

# Writing for Business

## **Level 2**

### Instructor Key

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**Training**  
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## Section 1: Effective Business Communications

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### ***Business Writing Is Your Voice***

Your business writing speaks directly for you. You can't stand over your readers' shoulders and explain what you *really* meant when you were writing your message. In most cases, your business messages—letters, memos, and emails—have to stand on their own. Even if you do have the opportunity to answer questions or clarify your points in person, your business writing will often be the first impression of you (and your organization) that others receive.

In Level 1, we learned the basics of crafting business communications. The first part of this course will review the three forms of business writing and the three stages of composing a business message. In addition, Level 2 will help you deliver your messages more effectively by showing you how to:

- Understand and write for your primary and secondary audiences
- Write clear, concise sentences using subject-verb agreement, parallel structure, and clear references
- Use proper punctuation including commas, semicolons, colons, and dashes
- Write strong paragraphs with clear topic sentences and supporting details
- Organize more effective memos
- Use subordination to help your ideas flow



*"Letters are not merely mediums of communication. They are effective substitutes for face-to-face visits, making and keeping friends, attracting and holding customers, and building a favorable image for your company."*

—Roy W. Poe, *The McGraw-Hill Handbook of Business Letters*

## Section 2: Review of Writing for Business, Level 1

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### *Three Forms of Business Writing*

Most of your business writing will take one of three forms: **business letters**, **business memos**, or **business emails**.

#### **Business Letters**

The **business letter** is the standard form of communication in the business world. A letter is the best format to use when you need to:

- Communicate with individuals outside your organization, especially when you don't have a regular working relationship with them
- Present information to a superior
- Communicate with many people at once
- Present information in detail


Full block letters are the most common format. They start with the *sender's address*, followed by the *inside address*, *salutation*, *body*, and finally the *complimentary close*.


#### **Business Memos**

A business **memo** or **memorandum** is designed to get things moving. Memos are action-oriented documents, which do one or more of the following:

- Inform the reader
- Persuade the reader
- Solve problems

Memos are often used to communicate changes to an organization's policies and procedures, and are frequently sent from superiors to subordinates. Since they are usually internal documents, memos use an abbreviated (and less formal) format that usually omits the sender's address, inside address, and complimentary close.

 See Unit 11 of the *Quick Reference Guide* for more information on business letters and memos.

 See section 11.40 of the *Quick Reference Guide* for more details on memos.

## Business Emails

**Email** is the least formal type of business communication. Emails are often used to exchange routine information but sometimes take the place of traditional business letters and memos.

Remember that email is public, not private (it can be read by others) and that it should **always** conform to standard rules of written business communications. Never flame anyone (vent negative emotions) in your email. Avoid poor etiquette such as ALL CAPS or IM (instant messaging) language. If you need to use sophisticated formatting or attachments, first make sure that your recipient can see them as you intend.

## The Three Stages of Writing

Experienced business writers develop their communications in three stages:

### 1. Pre-writing

In **pre-writing**, you start with the **3W's**: your **purpose** (**Why** am I writing this?), your **audience** (To **whom** am I writing?), and your **information** (**What** am I writing?).

After you've captured the 3W's, trim the list and organize your thoughts to set the stage for writing the first draft.

### 2. Writing the first draft

Some writers consider this to be the easiest part! Simply let your ideas flow based on the list or outline you created during pre-writing.

### 3. Revising

In the final stage, you re-write to ensure your writing follows the **6C's**: it should be **complete, concise, clear, courteous, consistent, and correct**.



Pre-writing and writing the first draft are covered in Unit 8 of the *Quick Reference Guide*.



Learn more about revising in Unit 9 of the *Quick Reference Guide*.

## Section 3: Analyzing Your Audience

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To review what you've already learned about pre-writing and knowing your audience, see page 34 of *Writing for Business, Level 1*.

In Writing for Business, Level 1, you learned that **knowing your audience** (for **whom** you are writing) is the second step in the Pre-Writing stage. Good business writing always keeps “you” (the reader) in mind. Before you start writing, always ask yourself the following questions:

- Who is my intended reader for this message?
- Who else might read this message?
- What biases or preferences do they have?
- Are they going to be receptive, neutral, or hostile to my message?

In Writing for Business, Level 2, you will add to your knowledge by learning how to address your audience’s **level of understanding** as well as their **motivations** and **biases**. You will also learn more about the difference between your **primary audience** (the individual(s) you intend to address with your message) and your **secondary audiences** (others who may read your message).

### ***Your Audience’s Level of Understanding***

Have you ever been overwhelmed by technical language? Your doctor, high school chemistry teacher, auto mechanic, or IT support person may have tried to explain something to you in terms you just couldn’t understand. Most people find this situation frustrating and prefer that specialists speak in plain, understandable language.

Most of us possess a surprising amount of knowledge about our lives, our interests, and what we do at work. In this sense, we are *all* specialists in what we do. In business, you will often need to write to people outside your immediate circle of co-workers. You may also need to document detailed procedures, instructions, or policies. It’s important to put yourself in your audience’s shoes and at least make an educated guess about their level of understanding.

Consider each of the following points when you’re writing:

- **Am I using jargon that is specific to my specialty, my department, or my organization?**

Jargon may be appropriate if you are communicating directly to another specialist about a shared topic of interest. However, in many cases, your business writing should assume that your reader has little or no special knowledge. They may be unfamiliar with the forms, reports, procedures, language, and organizational structure that you work with every day.

Unless you are absolutely sure of your audience's level of understanding, avoid specialized jargon that can leave readers scratching their heads.

- **Is my recipient *really* interested in this level of detail?**

Not everyone is interested in the fine details of your analysis or instructions—even if *you* think they should be. Be realistic with the level of detail that your audience is willing to accept.

Consider including an executive summary at the top of your business message so your readers can absorb the general points even if they won't bother with the details.

### ***What Motivates Your Audience?***

Marketing and communications experts tell us that typical business motivations include:

- Profit
- Savings
- Prestige
- Safety/Security
- Comfort
- Quality
- Growth
- Convenience
- Health
- Productivity/Efficiency
- Loyalty
- Curiosity

This list taps only a few possibilities. Human beings can have many different motivations and often have multiple motivations at any given time. You should always tailor your business message to your audience's motivation(s).

For instance, if you are drafting a letter to announce the results of your division's cost saving initiatives, you could lead with:

- Amount of money saved (**savings** motivation), or
- How fewer workers are accomplishing more with less (**productivity/efficiency** motivation), or
- How your organization leads peer organizations in adopting cost-cutting measures (**prestige** motivation)

### Exercise: Motivations

Read each statement and write the primary motivation behind it. Refer back to the list of motivations on the previous page.

1. *Prestige* Launching these new products will ensure that we maintain our place in the market.
2. *Loyalty* I've worked with Mr. Tibbs for twenty years. If he goes, I go.
3. *Productivity/  
Efficiency* Previously, it was necessary to walk to the other side of the building to make copies. Our purchase of three new copiers ensures that all employees have convenient access.
4. *Quality* We are adopting an extra proofreading step because we have discovered that our largest customer received a book which contained a number of errors.

### Bias

Depending on your its attitude, motivations, and prior experience with you (or your organization), your audience may have one of three different biases toward your message:

- **Positive Bias:** Positively predisposed to your message
- **Neutral Bias:** Neither positively or negatively predisposed to your message
- **Negative Bias:** Negatively predisposed to your message

You may need to craft your message differently depending on your audience's bias:

Audience's Bias	Your Approach
<b>Positive or neutral</b>	Reinforce or improve existing attitudes by stating the benefits your audience will receive.
<b>Negative</b>	Use one or more of the following techniques: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Limit your request to smallest one possible.</li> <li>• Anticipate and respond to objections.</li> <li>• Lead with points your audience will agree with.</li> <li>• Get your audience to agree there is a problem, then solve it.</li> </ul>

### ***How Will Your Audience React to your Message?***

If you have an idea of your audience's motivations and biases, or if you've worked with them in the past, you can probably anticipate how they will react to your message. Will they be:

- Upset?
- Happy?
- Excited?
- Frustrated?
- Confused?
- Disappointed?
- Interested?
- Bored?

Consider how your audience will react and choose your tone and approach accordingly.

### ***Primary and Secondary Audiences***

Your **primary audience** is whomever you intend to read your message. However, once a message leaves your hands, you have little control over who else sees it. Others who receive your message comprise the **secondary audience**. This could include anyone who:

- Receives a copy
- Needs to approve your request or plan of action
- Supervises or works for your primary recipient
- Will be affected by your message
- Hears about your message

Always consider who, besides your intended recipient, might see your business messages.

**Class Exercise: Audience**

Discuss how you would revise the following memo, assuming the following:

- Your audience is not familiar with your internal office procedures and materials.
- Your audience is not interested in detail.
- Your audience is motivated by efficiency, but also by maintaining good relations with others in the firm.
- Your audience is neutral toward your message.
- Your secondary audience includes the maintenance staff.

**To:** Martina Lopez, Director  
**From:** Kyle Martin, Office Manager  
**Date:** August 10, 20\_\_  
**Subject:** File room security

It has come to my attention that the file room latch and lock have been broken for the last four weeks. We have made a number of calls to Maintenance and it is obvious that they're too busy taking their coffee breaks to address the problem.

We store the following materials in the file room:

TPS Reports	Quarterly, 2000-current
SCODA3 Profiles	Per client, 1985-current, with the exception of 1992-1993, when profiles were not available
YARDA Data	Bimonthly, except July-August data, which are combined into 1 volume on odd-numbered years
BORJO folders	1993, 1994, 1995, 1997, 1998, 2000, 2001, 2003, 2004, 2006

Obviously, unauthorized access to these materials is a huge problem and you can see why the situation needs to be resolved. Hopefully you can make some calls to the Maintenance Department and light a fire under them so they fix the latch and lock.

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- § Didn't consider secondary audience: insults the maintenance crew. Also, the primary audience is motivated to maintain good relations with others in the firm.
- § Provides too much detail about the materials. The audience doesn't need to know the specific years that are stored in the closet.
- § Assumes audience is familiar with office procedures and doesn't explain the situation fully ("Obviously, unauthorized access to these materials is a huge problem and you can see why the situation needs to be resolved.")

## Section 4: The Building Blocks of Good Writing

All writing begins with words arranged in **sentences** and **paragraphs**. As we saw on page 1, your writing has to stand on its own. Clear, concise, well-constructed sentences and paragraphs will make your writing strong and sturdy.

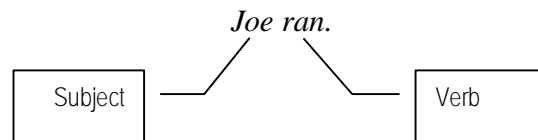
### Writing Clear, Concise Sentences

To write clear, concise sentences, you will need to understand a few basic concepts of grammar and sentence construction:

- **Nouns and pronouns**
- **Verbs**
- **Subject-verb agreement**
- **Parallel structure**
- **Clear references**

### Sentence Basics

A complete sentence contains a subject, which is based on a *noun* or *pronoun* (a person, place, or thing) and a *verb* that tells what the subject is, does, or what happens to the subject. In fact, only a noun and a verb are required to write a sentence:



Always ask: Who did what? *Who* is the subject, and *what they did* is the verb.

### Nouns and Pronouns

The subject can be a pronoun, which takes the place of a noun. Pronouns are underlined in the example below:


We went to the grocery.


They are moving out of town.

She will attend the noon meeting.

It is on the shelf.

He went to a meeting.

 The full subject is the noun (or pronoun) plus all its modifiers. The simple subject is the main noun—the one that performs the action. In this guide, when we say “subject” we mean the simple subject.

 “One who does grasp the rudiments of grammar finds a comforting simplicity at its heart, where there need only be nouns, the words that name, and verbs, the words that act.”

—Stephen King, *On Writing*



Learn more about verbs in sections 5.54-5.65 of the *Quick Reference Guide*.

## Verbs

There are three types of verbs:

1. **Active verbs:** used when someone or something is *doing* something
2. **Passive or state of being verbs:** connect the subject to a description of *what it is*
3. **Helping or auxiliary verbs:** create verb *tenses*



Active verbs are further classified as transitive (when they act on an *object*) or intransitive (when the subject acts by itself).

The first two examples on the right use transitive verbs (*wrote*, *walks*) and the last example is intransitive (*slept*).

Many verbs (including *wrote* and *walks*) can be either transitive or intransitive depending on how you use them.

### Active Verbs

Active verbs are about *action*. If someone or something is *doing* something, then you will use an active verb. The active verbs are double-underlined in the examples below.

Sally wrote a memo to the department.

Ron walks his dog every evening.

Abdul slept soundly.

### Passive or State of Being Verbs


A passive or state of being verb connects the subject to a description of *what it is*. The passive verbs are double-underlined in the examples below.

Sally was the department head.

Queenie is Ron's dog.

## Helper or Auxiliary Verbs

Helper or auxiliary verbs combine with active or passive verbs to create *tenses* such as past, future, and present. You don't need to know the names of all the tenses to be an effective business writer, but some of the most common tenses are listed below to illustrate the use of helper verbs.

 Learn more about verb tenses in sections 5.57-5.63 of the *Quick Reference Guide*.

Tense	Example	Auxiliary/ Helper Verb	Sentence	The time something happened
<b>Past perfect</b>	Had moved	Had	Carla <u>had moved</u> the box from the dock to the conference room before the meeting.	Distant past
<b>Past</b>	Moved		Carla <u>moved</u> the box from the conference room to her office.	Past
<b>Present perfect</b>	Has moved	Has	Carla <u>has moved</u> the box from the conference room to her office	Past
<b>Present</b>	Moves		Carla <u>moves</u> the box from her office to the storeroom.	Now
<b>Present continuous</b>	Is moving	Is	Carla <u>is moving</u> the box from her office to the storeroom.	Now
<b>Future</b>	Will move	Will	Carla <u>will move</u> the box from the storeroom to the dumpster if no one needs it.	Future

When someone refers to the “verb” of a sentence, they usually mean the verb plus all its helpers (if any).

*Carla is moving the box from her office to the storeroom.*

**Exercise: Find the Subject and Verb**

Underline the subject once and the verb twice in each of the following sentences.

1. Many colorful umbrellas line the shore on Tuesday.
2. A driver was yelling at the pedestrian for walking in front of his car.
3. Amy's recorder worked beautifully during the ceremony.
4. The temperature has already hit more than 100 degrees.
5. The boom echoed through the valley.

## Subject-Verb Agreement

Verbs must agree in number with their subjects.

*The girl sings.* (singular)

*The girls sing.* (plural)

Subject-verb agreement becomes more complex when you use collective nouns and when you place phrases between the subject and verb.

### Collective Nouns

Collective nouns represent a collection or group of people or things that are grammatically considered **one unit**. Examples:

- Crew
- Republic
- Herd
- Team
- Nation
- Committee
- Bunch
- People
- Federation
- Flock
- Swarm
- Pair

A collective noun should agree with its verb. If you're talking about the noun as a collective group, the verb will be singular. If the noun is talking about separate individuals within the group, the verb will be plural.

Examples:


*The committee has completed its investigation.* (The committee is acting as a whole—one unit—so the verb is singular).

*The committee are divided in their opinions.* (The members of the committee are acting as multiple individuals, so the verb is plural).

The second example is correct, but many readers will question it because it *looks* strange. You can often clarify this kind of sentence by re-wording it to remind readers that you're talking about multiple individuals:

*The members of the committee are divided in their opinions.*

In this case, the noun is *members*—which clearly agrees with the verb *are divided*, even though the phrase *of the committee* appears between the subject and the verb (more about this in a moment).

 Sections 5.66-5.70 of the *Quick Reference Guide* give more details about subject-verb agreement.

More examples:

*The crew is working on Route 270.*

*The people are planning a surprise party.*

*Our nation is united.*

### Phrases between the Subject and the Verb

The number of the subject is not changed by a phrase following the subject:

*This tree, unlike some others, grows quickly. (The verb, *grows*, agrees with the subject, *trees*. *Unlike some others* is a phrase between the subject and verb).*

*The swarm of bees is after me! (The verb, *is*, agrees with the subject, *swarm*. *Of bees* is a phrase between the subject and verb).*

Pronouns are often used in conjunction with phrases that may mislead you when you check subject-verb agreement. Here are a few rules:


Singular pronouns	Plural pronouns	May be singular <i>or</i> plural
§ Each	§ Several	§ Some
§ Either	§ Few	§ All
§ Neither	§ Both	§ Most
§ One	§ Many	§ Any
§ Everyone,		§ None
§ Everybody		
§ No one		
§ Nobody		
§ Anyone		
§ Anybody		
§ Someone		
§ Somebody		
<i><u>Each</u> of us <u>is</u> coming.</i>	<i><u>Several</u> of us <u>are</u> coming.</i>	<i><u>Most</u> of the play <u>was</u> interesting.</i> <i><u>Most</u> of the plays <u>were</u> interesting.</i>




Phrases between the subject and verb are usually prepositional phrases. Read more about prepositional phrases in sections 5.31-5.33 of the *Quick Reference Guide*.

### Other Agreement Situations

- Subjects joined by *and* take plural verbs.  
*Joe and Mary are coming to visit.*
- Singular subjects joined by *or* or *nor* take singular verbs.  
*Joe or Mary is coming for a visit.*
- If a singular subject and a plural subject are joined by *or* or *nor*, the verb agrees with the subject nearer the verb.  
*Two boys or one girl is still able to sign up.*
- Words stating amounts are usually singular.  
*Twenty-five dollars is the entrance fee.*
- Some nouns are always considered plural even when referring to a single item.  
*Your eyeglasses are on the counter.*  
*Your pants are due back from the cleaners today.*  
*The riches were from heaven!*

 *And, or, and nor* are conjunctions. Learn more about them in sections 5.16-5.19 of the *Quick Reference Guide*.

 However, the phrases *pair of eyeglasses* and *pair of pants* take singular verbs—because *pair* is a collective noun. *Of eyeglasses* and *of pants* are prepositional phrases modifying the noun *pair*.

**Exercise: Subject-Verb Agreement (2)**

In the story below there are several errors in subject-verb agreement. Look at the underlined word. If it is incorrect, cross it out and write the correct word above it.

Jan is ~~preparing for her~~ Clerk 3 exam. First, with the help of her two co-workers, Jan practices reading all the material ~~in the book~~. Jan knows that the punctuation rules in the workbook ~~needs to be~~ learned. Jan's workbook, unlike her other reading materials, rates careful study every evening. Naturally, every one of Jan's co-workers ~~wants~~ to pass the exam, too. Even the most reluctant test-takers study hard for the exam.

Finally, the day they've been waiting for arrives. A written test of the punctuation rules ~~starts~~ the exam. Then the actual case study section of the tests begin. Jan completes each of the sections successfully.

Jan can celebrate with her friends!

## Parallel Structure

Your writing will flow better if you use the same word structure and tense whenever you write:

- A series
- A list
- Multiple sentences that describe actions occurring at or around the same time

### Examples of parallel structure in a series:

*The copy center's main responsibilities are printing, duplicating, collating, punching, and binding materials. (Good parallel structure: all items in the list share the same form).*

*The copy center's main responsibilities are printing, duplicating, collating, punching, and to bind materials. (Poor parallel structure: *to bind* doesn't match the other items in the list).*

### Examples of parallel structure in a list:

#### Good parallel structure

- § *Pre-writing*
- § *Writing the first draft*
- § *Revising*

#### Poor parallel structure

- § *Pre-writing*
- § *To write the first draft*
- § *Revising*

### Examples of parallel structure in multiple sentences:

*The R&D department has researched these customer complaints. They haven't found any design flaws. (Good parallel structure: verb tense matches in both sentences).*

*The R&D department has researched these customer complaints. They aren't finding any design flaws. (Poor parallel structure: verb tense differs between the two sentences).*

Parallel structure keeps your writing consistent and coherent.



All the responsibilities (printing, duplicating, etc.) in the first parallel structure example are gerunds. *To bind* in the example is an infinitive. Both gerunds and infinitives are verb forms that act as nouns. The *Quick Reference Guide* includes more information on gerunds and infinitives in sections 5.71-5.72.

**Exercise: Parallel Structure**

Some of the following passages include errors in parallel structure; others are correct. Review the passages and write in corrections as necessary.

1. Every technician's kit should include:

§ 2 rolls of duct tape

§ 1 flashlight

§ 50 assorted fasteners

§ An emergency flare

1 emergency flare

2. Our marketing department is proud of its reputation as a brilliant, creative, go-getter, and accessible team.

*Our marketing department is proud of its reputation as a brilliant, creative, go-getting, and accessible team.*

3. It is crucial that every new CSR understand how to field customer calls, when to ask for help, and where to report problems.

*OK as is.*

4. Historically, our sales group tends to miss its quota during the third quarter but recovers during the fourth quarter. The holiday season always made up for poor sales during the fall.

*Historically, our sales group tends to miss its quota during the third quarter but recovers during the fourth quarter. The holiday season always makes up for poor sales during the fall.*

## Keep References Clear

When you use words that refer to, modify, or connect to other words in a sentence, it's important to keep their references clear. Make sure you know **exactly** what you're referring to, and make it obvious to your reader. Unclear references leave questions in your readers' minds.

### Modifiers

Many unclear references involve phrases or clauses that modify a noun or verb in the sentence.

*James is a nurse with County Hospital who is starting a new exercise program.*

*Who is starting a new exercise program* is a dependent clause which is intended to modify a noun in the sentence. Unfortunately, it's unclear which noun it's modifying—James or County Hospital.

The author could improve the sentence by placing *who is starting a new exercise program* next to James, the subject of the sentence:

*James, who is starting a new exercise program, is a nurse with County Hospital.*


The word *only* is particularly sensitive to placement in a sentence. Here are two versions of a sentence, with the *only* placed in different positions:

*He only drove to the grocery store.*

*He drove only to the grocery store.*

The two sentences are similar but have a subtle difference. The first sentence uses *only* to modify the verb *drove*. This sentence indicates that he drove to the grocery store—he didn't walk, ride his bike, or catch a ride with someone else.

In the second sentence, *only* modifies the phrase *to the store*. This sentence implies that he drove specifically to the grocery store and not to work, to a restaurant, or to any other location.

 A clause has its own subject and verb. The *Quick Reference Guide* describes clauses in sections 6.15-6.22.

## Pronouns

Most other unclear references involve **pronouns**. Consider this example:

*Sue's day included a meeting and a teleconference. It was unproductive.*

What was boring—the day, the meeting, or the teleconference (or all three?) *It* could refer to three different nouns. Without further clarification, most readers would probably guess that her *day* was unproductive.

In this case, the author should revise the second sentence to make the reference more specific:

*Sue's day included a meeting and a teleconference. The meeting was unproductive.*

or it could be re-written more concisely as:

*Sue's day included an unproductive meeting and a teleconference.*

## Exercise: Writing Clear References

Each of the following examples contains an unclear reference. Find the reference in each item and re-write it. You may have to use your judgment to guess what the author intended!

*Answers will vary. Possible re-writes are given below.*

1. Nick was carrying a backpack, an iPod, and a water bottle on the bus. They were black and green.

*Nick was carrying a black backpack, a green iPod, and a water bottle on the bus.*

2. My son's wedding took place on a Sunday in May and featured a 5-tier cake. It was gorgeous.

*My son's wedding took place on a Sunday in May and featured a 5-tier cake. The wedding was gorgeous.*

3. We booked a hotel for our conference, which is right across the river from the downtown area.

*We booked a hotel for our conference. The conference is right across the river from the downtown area.*

## Punctuation: Commas, Semicolons, Colons, and Dashes

Punctuation guides your reader through each sentence. Different punctuation can transform the same set of words into something very different. Consider the following example from Lynne Truss' *Eats, Shoots & Leaves: The Zero Tolerance Approach to Punctuation*:

*She eats shoots and leaves.*

That sentence could describe an animal: maybe a koala, panda, or deer. Insert a few commas, though, and suddenly you're talking about a sharpshooter or basketball player:

*She eats, shoots, and leaves.*

This section will give you a few hints to help you use punctuation correctly and effectively.

### Commas

Commas are the second most common form of punctuation (after periods) and serve many functions in a sentence. The *Quick Reference Guide* describes all the uses and misuses of commas, but we will review the three most common here.

- Never combine two sentences using only a comma. Use a semicolon (see below) or add other words to connect the sentences.

*He always gave the weekly status report, he was team leader.* (incorrect)

*He always gave the weekly status report; he was team leader.* (correct)

*He always gave the weekly status report, since he was team leader.* (also correct)

- Use commas to list three or more items in a series. Always include a *terminal comma* just before the conjunction and last item in the series.

*Our lunch buffet features fruit, lunch meats, and desserts.* (Uses terminal comma between *meats* and the word *and*).

*Our lunch buffet features fruit, lunch meats and desserts.* (Omits terminal comma).



Learn more about commas in sections 1.24-1.42 of the *Quick Reference Guide*.



This error is called a comma splice.



The terminal comma is not actually required for correct grammar, but it is the *preferred* usage according to most contemporary sources. It makes your sentences clearer and helps ensure good flow.

- Use commas to set off a *parenthetical expression* that describes, identifies, or clarifies a noun in the sentence.

*Bob's co-worker, Shanice Wilson, is already in the conference room.*



*"Sometimes you get a glimpse of a semicolon coming, a few lines farther on, and it is like climbing a steep path through woods and seeing a wooden bench just at a bend in the road ahead, a place where you can expect to sit for a moment, catching your breath."*

— Lewis Thomas, "Notes on Punctuation," *The Medusa and the Snail*

### Semicolons

As mentioned in the previous section, semicolons can join two sentences (or independent clauses) into one.

*It's been a long day; let's head home.*

*Dan is an excellent technician; unfortunately, his management skills leave something to be desired.*

Semicolons also separate items in a series when the items themselves contain commas.

*ABC Company has offices in three Midwestern capitals: Columbus, Ohio; Lincoln, Nebraska; and Springfield, Illinois.*



Learn more about semicolons in sections 1.89-1.92 and colons in sections 1.17-1.23 of the *Quick Reference Guide*.

### Colons

Colons are used to introduce a quotation, an example, a list, or a clause that emphasizes or clarifies a statement. Here are a few examples:

*Before you start proofreading a manuscript, be sure to have the following supplies on hand: a red pen, a guide to proofreader's marks, a style guide, and a stack of Post-it™ Notes.* (colon introduces a list)


*It's clear that your supervisor has been an excellent coach and mentor to you: your presentation was flawless.* (colon introduces a clause that clarifies a statement)

## Dashes

Dashes set off abrupt breaks, examples, or clarifications. A dash is stronger than a comma and more relaxed than parentheses. Dashes are considered more casual than colons, so avoid using them when you're writing in a formal tone.

*Three of our staffers—Raoul, Cassandra, and George—have been nominated for Employee of the Year. (dashes set off a parenthetical expression that clarifies the noun staffers)*

*Zach is having difficulty in routing calls—the new phone system has a different set of features than the old system.*

 Sections 1.43-1.46 of the *Quick Reference Guide* discuss dashes.

 Don't use spaces on either side of a dash.

## Exercise: Punctuation

Place the correct punctuation marks in the sentences below.

1. The problem is in my opinion very complicated

*The problem is, in my opinion, very complicated.*

2. Danh who researched his family's history in Vietnam was moved by the experience

*Danh, who researched his family's history in Vietnam, was moved by the experience.*

3. Gina's favorite athletic activities are soccer gymnastics aerobics and jogging

*Gina's favorite athletic activities are soccer, gymnastics, aerobics, and jogging.*

4. These are the things you need a rake shovel and spade

*These are the things you need: a rake, shovel, and spade.*

5. Masako didn't like the offer however it was better than nothing

*Masako didn't like the offer; however, it was better than nothing.*

6. The desk drawer was stuck so George pulled harder

*The desk drawer was stuck, so George pulled harder.*

## Sentence Length

Your business writing should avoid extremes in sentence length. Writing entirely in short, choppy sentences is fatiguing to the reader and destroys the flow of your ideas. On the other hand, your readers may feel rushed, miss your points, or lose their place if you use too many long, complex sentences. Try to strike a balance between short sentences and longer sentences in your writing.

Here is an example (from *How to Write First-Class Business Correspondence* by Baugh, Fryar, and Thomas) of a sentence that is too long:

*Our discussion of the new product division has given me a chance to consider obtaining the Baton Rouge plant which has always been an attractive prospect, even in the recession because of its location and local labor supply, and it might be a good time to bring the purchase proposal before the board when it meets on Saturday.* (p. 44)

This sentence contains at least four separate ideas, one of which (the recession) isn't really relevant to the points the writer is making. The authors suggest re-writing it in four sentences:


*Our discussion of the new product division has given me a chance to reconsider purchasing the Baton Rouge plant. I've always felt the plant was an attractive prospect, given its prime location and the local labor supply. I'd like to propose that we purchase the plant. Perhaps we can bring the idea before the board at its Thursday meeting.* (p. 45)

This same example becomes repetitious and tedious when written in short, choppy sentences:

*We have been discussing the new product division. This discussion has given me a chance to reconsider purchasing the Baton Rouge plant. It has a prime location and an excellent local labor supply. I've always felt the plant was an attractive prospect. I'd like to propose that we purchase the plant. Perhaps we can bring the idea before the board. The board meets next Thursday.*

You will need to use your judgment in choosing the best length for your sentences. Here are a few guidelines to help you:

- Each sentence should contain only one or two main ideas.
- Vary sentence length to keep the reader’s interest.
- Use short sentences to highlight very important points.
- If your sentences are too long, the words *and* and *but*—as well as semicolons—often signal where you can break sentences.
- If your sentences are too short and choppy, you have many options to join them together:
  - § Use either **coordinating conjunctions** (like *and*, *but*, *not*, and *or*) or **semicolons** to connect equal ideas.
  - § Use **subordinating conjunctions** (like *after*, *although*, *if*, *since*, or *when*), **colons**, or **dashes** to connect a main idea to a supporting idea.
  - § Turn one of the sentences into a **parenthetical expression**, a clarifying phrase set off by commas, dashes, or parentheses: “*Ramon, our supervisor, reviewed the mid-year budget.*”

 Learn more about all types of conjunctions in sections 5.16-5.19 of the *Quick Reference Guide*.

**Exercise: Sentence Length**

The following passages are written using short, choppy sentences. Combine them to make longer, flowing sentences. There is more than one right answer for each!

1. The river is too wide. I can't get over it.

*The river is too wide; I can't get over it.*

2. Ajit started yesterday. Grace started yesterday, too.

*Ajit and Grace started yesterday.*

3. Shawnda wrote a redevelopment proposal. She presented it to the City Council yesterday. Shawnda works for QRS Construction.

*Shawnda wrote a redevelopment proposal and presented it to the City Council yesterday. She works for QRS Construction.*

These sentences are long and contain too many ideas. Rewrite them as multiple sentences with 1-2 ideas each. As with the previous exercise, there are many correct ways to re-write these examples.

1. Our office move is going exactly as planned; yesterday, we finished packing and today the movers are carrying furniture to the new office suite—it was vacated just last week by the Marketing Department, which is now on the third floor with Accounting.

*Our office move is going exactly as planned. Yesterday, we finished packing and today, the movers are carrying furniture to the new office suite. The suite was vacated just last week by the Marketing Department, which is now on the third floor with Accounting.*


Also, the second sentence is in passive voice and could be re-written: *The Marketing Department vacated the suite just last week and Marketing is now on the third floor with Accounting.*

2. I have serious doubts about the early retirement buyout plan, although it has been successful at other agencies like ORST and OHIJ: those agencies had only a few employees over 50 and experienced manageable turnover as a result, whereas 35% of our employees are over 50 and therefore are eligible for early retirement.

*I have serious doubts about the early retirement buyout plan. Although the plan has been successful at other agencies like ORST and OHIJ, those agencies had only a few employees over 50 and experienced manageable turnover as a result. 35% of our employees are over 50 and therefore are eligible for early retirement.*

## Writing Strong Paragraphs

The *Quick Reference Guide* defines a paragraph as “a group of related sentences that present one major idea” (p. 96). Paragraphs break your text into bite-sized chunks for your readers. Each paragraph should focus on one main idea (expressed in a **topic sentence**) and include information that clusters around and supports the topic sentence (**supporting details**). Strong paragraphs help your reader to follow your topic, point by point, through the length of your memo, letter, or email.

 The *Quick Reference Guide* covers paragraphs in detail starting on page 96 (sections 6.45-6.57).

### Topic Sentences

A strong paragraph always centers on a **topic sentence**, usually located at the beginning of the paragraph. The topic sentence:

- Is the most general in the paragraph
- States the purpose of the paragraph for the audience
- Is the most important sentence in the paragraph
- Helps the reader focus on the main idea

The topic sentence tells what is to come. Everything in the paragraph should be focused on the topic sentence, and refer back to it. The rest of the sentences in the paragraph tell more about the topic sentence, or “support” this main idea.

A topic sentence can’t be a simple statement of fact because there would be no details to develop: it has to be broad enough in scope to support the rest of the paragraph. In fact, many good topic sentences are fairly abstract (see page 5 of *Writing for Business, Level 1*) and are supported by concrete sentences.

*The office supplies budget is increasing by \$1000 this year.* (Probably too narrow and specific to make a good topic sentence, unless you’re going into detail about the office supplies budget and what it includes).

*The departmental budget is increasing by 25% this year. This includes a \$1000 increase in the office supplies budget, a \$2000 increase in...*  
(better, broader topic sentence with supporting details)

### Position of the Topic Sentence

The topic sentence is usually located at the beginning of a paragraph. However, in some cases you will need to build a case for something and then write a topic sentence at the end of the paragraph. This technique can be very effective in persuasive writing.

*The main cross-streets were last re-paved 25 years ago and are covered with patch upon patch. Tree roots have buckled sidewalks on every block. Aging water mains break regularly during the winter months. It is clear that this neighborhood's infrastructure is overdue for a major overhaul.*  
(topic sentence underlined)

### Exercise: Write a Topic Sentence

The following paragraph has a main idea, but no topic sentence. After reading it, write a topic sentence and place it in the paragraph where it belongs.

*A guide to the city should have a variety of skills. (answers will vary)*

A good guide to the city must, of course, know a great deal about the history, buildings, and people of the city. He or she must be able to discuss each important site as it comes into view of the tour group. A sense of humor is another necessity, along with a great deal of patience. In addition, it helps if a guide speaks several languages fluently.

From: *Writer's Manual, A Student Resource for Improving Writing*; Edward Fry, Ph.D, Elizabeth Sakiey, Ed.D, Contemporary Books, 1997.

### Supporting details

All remaining sentences in the paragraph are **supporting details**. They could include:

- **Reasons** which tell **who, what, when, where, how, or why** (5 W's)
- **Examples** of the main point
- **Quotes** illustrating the main point
- **Clarifications** of the main point

**Exercise: Write a Paragraph**

Write a paragraph based on the following points. First, identify and underline the point that you will use for your topic sentence for your paragraph. Use the other points in the list as supporting points. You will need to re-write the points to help them flow.

- 6 employees will be paired with their supervisors in the annual sack race.
- The prize for the sack race is a day spa treatment for two.
- Food will be provided by DEF Barbeque.
- The fair will be held on August 15.
- All employees are invited to the annual PQR Industries Family Fair.
- Entertainment will be provided by local band The Right Stuff.
- RSVP by July 15.

Topic sentence should use the bullet point *All employees are invited to the annual PQR Industries Family Fair.*

Answers will vary. Here is an example:

*All employees are invited to the annual PQR Industries Family Fair. The Family Fair will be held on August 15 and will feature food provided by DEF Barbeque. Local band The Right Stuff will provide entertainment. As always, 6 employees will join their supervisors in the annual sack race; the prize this year is a day spa treatment for two. Please RSVP by July 15.*

## Section 5: Putting Your Message Together

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In this section, you will learn how to apply your writing skills to create clear messages for your audience. You will learn:

- Six ways to organize memos
- How to emphasize certain ideas and subordinate others

### ***Organizing Your Memos***

As discussed on page 1, memos are internal documents that inform, persuade, and/or solve problems. Memos are less formal than letters, get to the point quickly and, since they're internal documents, usually assume that the readers are already familiar with the organization and its operations.

*How to Write First-Class Business Correspondence* describes six ways to organize business memos.

- **Chronological:** Tells the history of a situation. A memo organized chronologically may start at the beginning and work toward the present, or start with the present situation and work back through past events to tell its history.
- **Functional:** Discusses the functions of products or of people in your organization (such as accountants, clerical staff, or project managers). The focus is on *present functions*, not on history.
- **Cause and effect:** Starts with causes and works up to effects, or describes the effects and then explains their causes.
- **Question and answer:** Anticipates the reader's questions and answers them, or summarizes questions that have already been asked and provides answers. A "Frequently Asked Questions" (or FAQ) web page is a good example of question and answer organization.
- **Geographical:** Summarizes financials, sales, costs, or other metrics for different regions, territories, or offices within an organization.
- **Problem, analysis, solution:** Gives a summary of a current problem, breaks it into its component parts, and proposes one or more solutions. These memos focus attention on specific issues that need to be resolved quickly.

### Exercise: Memo Organization

Indicate which type of memo organization would best address each of the following situations.

1. *Chronological* Your company has just acquired a supplier. You want to tell the history of the supplier to help employees become more familiar with its culture.
2. *Functional* Your division has just completed a huge re-org. You need to communicate information on the new positions and their roles and responsibilities to everyone in the organization.
3. *Problem, analysis, solution* The break room smells horrible! You investigated and discovered the culprit: take-out food left in the fridge for several weeks at a time. You'd like to propose a weekly purge of the refrigerator.
4. *Geographical* You're presenting sales figures for your company's branch offices around the state.

### Emphasis and Subordination

Emphasis and subordination help your readers to understand which ideas are important. Emphasize information to draw attention to it and subordinate information to take emphasis away from it.

Here are some ways you can emphasize an idea or main point:

- Place it in a short sentence so it stands on its own.
- Place it in a short paragraph.
- Devote more space to it (make it the topic of a paragraph or give it an entire section of your business document).
- Place it in the first paragraph of your business document.
- Place it in the *last* paragraph of your document.
- Let readers know that you consider the idea important: use words or phrases like “most important,” “primary,” or “major.”
- Repeat the information in different ways.
- Highlight the information using **bold**, *italic*, ALL CAPS, underline, or color.

If you need to *de-emphasize* or subordinate an idea, try one of the following:

- Place it in a long sentence.
- Place it in the middle paragraphs of your document.
- Devote less space to it than other ideas.
- Let readers know that you consider the idea less important: use words or phrases like “less important” or “minor.”

### **Class Exercise: Emphasis and Subordination**

The author has written the following paragraph to recommend a new model of desktop PC for the department. The author’s supervisor would like to emphasize the new computers’ performance improvements over the old model but de-emphasize the high price. Discuss as a class how the paragraph could be revised to reflect better emphasis and subordination.

I recommend the ABC Systems Model 10, priced at **\$2149**. It has the same form factor as our current desktop system and will not require any modifications to employee work spaces. It also comes equipped with the same version of Windows and Microsoft Office as our current machines, so we won’t have to re-train users. It has more memory, a faster processor, and a bigger hard drive than the old model. The remote management feature lets the help desk troubleshoot without having to send out a technician. Best of all, we can expedite delivery and have the systems ready to go in two weeks.

- |   |
|---|
| <p>§ Don’t lead with the price, and <i>definitely</i> don’t leave it bolded and underlined.</p> <p>§ De-emphasize price; move it to the middle of the paragraph and/or embed it in a longer sentence like “System are \$2149 each and will be ready to go in two weeks.”</p> <p>§ Don’t use “best of all” when talking about the delivery schedule: that isn’t the point you want to emphasize.</p> <p>§ Move the sentence “It has more memory, a faster processor, and a bigger hard drive than the old model” closer to the top of the paragraph.</p> <p>§ Consider re-writing the sentence about performance for more impact. Give more specifics and make it more prominent in the paragraph.</p> |
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