Chapter **1**
Introduction

The ability to concisely and accurately convey meaning to different people is a prerequisite in today's fast-paced world. Whether you are a student about to step into the workplace or a more seasoned employee with years of experience, you must be able to communicate effectively to advance your career. You communicate in many ways at work. A large amount of this communication is in writing. Some employers consistently rank good writing skills—whether the document is printed or on the screen—among the desired skills for both new hires and current employees.

In this chapter, you will learn about:

• the value of effective writing at work;

• characteristics of work-related writing;

• phases of the writing process.

1.1   The Value of Effective Writing at Work

In a working environment, when would you choose to communicate through writing? Typically, you will choose to communicate through writing when one or more of the following conditions are in place:

• A permanent document is required.

• The intended receiver of the message is not present.

• The sender of the message wants to establish a formal interaction with the receiver.

At work in administration, business or management, and in any other profession, you probably use a pen and a computer keyboard more than any other equipment. Writing is one thing that you must do every day, and success in your career depends largely on your ability to express your thoughts clearly, simply, and persuasively in your writing. However, many people enter the workplace clueless about the right way to frame a request or compose a routine email. They may wonder about some issues, such as how the document should look like, what tone to adopt, or which organizational strategy to use. Learning how to write professionally begins with the awareness of the value of effective writing at work. Exactly speaking, the value of effective writing at work is as follows.

1.1.1 The Place of Writing at Work

Writing is important to work. Estimates of the time people spend writing in a normal workday run upwards of 25%. If we also count both the time spent planning writing and the time spent reading what others have written, the figure is close to 40%. That is a lot of time, and it represents a significant work expense.

Poor writing is bad work. It slows down the communication process, causes confusion, and encourages mistakes. Most workplaces are inundated with paperwork for too many papers around—reports are too long, memos too frequent, correspondence too burdensome. When the writing is not only lengthy but bad—filled with mistakes, poorly organized, unclear—it becomes a hindrance rather than a tool for work.

But good writing is more than just a tool for work. Let's take business as an example. In the widely heralded information economy era, written information (whether in hard copy or electronic form) is often the commodity that is being traded. Product documentation, feasibility studies, product brochures, test reports—these all represent business products just as manufactured goods do.

1.1.2 The Role of Individual Writing in the Workplace

Good writing is also important at the individual level. Writing serves to establish and maintain an employee's role within a company. The impressions made on you as a worker, especially by higher-ups who are not in your immediate work setting, are often based on what you write.

The memos and reports that employees write also serve as a primary means of individual evaluation. No one may ever say outright that you will be evaluated on your written reports or memos, but all too frequently nobody knows what you did until you put it in writing. Thus writing serves as a key means of job evaluation and plays a large role in decisions concerning promotions and merit rises.

Many employees do not define writing as their work. They say they are test engineers, or biologists, or sales representatives, or accountants. Yet these workers spend much of their time writing, and many of their work activities are directly aimed at producing some written products. Writing is a tool closely related to success within the organization; the higher they move up within an organization, the more important and time-consuming writing becomes.

1.1.3 The Merits of Effective Writing at Work

Help You to Concentrate

Preparing a description, like making a careful drawing or preparing a plan to scale, makes you concentrate on the object or event to be described and helps you to ensure that your record is both accurate and complete. Similarly, entering observations on a data sheet during any practical investigation or inquiry, with words or numbers, makes you concentrate on your work and helps you to ensure that each entry is inserted at the right time—so that all necessary data are recorded.

Help You to Remember

The ability to listen, select, and make concise notes relevant to your present or possible future needs is an important skill at work. In administration, business, and management, you make notes during conversations, interviews, and meetings, so that you can remember:

- the subject discussed (a heading);
- with whom it was discussed;
- when it was discussed (the date);
- the gist of what was said (a few words, phrases, numbers and dates, and complete sentences where necessary);
- any conclusions and anything agreed on.

Help You to Think

In writing, you capture your thoughts. Writing is therefore a creative process that helps you to sort your ideas and preserve them for later consideration. Preparing a memo or a report makes you set down what you know, and so leads you to a deeper understanding of your work. For example, preparing a progress report helps you to view an aspect of your work as a whole, to recognize gaps in your knowledge, to avoid time-wasting distractions, and to know when the work is complete.

Help You to Be Well-organized and Time-effective

Making a note of the things you expect to complete is of much help. You may also find it helpful to work to some kind of weekly timetable, which may be on a page, on which you can enter firm commitments and notes of things you hope to achieve at other times. Even if you

cannot plan each week in detail, your list of the things you plan to do each day is the basis of efficient organization. For example:

- Prepare the list as you decide what needs to be done.

- Number the tasks as you decide your order of priority.

- Cross tasks off your list as they are completed, and add new tasks as they are brought to your attention.

- Revise your order of priority as new tasks are added to the list.

By working to a job list each day or weekly or monthly, you develop a good habit of effective time management. This not only makes for efficiency but also helps you to avoid stress by being in control, which can benefit you in the long run.

1.2 Characteristics of Work-related Writing

Workplace writing has certain characteristics that form the underpinning of anything you write, from an email to your boss, to a résumé for a new job, to a proposal for a new business. When you think of work-related writing, what characteristics come to your mind?

At first, you typically write work-related documents for a specific audience/reader and the work-related documents should be useful to the audience/reader. Then, they should be well-organized, clear, concise, accurate, and complete. Many work-related documents contain visuals, such as graphs, diagrams, or tables, even pictures. Last but not least, the tone of work-related writing tends to be more objective and unbiased; it also attempts to maintain a positive tone.

All in all, remember to integrate the following characteristics into your writing at work.

Accuracy

Professionalism comes first in the workplace. One of the best ways to illustrate to our readers that we are professionals and experts is through accuracy. Inaccuracy shows carelessness that few professionals or organizations can afford in a competitive, global marketplace.

Brevity

Brevity is expected in workplace communication. No one wants to wade through wordy prose to get to a point. Conciseness in work-related writing can save time and effort, thus enhancing communication efficiency.

Clarity

If a reader has to reread to understand anything you write, it means that you have not done your job well. Every sentence you write should be easy to read. Clarity comes from using words the readers will recognize and use correctly. Stay away from unnecessary jargon or technical terms. One way to check your work for clarity is to give your draft to someone who knows nothing about what you are writing. If he or she can understand the document, it is probably clear.

Correctness

Poor grammar and word use make both the writer and the organization appear ignorant and sloppy. To hone your grammatical skills, work with a grammar guide next to you. Consult the guide when you are unsure about any writing issue. Make good use of your word processor's grammar and spelling check, but do not rely on them solely.

Strong Nouns and Verbs

Good writing uses nouns and verbs to do the heavy work and saves adverbs and adjectives for rare occasions. Instead of "Our auto policies are competitive", say "Our auto policies beat the competitor's". Be cautious about the overuse of *is*, *are*, *was*, and *were*, for "be" is regarded as the most boring and overused verb in the English language. On the one hand, "be" is a weak verb form, in part because it indicates a state of existing rather than action. Furthermore, "be" verbs are sort of passive rather than active.

Simple Words

Avoid jargon and choose the simpler, more recognizable word over the longer, more flowery one. Instead of *rhinovirus*, use *a cold*. Opt for *email* over *electronic message*. In *utilize* versus *use*, *use* wins. Just imagine how the number of words your reader has to wade through goes down with simpler words or everyday language.

Sentence Variety

Sentence variety has two elements. The first is sentence beginnings. It means to avoid writing sentences that begin with the same word or phrase. As you edit, look at the way your sentences begin. Do three sentences in a row begin with *I*? Or do two sentences within one paragraph begin with *There are*? Make your sentence beginnings different and attractive. The second way to attain sentence variety is to vary the sentence length. Natural-sounding prose combines short, medium, and longer sentences. We have several ways to alter the sentence lengths. Join two sentences whose content is closely linked by embedding the gist of one sentence into the other. Combine two sentences with a coordinate conjunction to make a complex sentence. Or try an alternate sentence beginning, such as an introductory phrase, which will add sentence variety.

Parallelism

Good writing often uses a device called parallelism, or parallel structure. Writers use parallelism instinctually because it appeals to our natural desire for symmetry. Parallelism matches nouns with nouns, verbs with verbs, and phrases with phrases as in "I came, I saw, I conquered." Readers expect parallelism, especially in sets of two or three items, and in bulleted or enumerated lists. Using parallel phrasing correctly is key to effective writing in the workplace.

Shorter Paragraphs

Big blocks of type scare readers away. Long paragraphs are appropriate for essays, but they have no place in professional documents. In work-related writing, the longest ideal paragraph should be no more than six to eight lines. Always be aware of how a paragraph appears on a page (or a screen), and take pity on your readers—don't make them slog through dense prose.

Positive Voice

Cultivate a positive image for you and your organization. A positive voice uses affirmative words to make a point. For example, instead of saying "We are out of blue shoes", you would emphasize the positive and say "Order any size of our white and black shoes". Avoid downbeat words or words that can convey a negative connotation and rephrase them positively. Instead of "No coupons will be honored after May 1", say "Coupons will be honored through May 1".

Appropriate Level of Formality

Whether to use an informal or formal writing style depends on the reader and the purpose of the document. There is no clear-cut way to determine when to use each style. Most of the time, emails are informal. However, sometimes, an email may require formality. To determine which style fits your needs, understand that informal writing allows you and the reader to connect at a more personal level. It can convey closeness, warmth, and friendliness. Formal writing, on the other hand, produces the impression of objectivity, seriousness, and professionalism.

Table 1.1 can help to guide you in choosing which style best suits your writing task.

Table 1.1 Comparison between formal style and informal style

	Types of Documents	**Characteristics**
Formal style	Letters Long reports Research proposals	No personal pronouns (*I*, *we*, etc.) No contractions Objective voice or use of passive voice No figurative language or clichés No editorializing Limited use of adjectives No exclamation points Longer sentences Some technical language
Informal style	Most communication within the organization including emails, memos, text messages Routine messages to outside audiences Informal reports	Use of personal pronouns Use of contractions Shorter sentences Easily recognizable words Limited use of warm, inoffensive humor

1.3   Phases of Writing

You should use a systematic process to develop your written documents. Every composition, whether it is a short business letter, an essay written by a student, an article in a magazine, a set of instructions, or a long report, should be undertaken in three phases. The process of writing can be described with an acronym: AWE, short for *assess*, *write*, and *evaluate*. The following will illustrate the three phases of work-related writing.

Phase 1: Assess

This phase includes the following steps:

- Analyze the audience.

- Identify the purpose.

- Gather information.

- Organize the information.

Before you ever put pen to paper or put your fingers on the keyboard, begin by assessing the writing situation and defining your readers and purpose.

Knowing the audience—your reader—is imperative for successful writing. As a writer, if you can put yourself in your reader's shoes, you will establish a mutually successful relationship, and your correspondence will be well received. Your reader will feel comfortable building a relationship with you, and you will have earned that reader's trust, loyalty, and most definitely his or her business or cooperation. This applies to clients, colleagues, supervisors, and subordinates—everyone. Consider first the needs of the people you expect to read any communication you are preparing. What are their backgrounds? What are their interests? What do you think they have already known about the subject of your composition? Writers need to be very clear about the target audience because the language and style we use depend upon who will read what we write. In essence, we have to psych out the reader to accomplish our writing goal. Written communication is more than the transfer of a message. Unless the message makes sense to the intended reader, that reader cannot respond properly and the communication is not effective. Here are some things you should determine about your reader:

- Is the reader technical or non-technical?

- How will the reader use this information?

- What are his or her expectations?

- What is his or her current knowledge on this topic?

- What kind of reader is he or she?

These are just examples of questions that will help you to understand your reader. As you build your professional relationships, you will be able to dig into even finer details about your reader that will personalize and enhance your communication.

The next part of assessing the writing situation is defining your purpose. Knowing your

purpose keeps you focused. The purposes of most work-related writing fall into three basic categories: informing, persuading, and requesting.

- Informative writing is a large category that includes generalized information, instructions, notifications, warnings, or clarifications.

- Persuasive writing makes an impression, influences decisions, gains acceptance, sells goods, or makes recommendations.

- Requests are written to gain information or rights and to stimulate action.

Once you have defined for whom you are writing and what you want to accomplish, continue your analysis of the writing situation by gathering the information to produce the document. Sometimes you may just need to extract information from your experience. Sometimes you need to conduct research. Sometimes you need to turn to the internet. This step is named information gathering. Anyhow, have your information on hand before you begin to write.

Once you have the information, organize it. You will need to decide how you want to organize your material to present it to the reader. A useful organizational tool is an outline which, whether formal or informal, is essentially a list of your major topics and subtopics in the sequence in which you want to present them. For example, you can add numbers to your notes as you decide:

1. What is the main point to be made in each paragraph?
2. How should you begin?
3. In what order should the other paragraphs follow?
4. What explanation or examples must be included in each paragraph?
5. Are there any tables or diagrams needed?
6. If there are, where should they be placed?
7. How should you end?

By adding numbers to indicate the order of paragraphs, you convert your first thoughts into a plan or topic outline. Preparing this plan will serve to remind you of relevant things that you already know, and to recognize gaps in your knowledge or information.

Phase 2: Write

This phase includes the following two steps: