



Your Passport to Professionalism:

Written Communication

Steps in this module:

1. **Learn:** Read the following brief document.
2. **Practice:** Review the 3 model documents at the end.
3. **Check your Success:** Complete the reflection activity.

Step 1—Learn

Introduction

Most jobs require that you communicate in writing. You will write down phone messages, leave notes for your co-workers, post a notice, and reply to email inquiries. Your job may even be to write business letters to external customers.

In Module 1 - Verbal Communication - you learned that the actual words you say contribute less than 10% of the meaning of your message. However, when you communicate in writing, the actual words are all you have to get your meaning across. Much more than with verbal communication, communicating in writing depends on how you **encode your message**.

Qualities of Good Written Communication



Communicating effectively in writing requires attention to all aspects of the product: **content, organization, tone, and appearance**.

Regardless of the form of your written communication, it should follow these guidelines:

- **Composed** correctly - Check your grammar and spelling. When in doubt, have your writing checked by an expert
- **Clear** - Read your text aloud to make sure it's understandable. It's even better to read it aloud to someone else such as a friend
- **Comprehensive** - Double check to make sure all the important details are included
- **Accurate** - Check all the details to make sure they are correct
- **Appropriate** - Make sure you are using the proper tone and level of formality

Composing Email Messages

There are basic rules to follow when you write for work. The bottom line is: the email messages that you send as an employee will look very different from the emails you write to your friends.

Correct Composition

Your friends don't care if you use complete sentences and words, correct grammar, and correct spelling. Your supervisor and coworkers do. In fact, the importance of correct spelling and proper grammar cannot be overemphasized.

Clarity

It won't bother your friends if you send them a message that is garbled. But it will bother your supervisor and your coworkers if you send one to them. **PROOFREAD** your message to make sure it says what you mean. Look for ambiguities.

Use these strategies to write clear messages:

1. Don't expect your reader to identify you from your email address. **Identify yourself.**
2. Keep the message as **focused and short** as possible.
3. **Get to the point** right away without being too curt.
4. Use **short paragraphs and bullets** to break up long blocks of text. If you have multiple subjects in one message, number them, and start your message by telling the reader how many parts there are.
5. **Write a meaningful subject line** that describes the content and gives your reader a reason to open your message. Avoid a generic subject, including the



dramatic: “Important! Read Immediately!” What is important to you may not be important to your reader. Rather than announcing that your message is important, write an informative subject that communicates the gist of what you feel is so important: “Emergency: All Cars in the Lower Lot Will Be Towed in 1 Hour.”

TIP: Never, EVER use the abbreviations you use to write text messages in your business email. u want ur boss r ur prof 2 think u cant rit?

The tone of your email can be easily misconstrued—especially when you are trying to be ironic or humorous. **Be conscious of the tone** that your message is conveying. If you are the reader, be aware that it is easy to read the wrong tone into the sender's words. This issue causes relationship problems, misunderstandings, and communication breakdowns. Instead of judging the tone for yourself, ask the sender to clarify the meaning.

TIP: Emoticons are out of place in business communication. Stick to the basics.

Completeness

Include all the important details. Email is different from text messaging. When texting, the participants expect back-and-forth exchanges. The readers of your work email will be annoyed if they have to email you back to get more information.

Accuracy

Mistakes in the information you send to your friends may not be a problem, but mistakes in information sent at work can cause issues.

Appropriateness

Your friends probably don't expect you to start with a greeting (Dear Bob,) or to put your name after your message. Your supervisor will likely expect it. Check with them to see if they have a preference. A good rule of thumb is to copy the format used by the person you are communicating with.

Your friends won't hold it against you if you delay or forget to reply to one of their messages. Your supervisor and coworkers will. You will be expected to reply promptly and definitely within in a day of receiving a work-related message.

You might get away with using off-color remarks or rude language in emails to your friends. It could get you fired if you use them for your work messages.

Use a simple presentation. Avoid fancy typefaces and don't depend upon bold type, italics, or large type to add nuances. The recipient's email reader may not have all the features that yours does. In a pinch, use asterisks to show *emphasis.*

Warnings

When you receive a rude or angry note, **do not reply right away**. Negative emotions can escalate quickly in e-mails. If you get a cranky message, just delete it, or pick up the phone and smooth things over.

Do not expect privacy!! The network administrator has access to your information. Don't worry: That person is much too busy to be poking around in your business for no reason. However, if people in authority want to read your emails and share them with others, they can do it. Therefore, assume that all of your email is public.

Leaving Notes and Phone Messages

Consider the following phone exchange:

- Student: Career Services. Jan speaking.
- Caller: May I please speak with Dr. Brown?
- Jan: Dr. Brown is not at his desk. May I take a message?
- Caller: Sure. Tell him Jack called.
- Jan: May I have your last name, please?
- Caller: Jack Jones.
- Jan: Would you like Dr. Brown to call you back?
- Caller: No. I'll call back later.
- Jan: Are there any other details you'd like me to give him?
- Caller: Tell him it's about the meeting tonight.
- Jan: Ok. So that's Mr. Jones calling for Dr. Brown about tonight's meeting and you'll call him back. Did I get it right?
- Caller: Perfect! Thanks!
- Jan: Thank you for calling, Mr. Jones.



Here is the message that Jan left:

March 15, 11:30 a.m.

To: Dr. Brown

Mr. Jack Jones called about tonight's meeting. He will call back later.

Jan Smith

Jan did everything right when she took this message for Dr. Brown. Here's the breakdown in terms of our goals.

Composition: Jan used complete sentences and spelled everything correctly.

Clarity: Jan respectfully asked the caller for details that made the message clearer, then she wrote the details briefly and clearly. She also made sure that Dr. Brown could read her handwriting.

Completeness: Jan included the date and time of the call and specified which meeting the Mr. Jones was talking about. She also noted that Mr. Jones would call Dr. Brown back. She printed her full name in case Mr. Brown wanted to follow up with her.

Accuracy: After taking down the message, Jan repeated what she had written to the caller to make sure she got it right.

Appropriateness: Jan's communication was appropriate while she collected the information and when she wrote the note. Right off the bat, she identified the office and gave her name. She was respectful and appropriately formal but friendly. She wasn't pushy when she asked for clarification. Her respectful attitude continued in the message.

TIP: *Do your best to keep phone messages private. Whenever possible, leave a phone message where the intended recipient, and ONLY the intended recipient, can see it.*

Posting Notices

Composition: Misspellings and bad grammar are even more of a problem when they're in big type and posted for everyone to see. Proofread and spell-check your sign. Always have someone else check your work.

Clarity: Signs call for short phrasing and active verbs.

Completeness: Be sure to include all the important information. Ask yourself: If I didn't work in this unit, would I understand this message? If you're announcing an event, include date, time, location, cost, and other details a person needs to attend successfully.

Accuracy: Check the details to make sure everything is correct.

Appropriateness: Your supervisor should approve any text that will be posted for others to see. It should go without saying that off-color language is forbidden. Be careful with humor, too. Sometimes people do not understand or interpret attempted humor differently.

TIP: Before you go crazy with fonts and colors, run your ideas by your supervisor.



Communicating With Outside Clients

Clear written communication is especially important when you write to people outside of your organization. Before you send a letter, invitation, announcement, bulk mailing or other correspondence, consult someone whose writing skills you trust to review it for **correct composition, clarity, completeness, accuracy, and appropriateness**. Your supervisor (or the person on whose behalf you are sending the correspondence) should review it before it goes out. With outside mailings, the **appearance** of the documents is also of particular concern. Your supervisor or a coworker will show you the stationery to use and the format to follow.

Business letters have a special format that include the outside address (usually in the letterhead), the inside address, the salutation, the body, the closing, and the signature lines. There is often a need to identify the preparer and note any additional documents that accompany the letter. Spacing between sections is also standardized.

In Closing

When you are writing to friends, it's fine to use shortcuts like abbreviations (IMHO – in my humble opinion, or LOL – laugh out loud) and nonstandard punctuation and spelling. They are signs of casual intimacy, like sharing fries with a friend. If you tried to share those same fries with a customer or a visiting dignitary, you might

seem disrespectful. For the same reason, don't use informal language when your reader expects formality. Always know the situation, and write accordingly.

Continue with Step 2 on the next page.

Step 2—Review Model Documents

Check your understanding of the concepts presented. Examine these examples of appropriate business communication.

You write a Thank-you email to a co-worker

Subject line: Thank you!

Dear Jane,

Thank you very much for teaching me how to stock the salad bar yesterday. It was helpful to have someone who has had experience show me the ropes. I appreciate your taking the time away from your tasks to work with me.

I hope I can return the favor some day.

Sincerely,

John

You write a note telling a co-worker about a change in procedures

February 21

John,

Mr. Su wanted me to let you know that we have to leave the lobby lights on when we close up from now on. He said it was a request from the security guard who patrols at night. Please let me know if you have any questions.

Jane

Your boss asks you to draft a letter about receiving an incomplete order

February 22, 20XX

OfficeMess

555 Long Street

Willamette, OR

To Whom It May Concern:

We have just received delivery of order no. 123 placed with you on February 18. We regret to say, however, that the order is incomplete.

As you can see in the copy of the enclosed invoice, we requested 1000 clear page protectors; however, the shipment we received contained only 400.

As a result of not receiving the full amount, we have been unable to complete an important project. We therefore hope you will ship us the remaining 600 items right away. If we do not receive them by Monday, we will be forced to cancel the order and buy them elsewhere.

We look forward to hearing from you soon.

Yours sincerely,

John Smith

Step 3—Check Your Success



Application

1. The following text will be used to post a notice in the cafeteria. Change the wording, layout, and font for maximum impact.

A lot of people on campus are enjoying Ultimate Frisbee. We play on Saturdays with Frisbees that the student government provides. We want to get more people involved so everyone is invited to this Friday's Ultimate Frisbee marathon Saturday starting at 11:00 and lasting until 4:00 on the west lawn. Student Government will provide the Frisbees.

2. The following message was left by a co-worker for a student employee in the Library. What type of information would you add to make it more complete?

Type your answer into the text box. (You can invent the information to add or just say what type of information is missing.)

You are supposed to re-shelve the books.

3. Edit the following emails written by student employees to their supervisors. For each message, click below the text and correct the composition. Make each as clear, comprehensive, accurate, and appropriate as you can.

sup? I can't work firday. U can schdule me another day. tell me when.

I happen to like working with Sheila but you put me with Bob. He sucks. I want to work with her.

You told me to file the papers but I couldn't find any. Sense I couldn't do it, I left.

Complete the reflection to save and review with your boss.

Passport to Professionalism

Reflection:

Date:

Name:

Written Communication

A. In your current position, what types of written communication do you use most often? (List them all.)

B. What are your main challenges with written communication?

C. What are some strategies you can use to ensure correct composition, clarity, comprehensiveness, accuracy, and appropriateness?