

## Writing for Business Students

### Overview

Business writing, because of its specific focus on efficiency, organization, and confidence, can look quite different from other more scholarly genres of writing. Business writing generally takes the form of reports, which may fall into subcategories such as case studies, recommendations for action, or evaluations.

According to Carter A. Daniel's *Reader-Friendly Reports*, "business people are intelligent, suspicious, and busy. So when you write for them you must be factual, persuasive, and efficient." (4) In other words, business writing should not be flowery, subtle, or overly verbose; the point is not the beauty of your language, but the clarity and accuracy of your information. The most important element is control; as Daniel says, "every sentence, every paragraph, and especially the report as a whole must be firmly controlled by a governing purpose." (8)

### Using Appropriate Tone

Before you begin writing, whether the project is a case study or a recommendation for future action, you need to ask one question: *What do you want the reader to do as a result of your work?* Your writing should always stress the benefits for the reader, sound confident, use nondiscriminatory language, be at an appropriate level of difficulty for the intended audience, and focus on essential material only.

Use active verbs and strong verbs whenever possible. For example, say "The company benefits" rather than "It is beneficial to the company". Don't overqualify your writing (using "I would agree" instead of "I agree", for example), as this can be potentially misleading—the "would/could/might" phrasing implies some sort of doubt or condition attached to your statement, and successful business writing should instead demonstrate your confidence and competence.

### The Usefulness of Internal Structure: Paragraphs, Charts, Subheadings

#### *Paragraphs*

Paragraphs should be direct and clear, not elliptical or nuanced. In general, a good organizational strategy—though it may seem repetitive to those outside the field—is to make the point, explain it, give details or corroboration, then restate it.

#### *Subheadings*

Subheadings demarcate topics and topic changes for a busy reader. They must be thesis-like, indicate the direction of the discussion, and introduce not only the topic but what point is going to be made about the topic. For example, "Questionable Integrity in the Workplace" is an appropriate subheading, while simply "Integrity" is not.

#### *Bullet Points and Lists*

Bullet points and lists are acceptable in all but the most formal business writing. If a list is the most efficient way to convey the information, use one! Be sure, however, that your formatting is consistent, and check for any parallelism problems: if one item on your list begins with an imperative verb, for example, the rest must match it.

#### A good list:

To be successful, the company must:

- diversify its holdings
- increase wages
- implement a customer loyalty program

#### A poor list:

To be successful, the company must:

- diversify its holdings
- a wage increase
- customers should be rewarded

### Using Numbers

Numbers have no significance unless compared with another number. For example, is it good that the company's profits increased by 4%? What if the rival company's profits increased by 8%?

In formal writing such as reports and case studies, write out the words for numbers below ten, unless they are very large numbers ("6.6 billion people"). Always use the 0 in decimals to avoid confusion: 0.6, not .6. Readability is the main criterion; if you are unsure, read the sentence aloud to hear how it might sound to a reader. Finally, avoid ambiguous words and phrases such as "pretty soon" or "a large amount of". How soon? What amount, specifically?

### **Including Charts and Graphs**

Always give graphs a descriptive title: what trend or change is being shown? Visuals should come *after* the discussion in the text: tell readers what to look for first, so they are prepared in advance. Graphs, charts, and other visual aids should always present a clear dominant impression, visible at first glance. You might think of this in terms of a visual representation of your thesis: "compact cars have increased their market share over the past ten years," not simply "car sales over the past ten years".

### **Industry Research, References, and Footnotes**

Research in the business world generally comes in three types: statistical (increasing or decreasing production, material costs, etc), news about developments in the industry (technological, regulatory, import/export shifts, etc), and competitive (market share, locations, goals of competitors). Research is generally conducted to support your overall thesis or recommendation, and should be deployed as a strategy for achieving the desired goal of the report; unlike research in other, more academic fields of writing, business research is not meant to open up new avenues of inquiry or pose complex questions. It has one purpose: to assist your persuasion of your audience. A useful source for business and economic terminology is *The McGraw-Hill Dictionary of Modern Economics*, which provides short explanations of frequently used concepts and terms.

Proper citation of sources also contributes to your credibility and persuasiveness as a writer. However, in most cases, a simple allusion to the source ("According to the April 2009 issue of the *Journal of Marketing Research*...") will suffice. Remember, efficiency should be the overall goal, and you do not necessarily want to make your readers look down at footnotes after each sentence. However, if you have multiple sources and multiple points that require attribution, footnotes provide needed clarity and precision. Use Chicago style references if footnotes or a bibliography are required, unless otherwise instructed by your supervisor or project manager.

### **Overall Appearance**

Appearance matters; reports should be as easy to read and accessible as possible. Readers will judge you on how you present yourself in writing. Always double-space, justify on the left side only, use at least one-inch margins, and use black ink on paper heavy enough to keep the next page from showing through. Number all pages after the first. Be consistent about where you place the numbers. Cover sheets are only necessary for especially formal reports, and should be simple: title, author, date. Avoid making your work look crowded or cluttered.

### **Sources for This Handout**

Daniel, Carter A. *Reader-Friendly Reports: A No-Nonsense Guide to Effective Writing for MBAs, Consultants, and Other Professionals*. New York: McGraw-Hill, 2012.

The Purdue Online Writing Lab on effective professional and technical writing:

<http://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/section/4/16/>