2.3: Word Choice and Tone

What you’ll learn to do: Discuss the impact that word choice and tone can have on a business message

Have you ever heard the phrase, “don’t shoot the messenger” when someone is blaming the bearer of bad news for the upset? This common metaphoric phrase dates back to before the widespread use of modern telecommunication when messages were usually delivered by human envoys. For example, during a war, a messenger would be sent from one camp to another. If the message was distressing or described a severe misfortune, the receivers might blame the messenger for such bad news and take their anger out on the unfortunate messenger.

The organization, word choice, and tone of your message allows the communication to be received and understood while maintaining a positive business relationship. This keeps the modern day messenger (or email sender) from being shot (or fired) all while maintaining good business relationships. With proper wording and phrasing, your communications can enhance your reputation and the reputation of your business.

learning outcomes

- Discuss strategies for creating reader-focused writing
- Discuss strategies to avoid language that can confuse or exclude readers
- Discuss strategies to avoid language that shows bias against individuals or populations
- Discuss strategies to improve concision in writing
- Discuss strategies to improve clarity in writing
- Evaluate the parallel structure of sentences and passages
- Discuss appropriate ways to indicate emphasis in business writing
Writing for the Reader

The audience (your reader, if the message is written) is the receiver of the business communication. This model focuses on the choices a writer or sender of a message can make to best convey their message to the receiver. If all choices are related to considering the receiver's needs over those of the sender, the message is more likely to achieve its purpose quickly.

To understand this concept, think about learning to change a tire. One way people could learn about changing a tire is from a description in the owner's manual sent by the auto manufacturer. Many individuals, on the other hand, have learned from watching or participating in the process—gaining hands-on experience. Which is easier? For the manufacturer (sender) the information is easy and cheap to print. For the tire changer (receiver) a personal assistant is easier, but more expensive. The sender needs to find the best balance.

Or, think about a clothes washing machine. The manuals tend to be printed on inexpensive paper and the grayscale images depict the controls. Some companies have decided to include instructional DVDs that demonstrate the controls. Which of these examples is more focused on the receiver? Which is more effective? Put the receiver first.

Please view this nine minute video about the impact and power in focusing on the audience. In this module, this concept is called you-view.

https://youtu.be/egeyiUpFsaw

You-view, or putting the reader first, encompasses two skills:

1. Put the receiver's needs before the sender's needs
2. Start with what the receiver needs to know

finding a lost shipment

Lynnette has worked hard to find a lost shipment. She finally has enough information to email the customer and provide an update on the situation. She begins writing up her draft: "You won't believe how many people I had to contact to find this for you. I had to call Texas, send a copy to Dallas, and then....." Stop! It is likely Lynnette is thinking the customer will be impressed with her efforts and feel like a valued customer. However, nothing in this email so far has answered the customer's primary need.

Let's rewind and imagine Lynnette wrote her initial draft focusing on getting the customer's primary need instead: "I have found your product at the Texas depot, and I have scheduled delivery for March 30." Lynette is satisfied with this draft: it is direct and delivers the needed information. However, the email does not take the you-view.

Notice how she talks about herself first with the use of personal pronoun "I"? In a subtle, but important improvement, Lynette should write, "Your product is scheduled for delivery March 30. Your product was in the Texas depot." While both versions of the email let the customer know the product's delivery information, the second version places emphasis
on the customer and makes the customer most important.

practice question

Malique has worked with Albert since he started at the store three years ago. Recently, Albert was promoted to be Malique’s boss. They are scheduled to sit down next week to establish performance objectives for the year. Malique is trying to decide how to start the first sentence of the email asking which form to use. Which of the following is the best choice?

- Albert, yo! In your new boss-role did they tell you which forms to use for our meetings?
- Albert, could you verify which form you want me to use for our meeting next week?
- Albert, I'm just going to use the same form as last time with a few updates. Ok?

Answer

Albert, could you verify which form you want me to use for our meeting next week?

Language as an Obstacle

Each of us has a variety of ways of speaking and writing depending on circumstances. You write a thank-you note to your aunt for the socks she sent much differently than you write a thank-you note after a job interview with the vice president of the division. In business communication, the key is to choose language that is direct and easy for your audience to understand.

When you're writing, it's important to consider your audience's understanding compared to your own. For example, if you're writing a newsletter for customers, you would use much different language than you would if you were writing a product status update to the engineers who initially created the product.

As you write, keep your eye out for these common language challenges:

- Clichés
- Jargon
- Slang
- Euphemisms
- Doublespeak

Cliché

Clichés that we use in everyday conversation (green with envy, face the music, add insult to injury, etc.) can make your writing sound boring. Merriam-Webster’s dictionary defines a cliché as “a trite phrase or expression; a hackneyed theme, characterization, or situation; something (such as a menu item) that has become overly familiar or commonplace.”
avoiding CLICHÉS

Consider the paragraph and revision below.

Original Paragraph

When I started thinking about getting a new job, I was completely clueless. I knew I wanted to do something really cool, but I was lost about what might fit the bill.

Revised Paragraph

When I started thinking about getting a new job, I was overwhelmed by my options and unsure of what to choose. While I knew I wanted to do something interesting, I was uncertain of what that might be.

### Avoid

Please resolve this ASAP.

Thanks for your help. Now just kick it through the goal posts.

### Try

Please resolve this by March 30.

Thanks for your help. Now you just need to finish submitting the paperwork to process the deal.

### Why

ASAP is not a time we each understand the same way. You might be thinking you will get a call back tomorrow. I might be thinking this research and forms needed will take a week, so seven days is sufficient.

“Kick it through the goals posts” is common enough, and overused enough, but it is a sport reference that many may not understand. It is not clear what step must be taken next.

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**Jargon**

The dictionary defines jargon as “the technical terminology or characteristic idiom of a special activity or group.” Since these terms are used within an activity, group, or profession, they’re typically not well understood outside that context. Within the context of a specific group, jargon may help members of the group refer to very specialized concepts, but those outside the group may find the jargon incomprehensible or may misunderstand the intended meaning.

For example, plumbers might use terms like *elbow, ABS, sweating the pipes, reducer, flapper, snake, and rough-in.* Other plumbers will understand those terms in the context of plumbing, but to non-plumbers, those terms may have different meanings or be entirely nonsensical.

Always keep your audience in mind. If you are addressing only members of a specialized field, using field-specific jargon will signal to your audience that you are also a member of the field and may allow you to talk about higher or specific concepts. However, if you are speaking to a broader group with no specialized knowledge, using jargon will only alienate or confuse your audience. If some technical terms are absolutely necessary when speaking to an audience, be sure to explain each term and its context.

For example, if you are writing a department-wide memo, it would be acceptable to use terms specific to your company or department. If you are writing a newsletter for customers, however, it would be better to avoid jargon and use broader language.
### Slang

Avoid slang or idiomatic expressions in formal business writing or in academic writing. Slang and idiomatic expressions make your writing sound informal and less credible. They can also make it harder for non-native English speakers to understand you.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Avoid</th>
<th>Try</th>
<th>Why</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Your help is appreciated. 10-4.</td>
<td>Your help is appreciated. I know exactly what do do with the claim now.</td>
<td>10-4 started in police and military circles as a radio shorthand. While many may know that it means of “ok” or “I understand”, it is not clear to all outside those circles.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ATM will work well in this situation.</td>
<td>Asynchronous Transfer Mode will work well in this situation.</td>
<td>If the receiver is not from the technical side of communications, someone might have been thinking about a bank machine.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

However, there are occasions when slang and idiomatic expressions may be appropriate, depending on who your audience is. If you are writing informally or humorously, slang and idiomatic language may help you better express yourself.

If you are going to use slang, however, make sure that you’re using it correctly. Customers who are “native speakers” of slang (i.e., people who are a part of the demographic you may be targeting by using slang) can very easily spot a marketing professional who doesn’t understand the correct usage of a slang term.

### Euphemisms and Doublespeak

Euphemisms are words or phrases used to talk about unpleasant or taboo topics in a more polite way. For example, instead of saying that you are leaving a meeting to urinate, you might say that you are “going to the restroom.” If you are talking about a person who just died, you might say that the person has “passed away.”

Doublespeak is a more deliberate form of euphemism that disguises the meaning of words so that the idea the words represent seems less unpleasant. For example, the act of terminating employment for many people at once may be referred to in doublespeak as *downsizing* or *right-sizing*, or a government dropping bombs might say it is *servicing the target*. Doublespeak language is usually used in bureaucracies and politics and should be avoided whenever possible.

In business writing (and all writing), you should avoid using doublespeak.
In business writing, your purpose should not be to hide meaning but to communicate clearly.

**Avoid**

- The department is being right-sized. There is a meeting for the entire staff next Friday.
- The month-end income statement showed a negative cash flow.

**Try**

- There will be layoffs in that department. There is a meeting for the entire staff next Friday.
- The month-end income statement showed a loss.

**practice question**

Ed, the District Manager, sent an email to the Store Managers. The Store Managers had already heard a recent marketing blitz was showing positive results, but the email was confusing. They wanted to thank Ed for the effort but were not quite sure whether the email was as positive as the rumors they had heard. The email almost sounded as though Ed wanted them to do some more work. Ed had written, “We sure got a big bang for our buck out of that newspaper special. Your share of the sweat equity on that will make the final numbers a breeze.” Why should Ed’s Store Managers be cautiously excited rather than thrilled with the turnaround?

- Ed has used several words that had negative meaning—bang’s association with guns and sweat’s association with unpleasant smells
- Ed had loaded his message with jargon that was unclear to the Store Managers
- Ed used email rather than a face to face meeting to share the comments, and that’s how bad news is delivered. Good news is always one on one

**Answer**

Ed had loaded his message with jargon that was unclear to the Store Managers

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**Bias Free Writing**

Why does the topic of bias-free writing follow a page about hidden meaning? Business writers work to be clear and direct in meaning, and drawing attention to details about race, age, country of origin, disability, and gender in the workplace might cause conscious or unconscious bias.

Let's look at some examples and ways to fix them. A simple rule for bias-free writing is to consider whether personal details need to be included to get the point across.

**Avoid**

- Franklin is the new African-American accountant.
- For someone nearing retirement, she caught on to that new software quickly.
- Abdul has some of the highest call center ratings, even though his Saudi

**Try**

- Franklin is the new accountant.
- She caught on to that new software quickly.
- Abdul has some of the highest call center
accent is strong.

John is one of our most active employees, even though he must use a wheelchair.

Did the cleaning woman bring new trash bags?

Do we have enough manpower to finish this project?

**Avoiding Gender Bias**

Writing in a non-sexist way requires the ability to recognize sexism in the first place. The next hurdle is to figure out a way to eliminate any inherent sexism without disrupting the flow of the piece. Here are a few techniques to help avoid bias.

**Gendered Nouns**

The first way to avoid gender bias in your writing is to use gender-neutral words when referring individuals in various positions:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Avoid</th>
<th>Try</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>businessman, businesswoman</td>
<td>business executive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>chairman, chairwoman</td>
<td>chairperson</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>the common man</td>
<td>the average person</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>salesman, saleswoman</td>
<td>salesperson, sales clerk, marketer</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Gendered Pronouns**

The next thing to be aware of is your use of gendered pronouns. While some still use *he* as a generic pronoun, this shows a strong bias towards male individuals. Instead you can use "he or she" ("his or her," etc) as the pronoun for a generic noun:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Avoid</th>
<th>Try</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Every employee should file his report by the end of the day.</td>
<td>Every employee should file his or her report by the end of the day.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>When filing the report, each employee should make sure he included yesterday’s data.</td>
<td>When filing the report, each employee should make sure he or she included yesterday’s data.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Using “he or she” is an okay solution, but it can get clunky in large doses: “Every employee should check with his or her supervisor that his or her report was properly filed.” Additionally, many individuals neither identify as male nor female and use *they* as a singular pronoun to refer to themselves. Thus, using “he or she” is often not the best solution. The best solution is often to rephrase the sentence to have a plural subject instead of a singular subject.

### Avoid

- Every employee should file his report by the end of the day.
- When filing the report, each employee should make sure he or she included yesterday’s data.
- Any author knows that his first draft of a piece won’t be good.

### Try

- All employees should file their reports by the end of the day.
- When filing the report, employees should make sure they included yesterday’s data.
- All authors know that their first drafts won’t be good.

### Singular *they*

While *they* is typically treated as a plural pronoun, when an individual has expressed a desire to be identified with gender-neutral pronouns (*they/*their/*theirs*), it is grammatically correct to use *they* as a singular pronoun (per the *Chicago Manual of Style*, one of the predominant authorities on grammar and style).

There are occasions, however, where you can’t simply make the sentence plural. For example, let’s look at this sentence: “Someone will call you to further discuss the issue. He or she will call between 9:00 and 10:00 tomorrow morning.” Only one person will be making the call, so we can’t make this sentence plural. In this situation, the solution may be to completely omit the pronoun: “Someone will call you to further discuss the issue. You can expect the call between 9:00 and 10:00 tomorrow morning.”

### Avoiding Race and Ethnicity Bias

When speaking about a racial or ethnic group, deciding which term to use can be a tricky subject because the ascribed meaning to particular terms and labels can frequently change. When choosing between terms to refer to a group, it is best to ask a member of that group what they prefer.

As a general rule in a business setting, do not mention a person’s race or ethnicity unless it is directly relevant to the situation.

### Avoiding Disability Bias

As a general rule, avoid using labeled nouns when talking about people with disabilities. Try to use emotionally neutral expressions rather than ones that assign a role, such as *victim*.

### Avoid

- the disabled
- the schizophrenic

### Try

- the people with disabilities
- the person diagnosed with schizophrenia
an AIDS victim a person with AIDS

a person suffering from epilepsy a person with epilepsy

practice question

What biased terms are in this paragraph?

Executives and their wives are invited to the recognition weekend. Childcare for children under 5 is available to any female employee that wants to have the afternoon off for the sailing tournament. Be sure to meet the short, Asian award-winning coach near the diving board of the main pier.

Answer

1) “their wives” implies women are not executives. Try “Executives and their spouses. 2) Childcare … is available to any female employee …” implies that only women manage childcare. Omit the “female” to open childcare to all employees. 3) “short” is a physical attribute. Focus instead on skills such as “award-winning” or what the person wears as the “championship jacket.” 4) “Asian” further focuses on physical attributes and race. It’s best to simply omit this.

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**Concise Writing**

At the heart of business is the idea that “time is money.” This may lead you to believe that shorter messages are always better; however, concise writing is not just fast or short; it is writing that balances the clarity of the message with efficiency.

practice question

Uriel enjoys the Human Relations Assistant job that he got right out of college, just two months ago. This is the first time his manager has asked him to create a company-wide message. He is supposed to remind employees of the dress code since some are dressing casually, and flip flops can cause a health code violation near the food. To get started, he pulled out his college English composition book. He wants to do his best so he is researching the proper use of semicolons to separate long sets of word in a sentence, and he is researching the proper metaphors to use in illustrating how flip flops are like bears wearing gloves while fishing. What is the best explanation for how Uriel is headed the wrong way in his planning?

• Uriel should copy and paste the wording from the employee manual to an email and send it with the proper citation
• Uriel is on the right track in working to create a metaphor that employees will talk about, since that will help them remember to dress appropriately
• Uriel needs to remember business writing is concise

Answer

Uriel needs to remember business writing is concise
Sentence Length and Complexity

With business writing, the main focus is on the reader’s ability to quickly absorb and react to the communication. Concise business writing uses clean, straightforward sentence structure to improve understanding and retention. This is different from the prose of novels or the beat of poetry in which taking pleasure in the complexity of sentences is part of the experience. Business writing uses simpler sentences to be more concise and thus less likely to be misinterpreted.

straightforward sentences

Grammatically, there are three kinds of sentences. It’s not especially important for you to be able to identify them in order to be a good business writer. However, taking a moment to think about how they work and what they do will help you become more concise and clear.

Simple sentences consist of a single independent clause:

Fido fetched. [A noun and a verb is all it takes to make a simple sentence.]

Whiskers ate her tuna. [This adds a direct object, “tuna,” but it’s still a simple sentence.]

Polly sat on her perch and whistled. [This includes a prepositional phrase, “on her perch,” and a compound verb “sat” and “whistled,” but it’s still a simple sentence.]

Compound sentences consist of two (or more, but that’s tricky) independent clauses attached by a comma and a conjunction:

Amanita threw the ball, and Fido fetched it. [“Amanita threw the ball” could stand alone as a sentence, as could “Fido fetched it.” That structure is what makes this a compound sentence.]

Complex sentences consist of at least one dependent clause followed by at least one independent clause:

While Amanita looked for the ball, Fido chased a grasshopper. [Even though the part of the sentence before the comma has a subject, “Amanita,” and a verb “looked,” the addition of “while” means it can’t stand on its own as a sentence. “Fido chased a grasshopper” can stand alone, so it is an independent clause.]

Compound-complex sentences — you can probably figure this one out from the name and the example:

While Amanita looked for the ball, Fido chased a grasshopper, and Whiskers looked bored.

So, Why Does This Matter?

Using compound and complex sentences is great! However, be sure you are not splicing together long strings of clauses that get really hard to follow. Additionally, you should vary your sentence types for more engaging reading.

In order to write straightforward sentences that are appropriate and effective in business communication, there are a few things to keep in mind.

- Be careful not to string together too many ideas in the same sentence. A sentence like this is not only confusing, it
also becomes really boring to read and doesn’t sound very sophisticated:

- **Michael copy edited the report, and the data tables were compiled, and the graphics looked wonderful.**
  
  - All three of these activities are part of the completion of a report, but they don’t really belong in the same sentence.

- **Michael copy edited the report while the rest of the team compiled the data tables. The graphics looked wonderful.**
  
  - By using a connector other than *and*—in this case, *while*—the sentence actually gives more information: that the copy editing and compiling happened at the same time. If you substitute “after which” for “while,” you’re actually telling a somewhat different story. Also, it’s great that the graphics are impressive, but that idea doesn’t belong in the same sentence.

- Starting a sentence with a dependent clause can sometimes bury the important news at the back end of the sentence. It’s not forbidden to begin with dependent clauses, but be very careful about when you choose to do so. Think about the emotions a reader goes through when faced with a sentence like this:

  - **While we suffered a dismal first quarter because of supply-chain issues, and our stock price wobbled a lot thanks to fluctuations in the Japanese market that caused the company to begin targeting employees for layoffs, the executive team is happy to report that we are on track for a profitable year.**
    
    - That sentence is almost cruel in the amount of anxiety a reader has to suffer before getting to the good news. The whole point of that sentence is that the company is doing well. Yay! Therefore, the sentence should start with the important part.

  - **The executive team is happy to report that we are on track for a profitable year, even though we suffered**
    
    - There’s a whole different response when the sentence tells the important news first.

- Clear is good; simple can be mind-numbing, so vary your sentence structures. Imagine an entire report full of this:

  - **Profits were up. This is good. Production increased by six percent. Employees received bonuses in two of four quarters. The stock split.**
    
    - Even though you are reading excellent news, you’re about to keel over from the monotony, aren’t you? Writing cleanly and concisely doesn’t mean writing like a robot. Think about how the small nuggets of information relate to one another, and combine them in sentences that a) make sense, b) put the important news first, and c) show that you take pride in writing well.

  - **We are happy to report that profits are up, and our shares have split. This results from a six-percent increase in production, and we were happy to reward our hard-working employees with bonuses in two of four quarters.**
    
    - Not only is it possible to read this passage without dozing off, it also gives more information by showing the relationship among the bits of information given.

Finally, watch your wordiness. As you write and edit, ask yourself whether you are using several words when there’s one perfectly good one that would suffice. At the same time, be careful of turning a single sentence into a paragraph by stringing together every idea you’ve ever had. Findings from Goddard (1989) suggest that sentence length is related to reader comprehension. This research suggests that between 20 and 25 words is the maximum for solid comprehension. Remember, your goal is not to make your sentences short, your goal is to convey your ideas clearly and to avoid ambiguity. That said, the more complex the material you are discussing, the more straightforward and clean your sentences need to be.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sentence Length</th>
<th>Comprehension Rate</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>8 words</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

https://biz.libretexts.org/Bookshelves/Management/Book%3A_Business_Communication_Skills_for_Managers/02%3A_Writin...
Remember, your goal is not to make your sentences short, your goal is to convey your ideas clearly and to avoid ambiguity, and you can do this by writing sentences with simple sentence structure.

**Avoid**

I am writing to tell you that the cat ate the mouse.

At this point in time, you need to complete a new application.

In a very few cases, the amount was refunded.

**Try**

The cat ate the mouse.

You need to complete a new application.

Rarely was the amount refunded.

**Why**

Isn’t it obvious that “I am writing”? How else would the reader see this?

What other time period could we be in?

Why use a whole phrase when a single word is right to the point?

Be careful not to repeat yourself over and over and over.

**Avoid**

It is absolutely essential that we clear these lines of customers quickly.

Those two items are exactly identical, except for the price tag we added.

It’s a true fact that she was late again.

**Try**

We have to clear these lines of customers quickly.

Those two items are identical, except for the price tag we added.

It’s true she was late again. *(Even better in most cases:)* She was late again.

Finally, become aware of your own bad habits. Do you use “also” too much to show the relationship between ideas? Do you adore the complex sentence type a little too strongly? Do you use “one” (as in “One hopes to understand the meaning of this sentence.”) and then get stuck in a bog of pronouns? Do you start sentences with “What it is, is . . . ”

Whatever your particular quirks, become aware of them and take care to look for and fix them when you edit your work.

Learn more

For more useful information on how sentences work, and to get some practice in before you start your own writing, check out this reading on Sentence Structure.

**Active and Passive Voice**

You’ve probably heard of the passive voice—perhaps in a comment from an English teacher or in the grammar checker of a word processor. In both of these instances, you were (likely) guided away from the passive voice. Why is this the

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case? Why is the passive voice so hated? After all, it’s been used in this paragraph already (twice now!). When the passive voice is used too frequently, it can make your writing seem flat and drab. However, there are some instances where the passive voice is a better choice than the active.

So just what is the difference between these two voices? In the simplest terms, an active voice sentence is written in the form of “A does B.” (For example, “Carmen sings the song.”) A passive voice sentence is written in the form of “B is done by A.” (For example, “The song is sung by Carmen.”) Both constructions are grammatically sound and correct. Let’s look at a couple more examples of the passive voice:

ACTIVE VOICE: Tamara lost the potential sale in North Dakota.

PASSIVE VOICE: The potential sale in North Dakota was lost.

You may have noticed something unique about the previous passive voice example: the passive voice can be used to “hide” who performed the action. Despite this sentences being completely grammatically sound, we don’t know who lost the sale if we only read the passive sentence. This could be a good way to focus on ways to improve company strategy, rather than focusing on a single person’s performance (and avoid calling out a single employee in a potentially public setting). If, however, it is important that Tamara lost the sale, but we want to focus on the loss rather than who lost it, saying “The potential sale in North Dakota was lost by Tamara,”

The passive is created using the verb to be (e.g., the song is sung; it was struck from behind). To be conjugates irregularly. Its forms include am, are, is, was, were, and will be, had been, is being, and was being.

Business writing is known for being direct and to the point in most situations, so you should favor active rather than passive verb constructions. But there are occasions when being too direct can make you sound insensitive. Consider the following refusal of a request for a raise:

1. ACTIVE VOICE: You cannot have a raise at this time.
2. PASSIVE VOICE: A raise cannot be given at this time.

In this case, the goal of using the passive voice to soften the negativity of the message has made the message sound more considerate. If you are trying to avoid throwing someone under the bus, one strategy is to de-emphasize the actor or subject in the sentence. Bring out your sensitive side by knowing how to tactfully apply passive voice. Reserve passive verbs for the moment you need to say “no” in a message.

For more information on how and why to use the passive voice check out Using the Passive Voice in Lumen’s Guide to Writing.

Clarity

Word selection and phrasing leads to successfully transferring meaning from the sender to the receiver. Doing this well enhances the writer’s reputation. The business’s reputation also grows—not in a blatant way but in a behind-the-scenes way. Think of the advice a home seller receives before an open house: have bread baking or apple cider simmering to

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create an aroma that makes the house feel more like a home. This small step might help a potential buyer make the right choice. Solid writing skills do that for the employee. The employee gains respect and appreciation thanks to writing skills that project credibility and confidence.

**Precision**

Business communication should be clear, specific, and chock-full of meaning. Work to be precise.

**Avoid**

- Capable of greeting many customers while attending to a multi-line phone.
- Your order has been received and will ship shortly.

**Try**

- Capable of greeting 25 customers an hour, while managing incoming phone lines for six district managers.
- Order number 1234, received August 1, ships on August 5. You should receive the order on August 8.

**Plain Words**

When trying to enhance your reputation, it is tempting to want to use complex words in order to appear smart and sophisticated. Unfortunately, this tends to obscure your ideas and potentially damage your credibility. Remember the focus of your writing should be on the reader understanding the message. Instead of focusing on “sounding smart,” concentrate on expressing accurate content with precise, unambiguous words so that the message is transmitted clearly. Be precise while understandable.

**Avoid**

- It sure seemed like the lawyer was trying to obfuscate the meaning.
- The remuneration the contractor receives is commensurate with the time and materials used.

**Try**

- It sure seemed like the lawyer was trying to confuse the meaning.
- The pay the contractor receives is equal to the time and materials used.

**Lists**

Lists can be used in several ways. Working with numbered lists or bulleted lists is a fast way to draw attention to several items. Lists add white space to a document, which helps the reader. They add emphasis because they stand out on the page. Numbered lists are used when order or importance matters.

**Avoid**

The store needs several items to process the refund for the incorrect billing. If you have the receipt, we’ll need that. After you find the receipt, circle the incorrect payment and add the voided check to the envelope. Remember that a stamped return envelope will get your money back more quickly. Please be sure to add that.

**Try**

To process your refund, the store needs several pieces of

**Why**

A numbered list provides the correct order and structure for the reader. It creates white space in the message.
documentation.
Please do the following:

1. Find the original receipt
2. Circle the incorrect items
3. Find the voided check
4. Complete a self-address stamped envelope

Include all items with your request.

When you go to the store, can you remember to get the items I need for my recipe? I forgot to get one orange, eggs for the mix (2), and the red for the icing, so I’ll need one bottle of red food coloring.

At the store, please purchase

- one orange
- two eggs
- one bottle of red food dye

It’s likely the shopper only needs to know what to buy, not why to buy it.

practice question

Can this passage be improved upon for clarity? Select the best improvement.

A) Mr. Angelo and his wife wanted to:

- Create a sort of shared use property that consisted of a camping site
- Create cover on at least enough acres of land for people to go out for the weekend
- Escape all the close-quarters camping and have some spaces for their canines
- Run around and be far away from other people

B) Mr. and Mrs. Angelo wanted to create a dog-friendly campsite. To maintain the colo camping feel, they plan to include:

- 10 acres of space per camping ground
- a 6-person fixed tent
- Restricted neighboring use

Answer

A) Mr. Angelo and his wife wanted to:
  - Create a sort of shared use property that consisted of a camping site
  - Create cover on at least enough acres of land for people to go out for the weekend
  - Escape all the close-quarters camping and have some spaces for their canines
  - Run around and be far away from other people

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Parallel Construction

Parallel construction of sentences, lists, and even headings makes messages much easier for the reader to absorb. Sometimes, for the newer writer, it might be easier to think of a predictable rhythm or format when working on how to achieve parallelism. Think of the beat of poetry or songs and how it makes the words easy to remember and predict. As a writer, you can use that same structure to your advantage.

Compare the two following sentences:

- Yara loves running, to swim, and biking.
- Yara loves running, swimming, and biking.

Was the second sentence easier to comprehend than the first? The second sentence uses parallelism. All three verbs are gerunds, whereas in the first sentence, two are gerunds and one is an infinitive. While the meaning of the first sentence comes through, it's easy to trip up over the mismatched items. The application of parallelism improves writing style and readability, and it makes sentences easier to process.

Compare the following examples:

- Lacking parallelism: “She likes cooking, jogging, and to read.”
  - Parallel: “She likes cooking, jogging, and reading.”
  - Parallel: “She likes to cook, jog, and read.”
- Lacking parallelism: “He likes to swim and running.”
  - Parallel: “He likes to swim and to run.”
  - Parallel: “He likes swimming and running.”

Once again, the examples above combine gerunds and infinitives. To make them parallel, the sentences should be rewritten with just gerunds or just infinitives. You could argue that the first sentence is correct in that “cooking,” “jogging,” and “to read” are all grammatically valid conclusions to “She likes.” However, when you put them together, the lack of parallelism leads to an incorrect sentence. Think of it this way: separately, Brussels sprouts, marshmallows, and sardines are delicious; together, they’d be kind of horrifying. An easy way to think about this is to make your sentence into three separate sentences:
The dog likes to run.

The dog likes to play fetch.

The dog likes to go to the dog park.

Remember how we talked about poetry or song at the beginning of this section? You can see from these three sentences that they “rhyme” in all but the last few words. To achieve parallelism, identify where the sentences start to be different, in this case, after “to.” Therefore, what comes after “to” is what your list should be made of in order to be parallel. Then check your parallelism by making sure that each of the items represents the same part of speech. In this case, each item—“run,” “play,” “go”—is a present-tense verb, so the parallelism works.

The dog likes to

run.

play fetch.

go to the dog park.

Here are a few more examples of parallelism in which the elements are all different lengths and types:

Jackson and Krista are cooking dinner, David and Rogelio are setting the table, and Ollie and Ron are picking up dessert. (Parallel elements are independent clauses that could stand alone as sentences.)

Juana looked for her phone under the table, on top of the bookcase, and inside the cupboard. (Parallel elements are prepositional phrases.)

Mandy and Torrence watched The Godfather, Mary Poppins, and a documentary about pelicans. (This may look tricky, but all of the elements in the list are nouns, so the sentence is parallel. Also, Mandy and Torrence have strange taste in entertainment.)

practice question

Which of the following examples best employs parallelism?

A) When scheduling travel, be sure to plan for each of these potential issues: a late arrival at the airport, a delayed flight time, a long wait at baggage claim, and an issue with traffic as you leave the airport.

B) Waiting a long time for customer service, feeling unheard, and poor merchandise—these are all common complaints that come to our customer service desk.

• A employs parallelism better
• A and B are equally parallel
• B employs parallelism better
A employs parallelism better

Parallelism can also apply to the way you talk about similar elements in general. If you’re writing a research paper that includes references to several different authors, you should be consistent in how you cite them. For example, if you talk about Jane Goodall and Henry Harlow, you should say “Goodall and Harlow,” not “Jane and Harlow” or “Goodall and Henry.” This is something that would carry on through your entire paper. You should use the same mode of address for every person you mention. Maintaining parallelism can also keep you from unintentional bias. Referring to three physicians as Dr. Jameel Smith, Dr. Samuel Evans, and Kathy will probably not make Dr. Kathleen O’Rourke very happy.

Parallelism is really helpful when you’re making lists, tables, or outlines. Think about the difference between these two versions of a list in an internal report:

~Tasks to be completed before the end of the quarter:

• Compile quarterly and aggregate sales data
• We should ask HR for a salary audit
• Presenting findings to the board
• Jeff does more searching for office space

~Tasks to be completed before the end of the quarter:

• Compile quarterly and aggregate sales data
• Request salary audit from HR
• Present findings to the board
• Continue office space search

Which one is easier to follow? Which is more professional in its look and feel? Essentially, any time you have a list—whether it’s within a single sentence or has a larger scope—you should focus on parallelism.

Emphasis

The correct amount of emphasis in business communications can help readers easily access the intended message. However, what is considered appropriate emphasis can differ drastically in this age of texting and social media. Remember that business communications are a part of a professional setting. While humans write the communications, the situation remains one company communicating to another or to a customer. This is not a personal communication that might include emotion or symbols for emotions.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Avoid</th>
<th>Try</th>
<th>Why</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ABC Company loves the opportunity to fill your Pick n Pack order.</td>
<td>ABC Company appreciates the opportunity to fill your Pick n Pack order.</td>
<td>“Love” is an intense human emotion, not the emotion of a thing—a company.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Allied Sales is so sorry and apologizes for the late order at its own expense with overnight shipping</td>
<td>Allied Sales shipped the late order at its own expense with overnight shipping</td>
<td>The company may not be all that sorry if the customer did not allow sufficient time. Move to the solution rather than increasing the focus on what went wrong.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
trouble the late delivery caused your pets delivery to make up for the missed shipment.

Your order is appreciated!! Your order is appreciated.

Please see the corporate request. There are FIVE QUESTIONS TO ANSWER.

Please see the corporate request. There are five questions to answer.

Recently, employees have erroneously entered wired rather than rewired on service orders.

Recently employees have erroneously entered wired rather than rewired on service orders.

She wanted to be called Susan not Sue.

She wanted to be called Susan not Sue.

If a RX5 cable is shipped an EU45 must be shipped at the same time.

If a RX5 cable is shipped an EU45 must be shipped at the same time.

The exclamation mark is clearly a mark of personal enthusiasm. Yet, most business communication is that “thing”—the company—rather than a human communicating. The introduction of this symbol in to business writing is relatively new. It can make the writer seem immature in the workplace.

Using all capital letters is construed as yelling at someone. This effect is further magnified when it comes in a downward message. Write well enough that the words communicate meaning clearly.

Use of Italic font provides emphasis without the startling impact of all capital letters.

Use of bold font provides emphasis without the startling impact of all capital letters.

Use of underline font provides emphasis without the startling impact of all capital letters.

Practice question

Why might the following email anger the remote employees it was addressed to?

I know we are new at working together. Many of you may not have worked with a remote supervisor before. Where possible, I will complete forms and information if I can submit them to headquarters for you. What happened last week was a PROBLEM when only one of the four of you responded to the request to ENTER YOUR PREFERRED VACATION DAYS. Without that information, I am unable to get backup for the team.

• No one wants to have a boss lecture everyone when at least one got it right.
• Now everyone is worried that they won't have the vacation days they wanted.
• The use of all capitals makes it appear the manager is yelling at the employees.

Answer

The use of all capitals makes it appear the manager is yelling at the employees.
In the examples above, notice how italic, bold, or underlined fonts all provide emphasis in a similar fashion. Any of the three are equally helpful, and the choice should be made based on what the organization or the writer prefers.

The analogy that best suits emphasis in a message is to think of salt in food. Some salt is tremendously helpful and enhances the dish. Too much salt is off-putting and may even be sickening.