

## **DEALING WITH WRITTEN COMMUNICATION IN BUSINESS ENGLISH CLASSES**

**Elena Ciortescu**

**Assist. Prof., PhD, "Al. Ioan Cuza" University of Iași**

*Abstract: It is widely known that in business communication, accuracy is no longer a priority as compared to fluency. Communication must be effective and the message must reach its recipient in terms of content and meaning. Its form and therefore, grammatical accuracy comes second. The area which, however, requires good knowledge of grammatical and linguistic rules in order to enable the successful transmission of a message is written communication. This is particularly due to the fact that written communication lacks the support that body language and visual aids could provide. Moreover, in most cases, written communication is performed in the absence of social context. For all these reasons, the importance of the ability to transmit a coherent message and to therefore meet the recipient's needs for information increases dramatically. From memos, notices on boards, reports, minutes, to e-mails, cover letters or CVs, written communication covers a wide range of skills that business students need to acquire in order to successfully face the challenges of business communication nowadays.*

*Keywords: business communication, writing skills, accuracy, fluency*

### **Introduction**

The main skills that foreign language trainers deal with are *accuracy*, *fluency* and *effectiveness*. While *accuracy* is primarily focused on lexis, grammar, pronunciation, *fluency* is concerned with speed and effort of speaking; finally, *effectiveness* deals mostly with the impact of discourse on the audience. One of the major differences between General English and Business English stems from the different treatment of the three above-mentioned issues: while General English is mainly concerned with developing accuracy and fluency, Business English is rather focused on fluency and effectiveness (Brieger, 1997: 41-2). This does not necessarily apply in the case of written communication: it is this particular area which requires accuracy in order to ensure that a coherent message is transmitted. We have already shown that it is the lack of social context, visual aids and body language that determines our

students' need to acquire the structures and linguistic patterns necessary to help them communicate successfully in writing.

As a Business English trainer, I often ask my students whether they are aware of the difference between *argot* and *jargon*. Most of them are incapable to tell the difference between argot – “words and expressions which are used by small groups of people and which are not easily understood by other people” and jargon – “special words and phrases which are used by particular groups of people, especially in their work” (cf. *Cambridge Advanced Learner's Dictionary* 2006). Undoubtedly, the excessive use of jargon leads to the possibility that the message might be misinterpreted. Consequently, a good starting point in teaching written business communication is to clarify the difference between formal and informal language. Moreover, students must become aware that the language they need to employ in written business communication should be formal; by using formal language, the danger of using argot and excessive jargon is eliminated, which should eventually spare learners the trouble of dealing with a message which can be easily misunderstood. After all, communication is effective only if the message has been received and understood by the receiver. Nowadays, managers still like everything to be done in writing; therefore, letters, memos, reports, minutes and, for a while now, e-mails are currently heavily used in professional communication. While eliminating the support that body language and social context may provide, written communication brings a series of advantages: the message is recorded, well structured, easy to distribute (particularly in the case of e-mails), cannot be varied and can be referred to again (Stimpson and Farquharson, 211: 228-30).

### **Writing Business Letters and E-mails**

Although there are several areas of business communication where traditional forms of correspondence (letters, messages of condolence, congratulations, confidential contracts, etc.) are still preferred, e-mails have clearly become the key communication medium. The best means to familiarize students with the current requirements of business written communication is to introduce them to the key aspects of letter writing, on the one hand, and of e-mail writing on the other.

While there are various types of letters, we have identified a standard structure which, once assimilated, could be used in a wide range of written messages. The essential elements in a standard business letter are illustrated below:

#### **Sender's address:**

Title, full name

Street address

Post code and town

Country

Telephone

Reliable/business-like email address

**Date**

**Inside/ Recipient's address**

Title, first and last name

Position of recipient

Department (optional)

Company/ organization name

Postal address

Post code

Country

**Attention Line**

**Salutation**

Dear Mr/Mrs/Ms/Dr/Professor + last name (no punctuation)

Dear Sir or Madam (if you do not know the name)

**Subject Title**

**Body of Letter**

**Complimentary close**

Dear Mr/Mrs/Ms/Dr/Professor + last name - Yours sincerely (no punctuation)

Dear Sir or Madam – Yours faithfully (no punctuation)

## Your handwritten signature

## Your full name (typed)

### Indicate enclosure

Special attention should be paid to the differences occurring in British and American styles in terms of date format, for example, i.e. dd/mm/yy in British English and mm/dd/yy in American English, or the use of punctuation in salutation (a comma is optional in British English while a colon is usually used in American English) and complimentary close. It is the writer who decides on the variety of English used in the letter; he/ she should, however, follow the path of consistency, irrespective of the style he decides upon. Among the tips that any learner of Business English should know when dealing with written communication, we mention the following:

- the blocked style is preferred; a line space is left between paragraphs;
- most courtesy titles are used in salutations: Mr, Mrs, Ms, Dr, Prof., Capt., etc; however, they **cannot** be combined as in: \*Dear Mr Prof. Coolbridge;
- if a letter begins with *Dear Sir, Dear Madam, Dear Sir or Madam*, it will be ended with *Faithfully yours*;
- if, on the contrary, the name of the recipient is known, the letter will be ended with *Sincerely yours*;
- if the letter is rather informal, it may be ended with *Best wishes*;
- Americans tend to end their letters with *Yours truly* or *Truly yours*;
- the abbreviation *pp* may occur in signature blocks, standing for *PER PRO*, meaning *on behalf of* and being most often used by administrators or personal assistants;
- the mention of *enclosure* is used to point to the fact that other documents are sent with the letter, e.g. bill of exchange, bill of lading, etc.;
- if copies are sent to people other than the mentioned recipient, c.c. (carbon copy) is added at the end of the letter before the name of the recipient(s) of the copy; moreover, if the name(s) of the copy receiver(s) must remain confidential, b.c.c. (blind carbon copy) should be used instead of c.c. (Ashley, 2015 : 8-14).

While the high degree of formality is the main characteristic of business letter writing, business e-mails are most often written in a rather neutral, sometimes informal, style. It is this feature that makes it necessary for learners to become acquainted with a wide range of

abbreviations, beside the typical structure that every e-mail should display. Writing e-mails does bring a series of advantages: it is very fast, easy to use in and between companies, being particularly useful for short messages and everyday correspondence. The fact that we can have access to e-mail 24 hours a day is clearly an advantage. Moreover, whatever we send or receive can be easily filed. However, there is also a number of inconveniences, among which the most serious one resides in the technical problems that may occur and which may easily blow one's work up within seconds. Also, e-mails are seldom used when confidential information is transmitted due to the high risk of having e-mail accounts attacked by hackers.

A. Ashely provides the general rules that apply to business e-mail writing:

-e-mails usually follow the style and conventions used in letter writing, i.e. the salutation and close fit the degree of familiarity between sender and recipient: e.g. if you begin with *Dear Mr Jamison*, you end with *Sincerely yours/ Best regards/ Kind regards*, depending on the degree of formality required; if you begin with *Dear Sir*, you end with *Yours faithfully*; if you begin with *Dear/ Hello Jane*, you end with *Best wishes/ Regards*; finally, if you begin with *(Hi) Rob*, you should end with *Best/ Cheers/ Take care/ Thanks*, depending on the context;

-another important element in e-mails is the *opening sentence* which should always be included in formal e-mails, in order to clarify context by explaining why the writer is writing, what the e-mail refers to, or to simply express a positive attitude:

e.g. *Dear Sir or Madam*,

*I am writing regarding the job ad I found on your website... (Ana Hochsieder in Business Spotlight 3/2014: 50);*

It is only in the case of informal e-mail writing that *opening sentences* could be left out. Quite expectedly, there is also a series of *closing sentences* that we should use in e-mails.

Formal e-mails may end with: *I look forward to hearing from you.*

*Thank you in advance for the support.*

Less formal e-mails may end with: *Hoping to hear from you soon.*

*Thanks in advance.*

*Let me know what you think.*

You can also close by offering to help:

F (i.e., formal): *Please let me know if I can be of further assistance.*

I (i.e., informal): *Let me know if you need any help.*

F: *Should you have any questions, please do not hesitate to contact me.*

I: *I'll be happy to answer any questions* (Anna Hochsieder in *Business Spotlight* 4/2014: 50).

We may also add that business messages should be written by taking into account aspects such as: audience, purpose, clarity, consistency, tone, etc.; grammar, spelling and capitalization are as important as in letter writing; e-mail messages should be short and to the point.

One aspect which is generally common to e-mail writing is the use of abbreviations. Students are therefore introduced to the most frequently used abbreviations so as to ensure that once faced with an e-mail using abbreviations they will be able to understand the message; moreover, they need to acquire the ability to use abbreviations in writing e-mails as often as possible for this practice saves valuable time: AFAIK – as far as I know, BTW – by the way, BFN – bye for now, COB – close of business, FYI – for your information, IOW – in other words, NRN – no reply necessary, OTOH – on the other hand, etc.

The standard structure of an e-mail comprises 3 key elements:

Header Information (To, C.C., B.C.C., Subject)

Message Text (comprising Salutation, Body of e-mail, Close, which usually follow the pattern of business letter writing)

Signature Block (name, title, address, telephone, fax, e-mail address) (Ashley, 2015 : 20-2)

### **Conclusions**

Writing skills are essential in information management and therefore indispensable in any type of business. However, the main risks that occur in business writing are related to meaning (documents are read in situations which are by no means related to the context in which they were written, e.g. the reader may simply be in a bad mood when reading your e-mail; this is what makes written communication exposed to misunderstanding – the fact that it is to a certain extent de-contextualized); permanence (with both its positive and negative consequences); technology (huge amounts of work can be lost within seconds). Nevertheless, there are a few guidelines that business students may consider in order to improve their writing skills: any written message, either a letter or an e-mail, should not be longer than required, i.e. it should be short and to the point; the language should be as simple as possible although the use of jargon and abbreviations is necessary; the importance of structure remains paramount: while providing coherence to the text, it serves as a guide to understanding the message. For these reasons, the use of standard phrases should be encouraged. While using standard phrases to pattern the message, attention must be paid to accuracy – the typical mistakes that occur in business writing are related to verb forms, ‘if’ clauses, use of adverbs

and adjectives, prepositions and false friends. The choice of register remains of paramount importance. Therefore, the acquisition of writing skills can prove a long and difficult experience for most business English learners. However, once familiarized with the key structures that occur in written communication, business writing can easily turn into a tool for successful self-marketing.

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