plural. A plural noun or two nouns take a plural verb. For example: the evening is warm (singular) or the evenings are warm (plural).
2. Subject and verb must agree. Example, each athlete believes in teamwork. All athletes believe the team will win. Note that "neither/nor" and "either/or" agree with the verb that is closest. For example: Neither Jenny nor Mike is available. Neither Jenny nor the admin clerks are available.
3. Verb tense must be consistent. For consistent verb tense, ask yourself whether the event occurred in the past, is going on now, or is going to occur in the future. Make the verbs reflect the time frame. Note that US English would use "learned" (as the past tense of learn) while UK English refer to it as "learnt".

5. Adjectives

An adjective describes a noun. They can describe qualities such as colour, size, type, number. Some words can be used as nouns or adjectives. For example, paper, chocolate, school, river, American. Tips when using adjectives:

1. When just two things are compared, the comparative form of the adjective is used. When more than two things are compared, the superlative is used. Short adjectives typically add “er” to form comparative or “est” for superlative while long adjectives (those with two or more syllables) form comparatives and superlatives by using the words “more” and “most”.
2. Don’t mix the use of more and most when comparing adjectives, or making double comparisons: more calmer or more friendlier.

6. Adverbs

Adverbs describe verbs in sentences. They can also describe adjectives or another adverb. They often end with “ly” and answer, “How? When? Where? Why? How much?” For example, he completed the report quickly. Tips:

1. Never use two negatives together. Negative adverbs usually start with “n”: no, none, never, nobody, nothing. Example of incorrect use, “He didn’t do nothing to help the situation.”
2. The double negative rule also applies to half-negatives. Don’t use them with another negative. Examples of half-negatives are: hardly, only, scarcely, but.

7. Prepositions

A preposition (about, below, in, since, after, between, into, through, among, by, like, under, at, up, before, from, on, with) is the word used to join the prepositional phrase to the rest of the sentence. That is, it shows a connection and gives meaning to the sentence. For example, he will not be at his desk for the next 10 minutes. Many people converting from German or other foreign languages might incorrectly say that he will not be on his desk for the next 10 minutes. Be careful if English is not your first language and double check if you are unsure.

Your Turn: Post-Assessment



Highlight the correct answer to help you assess and improve your grammar skills:

1. My manager, my colleague and **I** / **me** went to the meeting.
2. Did anybody leave **their** / **his** file in the boardroom?
3. The team **is** / **are** from many different countries.
4. Of all the filing systems, Sandra’s was **neater** / **neatest**.
5. Which of the two employees had the flu **worse** / **worst**? Tom was **sicker** / **sickest**.
6. Please do not send emails **at** / **over** the weekend.

Lesson 7: Perfect Punctuation

1. Capitalisation (Case)

Do's

You should capitalise the following:

1. The first word in a sentence.
2. Proper nouns. Names and titles of specific people, places, organisations, businesses and governmental bodies.
3. Job titles that relate to specific individuals; e.g. John Peters, Chairman and Chief Executive.
4. Historical events or periods; e.g. South African Freedom Day.
5. Special events and calendar items; e.g. Spring Day, Mother's Day.
6. Headings. Usually title case should be used for headings (especially level 1 through 3. Sometimes sentence case is more appropriate for particular headings. (level 4, 5 and especially 6).

TIP: Consistent use of the same case style for each heading is important throughout related reports or pieces of writing, for example:

Title case: Global Fraud Survey

Sentence case: Global fraud survey

Don'ts

You should NOT capitalise the following:

1. Seasons; e.g. winter, summer, autumn, spring.
2. Point on the compass; e.g. northeast, west, south, etc.
3. General occupation titles; e.g. All senior managers in the organisation.
4. When speaking about markets or industries in general body text or charts; e.g. The global real estate market.

NOTE: TYPING IN ALL CAPS is considered shouting and is frowned on in most cases. That said, there are times when words set in all capital letters are necessary and acceptable. Acronyms, such as SARS, and abbreviations such as RSA or USA generally appear in either all caps or small caps within body text.

2. Abbreviations

Use abbreviation sparingly and when in doubt, spell it out. In any style of writing, it is better to write words out completely than to risk the improper use of an abbreviation.

1. Do not use periods after letter abbreviations unless the abbreviation can be read as a word. There are a few exceptions to this rule, such as, US, UK and RSA.
2. When abbreviating amounts use “b” for billion and “m” for million.
3. Use singular abbreviations for singular and plural words; e.g. 100km not 100kms.
4. Use the abbreviation of company names correctly; e.g. The full “Ernst & Young” name is used on all external communications. However, the “EY” abbreviation can be used for all internal documents. And after the first mention of “Ernst & Young (EY)” in legal and technical documents. The “E&Y” abbreviation is never used.
5. Avoid using etc. where possible. Rather precede a list of items with “such as” or “including”.
6. Use Latin references correctly:

e.g.	<i>means</i>	for example
i.e.	<i>means</i>	that is
et al.	<i>means</i>	and others like
ibid.	<i>means</i>	in the same source
etc.	<i>means</i>	and so on

NOTE: Users of American English frequently put a comma after i.e. and e.g.:
The standard discount applies; i.e., 10%.
Some staff (e.g., John and Tony) are on leave.

3. Acronyms

Do your best to avoid the use of acronyms. Although they can save readers time, they can also be confusing. When you do use acronyms, introduce it the first time by placing it in parenthesis after the fully written version. For example, **South African Revenue Service (SARS)**. After that, it is acceptable to use just the acronym.

4. Ampersands

The ampersand (&) is a symbolic abbreviation for the word ‘and’. Historically, the symbol is a stylised version of the French word ‘et’ (meaning ‘and’). Do not use an ampersand in general writing simply to abbreviate the word and. Its use should be limited to a few situations:

1. In certain company names; e.g. Smith & Jones Consulting
2. If space is very limited; e.g. in a table with a lot of text
3. When artistic considerations dictate; e.g. a logo
4. In some academic references; e.g. (Grant & Smith, 1998)

5. Dates and Times

The use of different date and time displays is one of the most common errors in business documents. It is important to ensure consistency, especially when writing external communication. Use the following guidelines:

1. When expressing two dates in the same century you can drop the first two numbers in the second date. If the dates are in different centuries, the full year must be used. And use an en dash between the numbers without spaces; e.g. 1950–53, 1960–2011.
2. When referring to decades, don't insert an apostrophe; e.g. 1990s not 1990's.
3. Write out dates as day, month and year; e.g. 12 December 2011.
4. Write dates with the number only and not with 'th,' 'nd' or 'rd'. Note that 'of' is also omitted.
5. Most companies use a 24 hour clock but you can use a.m. and p.m., provided you correctly add the periods in between. You can drop the zeros when time is on the hour; e.g. 4 p.m.

6. Numbers and Monetary Systems

This is another area of writing where there are frequent inconsistencies and lack of awareness of correct business practice. Use the following guidelines to ensure you get it right:

1. Write out numbers in full up to and including the number nine.
2. Express numbers 10 and above as digits.
3. When a sentence contains a number lower and higher than 10 (and refers to the same type of thing), use digits for all.
4. Capitalise and spell out whole numbers and fractions that begin a sentence; e.g. Ten people attended.
5. Use the % symbol rather than the word, unless it appears after a spelled-out number.
6. Express fractions or mixed numbers as decimals; e.g. 0.5% rather than ½%.
7. Drop zeros in numbers with seven or more digits; e.g. US\$3b rather than \$ 3,000,000,000.00.
8. Use a decimal point (full stop), not a comma, when abbreviating large numbers; e.g. R1,200,000 should be abbreviated to R1.2m and R6,400,000,000 should be abbreviated to R6.4b.
9. Always clarify the money system you are using; e.g. US\$4m, US\$4 million, GB£5m, GB£5 million.
10. Include the plus sign (+) and country code at the beginning of all telephone numbers. The digits should be grouped the way they are grouped in each individual country.

7. Commas

Commas are, undoubtedly, a grey area when writing the English language. The key again is consistency. Because language and conventions change over time, what you do today might not be considered “right” tomorrow, but as long as you are consistent within a document, fewer people will see your usage as “wrong.” Use as ***few commas as possible***; the following list highlights when comma use is appropriate:

1. To separate independent clauses when they are joined by any of these seven coordinating conjunctions: and, but, for, or, nor, so, yet; e.g. He loved his work, but he needed a vacation.
2. When a related thought comes before a complete thought; e.g. Even though he loved his work, he needed a vacation.
3. After introductory words or phrases; e.g. Again, he thought about his vacation.

Note: Introductory elements (whether words, phrases or clauses) always establish one of two things: they establish time or condition.

4. To separate items in a series; e.g. Jim loved his wife, his work and his vacations, in that order.
5. In the middle of a sentence to set off clauses, phrases and words that are not essential to the sentence.
6. To set off interrupting words or phrases; e.g. “I love my work,” he said, “but I need a vacation.”
7. Use a comma to shift between the main discourse and a quotation.
8. Use commas wherever necessary to prevent possible confusion or misreading (just be careful not to overdo it).

8. Semicolons

The most common uses of the semicolon are:

1. To unite two sentences that are closely associated, complementary or parallel:
Writing is a skill; one must practise to improve a skill.
2. To act as a stronger comma, either for emphasis or to establish a hierarchy:
The teams were Tom, Dick and Harry; and Mandy, Martha and Mary.

9. Colons

A good rule of thumb to follow on using a colon is that there should always be a complete sentence on one side or the other and perhaps even both. Typically, a colon signals that additional clarification is coming after it. The most common uses of the colon are to:

1. Introduce a list which explains or provides the information promised in, the previous clause.
A manager needs two planning tools: pen and paper.
2. Show elapsed time or clock time figures. For example, 18:35.
3. Separate statement to example, statement to explanation, cause to effect, introduction to main point.
To err is human: we use computers.

10. Apostrophes

Correct use of the apostrophe is as follows:

1. To indicate possession (Martha's coat, the cousins' coats) but NOT with "yours, theirs, its," etc.
2. To show omission of letters; e.g. It's means "it is." Don't means "do not."
3. When writing about joint ownership, possession is shown only on the last noun, but where individual ownership exists, possession is shown on each noun.
4. To form plurals of a single letters; e.g. Two A's, three B's.
5. Do not use an apostrophe to create the plural of numbers, symbols and acronyms; e.g. 10s, ABCs.

NOTE: Do NOT use apostrophes for possessive pronouns or for noun plurals.

Tips when showing possession

To see if you have a possessive, turn the phrase around and make it an "of the..." phrase:

- the boy's hat = the hat of the boy
- three days' journey = journey of three days

Place the apostrophe correctly to show possession:

add 's to the singular form of the word (even if it ends in "s")	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • the owner's car • James's hat
add 's to the plural forms that do not end in "s"	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • the children's game • the geese's honking
add ' to the end of plural nouns that end in "s"	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • houses' roofs • three friends' letters
add 's to the end of compound words	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • my brother-in-law's money
add 's to the last noun to show joint possession of an object	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Todd and Anne's apartment.
If the noun after "of" is a building, an object, or a piece of furniture, then no apostrophe is needed.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • room of the hotel = hotel room • door of the car = car door • leg of the table = table leg

TIP: For Lars and anyone else whose name ends in S, you generally let your ear be your guide. If Lars's ticket sounds awkward, feel free to omit the final S. The only rule in this case is that you must (MUST) be consistent. You can't have Lars' rippling muscles then Lars's boyish charm.

11. Dashes

Distinguish between the three different dashes (hyphen, en dash and em dash). Many writers only use the hyphen.

1. Use the **hyphen** in connected words (take-off, daughter-in-law).
2. Use the **en dash** (a dash the width of an 'n') where the dash is replacing the word 'to'. Examples are:
 - spans of numbers, such as '3–5'
 - connecting nouns, such as 'France–Italy' final
3. Use the **em dash**:
 - instead of a colon; or
 - to set apart a strong interruption — like brackets or bracketing commas — within a sentence.

TIP: The hyphen is on the keyboard but the en and em dashes aren't. They are produced by using a special combination of keys on the keyboard. It is best to limit your use in most documents.

12. Forward Slashes

Forward slashes have limited use in business writing, such as acting as appropriate separators when writing short dates (12/01/2020) – although long date format is preferred. They can be used when writing website paths or if contained in certain numbers, like a serial or invoice number. They should not be used to refer to 'male or female' by writing 'he/she'. They should also seldom be used to indicate 'and/or' as it is cumbersome and can create ambiguity.

13. Quotation Marks

You will see quite a bit of variety in the use of quotation marks when you're reading. This is partly because American English uses double quotation marks to indicate speech and single quotation marks to indicate speech within speech (e.g. "He said to me 'You're always late.'") In the UK, these marks were traditionally used the other way around, though many writers now conform to the American standard. In most cases, either is appropriate, provided that you are consistent. Adhere to the following rules:

1. Quotations that aren't direct speech also take double quotation marks.
2. Put commas and periods within quotation marks.
3. Place colons and semicolons outside closed quotation marks.
4. Place a question or exclamation mark within closing quotation marks if the punctuation applies to the quotation.
5. Place the punctuation outside the closing quotation marks if the punctuation applies to the whole sentence.
6. Single quotation marks are always used to single out a particular word – you'll see many examples of that in these lessons, when a word is being talked about rather than performing its usual function in a sentence.

NOTE: Single quotation marks are also used around words whose appropriateness in a particular situation is dubious, e.g. "our 'beloved' leader" (as written by somebody who doesn't think the leader in question is worthy of such a description). This is slang usage, however, and is not usually appropriate for business writing.

14. Parenthesis

Parentheses (or brackets) are used to enclose incidental information, such as a passing comment, a minor example or addition, or a brief explanation. As with the dash, parenthesis should be used sparingly and the decision to use them is your judgment call. The following indicate some common uses of parenthesis:

1. Use parentheses to enclose words or figures that clarify or are used as an aside.
2. Use parentheses to show less emphasis or importance. Em dashes, which could also have been used instead of parentheses, show more emphasis.
3. Place a comma or semicolon that would normally follow the word preceding the parenthetical phrase after the close parenthesis.
4. If a complete sentence is contained in parentheses, it should be treated as its own sentence, i.e. capitalised and punctuated appropriately within the parentheses.

15. Ellipse

Ellipses are used in two places:

1. In quoted material, to show that words have been left out of a quotation or the speaker trailed off.
2. In one's own writing, to pause or trail off.

TIP: Although ellipses are important in quoted material (to show that words are missing), they are rarely a good idea in one's own business writing. In our own writing, we shouldn't be pausing (unless giving a speech) or trailing off. Pausing and trailing off do not inspire confidence in our readers although they can create a certain mood in advertising copy.

16. End Punctuation

A sentence may end with a period (.), a question mark (?) or an exclamation point (!).

NOTE: There is very little place for the exclamation point in business writing. Use it sparingly, if at all. And never double-up your end punctuation (???) in business documentation.

Your Turn: Post-Assessment



Complete the following exercises to help you assess and improve your punctuation skills:

Incorrect or Incomplete	Correct and Complete
NLP (Neuro-Linguistic Programming)	
Dear Susan,	
Kind Regards,	
Finalize	
4:35 p.m.	
60kms	
U.K.	
Eg.	
12/06/2010	
Global tax symposium	
Global Real Estate industry	
Fifteen	
8%-10%	
R 3,000,000.00	
10's	
The assignment was due on Tuesday; but he didn't finish it until today.	
In SA driver's stay to the left.	
Did I hear you say: "I love my job?"	
Once again I had produced a perfect report.	
John___ and Samantha___ new business (joint possession)	
One week___ vacation.	
Please bring a pen, paper, and highlighter.	

Module 2: Planning, Structure and Formatting

Objectives

After completing this module, you will be able to:

1. Use brainstorming to enhance your thinking.
2. Use Minto's Pyramid to communicate in a structured way that engages your reader.
3. Use both hemispheres of your brain and become a more effective thinker.
4. Plan documents with ease and engage in second level planning.
5. Format professionally.

Lesson 1: Better Thinking through Brainstorming

The term **brainstorming** has become a commonly used word in the English language as a generic term for creative thinking. The basis of brainstorming is **generating ideas** based on the principle of **suspending judgment** – a principle which scientific research has proved to be highly productive in individual effort as well as group effort. The generation phase is separate from the judgment phase of thinking.

In Michael Morgan’s book “Creative Workforce Innovation” he gives the following guidelines:

Brainstorming is a process that works best with a group of people when you follow the following **four rules**:

1. Have a well-defined and clearly stated problem (or objective).
2. Have someone assigned to write down all the ideas as they occur.
3. Have the right number of people in the group.
4. Have someone in charge to help enforce the following guidelines:
 - 4.1. Suspend judgment
 - 4.2. Every idea is accepted and recorded
 - 4.3. Encourage people to build on the ideas of others
 - 4.4. Encourage way-out and odd ideas

In “**Serious Creativity**”, Edward de Bono describes brainstorming as a traditional approach to do **deliberate creative thinking** with the consequence that people think creative thinking can only be done in groups. The whole idea of brainstorming is that other people’s remarks would act to stimulate your own ideas in a sort of chain reaction of ideas.

Groups are not at all necessary for deliberate creative thinking and “**Serious Creativity**” describes techniques for individuals to use to produce ideas. In a group, you have to listen to others and you may spend time repeating your own ideas so they get sufficient attention. Thinking as a group using brainstorming can certainly produce ideas but individual thinking using techniques such as those described by de Bono should be employed.

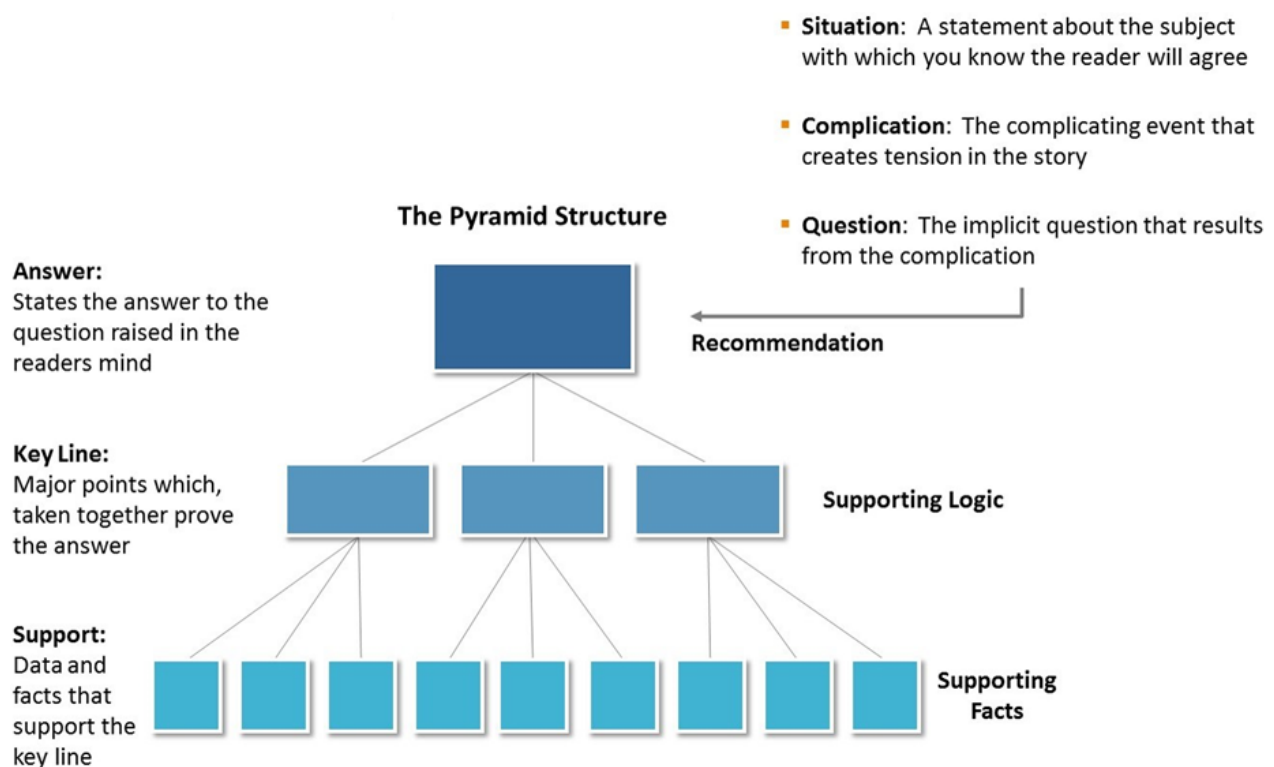
De Bono believes that individuals are much better at generating ideas and fresh directions. Once the idea has been born then a group may be better able to develop the idea and take it in more directions than can the originator.

Lesson 2: Structured Communication Using Minto's Pyramid

The Minto Pyramid Principle refers to a **'top down' process for organising your thinking** so that your key message can easily lodge in a listener or reader's mind. Many times, you'll only have a few minutes to communicate your key message. Then, if needed, you can dig deeper and present more details. The Pyramid Principle is about structured communication and thinking and observes the way people ideally work out their thinking by creating pyramids of ideas, where they:

1. Group together low-level facts they see as similar.
2. Draw an insight from having seen the similarity.
3. Form a new grouping of related insights, etc.

This eventually ends in a single pyramid of ideas, which at many levels, **obeys logical rules and is held together by a single golden thread**. Communicating then requires that you simply guide the reader down the pyramid. It uses the acronym: S-C-Q-A that **helps you present your ideas in a way that immediately engages the listener/reader** before you provide the answers (as shown in the following figure):



This technique applies to all communication in which your purpose is to offer your thinking to a reader – whether it is a meeting, an email, 1-page memo, academic assignment, multi-page report or formal slide presentation. It works equally for internal or external audiences, and regardless of medium or language. For this reason, the Minto Pyramid Principle has become **the de facto standard of effective communication** for all major consulting firms and professional organisations around the globe.

Lesson 3: Effective Writing Plan

Step 1: Decide why you are writing. Decide why you are writing, to whom you are writing and what you want the reader to say, think, feel and do.

Step 2: List the key points. List the major points you need to give the reader to accomplish your purpose and get the reader to do what you want done or to understand what you need them to understand.

Step 3: Arrange the topics in order. To help you put them in order, think of what structure will be most beneficial to your reader and help to achieve your objective.

Step 4: List the details you will include. Make sure you give enough detail for your reader to be able to understand your point and/or act if necessary. Give facts, reasons and explanations.

Step 5: Arrange details under major topic headings.

Step 6: Write the first draft of the document in the correct format.

Step 7: Revise, review and edit.

Step 8: Write the final draft.

Second Level Planning

Always read your writing critically. If possible, leave it alone for a few days and then re-read it. Or ask someone else to read it for you. Ask:

1. Is this clear, concise and persuasive?
2. Have I addressed the critical issues?
3. Is the detail relevant and complete?
4. What does my reader really need to be able to SAY, THINK, FEEL and DO?

Summary

1. Plan carefully. Use the pyramid structure so that you know exactly what you'll be writing about.
2. Organise your document into sections.
3. Use every day English whenever possible.
4. Avoid jargon and legalistic words and explain any technical terms you have to use.
5. Keep your sentence length down to an average of 15 to 20 words.
6. Adhere to one main thought in a sentence and one main idea or theme per paragraph.
7. Use active verbs as much as possible. Say 'we will do it' rather than 'it will be done by us'.
8. Write factually and in a style that is suitable and with the right tone of voice.
9. Always check that your writing is accurate, clear, concise, compelling and readable.
10. Format professionally and consistently to create a polished a professional impression.

Lesson 4: Professional Formatting

1. **Font type:** Favour sans serif font types and use only one or two font types when you design your document.
2. **Font size:** Body text is usually 10pt (sometimes 11pt or 12pt).
3. **Font colour:** Limit the use of colour to one or two colours and differentiate headings by alternating colours (if your template allows). Make sure you use a good tonal contrast between the type and the background.
4. **Alignment:** Left alignment is preferred because it is smoother and easier to read. Justified text may look neater, but it is more difficult to read. Centre alignment should be avoided as it negatively affects the unloading rate.
5. **Emphasis effects:** Use bold for emphasis. Do not use italics for long text passages and avoid underlining.
6. **Spacing:** Use at least 1.15 line spacing and 6pt before and after is common for normal paragraph spacing. Use white space to invite your reader into the document.
7. **Capitals:** Avoid using all caps and be consistent with capitalisation of headings (either title or sentence case).
8. **Headings:** Usually, Heading 1 = 14pt and Heading 2 = 12pt. The general rule of thumb is that headings are differentiated by 2pt. If a heading carries over onto a second line, try to break it at a point that 'makes sense.' The spacing above a heading must always be double the space below.
9. **Figures, charts or diagrams:** Always use captions with illustrations and ensure that the size and formatting of the object compliments the document.
10. **Pictures or embedded objects:** Crop and size images correctly to avoid distortion and ensure that it is in proportion with body text. It is generally better to avoid ClipArt (as they are overused) and favour fresh images that are of a suitable resolution.
11. **Pull quotes:** A pull quote (or callout box or sidebar) takes an extract from your text and displays it prominently, usually in a side margin. You should keep it short and choose a powerful extract, as you want to encourage your reader's curiosity.
12. **Headers and footers:** Most documents – especially reports – should have a header and footer (unless you are writing a one-page letter or memo). Document titles and business branding are typically reflected in the header while page numbering is typically displayed on the right-hand side of the footer.

Lesson 5: Sections of a Report (or Assignment)

1. A **title page** is used to display the title of the report as well as the name of the recipient (individual or organisation), the writer and the date. A short report will not need a title page but should have a title.
2. An **abbreviations list** must be included in long reports if you have used more than a handful of abbreviations. It is best to display it in a table format (with the abbreviation in the first column) and sort it alphabetically.
3. The **table of contents list** is only needed in long reports or if specified as a requirement.
4. The **abstract** is only needed in formal reports, such as reports of scientific research. It is a summary of the report. The abstract appears in library files and journals of abstracts. It won't usually be printed with the report so it needs to be able to stand alone. Keep it between 80 and 120 words. Don't confuse this with an 'executive summary' which we will talk about later.
5. The **introduction** should be brief and answer any of the following questions:
 - What is the topic and how does it relate to the wider field?
 - What is the background?
 - What is the purpose of the report?
 - What is the scope of the report?
 - What was your method of working? If the method is long and detailed, put it in an appendix.
 - How will the sections of the report be arranged?
6. The **discussion** is the **main body** of the report. It is likely the longest section, containing all the details of the work organised under engaging headings and sub-headings. Few readers will read every word of the body. So, start with the most important, follow it with the next most important and so on. You should follow the same rule with each paragraph. Begin with the main points of the paragraph and then write further details or an explanation.
7. The **summary or conclusion** section is sometimes placed before the discussion section. It summarises what the research findings are or what has been discovered, your conclusions and how you reached them. It can also indicate what can be learnt from what has happened before. The conclusion is your main findings. Keep it brief. Do not introduce any new information in the conclusion.
8. The summary and conclusions may lead to your **recommendations about** what should be done in the future. They must be based on the conclusion and be specific, practical and well organised.
9. A **reference list** (sources referred to in the report) or **bibliography** (sources consulted or of interest but not necessarily referred to in the report).
10. The **appendix** is for material that readers only need if they are studying the report in depth. Relevant charts and tables should go in the discussion where readers can use them. Only put them in an appendix if they would disrupt the flow of the report. Appendix items are usually referenced using alphabetical characters and must be arranged in the order they are referred to in the reports.

Module 3: Electronic Mail

Objectives

After completing this module, you will be able to:

1. Create professional email messages.
2. Draft professional out-of-office autoresponders.
3. Understand why email etiquette is vital.
4. Gain insight into email etiquette rules.

Lesson 1: Email Layout Guidelines

Email is one of the most commonly used communication tools in business today, yet many people write emails in a sloppy, inefficient and unprofessional way. It is important that we are aware that emails are not an excuse to write using sms language or obscure abbreviations. All the writing principles that we have covered this far apply to emails too. For example, keep sentence short, have one idea per paragraph, write in the active voice and ensure they are opened and closed correctly. For example:

From: Joan Harrison [mailto:jharrison@henleysa.ac.za]

Sent: 14 May 2015 15:55

To: Sharon King

Cc: 'Tiffany Oates'

Subject: SLA: Sharon King: MAP MAY 2015

Henley Business School **Top 1% globally** for customised education as ranked by the Financial Times. [Find out more](#)

Dear Sharon

I have attached your SLA for your delivery on Management Acceleration Programme (MAP+) next week on 20 & 21 May 2015. Please sign attached SLA and return to me.

Looking forward to seeing you.

Kind regards

Joan Harrison

Executive Education - Programme Manager

Mobile +27 83 330 0000

Email jharrison@henleysa.ac.za

Direct +27 11 802 0776

Switchboard +27 11 808 0860

Kirstenhof Campus, Cnr Witkoppen and Milcliff Roads, Paulshof, Johannesburg

GPS S26.03719° E28.05738° | [Click here for Google Map](#)

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Lesson 2: Compile Out-of-Office Autoresponders

Sample 1:

Good day

I am currently out of the office with no access to email. I will return on Wednesday, 8 October 2014.

Should you need any assistance, please contact the following people:

- General communication: Giuseppe Lattuca (glattuca@barloworld-equipment.com)
- Intranet queries: Nardus Schroeder (nschroeder@barloworld-equipment.com)
- Keeping Track queries: Lynne Mackie (lynne@lhcom.co.za)

Alternatively, if urgent, please send me an sms or call me on my cellphone +27 (0)83 497 8438.

I will deal with all other queries on my return.

Kind regards

Melissa Visser

SAP MM and Managed Procurement

Barloworld Equipment

a division of Barloworld South Africa (Pty) Ltd

Tel: +27 (0)11 929 0759

Cel: +27 (0)83 497 8438

Email: MVisser@barloworld-equipment.com

Sample 2:

From: Tonia Lessing [<mailto:tlessing@ens.co.za>]

Sent: 20 May 2013 06:19

To: Sharon King - Key Steps

Subject: Automatic reply: Tonia, the A is for 'Attitude', what is the B?

Dear Sender

Thank you for your mail.

I am on maternity leave until 26 August 2013. Please contact Carol Steyn (+27 11 269 7747 or csteyn@ens.co.za), who will direct your query to the appropriate person.

Kind regards

Tonia Lessing

Corporate Commercial Department | Director

tel: +27 11 269 7965 | cell: +27 82 765 4123

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Lesson 3: Thirty Email Etiquette Tips

1. Always confirm that email is really the best mode of communication.
2. Be concise and to the point.
3. Answer all questions and pre-empt further questions.
4. Use proper spelling, grammar and punctuation.
5. Keep your tone and language appropriate.
6. Use a meaningful subject line.
7. Use active instead of passive voice.
8. Make it personal.
9. Answer swiftly.
10. Use templates for frequently used responses.
11. Do not attach unnecessary files.
12. Use proper structure and layout.
13. Do not overuse the high priority option.
14. Use URGENT and IMPORTANT with care.
15. Do not write in CAPITALS.
16. Be careful with formatting.
17. Take care with rich text and HTML messages.
18. Do not leave out the message thread.
19. Add disclaimers to your emails.
20. Re-read the email (preferably aloud) before you send it.
21. Do not overuse Reply to All.
22. Use the CC field sparingly and the BCC option appropriately.
23. Take care with abbreviations and emoticons.
24. Do not request delivery and read receipts.
25. Do not ask to recall a message.
26. Do not copy a message or attachment without permission.
27. Do not use email to discuss confidential information.
28. Do not send or forward emails containing defamatory, racist or inappropriate remarks.
29. Do not forward virus hoaxes and chain letters.
30. Do not reply to spam.



Key Steps to Greatness

Key Steps	Resources	Date	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>

YOU CAN produce professional written communication... again and again and again.

Thank you for taking Key Steps with us today. Now that you have taken these Key Steps to unleash your potential and enhance your skills, you can keep taking them back in the workplace, can't you?

Every day, ask yourself, "What can I do improve my writing and enhance my professionalism?"

Then just keep taking one step at a time to...

"be the difference that makes the *difference*"