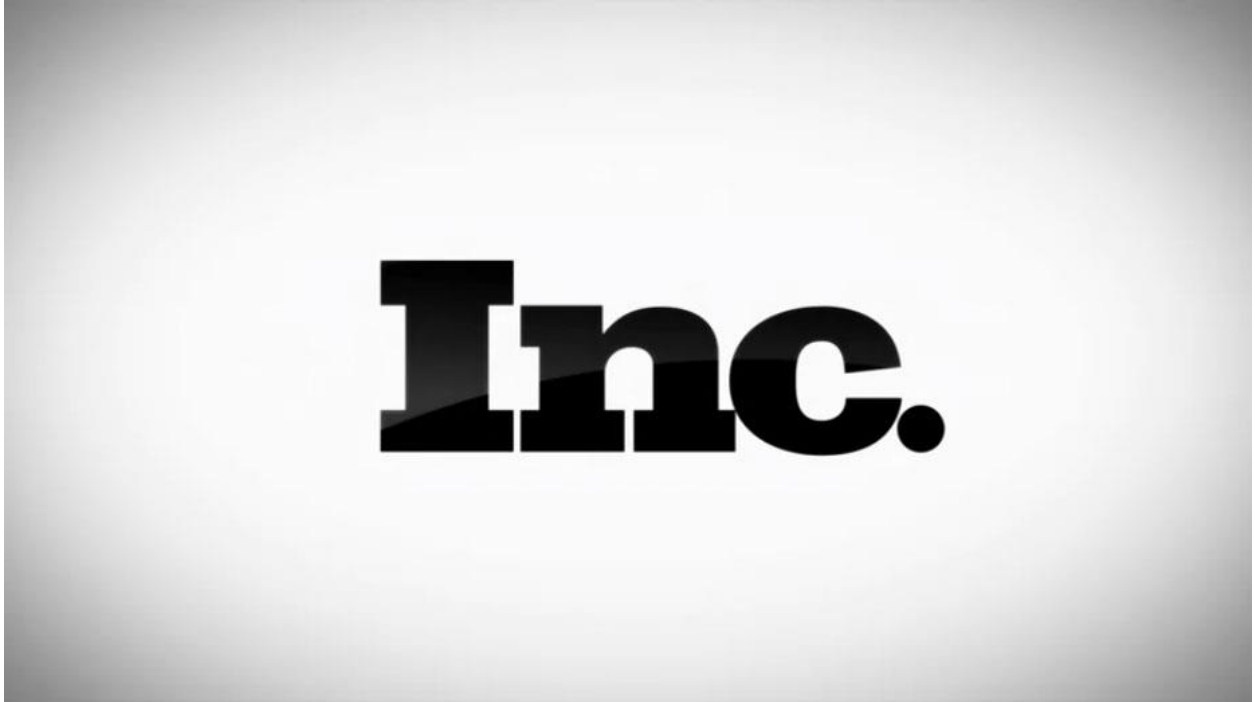


Written Communication

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Related Terms: [Communication Systems](#)

Written communication involves any type of interaction that makes use of the written word. Communication is a key to any endeavor involving more than one person. Communicating through writing is essential in the modern world and is becoming ever more so as we participate in what is now commonly called the information age. In fact, written communication is the most common form of business communication. It is essential for small business owners and managers to develop effective written communication skills and

to encourage the same in all employees. The information age has altered the ways in which we communicate and placed an increasing emphasis on written versus oral communications.

The ever-increasing use of computers and computer networks to organize and transmit information means the need for competent writing skills is rising.

Dr. Craig Hogan, a former university professor who now heads an online school for business writing, receives hundreds of inquiries each month from managers and executives requesting help with improving their own and their employees' writing skills. Dr. Hogan explains, in an article entitled "What Corporate America Can't Build: A Sentence," that millions of people previously not required to do a lot of writing on the job are now expected to write frequently and rapidly. According to Dr. Hogan, many of them are not up to the task. "E-mail is a party to which English teachers have not been invited. It has companies tearing their hair out." Survey results from The National Commission on Writing study back up this assessment. They found that a third of employees in the nation's "blue chip" companies write poorly and are in need of remedial writing instruction.

The need to develop good writing skills is only highlighted by the fact that in the information age, it is not uncommon to have business relationships with customers and suppliers that are established and maintained exclusively through the use of written communications. In this environment, "the words we write are very real representations of our companies and ourselves. We must be sure that our e-mail messages are sending the right messages about us," explained Janis Fisher Chan, author of *E-Mail: A Write It Well Guide-How to Write and Manage E-Mail in the Workplace*, in an article appearing in *Broker Magazine*. The key to communication, of course, is to convey meaning in as accurate and concise a manner as possible. People do not read business memoranda for the pleasure of reading. They do so in order to receive instructions or information upon which to base decisions or take action. Therefore, highly literary prose is not desirable in business writing. Overly formal prose may also be counterproductive by seeming stand-offish or simply wordy. A style of writing that is too informal can also convey an unintended message, namely that the subject matter is not serious or not taken seriously by the sender. A straightforward, courteous tone is usually the best choice but one that may not come naturally without practice.

THE COMMUNICATION PROCESS

The basic process of communication begins when a fact or idea is observed by one person. That person (the sender) may decide to translate the observation into a message, and then transmit the message through some communication medium to another person (the receiver). The receiver then must interpret the message and provide feedback to the sender indicating that the message has been understood and appropriate action taken.

As Herta A. Murphy and Herbert W. Hildebrandt observed in *Effective Business Communications*, good communication should be complete, concise, clear, concrete, correct, considerate, and courteous. More specifically, this means that communication should: answer basic questions like who, what, when, where; be relevant and not overly wordy; focus on the receiver and his or her interests; use specific facts and figures and active verbs; use a conversational tone for readability; include examples and visual aids when needed; be tactful and good-natured; and be accurate and nondiscriminatory. Unclear, inaccurate, or inconsiderate business communication can waste valuable time, alienate employees or customers, and destroy goodwill toward management or the overall business.

ADVANTAGES AND DISADVANTAGES OF WRITTEN COMMUNICATION

One advantage to using written forms of communication is that written messages do not have to be delivered on the spur of the moment; instead, they can be edited and revised several times before they are sent so that the content can be shaped to maximum effect. Another advantage is that written communication provides a permanent record of the messages and can be saved for later study. Since they are permanent, written forms of communication also enable recipients to take more time in reviewing the message and providing appropriate feedback. For these reasons, written forms of communication are often considered more appropriate for complex business messages that include important facts and figures. Other benefits commonly associated with good writing skills include increased customer/client satisfaction; improved inter-organizational efficiency; and enhanced image in the community and industry.

There are also several potential pitfalls associated with written communication, however. For instance, unlike oral communication, wherein impressions and reactions are exchanged instantaneously, the sender of written communication does not generally receive immediate feedback to his

or her message. This can be a source of frustration and uncertainty in business situations in which a swift response is desired. In addition, written messages often take more time to compose, both because of their information-packed nature and the difficulty that many individuals have in composing such correspondence. Many companies, however, have taken a proactive stance in addressing the latter issue. Mindful of the large number of workers who struggle with their writing abilities, some firms have begun to offer on-site writing courses or enrolled employees in business writing workshops offered by professional training organizations, colleges, and community education programs.

E-MAIL COMMUNICATIONS

Electronic mail has emerged as a highly popular business communication tool in recent years. Indeed, its capacity to convey important corporate communications swiftly and easily has transformed it into a communications workhorse for business enterprises of all sizes and orientations. But many users of e-mail technology pay little attention to basic rules of grammar and format when composing their letters, even when they are penning business correspondence addressed to clients, customers, vendors, business partners,

or internal colleagues. This sloppy correspondence style reflects a lack of professionalism and may communicate to the recipient a view of the company behind the message as equally unprofessional. The ease and informality of the medium should not be confused with the writing necessary to use it properly.

Given this unfortunate trend, many business experts counsel companies to install firm guidelines on tone, content, and shape of e-mail correspondence. These guidelines should make it clear that all employees are expected to adhere to the same standards of professionalism that (presumably) remain in place for traditional postal correspondence. Proper spelling and grammar and the ability to frame correspondence in suitably diplomatic language should be hallmarks of electronic mail as well as regular mail, especially if the communication is directed at a person or persons outside the company.

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