Best Practices for Business Writing

Focus on Report Formatting and Style

Presented by
The Student Learning Commons
This presentation will ...

- Highlight main differences between business and academic writing
- Describe formatting and organization for informal business reports (task, progress)
- Overview some basics of information design:
  - visuals
  - “chunking”
  - techniques for clear and concise writing
Most academic writing has…

An intro/body/conclusion structure usually held together by an overarching thesis statement

A tradition of moving readers gradually through the evidence being presented

“Well-developed,” often lengthy, paragraphs that convey and support a sustained argument

Citations—references to other sources—to help justify and support the arguments. These are parenthetical (MLA/APA) or footnotes/endnotes.
Business writers…

Do **not** use an essay structure or standard academic citation styles

Write chiefly to provide information to a given audience and/or to influence decision-making

Use formatting and information-design to convey information most efficiently

Value concision as well as correctness of expression
Consider your PURPOSE

In business communication, you…

- **transfer knowledge** from a person who knows it to a person who needs to know it (adapted from Saul Carliner, *Information Designer’s Toolkit*).
- **convince readers**—through content, clarity, and appropriateness of presentation—*to do something* with this knowledge. Indeed, much business communication is persuasive.*

*This link will directly download a PowerPoint presentation by the Purdue Online Writing Lab (or you can go to the Purdue OWL business writing page).*
Consider your TARGET AUDIENCE

Ask the following questions:

- **Who** are the primary readers (in other words, who are the main stakeholders)? Are they decision makers? Specialists? Problem-solvers? Clients? General readers seeking practical info?
- **What** do I want readers to know?
- **Why** do I want readers to know this?
- **How** much background knowledge do the primary readers already have?
- Are there secondary readers...and what stake do they have in the document?
Informal business reports...

Purpose: provide routine information to a “regular” reader. They tend to

- use MEMO format
- be brief, side-stepping detailed documentation
- assume the target reader already has background.
Task reports...

...may fulfill several purposes:

- Recommend an action
- Justify a solution
- Record/document an inspection or process
- Provide information (without a recommendation)
Progress reports…

- Are part of almost all long-range projects
- Summarize the progress, status, and projections related to a project
- Answer a variety of audience questions: i.e. what has been accomplished, what resources have been used, is the project on schedule, what plans need to be altered, what happens next
Skeleton of an informal report ...

TO:  
FROM:  
DATE:  
SUBJECT:  

========

Work Completed
Current Status of X
Current Status of Y
Work Remaining
Overall Status

CC: ____
Organizing report contents...

Order tasks and information according to a logical sequence that will most efficiently fulfill your PURPOSE and AUDIENCE’S needs.

Common patterns of organization include…

- chronological order
- order of descending priority
- order of value or interest for your target audience

Do not organize your report as if it were an essay.
Organizing report contents...

For example, if you’re preparing a recommendation report...

- Explain the problem and its causes
- Recommend specific changes
- Explain why the changes will be beneficial

Do not leave the recommendations to the end, as if they were part of the conclusion to an essay.
Organizing report contents ...

This is a typical organizational scheme for a progress report:

- TO:
- FROM:
- DATE:
- SUBJECT:
- 
- Work Completed
- Current Status of X
- Current Status of Y
- Work Remaining
- Overall Status
- CC: ___
Incorporate **visuals** for more “richness” of information, accuracy, and impact.
Information design: “how not”! ...

Don’t let your visuals get over-complicated! Readers will not be able to process the information effectively.
Information design: “how not!...”

A typical “well developed” essay paragraph tends to look like this...

Information design: use “chunking”

“Chunking” allows your target reader to process information more easily and efficiently…

“Chunking” techniques include white **space**, informative **headers**, and bulleted **lists**.
Information design: good writing

5 top strategies:

- Avoid the “Top Ten Editing Errors” (hand out available)
- Cut out “deadwood”—eliminate wordiness and redundancy
- Improve sentence clarity—place nouns/verbs close together; keep to a “given/new” information contract
- Use the active voice whenever possible and appropriate
- Use “jargon” only if your target audience would find its use clear and efficient; otherwise, use plain language
Information design: executive summary

5 top strategies:

- Imitate the organization of your report and include your major point/recommendation
- Include only the main points from the report you’re summarizing
- Keep the style coherent, not choppy or “list-like”
- Keep the document visually clean: use “chunking” and bullets
- Do not include (1) references/citations* or (2) specific details

*In formal reports, references to information sources may be listed as part of the end-matter. Always respect “in-house” or preferred practices when formatting references.
Online resources for follow-up…

- Student Learning Commons Writing Resources: [http://learningcommons.sfu.ca/writing/Onlineresources.php](http://learningcommons.sfu.ca/writing/Onlineresources.php)
- The Purdue OWL—
  - Conciseness and Clarity in Business Writing: [http://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/648/02/](http://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/648/02/)
  - The Active and Passive Voice: [http://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/539/01/](http://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/539/01/)
Any questions … ?

Please feel free to use Student Learning Commons resources: learningcommons.sfu.ca