# Writing Essentials

*Never fall in love with your own writing.*
~John Morris

This chapter is a close companion to the 3-part Writing Process introduced in Chapter 2. In fact, it was born of our desire to keep that process as tight as possible without compromising some of the specialized tasks students often find relevant to their assignments. Our intention was to keep Chapter 2 consistent with a generic process for business school that will fit the majority of assignments. To enable this focus on the overall process, we created this chapter of writing essentials to capture common *one off* items. We consider these as *one off* because 1) they support the basic writing process of analyze, compose, and finish; 2) all courses have unique skill requirements so the instructor may have varying interests in how you do these things; and 3) doing these things will not harm any student's grade despite the individual expectations or tastes of the instructor.

## Formatting a Business Report

The primary reason for writing is communication and this does not vary between disciplines. However, there are differences between academic and business writing styles. In business writing, we tend to be informal and use a perspective that matches the circumstances. In academic writing, the tone is more formal and we are biased toward a distant, third-person perspective as evidenced by the choice of pronouns and a clinical tone. Both academic and business writers emphasize facts, but business writers give opinions too. Academics use long sentences, but business readers see such writing as stilted and cumbersome. But note, while business writing is less formal than academic writing, it is not conversational. Avoid using slang!

Figure 3.1 Academic and Business Writing Compared

| Characteristic | Academic Writing | Business Writing |
|---|---|---|
| Purpose | Learning and demonstration of mastery. | Writing actionable items, calls to action, and getting things done. |
| Appearance | As identified by the instructor, typically 1″ paper margins, a title, and page numbers using paragraph indents, double-space, and twelve-point Times New Roman font. Visually, it is uniform and boxy. | Typically not specified, dictated by subject matter and the firm's tradition. Single spacing (or maybe 1.15) is common with frequent use of white space and page numbers. Uses titles, headings, and subheadings along with bulleted and numbered lists, graphs, charts, logos, and pictures. Fonts vary, but are generally friendly but not cartoonish.<br>The effect is visually attractive and pleasing yet the document can be quickly scanned, or read more slowly for details. |
| Audience | Your teacher or instructor. | Driven by circumstances; depends on the interests and needs of the specific stakeholders. |
| Document Life | Since an essay or exam is the typical product, its useful life is usually very short-lived. Typically, kept for reference until the end of the term or some institutionally mandated period. | The document is generally just a starting point and can transition into other forms of communication (written documents become oral presentations or formal presentations become informal meetings). Parts of documents may take a life of their own, being reused multiple times in different contexts by the same and different authors. Some documents may be stored in a firm's knowledge management repository for reuse or for regulatory or legal reasons. |
| Citations | Direct quotes and paraphrasing from outside sources must be cited in predetermined academic conventions like Chicago, MLA, and APA. | Once created, content of reports becomes the firm's property and paraphrased, quoted, and boilerplated text is not cited. If outside sources are used, citation varies according to the needs of the audience or client. |
| Tone | Authoritative, yet inquisitive to show the author has knowledge about their topic and thesis, but is open to new learning. | Driven by circumstances; depends on the interests and needs of the specific stakeholders. May be friendly, authoritative, persuasive, or even argumentative. |
| Voice | Usually passive, especially in science writing. Passive voice prioritizes the **experience** of an action over the **performance** of that action. | Always uses an *active* voice, one in which the subject performs the action stated by the verb. For example," The CEO (subject) ordered (verb) her team to get in line or get out." Active voice tends to use fewer words, be more direct, and easier to understand. |

## Understanding Assignment Requirements

Bloom's taxonomy is a framework with which to classify skills; it is based on the 1950s research of Benjamin Bloom and is sometimes referred to as *levels of thinking*. Because it's useful in calibrating difficulty, many instructors employ Bloom's taxonomy to write learning objectives and assignments. The lower level (easier) skills, such as remembering, set the stage for higher level (difficult) skills, such as analyzing or evaluating. In a given course, and indeed across the curriculum as a whole, students are asked to demonstrate lower level skills first and to progress to higher level thinking; the starting point is often referred to as *foundational* while the endpoint can be thought of as *mastery*. Sometimes mastery is called Critical Thinking. For the purposes of this guide, the levels will be explained as they relate to the ways they might be used in assignment descriptions or prompts.

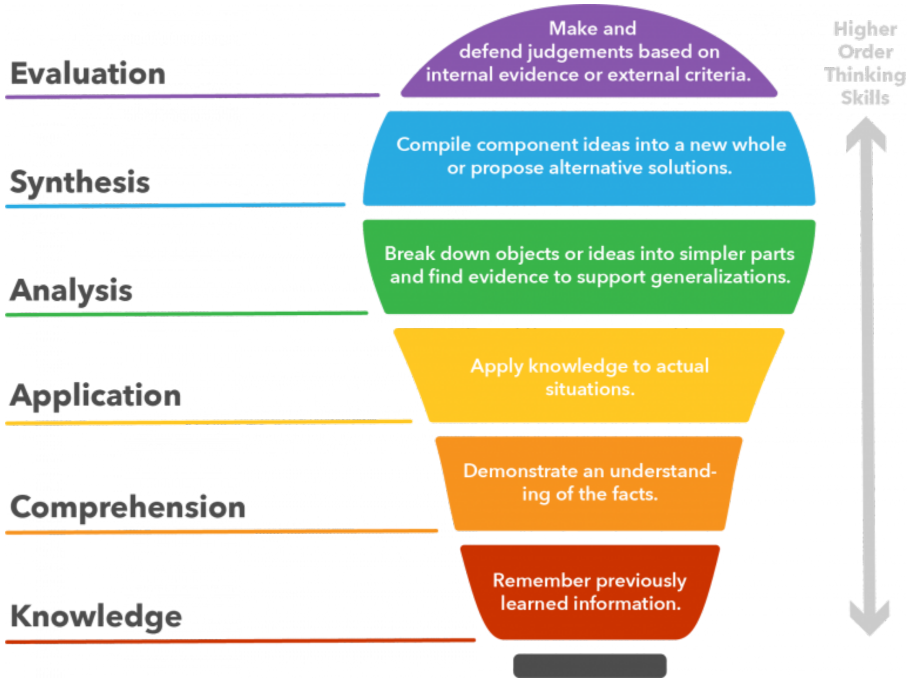


*Figure 3.2 Bloom's Levels of Thinking*

As you read through each of the *level* descriptions below, recognize that the verbs your instructor chooses in an assignment prompt identify the levels of thinking they expect from you as a student. The common verbs we listed are representative, not exhaustive; your specific discipline may even have its own vocabulary around each of these levels of thinking.

Regardless of the discipline, the foundational level always starts with knowledge specific to the subject and then progresses to comprehension, application, analysis, and synthesis and culminates in mastery as demonstrated through evaluation. Just like an artist must first learn about the variety of implements for placing paint on canvas (knowledge) before they actually dip their brush into a jar of paint, students of business must first understand the vocabulary they will need before trying to understand a theory or model. Likewise, the same student needs to comprehend the business theory before they can apply it to a case. Learning progresses along these *levels of learning*.

The tool that Bloom gave to teachers through his taxonomy makes describing this progression easier. And this progression works equally well whether moving through a subject or a discipline. That's why BA 101 comes before BA 211. As you read assignments in your various courses, pay attention to the descriptors; they will help you understand how complex your responses should be.

Which of the levels an assignment falls into is not always clear or obvious, and it may not be possible to merely use the assignment's verb choices to determine its category. Higher level assignments in particular build on and often use the terms from lower levels of Bloom's Taxonomy. So it may be helpful to fully understand each verb of the assignment and what level of thinking it demands, using Bloom's Taxonomy as a guide.

## Knowledge Level

Common verbs: *arrange*, *define*, *describe*, *identify*, *label*, *list*, *name*, *order*, *recall*, *select*, *state*

For example:

**Identify** the four parts of a SWOT analysis.

**Name** the three stages of the value chain.

These prompts are simple; they are asking you only to state the parts of something, either the parts of a SWOT analysis or the stages of the value chain. Therefore, these two examples do not require you to go beyond stating; that is, once you have replied “strength, weakness, opportunity, and threat” to the first prompt, you are done. Obviously, this type of question is very basic. If used at the beginning of the term or in a foundational course for a degree program, it may be a multiple choice or short answer type question. If it comes later in the term or curriculum, it is usually paired with a higher level question.

## Comprehension Level

Common verbs: *comprehend*, *classify*, *define*, *discuss*, *explain*, *summarize*, *paraphrase*, *restate*

For example:

**Explain** the four parts of a SWOT analysis.

**Summarize** what happens at each stage of the value chain.

Note in the previous level, knowledge, you only had to identify or name the parts of SWOT or a value chain. Now at a comprehension level, you would be required to go beyond just stating the terms to explain what role each part plays. Comprehension involves a more in-depth knowledge of the process or model. So, if you stopped at “strength, weakness, opportunity, and threat” when responding to the prompt above, you would receive no or only partial credit for your answer. In other words, comprehending a model is a higher-level of thinking than just knowing what the parts are called.

## Application Level

Common verbs: *apply*, *chose*, *construct*, *compute*, *determine*, *develop*, *extend*, *predict*, *report*, *use*

For example:

**Use** SWOT to describe the future prospects of Company X.

**Construct** a drawing of Company X’s major value chain activities.

know and understand about SWOT analysis or value chain within the context of a new situation. To do this, you also need to apply what you know about Company X's business to the specific model. At the application level, you must still know and comprehend the SWOT model, but you must also apply its rules and principles to describe Company X's specific future prospects.

Clearly, as you progress to this third level of thinking, if you had not yet mastered either of the previous ones, it will show up in how you describe those particular prospects. In other words, if you thought that "S" represented "strategies" instead of strengths, your answer will appear nonsensical to anyone who has mastered these three levels of thinking relative to SWOT analysis.

## Analysis Level

Common verbs: *analyze*, *break down*, *compose*, *contrast*, *differentiate*, *distinguish*, *examine*

For example:

> **Distinguish** between the unique strengths of Company X and Company Y.
>
> **Analyze** Company X's value chain to identify its primary vulnerabilities.

At the analysis level, you are able to split up a subject into component parts in order to examine how they relate to each other. As with the earlier levels, you are still expected to have mastered less complex thinking before being challenged to analyze; now you not only understand the context for using a model, you also understand the content being studied and how it is organized, making this a more complex and nuanced task than application.

Distinguishing between the strengths of two independent entities—Company X and Company Y—requires the student to use the appropriate language (knowledge), correctly (comprehension), within the context of each's strengths (application), and compare the relationship correctly. So, if Company X is known for its market power and brand and Company Y is known for its market power and scale of operations, the student will need to explain what these distinctions mean to each company; that is, describe the implications of brand to market power in contrast to scale of operations to market power.

## Synthesis Level

Common verbs: *adapt*, *arrange*, *compare*, *categorize*, *formulate*, *integrate*, *organize*, *propose*, *write*

For example:

> **Compare** the likelihood of success of Company X if they spend money to improve their existing software (strength) versus if they streamline their production process (weakness).
>
> **Propose** a revision to Company X's supply chain organization.

Going beyond a *break down* exercise (analysis), these prompts are asking the student to generate a complete argument by combining their understanding of each of the parts. To demonstrate a mastery at the synthesis level, the student is expected to be able put the parts of a thing back together in order to create a new whole that is different than what existed before. Such comparisons or proposals rely on analysis using a properly applied framework, but the student is expected to be much more complete. For example, the instructor may expect a formal report or persuasive proposal.

## Evaluation Level

Common verbs: *appraise*, *assess*, *conclude*, *criticize*, *defend*, *justify*, *critique*, *persuade*, *predict*

For example:

> On which part of the SWOT analysis should Company X focus in order to ensure its future success? **Defend** your choice.
>
> Describe the value chain activities for Company X and Company Y? **Conclude** which company operates more efficiently and suggest improvements for each.

In the first prompt, the student must first understand all parts of the SWOT analysis in order to determine which is most important. Then they apply what they know about both Company X and Company Y and the market in which they both operate. Not only will the student need in-depth knowledge about the models, companies and markets, but they must evaluate each in order to derive a conclusion. This involves extensive research, analysis and finally integration before arriving at a conclusion. But, the student is not yet done because they must also *defend their choice*. This involves appraising all of the previously mentioned information and prioritizing that information based on its merits, in order to create a persuasive defense!

# Thesis statements

A thesis statement is a sentence that states the main idea of a report. Its purpose is to give direction to the report and let readers know its content. See the example, Thesis Option #1. Note how the thesis statement clearly responds to the prompt, but without going into detail; the specific information about how the company will ensure its future success will be addressed in the body paragraphs of the report.

A thesis statement can also contain a supporting point, if that point will be the central theme of the report. See the example, Thesis Option #2. Either thesis statement works and which one you choose depends on how you want to approach the prompt.

All reports should include a thesis statement, but the length and content will be determined by both the assignment and author's preference. When crafting a thesis statement, consider your response to the prompt, your personal opinion on the topic, or what you believe is the strongest argument. The thesis should be drafted at the beginning of the writing process to serve as your guide and then revisited (and probably rewritten) during the polishing phase to ensure it is still in alignment with the theme of the report.

**Prompt:** On which part of the SWOT analysis should Company X focus in order to ensure its future success? Defend your choice.

**Thesis Option #1:** To meet their long-term objectives, Company X should pay the most attention to their strengths, specifically the development of AppX.

**Thesis Option #2:** To meet their long-term objectives, Company X should focus on their strengths, specifically the development of AppX technology, ***because they are currently the only company that uses this highly innovative technology.***

# Keeping writing honest and avoiding plagiarism

## Plagiarism and How to Prevent it

Merriam Webster's dictionary defines plagiarism as "to steal and pass off (the ideas or words of another) as one's own or use (another's production) without crediting the source". Examples of this could include copying someone else's work and calling it your own or improperly citing portions of another's work. Whether intentional or unintentional, plagiarism is a serious offense and will be dealt with in a serious manner by university officials. However, students' desire to maintain honesty in writing should be driven not by the fear of consequences associated with plagiarism, but rather the knowledge that they have acted in an ethical manner, and their writing reflects that.

Maintaining honesty in writing requires continuous commitment from the writer. The responsibility for avoiding both intentional and accidental plagiarism falls completely on the writer and anytime a writer attaches their name to an assignment, it must be completely their own. Identifying the common causes of plagiarism will help you understand the best ways to prevent it.

## Common Causes

There are a few common causes for plagiarism.

**Inexperience.** Students do not know how to properly cite works. Citing properly according to a style guide requires a lot of attention to detail. There are many online resources that can help with this and you will get better with practice.

**Misunderstanding.** Students may not understand the necessity of citations. Especially students from cultures where borrowing someone's work is considered as giving them honor, rather than stealing as it is in American culture, the concept of citing work may be unfamiliar. Knowing the norms of the culture and system you are living and working in and the standards that universities hold students to is key to preventing plagiarism.

**Carelessness.** Students are unsure of how to approach the assignment or lack confidence in their own work. However, learning is a process, and by copying someone else's work rather than engaging in the process of learning, students are only selling

**Procrastination.** Poor time management and procrastination can also lead to plagiarism. When students feel they are unable to complete an assignment on time, they may feel their only choice is to plagiarize. Staying on top of deadlines and being realistic about the amount of time assignments require can help with this.

**Oversight.** When participating in group work, students rely on others to correctly cite. With group assignments, all members of the group are responsible for the content, so if there is an improper or missing citation, each member will face the consequences. It's a good idea for all members on a group assignment to be responsible for proofing the document and looking for potential problems.

## What and How to Cite

Citing means giving proper credit to the creator of the intellectual property that you are using in your research. Citations generally require the author's last name, date, title, source and link to the source, though these items and their sequence vary among the citation styles.

There are three main styles of citations. The style of citation is just that—it's the way a citation is displayed both in the text and in the reference list. The style of citation used depends on both the academic discipline and professor's preference. Some professors don't mind if students use whatever citation style they are comfortable with, while others are more particular and require students to cite in one particular style.

Regardless of citation style, sources need to be cited in two ways.

**In-text citations.** These citations appear in the text, after the information that you are referencing and are in either parenthetical or footnote form, depending on which style of citation you are using. Both paraphrased and directly quoted information need to be cited (though in different ways) and a general rule is that a phrase of more than 4-5 consecutive words taken from any source needs to be cited. The way to cite directly quoted and paraphrased material depends on the citation style. No matter which citation style you're using, the author's last name needs to be shown in-text or in the footnote, and the full citation must appear in the reference list.

**Reference list (also called Works Cited).** This is a list of sources which needs to be included at the end of your report. The list must contain all the sources you used in your report and will either be in alphabetical order or the order in which they appear in your report. Chicago, APA, and MLA styles have very particular rules about what information needs to be included from each source and how it is displayed, so consult the manual for details on how to compile a reference list.

As mentioned, citing properly in a given style is best done using a manual of that particular style. Manuals are widely available online. One comprehensive and well-known website with these manuals is Purdue OWL, the online writing lab run by Purdue University. Chicago, APA, and MLA manuals of style can be found there. This video and this Citations 101 website will provide further explanation. By the way, although you might like to include an impressively long list at the end of your report, avoid the temptation of including sources that you did not cite; that is a bibliography. In a bibliography, you list all material you read or reviewed when preparing your report. Unless specifically requested, most instructors are not interested in a bibliography.

Because citation style is generally determined by the course instructor, it's best to follow their instructions. Although we are using a Chicago style, this textbook specifically avoids promoting one style of citation over another. If your instructor doesn't specify a style, you should be sure to ask.

## Writing for Persuasion

Persuasion is selling and business is all about selling. Whether selling your idea to investors, persuading a client to buy your proposal, or persuading your boss to take your suggestions, there are elements of persuasion in nearly all aspects of business. Indeed, even in school, there is an element of persuasion in getting the scores on assignments you deserve and the grades you desire.

There are several elements to persuasion that are important to keep in mind which were addressed generically in the 3-part Writing Process. But let's put those in the context of writing to persuade. First, you need to understand your audience and what they want. The elements in the Analyze portion of the 3-part Writing Process address this task from several angles, but importantly, they help you put your words into words that your audience will absorb.

Once you know the objective of your writing (referred to in the 3-part Writing Process as "assignment purpose") you must dive into the data. Mark Twain famously popularized the saying "There are three kinds of lies: lies, damned lies, and statistics." The headlines in the popular press are full of business executives going to jail over some kind of deception or act of omission. Your boss (and your professor) do not want you to make up facts in order to create a persuasive argument; this is the literary equivalent to putting *lipstick on a pig*, because no matter how nice you try to make the pig look, it is still a pig!

Digging into the data means getting answers that will support your stance. As the Twain quote implies, however, sometimes this means looking at the data from a variety of perspectives. If you come to a conclusion that is obviously questionable, be prepared to explain your assumptions. Knowing why a stance is not convincing is often as important as having a strong set of arguments in support (see the next section on counterarguments). But, let's stick with crafting your position persuasively for just a bit longer.

Using data is powerful in defending a position. How many times have you debated with your buddies over the merits of some particular figure or event only to have someone pull out their phone and ask Google for an answer? If you are arguing which city is bigger, census data provides a sufficient comparison and *debate concluded*. Likewise, comparing the wisdom of one approach over another relative to a marketing problem can be furthered or hindered through the application of data.

Data, when used in conjunction with an appropriate business model, is even more persuasive. When professionals look at problems, they are generally assessing an appropriate framework to understand what is happening, which will then yield a path forward. When an investor is asked about a stock, they examine its historical records, its current 10-K, and may determine its price-to-earnings ratio before providing a recommendation. When an attorney examines the liability for a consumer product, they will examine the evidence, look at previous case law, and apply a standard of probable cause. Both the financial ratios and legal precedents are business models that provide a framework for a decision. As a student of business, it behooves you to act in an equally professional manner by looking for an appropriate business model to frame your arguments.

When making your case, ask yourself if you have an effective position that is supported by the facts; you are not ready to transition from analysis to composition until you do. Then look for a good "hook" to grab the attention of your reader and encapsulate your position by speaking directly to a need of your audience. Use effective editing to get all unnecessary words out of the way. Look for graphics or figures that will support your position. And, look at the most convincing argument in opposition to your position and decide how you can most convincingly refute it.

## Writing a Counterargument

In order to be persuasive in writing (and in presentations), counter argumentation can be used. A well crafted counterargument takes place in two steps and will enhance the persuasive ability of a report or presentation.

A counterargument is a statement that goes against your claim, which is then followed by a statement that proves your claim is still logical or sound. When trying to persuade your audience, either in written form or through a presentation, you first your initial stance. Think of this as a *turn against* your own argument. Finally, you *turn back* to your original argument (second step) using a "but", "yet", "however", or something similar to highlight the logic or evidence that outweighs the possible opposition. You show that you have considered the strongest counterargument and that your argument prevails. A more detailed description of how to construct a counter argument is given in the next section.

Always consider your audience, and the objections they may have to your opinion or proposal. Brainstorm **why** your audience would disagree with you, and the **support** they would use to disagree with you. The turn against should contain: drawbacks to your claim, an alternative conclusion drawn from the same data, or a different conclusion that makes sense within the context of your argument. It is key to both present the argument against your thesis and elaborate on why others would support that argument. The elaboration does not have to be lengthy (1-2 sentences is fine), but does need to succinctly and clearly support the opposing view.

Including a counterargument in writing is a method of persuasion with two primary benefits. First, it shows that you have considered and are willing to acknowledge multiple points of view before settling on one. In business, there is rarely one clear-cut solution to a problem and all viable options need to be carefully weighed. Showing that you, as a writer, have approached the issue from two or more perspectives enhances the credibility of your final opinion. Secondly, it also allows you to address possible objections to your opinion and refute them (prove them wrong), which shows readers who may object initially that there is a better option.

Skillfully writing a counter argument requires higher level thinking, the ability to understand multiple perspectives, and good planning. But, be careful using counterarguments. If your logic is trite or your approach obviously feeble, you will do more harm than good to your report.

Counterarguments will not enhance all reports, so consider whether the assignment calls for one. If the purpose of the assignment is anything other than persuasion, a counterargument is not appropriate. For instance, in the previous section on levels of thinking, you learned that responding to the prompt "Explain the four parts of a SWOT analysis" is a low level (comprehension) in Bloom's Taxonomy. When answering this question, it's not useful to include a counterargument because there is no argument in the first place. However, in the question "On which part of the SWOT analysis should Company X focus in order to ensure its future success? Defend your choice" you are required to give an opinion and it is your goal to persuade your audience to agree. By presenting your opinion, proposing a counterargument (in this case, the suggestion that another element of SWOT is more important), and then refuting that opposition, your argument is made stronger.

## Constructing the Counterargument

The counterargument is generally positioned in one of two parts of the paper, either immediately after the introduction paragraph or right before the conclusion paragraph. The counterargument should be contained in one complete paragraph, not interspersed throughout multiple paragraphs.

Your counterargument will make up the first part of its own paragraph. Start your counterargument paragraph with terms that allow your reader to know you are presenting the opposing point. Possible phrases to use are:

> Some may argue that…
>
> Others may hold the belief that…
>
> It might seem that…

Admittedly,...

Opposing views claim that...

In the second half of the paragraph, following the presentation of the other side in support of it, signal to the reader that you will now turn back to your original thesis and refute your opponent's claims by stating why they are wrong. This step also will involve the skillful use of transitions. For example:

Yet..

Nevertheless...

However...

This rebuttal (the turn back to your original position) needs to directly disagree with opposing argument stated in the first sentence of this paragraph and contain elaboration. Be sure to consider an explanation for why the counterargument is problematic or why it is less important than your argument.

Finally, write a conclusion sentence at the end of the paragraph to sum up your idea and link back to your thesis.

Here is an example of a counter argument paragraph which could be found in a report responding to this prompt we have seen before: *On which part of the SWOT analysis should Company X focus in order to ensure its future success? Defend your choice.*

**Thesis:** Company X should pay the most attention to their strengths, specifically the development of AppX technology, because they are currently the only company that uses this highly innovative technology.

**Some may argue that** Company X should focus on the opportunity to expand into the Asian market. This market has over 2 billion young consumers, which is a huge potential market for Company X's products. By taking advantage of this opportunity, Company X could open the door to a global market and a large consumer base. **However**, this new potential market is currently saturated with Company X's competitors, many of them whom failed to make a profit last year. Focusing on AppX technology, a proven strength of Company X, in a space with no current competitors is a far less risky move than seeking an opportunity elsewhere where the competition is stiff. **Thus,** investing in a current strength, is the wisest choice for Company X.

Note that the thesis, or writer's opinion, is in support of focusing on strengths, while the counterargument paragraph begins by presenting the argument that Company X should pay most attention to opportunities. The transition words in bold signal the turn away from and turn back to the thesis, and the conclusion of the writer.

Writing a counter argument is a skill that takes time to develop. With careful thought and planning, writers will become more adept at it, and therefore enhance their persuasion skills.

# Grammar

English grammar is complex and filled with rules and exceptions to those rules. When thinking about learning or improving your grammar there are, of course, many aspects to consider, far more than can fit in this writing guide. Therefore, this guide focuses primarily on those most critical for writing clarity, based on our experience.

## Agreement and Referencing

There are two types of agreement in the English language: subject-verb and pronoun.

In English, subjects and verbs must agree, meaning that if you use a singular subject a singular verb must go with it. For example:

> He **goes** to the store.
>
> They **go** to the store.

Generally, this is pretty straight-forward for native speakers of English, yet in some instances it can be hard to know whether a subject is plural or singular. In the instances below, the subject of each sentence is singular and therefore takes a singular verb.

> **One of the members** is absent.
>
> **The team leader**, as well as his interns, is well-prepared.
>
> **The group** with all the posters presents first.

Remembering whether a subject is singular or plural is a matter of memorization. The following words all require a singular verb: either, neither, each, everyone, everybody, anyone, anybody, no one, nobody, someone, somebody. For example:

> **Each of the members** contributes to the team.
>
> **Nobody** was prepared for the emergency.

While incorrect subject-verb agreement will be noticeable to your reader, it likely won't confuse them. Lack of pronoun agreement or unclear pronoun referencing, on the other hand, has the possibility to cause confusion to the reader. Each pro-

> Mohammed finished **his** expense report then **he** went home.

It is clear that both “his” and “he” mean “Mohammed”.

There are two main problems which can occur with pronoun referencing. The first is that there is more than one noun the pronoun could refer to. For example:

> Nora and Maria worked diligently, and after more than a week **she** finished the project.
>
> Not long after the company set up the subsidiary, **it** went bankrupt.

In the first sentence it is unclear who “she” is because “she” could mean either Nora or Maria. If they both finished the project, the pronoun “they” should be used. In the second sentence, the pronoun “it” could represent both the company and the subsidiary, which leaves the reader wondering exactly who went bankrupt.

The second potential problem with pronoun referencing is when the pronoun refers to a word that is implied, but not specifically stated. For example:

> At ABC, Inc. **they** go to great lengths to keep employees happy.

It can be inferred that “they” means the company, but it could also mean the supervisors, managers, or human resource department at ABC, Inc.

Remember, pronouns need to clearly refer back to a noun and be in the same (singular or plural) form as the noun they are representing. In the case of referencing, if there is a doubt whether the pronoun does this, it is better to use the proper noun. In written work, being diligent about checking that each verb agrees with the subject of the sentence and that each pronoun correctly represents the noun it is intended to, is the best way to identify these errors.

## Tenses

While there are more than 15 verb tenses in the English language. In academic writing, the most commonly used tenses are present simple, past simple and present perfect. Below are common situations when each tense is used:

## Present Simple

To make general statements that are still true

To state proven facts

For example:

A SWOT analysis is done to assess a company's strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats.

> Kellogg's is a leading producer of breakfast cereals.
>
> Americans eat more organic food than ever before.

## Past Simple

To introduce past research

To describe how data were gathered

For example:

> Chen and Li found that employer satisfaction with job performance was related to benefits the company offered.
>
> To understand the market better, researchers interviewed 150 participants.

## Present Perfect

To connect the past to what is still relevant in the present

For example:

> The internet services industry has become more profitable over the years.

## Modals for making recommendations

the strength of the suggestion. First, consider your audience. If your audience is a superior, it's necessary to show respect to them by using a softer and less forceful tone.

For example:

> You must invest in new equipment in order to increase profits.
>
> You should invest in new equipment in order to increase profits.

The first example is very direct, too direct for a recommendation to a superior. The second example is a recommendation with the correct tone. In addition to using "should", the following words are in the appropriate tone to make a recommendation: suggest, propose, urge, advise.

## Word Choice

Deciding which words to use can be a tough choice, but in all cases, prioritize clarity. If your reader is not able to understand precisely what you mean, there will be a breakdown in communication.

## Collocations

Collocations are word that commonly go together in English, and are known to "fit" together. A simple example is:

> We solved the problem.
> We answered the question.

However, if we switched the verbs in the two sentences and said "We solved the question", this isn't correct because "solve" and "question" don't collocate well together.

While varying your word choice by using synonyms can make your writing more interesting to read, if you do not have a keen awareness of the contextual uses of the word, you run the risk of error or incorrect meaning. For example:

> An increase in sales will mean a bigger market share for our product.
> An addition in sales will mean a bigger market share for our product.

While "increase" and "addition" are synonyms according to Merriam Webster's thesaurus, the meaning of the two words is not

Awareness of words that fit well together is something native speakers of English often have because they've been exposed to the English language since childhood, while non-native speakers need to learn subtle uses of words. There are rarely strict rules that govern collocations, which also makes collocations challenging for non-native speakers. The best way to improve your knowledge of collocations is to expose yourself to English as much as possible, and to pay attention to which words are often used together.

## Set phrases

Like collocations, idioms, including the proper use of phrasal verbs and prepositions, are something that is learned with time and practice. For example:

> Apply their knowledge into reality.
> Put their knowledge into practice.

Both phrases are understandable, yet many native English speakers would say the second example just "sounds better", without really knowing why. There are some grammar rules surrounding these set phrases, but the majority of phrases have developed over time and are now considered standard usage. As with collocations, learning set phrases takes time and practice.

## Prepositions

Prepositions are also a matter of memorization, which follow some, but not many predictable rules. Below are examples of correct usage of prepositions:

> Spending on
> Consumption of
> Deadline for
> Key points of
> Take away from
> Increase/decrease in

Incorrect usage, for example, using "spending in materials increased over the period" can still be understood, but is not grammatically correct. Using the correct phrase is necessary for writing and speaking in a professional way, as in the case "spending **on** materials".

## Parallel Construction

> Today, I'm going to shop for groceries, take a walk, and washing my car.
> Today, I'm going to shop for groceries, take a walk, and wash my car.

The first sentence is not grammatically parallel because the third verb "washing" is not in the same form as the previous two; in the second sentence all three verbs are in the same form, present simple, so this sentence is parallel.

Parallel construction must be used in a series or list which is separated by commas, and uses the conjunctions "and" or "or", as in the above example.

Parallel construction also must be used within phrases. For example:

> They were advised they should focus on the company's strengths, they should cut costs, and a couple new positions should be created.
> They were advised they should focus on the company's strengths, they should cut costs, and they should create a couple new positions.

The first sentence is incorrect because the third phrase is not parallel to the others, while in the second sentence the correct parallel construction is used.

Additionally, you can remove unnecessary words, and let "should" be the modal for all three verbs. For example:

> They were advised they should focus on the company's strengths, cut costs, and create a couple new positions.

Parallel construction must also be used in the patterns of: between/and, either/or, neither/nor, not only/but also. For example:

> The management had to decide between investing in new equipment and buying back shares.They were advised to not only focus on the company's strengths, but also cut costs.

In the first sentence, "investing" and "buying" are parallel. In the second, "focus" and "cut" are parallel. Both of these sentences are grammatically correct.

**Tip:** The best way to ensure your sentences are parallel is to pick out all the conjunctions in your writing and look at the series before and after the conjunctions. Each item in a series must be in the same grammatical form.

Transition words are conjunctions, or connecting words, that establish connections between sentences and between paragraphs. The purpose of transition words is to guide your reader through your report to reach your intended conclusion. Transition words do this by showing the logical connection and the relationships between ideas. For example, if you want to contrast two ideas, the word "however" can be used, while in comparing ideas the word "likewise" can be used. Using the correct transition clarifies your meaning, but using the wrong transition can confuse your reader. For example:

> The profits of Company X increased in the second quarter compared to the first quarter, likewise revenue declined.

In the example above, the transition "likewise" is incorrect because it signals to the reader that what comes both before and after the transition word will be the same or similar. This isn't the case however, because profits increased yet revenue declined. The correct transition here would be "however".

This site link provides a comprehensive list of transitions and their uses.

Use of transition words does not necessarily mean that a report will be easy to follow. In fact, transitions used incorrectly or overused can make the organization of a report less clear and leave the reader confused, as in the example above. Transitions themselves cannot replace good organization, rather proper organization needs to come first and transitions then enhance the organization.

Transition words can also be overused, and if they are, they can be a distraction to the reader. Transition words are often encouraged among immature writers because they mark ideas, yet when writers develop, it is no longer necessary to mark each sentence with "first…second…third" In some cases, very few if any, transitions are needed to make a report flow well. If you read publications like the Wall Street Journal or New York Times, you will notice how few transition words are used. Instead of using transition words to connect ideas, strong writers use other methods. Note that in the excerpt from The New York Times below, only one transition phrase is used, which is "for example".

> On Thursday, Apple became the first publicly traded American company to be worth more than $1 trillion when its shares climbed 3 percent to end the day at $207.39. The gains came two days after the company announced the latest in a series of remarkably profitable quarters. Apple's ascent from the brink of bankruptcy to the world's most valuable public company has been a business tour de force, marked by rapid innovation, a series of smash-hit products and the creation of a sophisticated, globe-spanning supply chain that keeps costs down while producing enormous volumes of cutting-edge devices. That ascent has also been marked by controversy, tragedy and challenges. Apple's aggressive use of outside manufacturers in China, for example, has led to criticism that it is taking advantage of poorly paid workers in other countries and robbing Americans of good manufacturing jobs. The company faces numerous questions about how it can continue to grow.

The following are additional ways of connecting ideas, as highlighted in red in the example:

Pronouns- "it's shares" refers to Apple's shares; "that ascent" means "the ascent from the brink of bankruptcy".

Substitution- "the gains" refers back to "shares climbed 3 percent"; "the company" is used twice, both times to reference Apple.

the reader bored or confused. As you develop as a writer, be intentional about balancing your transition words with the other methods of organization.

## Writing Concisely

Well-known author, George Orwell said, “If it’s possible to cut a word out, always cut it out”. This doesn’t mean never write the word, rather in the editing process, search for and cut out words which don’t add value to your work.

Good writers are able to express their intended meaning without using unnecessary words. In business writing in particular, being clear and concise needs to be prioritized over being fancy and wordy. Busy executives have no time to mull over long, complex sentences when a short version is clearer and provides the same meaning.

Many writers find it easier to initially write from stream of conscience, including many transition phrases such as “I intend to tell you…”, “My first claim is…”, “The second thing is…”, and “My final analysis shows”. However, as stated in the revising section, these extra words and phrases should eventually be eliminated. Most often, they can be deleted without any other modification to the sentence. For example:

> I intend to show you why good writing is always worth the effort.
>
> ~~I intend to show you why~~ Good writing is always worth the effort.

In this fashion, we’ve reduced the sentence by six words (24 characters or 45% including spaces), without changing its meaning, and the sentence is more powerful in the process.

Whereas writing every word that comes to mind is fairly easy to do, writing concisely is more challenging and takes considerably more time and effort. You must be intentional about each word you write and ask yourself whether it serves a purpose. Consider whether one word could replace several and if a shorter word could replace an unnecessarily long word. Consider whether entire sentences, paragraphs, or even sections could be eliminated. However, you must find a balance between being concise and eliminating too much. Cutting out too many words could leave your reader confused about the connections between ideas or unable to follow your logic.

Use the following steps to help you write more concisely:

1. **Eliminate redundancy.** If one word has a similar meaning to another in the same sentence, delete one. It’s not necessary to say the same thing twice. For example:

> Carrots contain a wide range of various nutrients.
>
> Carrots contain various nutrients.

She explained some of the various methods of doing an analysis.

She explained the methods of analysis.

2. **Be specific with qualifiers**. Qualifiers are almost always vague in nature. For example:

The CEO proposed several new changes and most of the board somewhat agreed.

What does "several" mean? It could mean 3 or 6 changes. How many is "most of"? These words adds no value to the sentence because they are too vague.

In business writing, before using any vague qualifier, consider whether a qualifier could be replaced with data. For example:

The CEO proposed 4 changes and 80% of the board agreed.

The word "somewhat" could easily be removed because it is not essential to expressing the author's intended meaning and could not be replaced by any concrete data. By removing this and quantifying the other words, the sentence becomes less wordy and the meaning is clearer.

3. **Reduce prepositional phrases.** Too many prepositional phrases in the same sentence can make the sentence hard to read. The word "of" is commonly overused, and can often be replaced by an adjective and noun or by making a noun possessive. For example:

Original: The collection of data was a process that consumed a lot of time.Revised: The data collection was time consuming.

Original: The reason for the failure of the new system was lack of knowledge of users.

Revised: The new system failed because the users lacked knowledge.

The prepositions "in", "for", "at", "on", and "over" should also be examined to determine whether they are necessary. For example:

The reason for the failure was that the team didn't address the needs of the customers.

The failure was caused by overlooking the customer's needs.

4. **Use verbs to show action.** To best emphasize the importance of the action, it is best to use strong, rather than weak verbs. The verbs "do", "is" and "have" are considered weak because though they have a purpose in the sentence, they don't convey an action. In the example below, the verb "do" should be replaced by the verb "evaluate", which is stronger. This also eliminates a preposition and does not change the meaning of the sentence. Use strong verbs, whenever possible.

We need to do an evaluation of the candidates. We need to evaluate the candidates.

5. **Reconsider the use of vague nouns.** Words like "factor", "aspect", "situation", and "area" are often vague. For example:

Original: In the areas of business related to finance, an understanding of mathematics is key.Revised: In finance, understanding mathematics is key.

Original: Salary is an important factor to consider when choosing a job.

Revised: Salary is important to consider when choosing a job.

Vague nouns can often be removed without altering the meaning of the sentence. If it is possible to remove a vague noun, do so.

Throughout the writing process and especially before submitting a report, check every word to make sure it adds value to the sentence; if it does not, remove it. Writing concisely takes dedication. It does not come naturally to many people, but is a skill that must be practiced and refined over time.

## Active Voice

The essential needs in business writing are communication and action. In active voice, the emphasis is on the doer of the action so the subject that performs the action typically comes *before* the verb. The object that receives the action typically comes *after* the verb, and therefore has less emphasis. By using passive voice the writer is conveying that the object is more important than the subject or that the subject is not known. In business writing, because it is generally necessary to know clearly who (subject) is doing what (verb), using active voice is preferable.

Additionally, it takes more words to write passively than actively so writing in an active voice will make you write concisely. For example, the following two sentences express the same meaning, but active voice uses 25% fewer words than passive voice.

Active Voice: XYZ Corp announced its quarterly earnings.

Thus, avoid passive construction unless it is absolutely necessary.

However, there are few situations when passive voice is necessary. One is if the doer of the action is not known. For example:

Passive Voice: Their house was broken into.

In this case, we do not know who performed the action, so passive voice is appropriate.

In the majority of business writing situations, passive voice is not appropriate because the doer of the action is known. In the example below, there is no reason to use passive voice.

Passive Voice: The meeting was led by the management team.

Active Voice: The management team led the meeting.

Active voice above is preferable because the doer of the action is the subject of the sentence. Before using passive voice, ask yourself if it is necessary. If it is possible to use active voice, do so.

## Tables and Figures

For ideas that are particularly important to your report, consider creating a graphic, figure, or image to illustrate. For example, in the Introduction of this textbook we used the *Indexed* line drawing cartoon from author Jessica Hagy because it aptly illustrates the task ahead for the aspiring business writer. We also used an hourglass graphic to illustrate the Essay Template because the shape seems useful in conveying the narrowing and broadening process of report writing. Similarly, there is a SWOT Checklist in Chapter 4 because it can serve as a convenient tool in creating your own SWOT analysis. You may find such tables and figures help you make your point effectively in a report.

When including graphics like we used in your report, place them where they can be easily referenced by your reader. Such figures should be numbered (*e.g.*, Figure 1) and given a descriptive title for reference in the body of the report. If the illustration is larger than a single page (for instance a financial report), or if it is only tangentially related to the main topic of your report (for instance an off topic, but potentially emergent opportunity), place it in an appropriately named appendix.

But, don't overdo things. When included, a spreadsheet or diagram should explicitly illustrate your thinking and communicate your message. Superfluous illustrations "pad" the report and distract from its value. Never include a figure without accompanying narrative to explain its meaning.

# Appendices – A Note on End Matter

In the process of researching, writing, and editing your report, it is common to identify a number of items that belong with the report but not necessarily in it. This is where the end matter comes in. For purposes of business writing, we refer to the items that come at the end of your report as appendices (plural) or an appendix (singular). As the title of this section suggests, appendices belong at the end of the report and are not generally considered in the word or page count of your report unless indicated otherwise. Usually, you will have no appendix or only one. If you use an appendix use the title of "Appendix: [describe the content]". However, for complicated reports, you might have multiple appendices. In this case, number the appendices as "Appendix X: [describe the content]" where "X" denotes the order in which it appears using capital letters starting with "A".

In rare cases you may also want to include entire pieces of external matter, *e.g.*, a financial statement from a subject, an extended description of a technical process, or a project work breakdown structure. These each deserve their own appendix.

# Actionable Recommendations

Although there are definite exceptions, many of your business school assignments will ask you to study a pile of data (or a case), apply a business model or two, and make a recommendation. In the business world, this last part—making recommendations—is generally what matters. If you make good recommendations, you may be a star. Bad ones can label you as someone to ignore. **What** you recommend is always important. Sometimes, **how** you recommend matters too.

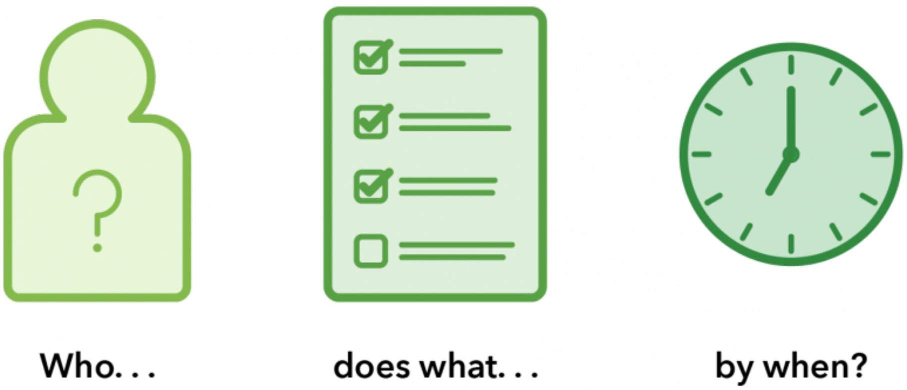


*Figure 3.4 Actionable Recommendations*

The quality of your recommendations is a direct result of the thoroughness with which you prepared the analysis. Recommendations are directed at solving whatever problem the client is facing. Your recommendations should be in line with your analysis; that is, they should follow logically from the observations and data you provide in the report.

However, making your recommendations *actionable* means that you provide specific, measurable, and detailed instructions that are likely to produce positive results for the client. Think in terms of **who does what by when?** Ask yourself, will my client be able to implement these proposed recommendations in my absence or will they just scratch their heads. Your actionable recommendations should answer the questions *how* and *how much*? Make your proposal as complete as possible given the time and information constraints.

Coincidentally, this practice of who-does-what-by-when, has another application. If you find yourself in a position of delegathree conditions cover most excuses for not acting. For example, a fellow student who was assigned to edit the final draft of your report says “I didn’t think this was my responsibility.” Or, that same miscreant claims “That’s not what I thought needed to be done.” Or possibly, he says “I thought I still had more time.” This simple action-focus of who-does-what-by-when, especially when done in writing by all involved parties, will go a long way toward preventing many group collaboration problems.

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