

## Lecture 5: Communication through Writing: Business Letters, Memos & Notices

We have already discussed the major principles of business communication in general and of business writing style in particular. We have also considered the crucial stages in planning written communication. Now we are going to consider how these basic principles and strategies apply in writing different kinds of business letters, memos, and notices.

1. **The Advantages of the Business Letter**
2. **The Business Letter Today**
3. **Letter Format**
4. **Letter Form**
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6. **Different Types of Letter**
  - *Job Application Letter*
  - *Collection Letter*
  - *Complaint or Grievance*
  - *Favorable Adjustments of Claims*
  - *The Unfavorable Response, or the Psychology of Refusal*
7. **Memoranda and Notices**

**1. The Advantages of the Business Letter:** All organizations today communicate with dozens of different publics: customers, suppliers, vendors, government agencies, community groups, manufacturers, schools, and so on. In most cases, that communication takes the form of telephone calls or letters. Although the use of letters is expensive (some estimates peg the cost of a letter at over \$7.00 today), letters do have at least two important advantages over many other communication media:

- *A letter establishes a record of the interaction*
- *A letter is personal*

It is true that electronic mail and computers now permit us to communicate in many new and different ways. However, the consistent and effective use of the letter as a business instrument has been proved millions of times in the last 2000 years. We are accustomed to it, and its use in the foreseeable future is certainly assured.

### 1. The Business Letter Today

**To the reader, the business letter is a reflection of the company.**

The letter is a liaison, the representative, and the courier of the organization, its products, its services, and its people. To the buyer, vendor, prospective customer, or government representative, that letter *is* the company.

- The letter that is concise, clear, friendly, courteous, and complete gives the reader an image of a firm that is efficient and concerned.
- Conversely, the letter that is carelessly typed, incorrect in its details, and sloppy in its makeup may reflect an image of an organization that is one with which the reader should not do business.
- Consequently, written communication must be prepared with care.

### 3. Letter Format

#### A. *There is no one correct letter format.*

- Almost every organization has developed its own design and format for its letters. Some use a block form, others use an indented style; some include the typist's and author's initials; others do not.
- However, whichever format an organization uses should be used consistently.

#### B. *The typical business letter is made up of six parts:*

- The **heading** is made up of the *letterhead* and the *date*. The former is usually carefully designed to project an effective nonverbal image of the organization. The date should be spelled out. Using only numerals may be misleading, i.e. 06.09.00 or 04/05/00.
- The **inside address** should carry titles of individuals. Street and city designations should ordinarily not be abbreviated. Recently, it has become acceptable to use the standard abbreviations for states in the United States and some nations, such as the U.S., the U.K., the U.A.E., or P.N.G.
- The **salutation** in formal correspondence should be followed by a colon. Whenever possible, the person's name should be used rather than the impersonal "Dear Sir" or "Dear Madam."
- The **body** of the letter should be centered on the page. Paragraphs should be relatively short.
- The **complimentary close** is typically "Sincerely," "Sincerely yours," "Truly yours," or "Yours truly." Gaining in popularity are signatures that are somewhat more informal: "Warm regards," "Best wishes," and "Cordially yours."
- The **signature** is often made up of the organization's name on the first line, the signature, the typed name used in the signature, and the person's title.

**N.B.** An *attention line*, *subject line*, or *letter reference number* usually appears in the area of the *inside address* and *salutation*. *Enclosure* and *initial designations* appear below the *signature*.

#### 4. Letter Form: *There are three popular forms for business letters:*

- Full block form
- Modified block form

- Modified block form with indented paragraphs

## 5. Principles of Business Communication:

- **Conciseness.** Most business people are very busy. The wordy letter not only is put aside because of the time factor, but its very wordiness makes comprehension difficult. Therefore, whenever you write a business letter, cut every possible sentence and word. Say only what needs to be said. However, don't make your letter so concise that it sounds curt or abrupt. Retain the friendly tone.
- **Completeness.** Check your letter to be sure it contains all the necessary information. For the reader to have to request information that should have been included is costly to both parties (and not just in monetary terms). Use a system for organizing to ensure completeness (see sections on *Drawing up the Tentative Outline* and *Outlining Methods*).
- **Courtesy.** Be sure to include a "Please," "We appreciate," or "Thank you very much" in your letter. A few words of courtesy do not violate the principle of conciseness; rather, they add to the communication.
- **Correctness.** Everyone has a tendency to focus on errors. To most people, errors are a reflection of a firm's inefficiency. Edit carefully for errors in spelling, sentence structure, price quotations, and the like.
- **Clarity.** Here again, careful editing will eliminate possible ambiguities. If there is any possibility that a statement may be misconstrued, take it out or rewrite.
- **Logical organization.** Logical organization is one of the keys to all effective writing. In a message as brief as most letters are, logical organization is vital. The effective letter writer must organize the points to be covered and their logical order in an outline noted on the letter he or she is replying to. Others make up the outline on a piece of scratch paper. Any system of organization that works for you will do. Whatever the method used, the important factor is making up the outline, carefully reviewing it, and using it as a guide for writing the letter.
- **Attractiveness.** The letter, like a package for a product, should "look good." Paragraphs should be brief and well balanced. White spaces should be generous: wide margins and adequate space between sections should be the rule. The entire letter should be centered on the page, and topic headings should be used if they facilitate comprehension.
- **Natural tone.** The tone of the letter should be friendly, natural, and sincere. Hackneyed, archaic, and obsolete phrases, words, and expressions should be avoided. Such expressions help build an image of a stodgy,, old-fashioned organization that may be "behind the times." Here are some examples of expressions to avoid:
  1. *as in the above*
  2. *advise*
  3. *as per*
  4. *as indicated*
  5. *attached hereto*
  6. *attached please find*
  7. *beg to state*

8. *beg to remain*
9. *contents noted*
10. *enclosed please find*
11. *hand you herewith*
12. *hereby acknowledge*
13. *hoping to hear*
14. *permit me to say*
15. *pursuant to*
16. *wish to state*
17. *take this opportunity*

- **Tact.** Avoid words or phrases that might antagonize or embarrass the reader. The careful choice of words is essential if one is to get the decoder's cooperation. At times it is necessary to convey unpleasant ideas, but the words chosen by the writer to accomplish that objective should permit the reader to save face and accept the idea.

## 6. Different Types of Letter:

- **Job Application:** Your resume (or C.V.) should be accompanied by a cover letter. In many respects, the cover letter to the resume is a sales letter and you are the product.  
Objectives of the cover letter:
  - Context: refer to your source of information about the vacancy.
  - Gain the reader's attention by indicating your major qualifications and how the firm would benefit from your skills and abilities
  - Describe your background and qualifications and refer to more complete data in your resume
  - Provide proof of your competence by referring to relevant awards, employment, degrees, and the reference list provided in your resume
  - Ask that an interview be scheduled a.s.a.p.; make the request positive and indicate that you wish to elaborate on how the firm will benefit by hiring you.

**N.B.** Other factors to consider: submit typewritten letters that are neat and error-free. Be specific. Tailor your cover letters to the specific jobs you are applying for.
- **Collection Letter:** Occasional accounts become delinquent, and although the firm wants to collect its money, it also wants to maintain good relationships. Most companies follow the same steps to collect delinquent accounts: a collection series, beginning with a reminder message and then becoming progressively more insistent as the letters in the series continue.

*Reminder:* Often a short note with a brief statement on the invoice such as “Did you forget?” is sent soon after a delinquent account is recognized. If the customer has not responded to the reminder, a *personal letter* (or a series of letters) is in order. That letter must be courteous and must specify *the exact amount due, the due date, and the consequences of nonpayment*. In addition, always convey the message that settling the bill is to the customer’s advantage.

- ***Complaint or Grievance (Claim Letters):*** Because today’s production and marketing systems involve so many different processes and people, claim letters regarding lost or mishandled merchandise, bills, etc., have become a constant part of doing business.

*The objective of a claim letter is to receive a definite answer.* The writer hopes that the reply to the claim will be favorable. However, if that is not possible, the writer may be satisfied with a compromise or a rejection. What the writer does *not* want is a letter that reaches no decision – this usually results in further correspondence, which wastes time and money.

*A claim letter should include 5 features:*

- An opening statement that refers very specifically to the transaction
- A specific statement of the loss
- A specific statement of the adjustment desired
- A statement to motivate favorable action
- A close

- ***Favorable Adjustments to Claims:*** Because of the increasing complexity of doing business, companies expect claims. They are aware that a certain percentage of claims will be entered in the natural course of doing business. Thus policies are established for making adjustments under various conditions.

Most firms recognize that making an adjustment graciously and openly is an opportunity for building good will. As a matter of fact, an adjustment made grudgingly often will do more damage than a refusal made courteously and intelligently.

**Buyer at fault:** At times a buyer will submit a claim that he/she may think is justified but actually is not. Firms will often grant such claims purely for the purpose of maintaining good will. However, it is important that the buyer be told (tactfully of course) that he/she is at fault. Normally that is done before the grant is made. The organizational pattern for the kind of letter used in this situation is:

1. reference to the specific transaction
2. a tactful explanation of how the buyer is at fault
3. claim granted (graciously)
4. a sales appeal, if applicable

## 5. a friendly close

Seller at fault: Obviously, this is a difficult situation to handle. Buyers are usually not very sympathetic when they have filed a claim because of the *seller's* error. Nevertheless, the seller must grant the claim and attempt to retain the customer's good will and continued business. The organizational pattern for the letter used in this situation is:

1. an opening that refers to the situation and almost simultaneously makes the grant
2. an explanation of how the error occurred, if such an explanation serves a reasonable purpose
3. a statement designed to rebuild the customer's confidence in the seller
4. a sales appeal, if appropriate
5. a friendly close

- ***The Unfavorable Response, or the Psychology of Refusal:*** When we say no to what others think is a reasonable request, the potential for causing problems (as well as losing sales and good will) is great. However, the need is still there. Provided one organizes carefully, the task of saying no becomes quite easy. The organizational plan is a simple one based on the assumption that everyone is reasonable and intelligent. If there is a legitimate reason for the refusal, people expect to be told what it is. Thus refusal letters should be organized in this manner:

1. a statement recognizing the situation
2. an explanation of why the refusal is necessary
3. the refusal, implied or stated
4. a constructive suggestion
5. a sales appeal, if appropriate
6. a close

If the explanation is offered *before* the refusal, it is usually unnecessary to include comments such as "therefore we must refuse," "it is not possible," "we regret," and similar negative expressions. The explanation indicates the reason for refusal and the refusal itself can be implied. One need only add "therefore you can appreciate," "we know you will understand," and so on. At times, however, it may be wise to add after the explanation a statement such as "therefore we must refuse...."

## 7. Memoranda and Notices.

In order to avoid misunderstandings, office workers routinely use the memorandum, or **memo**. The memo acts as a record that can be filed and referred to later, if necessary. When identical information must be transmitted to several individuals, the memo is an essential tool. In addition, a memo can be used to confirm assignments, fix responsibility, and document decisions or minutes of meetings.

**Memo Format:** The memo provides the busy executive with information quickly and concisely. For easy use, memos have taken on an almost universal form:

1. Memos are usually written on full-page or half-page paper.
2. At the top, memos have a four-item heading:
  - To:
  - From:
  - Date:
  - Subject:
3. The *subject line* tells the reader exactly what the memo is about, eliminating the need for an introductory paragraph. This line should be clear and specific.
4. The information in the memo should be clear and concise. Tables and headings should be used whenever possible so the reader will note important information immediately.

**Memos are a record.** Memos should be planned as carefully as a lengthy research project. Although memos are usually brief, they make up a significant part of records in company files.

Another medium used to communicate with large numbers of people within an organization is the **notice**. The channel of communication is then the *notice board* on which it is posted, the *journal* or *newsletter* in which it is displayed, etc. Notices serve the purpose of bringing a matter to people's attention. They are used for

- Effective impact in the presentation of a message (visually and intellectually)
- Longer-term display of the message, as a continual reminder and record
- Instruction, education, reminding or persuasion.

The *format* of a notice is extremely flexible. Their *design* should be easily seen, quickly grasped and attractive. Notices should

- Stimulate immediate interest
- Be easy to read and comprehend
- Encourage the appropriate reaction on the part of the reader
- Stick in his/her mind

### **Summary:**

- People derive an image (impression) of an organization as a result of evaluating the quality (or lack thereof) of a business letter.
- The business letter is quite costly
- The business letter is usually divided into
  - The heading (includes the letterhead and date)
  - The inside address
  - The salutation
  - The body of the letter
  - The complementary close
  - The signature. Added to these are miscellaneous items such as the *subject* And *reference lines*, *attention line*, *author's and typist's initials*, and *enclosure* and *carbon copy notations*.

- The forms most usually used for business letters nowadays are
  - Full block form
  - Modified block form
  - Modified block form with indented paragraphs.
- The principles of business communication include
  1. Conciseness,
  2. Completeness,
  3. Courtesy,
  4. Correctness,
  5. Clarity,
  6. Logical organization,
  7. Attractiveness,
  8. Natural tone.