

Technical Writing Skills

Workplace Communication - Memos & Emails

Learning Outcome

Write clear, well-organized memos and emails.

Use various strategies to improve clarity and coherence of your writing.

Write effective subject lines.

Clarity and Coherence

Tell your readers where you will be leading them before you start; if they understand what you plan to do and why, they will be better able to concentrate on the information you provide.

Clarity and Coherence

Structuring units critical to coherence are:

- titles
- headings
- lists
- introductions
- conclusions

Clarity and Cohesion

Rule #1: Write effective subject lines.

A good subject line communicates the topic and the purpose of the document.

Compare the following:

- A. *200-V Power Supply*
- B. *200-V Power Supply Shipping Problems*
- C. *Recommended Solutions to the 200-V Power Supply Shipping Problems*

Clarity and Cohesion

As you check your subject lines, ask yourself these two questions:

1. Is it sufficiently precise?

Compare:

- A. Suggestions
- B. Suggestions for improvements to lock-down procedures

Clarity and Cohesion

2. Is it easy to read and understand?

Compare

- A. Shipboard Corrosion Task Force Meeting Minutes
- B. Meeting Minutes for the Task Force on Shipboard Corrosion

Clarity and Cohesion

Rule #2: State the purpose up front.

A succinct statement of purpose at the start of the memo answers the reader's crucial question,

"Why are you telling me this?"

Clarity and Cohesion

Examples

- A. The purpose of this memo is to inform you of the preliminary test results for the new chip.
- B. This is a request for additional funding to cover the increased costs of the materials for the plant-renovation project.

Paragraph Structure

Rule #3: Conclude with an action statement.

Action statement is a list of future tasks that you or some of your readers will carry out.

Discussion

What is the advantage of setting this section off at the end of the memo?

Clarity and Cohesion

Rule #4: Use headings if appropriate.

Headings serve four main functions:

1. To act as attention-getting devices because they are easy to see and understand.
2. To act as transitions as they guide the reader from one section to another.
3. To access the information in a memo because they break down and organize large, diverse sections of material into smaller, more readable parts.
4. To break up a page of text uninterrupted by white space.

Rule #5: Use lists to communicate parallel information.

Discussion

How can the following information be presented as a list?

“We recommend that Operations bid on this facility because it contains the latest production technology, it is fully computer controlled, and it contains ample space for processing, storage, and future expansion, both inside and outside.”

Clarity and Cohesion

Example

We recommend that Operations bid on this facility for three reasons:

1. It contains the latest production technology.
2. It is fully computer controlled.
3. It contains ample space for processing, storage, and future expansion, both inside and outside.

Activity

Review: Basic Information Blocks

1. Main Message

This says in very few words the information you most want to convey. In effect, it summarizes the whole message into a short summary statement, i.e. a topic sentence.

Review: Basic Information Blocks

Hint: Before writing, try explaining in one sentence the main thing you want to tell the reader. Start with these six words:

I want to tell you that...

Now finish the sentence.

Review: Basic Information Blocks

Compare:

- A. Your order for 14 rolls of 22AWG wire was filled on May 27 and shipped by rail express the following day. We apologize for the delay.

- B. Referring to your telephone question of yesterday afternoon, we had difficulty in filling your order until May 27 and apologize for the delay. The 14 rolls of 22AWG wire were shipped the following day.

Activity

Review: Basic Information Blocks

2. More Details

This part amplifies and explains what has been said in the main message. It offers evidence to support what you are saying and answers questions the receiver would ask if given only the main message.

Review: Basic Information Blocks

Hint: After you finished the main message, ask yourself what the reader of this information might ask.

Example

(I want to tell you that) I won't be able to repair the cooler by Saturday, May 12.

Discussion

What questions do you think the reader would ask?

Review: Basic Information Blocks

Most likely questions would be:

- Why can't you?
- What are you doing about it?
- When will you do it?

If you then answer these questions, you will have a complete communication.

3. Other Information

This part can contain a variety of information connected with the main message, but not an essential part of it. It might suggest how or when something should be done, comment on costs of a project, or predict what will happen next.