# Formatting Business Writing

In order to properly format a document, we must first understand the primary components of that document. These skills—including spacing, emphasis, and more—are the same skills used in emails, memos, business reports, and employability documents.

Two of the most widely used examples of word processing software are Microsoft Word and Google Docs. Both Word and Google Docs provide the business writer with the formatting tools needed to create professional documents.

Specifications of the basic letter, memo, or email format:

- Paragraphs are not indented

- Line spacing is 1.0 (or 1.15) in the paragraph

- Line spacing is 2 between paragraphs

- Left margin is justified/aligned, which means it looks like a straight line

- Right margin is ragged (left aligned paragraph) or straight line (block paragraph)

- Font size is 10 or 12 depending on font type (Arial and Times New Roman are common fonts because they are universal across PC and Mac platforms)

## Business Letter Format

There are numerous online sources describing the format of a business letter. Many businesses have specific formats for communications coming from their organizations, and of course, those formats take precedence. There is likely pre-printed letterhead with the company logo and address available. Today, it is commonplace to include company email and website addresses in the address block or heading.

As you begin to use both Word and Google Docs, you will become familiar with templates that help with many of the spacing issues.This section comes from a widely recognized source, **Purdue OWL (Online Writing Lab)**. There are several common styles: Block, Modified Block, and Semi-Block. These instructions address the most common parts of a business letter using block format.
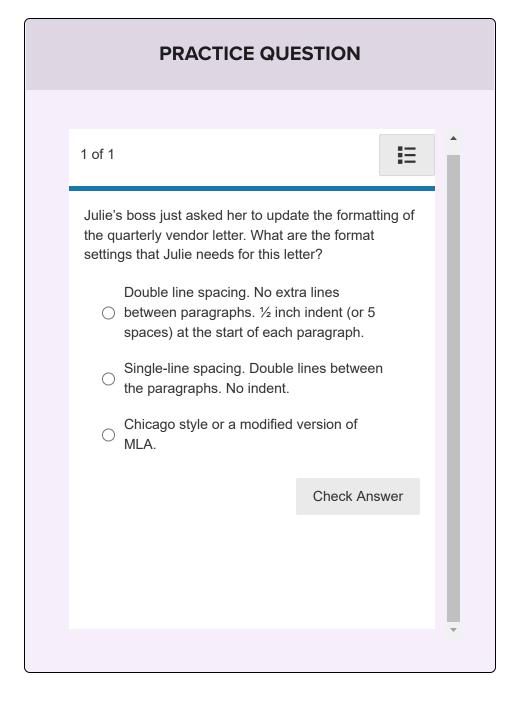
- Sender's Address

- Date

- Inside Address

- Salutation

- Body

- Closing

- Enclosures or attachments

## Business Memo and Email Format

With the increasing use of email, memos are less frequently found in the workplace. For business writers, to think of memo and email formats as the same is not too far a reach. Pay careful attention to the subject line in both emails and memos. As discussed in the previous sections, the subject line plays a critical role in providing guidance for the reader regarding urgency, topic, and actions to take. In an email or memo, use **bold** paragraph headings for scannability. Doing this helps you stay organized, and readers love it because it helps them pick out the most important information easily.

For more information on how to format a memo take a look at **this document on standard memo formatting** or **Module 3: Written Communication's page on memos**.

Julie's boss just asked her to update the formatting of the quarterly vendor letter. What are the format settings that Julie needs for this letter?

○ Double line spacing. No extra lines between paragraphs. ½ inch indent (or 5 spaces) at the start of each paragraph.

○ Single-line spacing. Double lines between the paragraphs. No indent.

○ Chicago style or a modified version of MLA.

Check Answer

## Style

When formatting any written communication, it's important to end

up with a document that's pleasing to the eye. Here are a few quick tips on making your document look good. For more tips, take a look at **Format: Make Your Message Inviting**.

## White Space

> "
>
> White space between words, white space between paragraphs. White space between sentences.
>
> When you see a block of text, break it apart into shorter paragraphs, sentences, words or bullet points.
>
> Sculpting as you go.
>
> You dear writer, shape the meaning of your content with the words, but shape the presentation by formatting.
>
> By the white space.

—Demian Farnworth[1]

For business writers, the choice of white space is not as free-form as sculpture, yet there are standard conventions to apply and business writing choices that aid the reader. Standard conventions appear in the final section of this module.

Notice how the quote from Farnworth has short lines and uses the blanks space showing through to break up the text. The rhythm of the words is represented visually. In business writing, paragraphs, just like sentences, are kept relatively concise. There is no prescribed length, but writers tend to avoid one sentence paragraphs. Writers also tend to avoid paragraphs that result in long, uninterrupted blocks of text. Regardless of length, each paragraph will have have a topic sentence with just as much support as it needs—no more, no less.

## Lists

Lists are excellent tools for two reasons: They create white space and they create a pattern that is easy for a reader to understand and recall. There are two types of lists: numbered (enumerated) and bulleted.

Use **numbered** lists when order or importance matters:

| Avoid | Try |
|---|---|
| To make toast, first plug in the toaster. Second, slide the bread in to the slot. Third, push down on the toasting lever. | Steps to make toast:<br><br>1. Plug in the toaster<br>2. Slide the bread in to the slot<br>3. Push down on the toasting lever |

In this example, the order of steps to make toast matters. Pushing down on the toasting lever provides no value without the bread loaded into the slot. Also notice how much easier the "Try" column was to understand and retain.

| Avoid | Try |
|---|---|
| The reasons the store is staying open later are that first, studies show per store profits increase by 3%. Second, customers like a pharmacy open in the evening for emergencies. Third, the Associate Manager lives close by, so a bit of a commute is not a worry. | The reasons the store is staying open later:<br><br>1. Studies show per store profits increase by 3%.<br>2. Customers like a pharmacy open in the evening for emergencies.<br>3. The Associate Manager lives close by, so a bit of a commute is not a worry. |

Notice that the Associate Manager's preference likely was not as

important to the additional store hours as sales and customer preference were.

Use **bulleted** lists when the items are of equal value.

| | |
|---|---|
| | Vegetables that may be mixed in store-made salads: |
| Vegetables that may be mixed in store-made salads are lettuce, tomatoes, carrots, or spinach | • Lettuce<br>• Tomatoes<br>• Carrots<br>• Spinach |

In this example, notice that any of the vegetables may be used. One item is not more important than the other. It does not matter the order in which the items are selected.

List items may be one word long, a phrase long, or a sentence long. They each must be constructed with parallel organization (see previous section on **Parallel Construction**).

Lists items may end with punctuation or without as long as they are all the same. Notice the consistency in the lists above.

## Headings

Headings provide significant assistance in longer messages or reports as a way of guiding the reader and providing white space to

separate ideas and messages. Most software programs have heading levels built in to a style that the writer may select. Using this pre-formatted style ensures consistency throughout a message.

## Serif vs. Sans Serif Font

When choosing a font type, the first thing to decide is if you need a serif or sans serif font. What is a serif? A serif is the small strokes on a font (as seen in Figure 1).



Figure 1. Serif versus Sans Serif fonts

While there is some debate on the topic, the general recommendations are as follows:

- When writing for print media, use a serif font for your body text and a sans serif font for headings.

- When writing for digital media, use a sans serif font for your body text, and you can use a serif or sans serif font for headings.

Font type impacts the selection of font size. For most business writing, the optimal fonts size is 10 or 12.

## Contribute!

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1. Farnworth, Demian. "**How To Dramatically Improve Your Writing With White Space**." nd. Web. 13 June 2018. ↵