Business and Professional Writing
A Basic Guide

SECOND EDITION

Paul MacRae

Praise for the first edition:

"Paul MacRae's *Business and Professional Writing* delivers on its promise to provide a basic bread-and-butter guide to workplace writing. Whereas other books combine practical writing instruction with communication theory, MacRae's background as a journalist comes through in his concise approach: he hones in on the core genres and skills that all professional writers *must* develop as part of their writing repertoires. This book practises what it teaches. Concepts are explained and illustrated clearly and efficiently. The strong section on grammar clearly explains the basics that need to be in every professional writer's toolkit. The book's brevity, conciseness, and to-the-point approach make it a practical, accessible textbook that would be a great resource for any student."
—Kelly Belanger, Virginia Tech

"*Business and Professional Writing* provides a solid overview of key topics related to business communication. Clear, concise chapters teach students about plain language, format, and grammar, and highlight the most common forms of business communication such as letters and memos. What makes this book stand out from the competition is its focus on news releases, brochures, and promotion on the web. Detailed instructions on how to construct an effective brochure are especially helpful to students who often struggle with this format."
—Precious McKenzie, Rocky Mountain College

Straightforward, practical, and focused on realistic examples, *Business and Professional Writing: A Basic Guide* is an introduction to the fundamentals of professional writing. The book emphasizes clarity, conciseness, and plain language. Guidelines and templates for business correspondence, formal and informal reports, brochures and press releases, and oral presentations are included.

Exercises guide readers through the process of creating and revising each genre, and helpful tips, reminders, and suggested resources beyond the book are provided throughout. The second edition includes new sections on information security and ethics in business writing. New formal proposal examples have been added, and the text has been updated throughout.

Paul MacRae is an instructor in business and professional writing at the University of Victoria.

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Acknowledgments

No work appears out of a vacuum, and this book is no exception. Since 2005, I have regularly taught an undergraduate course on business and professional writing. I inherited that course from professors Claire McKenzie and Norma Depledge; I also inherited from them many of the key concepts in this book, including the eight Cs of good professional writing, the AIDA format for persuasive writing, and the format for "bad-news" letters, among others. I am sincerely grateful to them.

I'd like to acknowledge University Canada West, a private university now in Vancouver but originally based in Victoria. I taught several courses, both in-classroom and online, at UCW, and designed two of the courses: one on writing for the media and a second on writing for business and the professions. *Business and Professional Writing: A Basic Guide* is based on the online textbook I wrote for UCW's business-writing course, and I am grateful to UCW for agreeing to allow Broadview Press to publish this version of it.

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When I began to teach writing in 2005, after more than 30 years in journalism, I made a startling discovery: I didn't know what my students didn't know about writing, and I didn't know what I didn't know about teaching writing.

As a former journalist, I often assumed at first that my students knew more about writing than they actually did. But I also often assumed I knew more about what students needed than I actually did. I quickly learned that what was obvious to me wasn't obvious to my students, and what was obvious to my students wasn't obvious to me. And so, over the years, my course materials and teaching evolved to fill the gaps in both my students' knowledge and my own.

Business and Professional Writing: A Basic Guide is the result of this learning process. This book contains everything that, I believe, students *need* to know to become strong writers in the professional and business world. But I have also tried to include background material that, based on a decade's teaching and learning, I found most students *didn't* know.

Above all, I hope this book will be useful to you, both in your writing for university or college and after you leave university for the world beyond. I wish you the best of luck! But, in university and in the work world, "luck" is almost always based on hard preparatory work.

So let's get started....

—Paul MacRae

Preface

Welcome to *Business and Professional Writing: A Basic Guide*. It's called a "basic" guide because that's what it is. It's what you *need* to know, without a lot of bells and whistles, for your first few writing assignments in the real world.

The bells and whistles in a textbook are cool, but as a student you're juggling course work and probably a part-time job, while still trying to have a social life. Do you really have time to read more than what you absolutely need to know?

Also, in the real, working world, you aren't going to be handed a major assignment, like a news release or formal report, without some previous training and knowledge learned on the job. In addition, in your first real-world writing assignments, you'll almost certainly have co-writers who are more experienced to train and guide you.

That said, being familiar beforehand with how to structure and format a formal report, say, or how to write a strong news release, or how to send an angry customer a "bad news" letter that won't lose the customer's goodwill, means you won't look like a complete newbie, and might even impress the boss!

So, in this book, we'll keep it simple. We'll be looking at some basic formats for correspondence, promotional materials (brochures, news releases, and the like), informal reports, and formal reports. We'll look at how to design attractive documents. And we'll look at how to make your writing as powerful, persuasive, and grammatically correct as possible.

Incidentally, "professional" writing in this book refers to writing within the professions like law, medicine, architecture, business, government, and so on, not "professional" writing in the sense of publishing your writing for money. However, the writing taught in this book is practiced by professional writers.

Let's discuss grammar for a moment. The grammar section is Chapter 3. If you are already terrific at grammar, then by all means skip that chapter. But if your grammar, spelling, and general written communication skills are even a bit dodgy, then you should spend quite a bit of your precious study time working on making your grammar perfect. Why?

It's not hard to learn the various professional writing formats—letters, brochures, news releases, reports, and so on, that we cover in this book. But if the writing you put into the formats isn't good—which means grammatically correct, easy to read, and clear—then your efforts will not succeed as you'd hoped.

Also, you want to write well because, as we'll discuss in more detail later, your writing reflects *you*. If your writing has grammatical and spelling errors or is hard to read, the literate reader will assume you aren't careful and detail oriented. They might also think you aren't too bright. In other words, you may look uneducated or sloppy or both. And that means you may not get the job you applied for, or gain the customer you hoped to persuade, or win the voters you hoped would elect you or your candidate, or clinch the commission you were counting on. So always keep this in mind: the quality of your writing reflects the quality of *you* to the world.

But good writing isn't just a matter of how you appear to the world; the quality of your writing also influences the quality of your thinking. Clear writing shows clear thinking; muddled writing reflects a muddled mind. It's obvious which type of mind employers, clients, and customers prefer. Fairly or not, they will judge your mind based on the quality of your writing.

Therefore, this book aims above all to give you the tools you need to become a fine *writer*. Then you can apply that fine writing to any task at all, from writing Aunt Mary to applying for your dream job to writing a formal report that will knock the socks off your boss or clients.

Introduction to Business and Professional Writing

In this chapter you will learn

- The importance of good professional communication and
- What the text will cover.

THE IMPORTANCE OF GOOD COMMUNICATION

We live in what has been called a "post-literate" age. Before television, radio, movies, and the Internet, reading was the major source of information and entertainment for most educated (i.e., literate) people. As a result, even if these literate people never took a grammar course (although many of them did), in their extensive reading they "absorbed" the rules of good writing and followed those rules in what they wrote. They were excellent writers almost by default.

However, when television appeared in the 1950s, computers and video games in the 1980s, and the Internet in the 1990s, the emphasis shifted from *written* media to *visual* and *aural* media for both entertainment and information. In schools, the importance of accurate spelling and grammar has given way to encouraging "creativity." For many years, "progressive" educators have believed that forcing students to learn the persnickety rules of writing, spelling, and grammar would hamper their ability to express themselves freely and creatively.

Nothing could be further from the truth. Indeed, without a thorough knowledge and mastery of the rules underlying any discipline, creativity is impossible. And in no other discipline but writing in English are the underlying principles of that discipline so thoroughly ignored.

For example, physicians aren't allowed to do surgery "creatively"; they need to have a detailed knowledge of the various parts of the human body and how those parts all work together. Architects and engineers don't design buildings and bridges without learning the basic, persnickety principles of construction and materials. Nobody in these professions believes that mastering the basic rules of anatomy and the tensile strength of materials will hamper professionals' "creativity."

Quite the opposite: mastery of the basics is the essential ingredient for creativity. And yet, many school systems have decided that budding writers can produce creative work without a thorough grounding in the basic rules of English grammar, spelling, and syntax.

The result of this flawed educational philosophy, plus the move away from print toward visual and aural media, has been several generations of students—not all students, for sure, but far too many—who, when they write, often can't spell, who don't know the fine points of grammar, and who, contrary to the educators' expectations, can't clearly express themselves in print, much less create great written work.

From the point of view of professional and business communication, all this would be unfortunate but not disastrous if professional communication had also moved away from written to visual and aural media. In fact, quite the opposite has occurred. The Internet and visual media may have helped to kill good writing, but the Internet and visual media have also made clear and accurate written communication in business and professional life more important than ever.

As a company vice-president has noted, "One of the most amazing features of the information revolution is that the momentum has turned back to the written word." And the need for clear written communication is true not just for business but for virtually all the professions. As one analyst has written, "Engineers tell us that they spend 20 to 40 percent of their work time writing memos, letters, emails, reports, and proposals." So, even if our schools—not all but many—no longer emphasize correct and clear writing, this kind of writing is not just expected but demanded in the world of work communication.

OUR COMMUNICATION SAYS SOMETHING ABOUT US

Not only is good written and spoken communication as important as it ever was but, as noted in the Preface, how well you communicate reflects heavily on *you*, as an individual, company, or organization.

For example, a company website may be visually pleasing. But if the page is riddled with grammatical errors that company will lose credibility with potential customers and, therefore, sales as well. For example, look at the following web-page advertisement for a car-rental company (the company name has been changed to protect the grammar-challenged):

> Thank you for asking XXX Car Rentals to quote for your car rental requirements. We are pleased to say XXX Car Rentals has invested many man-hours, in gearing our whole rental operation to work for our customers. We pride ourselves on the high level of customer service we achieve, we are also sure you will find us good value for money.
>
> At XXX Car Rentals we are aware that car rental can be a stressful time for the best of us, that's why we have made our service very easy to use. In fact we call it hassle free. So allowing you to start enjoying your holiday the moment you drive off in your rental car, or even getting to that all important business meeting faster. If you need to cancel your trip for any reason, XXX Car Rental will refund your money back in full, with no penalties. We are sure once you have tried our service; you will be delighted and will never look back.
>
> Think of all the extras you are getting with XXX Car Rental, and when comparing quotes from other rental agencies, check that they include all that we offer, at no additional cost to you.

The advertisement is riddled with small grammar and wording errors. Later in this chapter, you will be asked, as an exercise, to find the errors and correct them to produce the advertisement as it should have been written.

For now, ask yourself this question: would you feel confident renting a car from this company? If XXX Car Rental can't get the small details of its web advertising right, will it get the details of car rental and auto mechanics right? Perhaps the company is superb at renting top-quality, perfectly running cars in a timely fashion. That doesn't matter if poor writing undermines the company's credibility with the firm's target audience—the people (usually literate) who can afford to rent a car for a holiday or business trip.

So our communication, in business, in the professions, in government, even just with work colleagues and friends, tells our audience a great deal about us. If we care about the details of our communication, probably we'll care about the details of our work as well. Therefore, to show ourselves in the best possible light, we need to write well and accurately.

And, in business and the professions, we *do* most definitely want to show ourselves in the best possible light. Why? If for no other reason, the financial success of the business or profession we work in—and therefore our livelihood—depends on the confidence clients and customers place in us.

Reputation is hugely important in business and the professions, in part because large sums of money are often involved, in part because much of business and professional communication is *persuasive*: we are trying to persuade someone or some group to perform an action we desire.

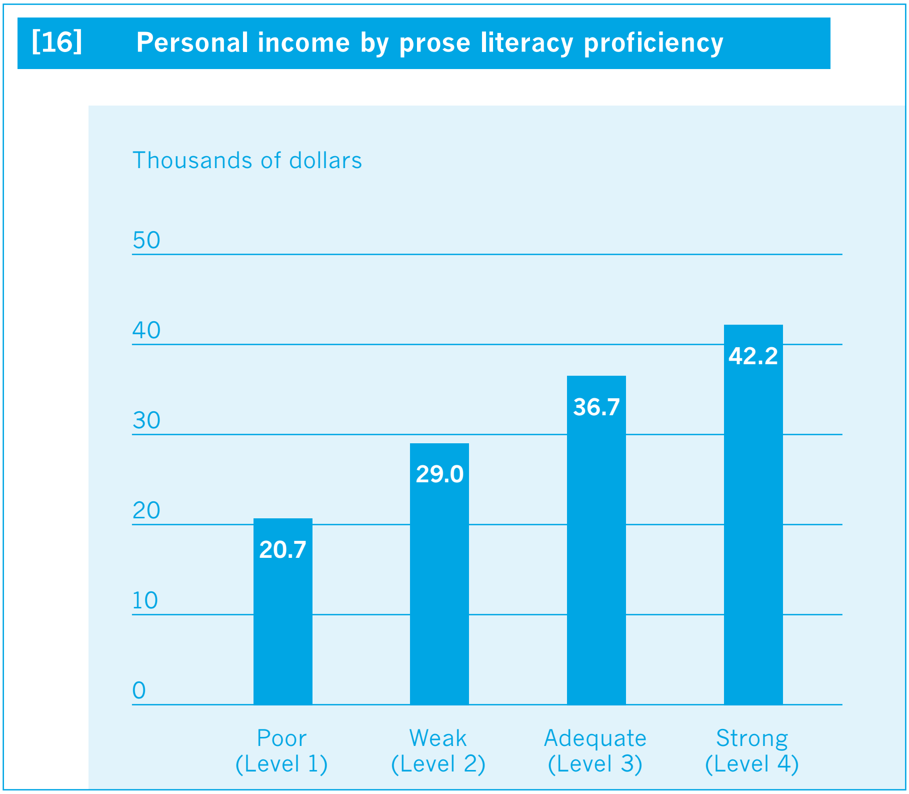

Figure I.1 Prose Literacy and Personal Income

Source: Adapted from TD Bank Financial Group, *Literacy Matters: A Call for Action* (Toronto: TD Financial Group, 2006), 12.

We want our audience to buy something from us, sign a contract with us, vote for us, agree to an action we desire. Because most people's first impulse is to resist this kind of persuasion, we need every tool at our disposal if we want to succeed. One of those tools is excellent communication.

There are added benefits to learning to write well—a higher income and increased chances of finding a job.

A report by the TD Bank on literacy notes that those with high literacy skills earn, on average, more than *double* the average income of those with poor literacy skills (see Figure I.1).[1]

The report also observes that those with strong literacy skills are more likely to find a job than those who don't write well (see Figure I.2).

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[1] TD Bank Financial Group, *Literacy Matters: A Call for Action* (Toronto: TD Financial Group, 2006), 12. This report can be found using the search terms "Brant Skills Centre," "Literacy matters," and "2012." Figures in the TD report were taken from Statistics Canada data.

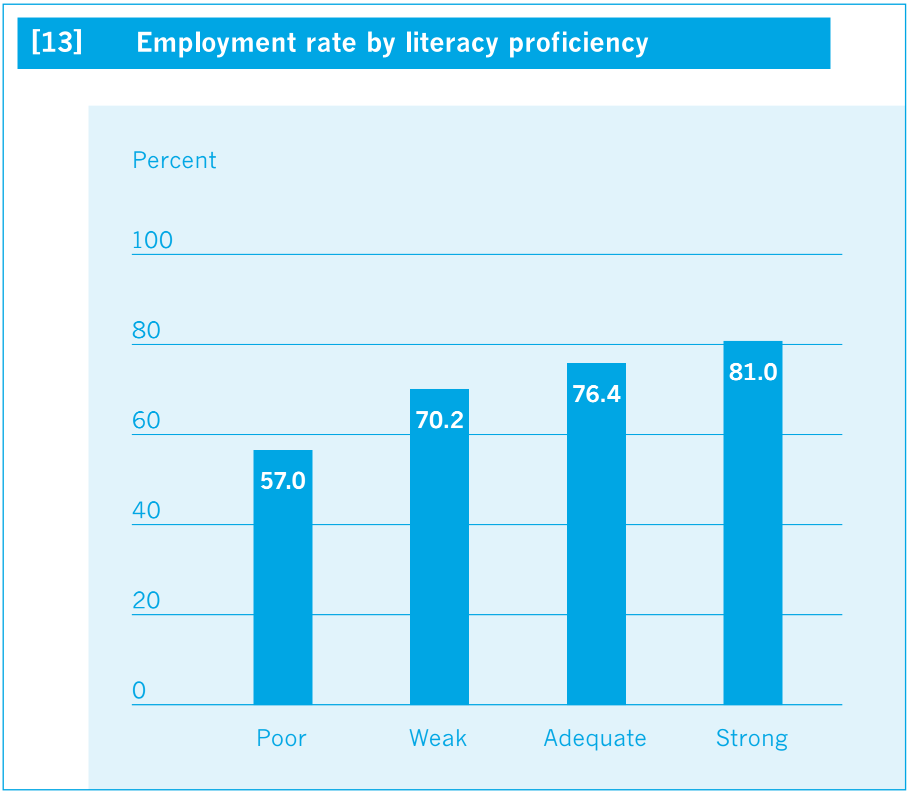

Figure I.2 Literacy and Employment Rate

Source: Adapted from TD Bank Financial Group, *Literacy Matters: A Call for Action* (Toronto: TD Financial Group, 2006), 11.

THERE ARE NO SHORTCUTS TO GOOD WRITING

In the past, top business executives and professionals didn't need to write well or correctly—they had staff to do that. Today, thanks to computer word processing, even executives and CEOs now need to do at least some of their own writing and proofreading.

These communications might be emails to a superior or to employees, letters to clients, or reports to higher management or to a client. Writing errors in any of these documents might make the recipient wonder about your or your company's basic competence.

Ah, you might say, but computers have spellcheck and grammar check. Unfortunately, although useful tools, spellcheck and grammar check won't catch errors such as the following: "We where gang to the stair for a battle of milch." All of these words are spelled correctly; they're just the wrong words, so spellcheck won't catch them. And grammar check, too, is at best a fallback tool—it's no substitute for actually knowing good grammar.

So, by all means, use spellcheck and grammar check to double-check your writing—these tools will definitely catch some errors. But they won't catch all of the errors by a long shot, and they may even create new errors by substituting the wrong word, such as "defiantly" instead of "definitely," or "costumer" instead of "customer," or "grate" instead of "greet." As a result, instead of your email reading "I will definitely be at the meeting to greet the customer," spellcheck might have produced "I will defiantly be at the meeting to grate the costumer."

Totally, 100 percent correct spelling and grammar are two human skills that computers still can't quite master. That means you—yes, you—need to know how to write with perfect grammar and spelling.

WHAT WE WILL LEARN

Quite simply, one of the most useful skills you can learn in your education, whatever your discipline, is good communication, written and spoken. Why? Regardless of what profession you ultimately choose, you will almost certainly be using these skills every single day, both on the job and off. The better you use these skills, the more successful you will be.

In a college or university setting, written and spoken material is graded, with "A" being very good, "B" pretty good, "C" marginal, "D" bad, and "F" fail. In the world of business and the professions, however, there are no Bs, Cs, and Ds. In the work world, anything less than an "A"—and preferably an "A+"—is an "F." It's something to think about. Communication is one of the constants of business and professional life, and it's in your interest to make all of your communication as close to perfect as possible.

In *Business and Professional Writing: A Basic Guide*, we'll be looking at the following topics in this order:

- **Plain language** (also called plain English): making your writing as clear, concise, concrete and specific, and coherent as possible.
- **The seven Cs** of good professional writing: writing prose that is clear, concise, concrete and specific, complete, courteous, coherent, and constructive.
- **The eighth C**, correct: using proper grammar, the foundation of good writing.
- **Copy-editing**: putting the finishing touches on your written work so it's perfect.
- **Document design**: making your written material as attractive to readers as possible.

- **Business and professional correspondence**: using various letter formats and conventions, with an emphasis on persuasive letters and "bad-news letters"—letters that tell clients or customers that you can't do what they are asking while keeping their good will. (Unless you choose a line of work that involves almost no writing at all you *will* be writing letters.)
- **Job-search letters and résumés**: writing effective cover letters and résumés. These are among the most important documents you will ever write, as they might (or, if poorly done, won't) land you the job of your dreams.
- **Promotional materials**: producing brochures and news releases (chances are very good you *will* be writing a news release or two in your working life, so this is worth knowing) and writing for social networking sites such as Facebook and Twitter.
- **Public speaking**: making an effective oral presentation—chances are very good that, at some point in your career (and maybe quite often), you will need to speak in public.
- **Group tasks**: giving group talks and taking minutes.
- **Informal reports**: structuring and writing these indispensable tools of business and professional life—luckily, this lesson is relatively easy to learn.
- **Formal reports**: producing these significant documents, just in case a report-writing task comes your way.

And, throughout the book, in the text boxes, you'll find various tips and tricks to improve your communication.

This book aims to give you the basic written and verbal skills you need to walk into any professional job and succeed, at least as far as written and spoken communication is concerned.

In the next chapter, we'll look at one particular and vitally important feature of good business and professional communication: plain English.

Exercise

Rewrite the car rental ad below, fixing the grammatical errors and making the ad more concise and direct. Can you identify the grammatical problems by name? One possible answer is in the Appendix, page 389, but don't peek until you've done the exercise.

> Thank you for asking XXX Car Rentals to quote for your car rental requirements. We are pleased to say XXX Car Rentals has invested many man-hours, in gearing our whole rental operation to work for our customers. We pride ourselves on the high level of customer service we achieve, we are also sure you will find us good value for money.
>
> At XXX Car Rentals we are aware that car rental can be a stressful time for the best of us, that's why we have made our service very easy to use. In fact we call it hassle free. So allowing you to start enjoying your holiday the moment you drive off in your rental car, or even getting to that all important business meeting faster. If you need to cancel your trip for any reason, XXX Car Rental will refund your money back in full, with no penalties. We are sure once you have tried our service; you will be delighted and will never look back.
>
> Think of all the extras you are getting with XXX Car Rental, and when comparing quotes from other rental agencies, check that they include all that we offer, at no additional cost to you.

Part I
The Basics of Strong Writing

In Part I you will learn about

- The difference between professional writing and academic writing,
- The seven Cs of good writing,
- The importance of correct grammar, and
- The importance of accurate copy-editing.

Chapter 1
Plain Language

In this chapter you will learn about

- The difference between academic and business writing and
- The importance of writing in plain language.

BUSINESS COMMUNICATION VERSUS ACADEMIC WRITING

The Preface briefly discussed the formats we will learn in this book—correspondence, report formats, and the like—but also the importance of good writing within each format. If the writing in a report, say, is inferior, that report will fail no matter how well it's formatted. So in Chapters 1 and 2 we'll discuss how to develop strong writing, and Chapter 3 will be all about grammar.

To be a good communicator in business and the professions, you may have to unlearn some of the techniques that might have made you a good academic writer. Here is what you are likely to find in good academic writing.

- The information is often highly complex.
- The language is often highly specialized.
- Sentences tend to be long and complex, in keeping with the complex subject matter.
- Paragraphs are long enough to explore each complex idea deeply.
- The style is formal—it avoids "I" and "you," although "we" is sometimes acceptable, and it doesn't use contractions (e.g., you will write "does not" instead of "doesn't").

- Academic citation and works-cited styles, like APA, MLA, or other academic formats, are highly detailed and strictly followed.
- Grammar rules are strictly followed (e.g., the “Oxford” comma is preferred, colons are used after full sentences and before lists, and so on. We’ll discuss these rules in Chapter 3.).

Most professional, non-academic writing, on the other hand, is very different.

- Ideas are expressed as simply and concisely as possible.
- Specialized words and jargon are avoided if possible (it’s not always possible, and specialized language may be necessary for some audiences).
- Sentences have one main idea, with perhaps one or at most two supporting ideas.
- Paragraphs are short—four to eight lines would be typical.
- The style is more informal than in academic writing; first (“I,” “me,” “we”), second (“you”), and third person (“he,” “her,” “they,” etc.) are all allowed, as are contractions (“don’t” rather than “do not” is acceptable).
- Grammar rules are (slightly!) relaxed (for example, sentence fragments are sometimes allowed for rhetorical effect, but in moderation, comma use is not rigid, and so on).

Academic and business writing styles are different because they have different audiences. The academic writer and reader is a specialist in a particular discipline, and specialized language is part of that discipline. The audience for a business or professional document is more often a generalist one, and this audience calls for a less specialized vocabulary and less complex set of concepts.

But, more importantly, the business or professional audience doesn’t want to spend a lot of time figuring out what the wording in a particular report or memo is trying to say—time is money! The meaning of professional writing should be immediately clear, unlike academic writing, which is sometimes obscure.

On the page, too, academic writing looks different from business and professional writing. An academic essay or published article may consist of page after page of print, in long, gray paragraphs, perhaps broken by the occasional picture, chart, or diagram. As a *visual* experience, an academic essay can be hard going; however, the hard going is, the academic writer hopes, rewarded by the essay’s stimulating intellectual content. That said, academic writing in some disciplines is moving toward a plainer style!

A business or professional document aims to be much more attractive, visually speaking. That means using white space, lists, pictures, charts and graphics, headings and subheadings, and many other techniques for easy readability that we will be discussing below in this chapter on plain language and in Chapter 5 on document design.

PLAIN LANGUAGE

Business, legal, government, and professional writing can, over time, sink into a morass of technical jargon and convoluted syntax that is almost unintelligible to the general public. In other words, this writing has become the communication of experts for other experts. This bureaucratese wouldn't be a problem if these documents didn't have to be read by non-experts, but that is often not the case.

For example, legal documents such as contracts, mortgages, and wills need to be both read and understood by people who aren't lawyers. Government communications often contain important information about laws and regulations on everything from legal business practices to the size and type of pipe fittings in a new house. If the business owners and tradespeople who have to follow building regulations, for example, can't understand the regulations—and they often can't—then there's a problem.

In short, hard-to-read texts cause more

- misunderstandings
- errors
- complaints
- inquiries
- staff time lost to problem solving.[1]

Therefore, many businesses and governments around the world are moving to put their communications into what is called plain language or plain English.

Features of Plain Language

What is plain English? It has a number of features:

- It uses *concrete and specific examples* rather than abstractions to be as clear as possible.

Worth Knowing
The British passport office found that 52 percent of passport applicants couldn't complete the form properly. When the form was rewritten in plain English, 97 percent of applicants were able to fill it out correctly, for a saving of 370,000 hours of administration time per year. Similarly, the UK's Royal Mail used mail-forwarding forms that had an 87 percent error rate among users and cost £10,000 a week for corrections. When the forms were rewritten the error rate fell and the Royal Mail saved £500,000 in only nine months.

Additional Resources
The following websites offer useful information on plain language:

1. US federal government writing guidelines: http://www. plainlanguage.gov/index.cfm

2. Center for Plain Language: https://centerforplainlanguage.org/learning-training/five-steps-plain-language/

3. George Orwell's essay "Politics and the English Language" on the need for plain language: https://biblio.wiki/wiki/Politics_and_the_English_Language

4. Daily Writing Tips: https://www.dailywritingtips.com

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[1] Plain Language Online Training Program, "Introducing Plain Language," *PlainTrain*, http://www.lisibilite.net/PlainTrain/IntroducingPlainLanguage.html. The *PlainTrain* website is an excellent resource on plain language and its application. The British passport office and Royal Mail examples come from an article at www.plainenglish.co.uk entitled "Chrissie speaks out for women in plain English."

- *It avoids unfamiliar words and technical jargon.* For example, it prefers "know" to the jargonistic "fully cognizant."
- It uses *active rather than passive verbs* for clarity, directness, and conciseness. Active verbs use fewer words: "The man ate the sandwich" (five words) versus "The sandwich was eaten by the man" (seven words).
- *It avoids wordy expressions* ("in order to do business" = "to do business"; "at the present time" = "now").
- *It avoids repetitiveness* ("please return my stapler back to me" = "please return my stapler").
- *It avoids nominalizations*—verbs used as nouns. So, instead of "He gave an introduction to the next speaker," you would write "He introduced the next speaker." In the first example sentence, "introduction" is a nominalization. Chapter 2 has more on nominalizations.

Plain language also aims to make text as easy to read as possible by

- using *white space* to make documents more readable;
- making *document-design elements easy to read*;
- using *headings and well-labeled graphics*, if appropriate; and
- using *easy-to-read lists, tables, and indexes* whenever possible.

In the next section we'll look at examples of how plain language can make communication clearer.

Examples of Plain Language

In recent years governments across North America have been rewriting cumbersomely worded and sometimes incomprehensible legislation into language the average person can understand. The result? The government saves time and money because civil servants don't have to field so many calls and letters asking what the laws and regulations mean.

Here's how one government has described this effort:

> Why is it important to use plain language? . . . It is more efficient, more effective, and leads to better public relations. Less time is needed to find and understand the information, less time is needed to deal with people who did not understand the information, and fewer errors are made.