

Qualities of Good Writing

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WHAT'S COVERED

In this lesson, you will learn about the characteristics of effective professional writing, as well as the rhetorical elements and strategies that contribute to good written communication. Specifically, this lesson will cover:

1. What Makes Good Writing?

For starters, good writing should always:

- Meet the reader's expectations
- Be clear and concise
- Be efficient and effective

1a. Fulfillment of Reader Expectations

To meet the reader's expectations, the writer needs to use the **self and social awareness skill** to understand who the intended reader is. One of the most important rules of writing is to know your audience.

In some business situations, you are writing just to one person: your boss, a coworker in another department, or an individual customer or vendor. If you know the person well, it may be as easy for you to write to them as it is to write a note to your parent or roommate. If you don't know the person, you can at least make some reasonable assumptions about their expectations, based on the position they hold and its relation to your job.

In other situations, you may be writing a document to be read by a group or team, an entire department, or even a large number of total strangers. How can you anticipate their expectations and tailor your writing accordingly? Naturally you want to learn as much as you can about your likely audience. How much you can learn and what kinds of information you get will vary with the situation.

Beyond learning about your audience, your clear understanding of the writing assignment and its purpose will help you to meet reader expectations.

1b. Clarity and Concision

All writers, no matter their professional context, should do their best to eliminate errors prior to distributing their message. Errors can include those associated with production, from writing to editing, and reader response.

Your twin goals of clear and concise writing point to a central goal across communication: fidelity. This concept involves our goal of accurately communicating all the intended information with a minimum of signal or message breakdown or misinterpretation.

Designing your documents, including writing and presentation, to reduce message breakdown is an important part of effective business communication.



Productivity: Why Employers Care

In written communication, it is critical to be able to organize your thoughts in an effective way. In the workplaces, it is also essential to manage your time to balance conflicting timelines and shifting priorities.

1c. Efficiency and Effectiveness

There are only 24 hours in a day and we are increasingly asked to do more with less, with shorter deadlines almost guaranteed. As a writer, how do you meet ever-increasing expectations?

Each writing assignment requires a clear understanding of the goals and desired results, and when either of these two aspects is unclear, the efficiency of your writing can be compromised. Rewrites require time that you may not have, but will have to make if the assignment was not done correctly the first time.

This leads us to the concept of effectiveness in writing. Effective writing is writing that succeeds in accomplishing its purpose. Understanding the purpose, goals, and desired results of your writing assignment will help you achieve this success.

IN CONTEXT

Your employer may want an introductory sales letter to result in an increase in sales leads, or potential contacts for follow-up leading to sales. Your audience may not see the document from that perspective, but will instead read with the mindset of, “How does this help me solve X problem?” If you meet both goals, your writing is approaching effectiveness.

Here, effectiveness is qualified with the word “approaching” to point out that writing is both a process and a product, and your writing will continually require effort and attention to revision and improvement.

2. Rhetorical Elements and Cognate Strategies

Another approach to defining good writing is to look at how it fulfills the goals of two well-known systems in communication. One of these systems comprises the three classical elements of **rhetoric**, or the art of presenting an argument.

These elements, first proposed by the ancient Greek teacher Aristotle, are:

- Logos (logic)
- Ethos (ethics and credibility)
- Pathos (emotional appeal)

Although rhetoric is often applied to oral communication, especially public speaking, it is also fundamental to good writing.

A second set of goals involves what are called **cognate strategies**, or ways of promoting understanding, developed in recent decades by Charles Kostelnick and David Rogers (1998). Like rhetorical elements, cognate strategies can be applied to public speaking, but they are also useful in developing good writing.

The table below describes these goals, their purposes, and examples of how they may be carried out in business writing.

Rhetorical Element	Cognate Strategy	Focus	Business Writing Example
Logos	Clarity	Clear understanding	"An announcement will be made to the company later in the week, but I wanted to tell you personally that as of the first of next month, I will be leaving my position to accept a three-year assignment in our Singapore office. As soon as further details about the management of your account are available, I will share them with you."
	Concision	Key points	"In tomorrow's conference call, Sean wants to introduce the new team members, outline the schedule and budget for the project, and clarify each person's responsibilities in meeting our goals."
	Arrangement	Order, hierarchy, placement	"Our department has a matrix structure. We have three product development groups, one for each category of product. We also have a manufacturing group, a finance group, and a sales group; different group members are assigned to each of the three product categories. Within the matrix, our structure is flat, meaning that we have no group leaders. Everyone reports to Beth, the department manager."
Ethos	Credibility	Character, trust	"Having known and worked with Jesse for more than five years, I can highly recommend him to take my place as your advisor. In addition to having superb qualifications, Jesse is known for his dedication, honesty, and caring attitude. He will always go the extra mile for his clients."
	Expectation	Norms and anticipated outcomes	"As is typical in our industry, we ship all merchandise FOB our warehouse. Prices are exclusive of any federal, state, or local taxes. Payment terms are net 30 days from date of invoice."
	Reference	Sources and frames of reference	"According to an article in <i>Business Week</i> dated October 15, 2009, Doosan is one of the largest business conglomerates in South Korea."
Pathos	Tone	Expression	"I really don't have words to express how grateful I am for all the support you've extended to me and my family in this hour of need. You guys are the best."
	Emphasis	Relevance	"It was unconscionable for a member of our organization to shout an interruption while the President was speaking. What needs to happen now - and let me be clear about this - is an immediate apology."
	Engagement	Relationship	"As faithful soldiers, we pledge to never leave a fallen comrade on the battlefield."



TERMS TO KNOW

Rhetoric

The art of presenting an argument.

Cognate Strategy

A method of promoting understanding.



SUMMARY

In this lesson, you learned the answer to the question, "**What makes good writing?**" Effective writers use their self and social awareness skills to **fulfill readers' expectations**. They also prioritize **clarity and concision** in their writing to minimize message breakdown. Finally, they work with **efficiency and effectiveness** by approaching their writing with a clear understanding of their purpose and goals. When planning communication, effective writers make use of a variety of **rhetorical elements and cognate strategies** to meet those goals.

Best of luck in your learning!

Source: This tutorial has been adapted from "Business Communication for Success" Version 1.0 by Scott McLean. Copyright 2010. ISBN 978-1-4533-2742-5 (Licensee Product: Workplace Communication), reprinted with permission from FlatWorld.



TERMS TO KNOW

Cognate Strategy

A method of promoting understanding.

Rhetoric

The art of presenting an argument.