

# Brill!ant

CUSTOMER SERVICE



## Better Business Writing

Desktop Summary

Graham Phelps

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## Email etiquette

### Ten things to check before sending an email

1. Make sure your e-mail includes a courteous greeting and closing. This helps to make your communications appear friendly and polite
2. Always address your contact with the right level of formality and make sure you spell their name correctly!
3. Spell check to reflect that you are educated and can communicate clearly with the written word. E-mails with typos are not taken as seriously.
4. Read your e-mail out loud to make sure the tone is correct. Try to avoid relying on formatting for emphasis; instead choose the words that reflect your meaning. A few additions of the words “please” and “thank you” go a long way too!
5. Be sure to include all relevant details or information necessary to understand your request or point of view. Generalities can sometimes cause confusion and unnecessary extra emails.
6. Are you using proper sentence structure? First word capitalised with the correct punctuation? Do not use multiple instances of !!! or ??? to avoid being perceived as rude or condescending.
7. If your e-mail is emotionally charged, walk away from the computer and wait to reply until level heads can prevail. Review the Sender’s e-mail again so that you

are sure you are not reading anything into the e-mail that simply isn't there.

8. Refrain from using the Reply to All feature, for whatever reason. Do not give your opinion to those who may not be interested. In most cases replying to the sender alone is your best course of action.
9. Make one last check that the

visible address or addresses in the To: field are those you wish to send your reply to (and in the case of multiple addresses that they know each other — otherwise use the BCC:).

10. Remember, emails should be considered as public and not private. Keep your opinions and thoughts objective and do not share anything confidential.

## Key principles

### Be impressive

Careful consideration of the reader's needs and expectations is the basis of good practical writing. Essential qualities are:

- Clear organisation
- Clear expression
- Relevant content
- Appropriate style

The first two of these meet the reader's needs. The third and fourth satisfy the reader's expectations.

### Always establish the aim and purpose of your writing before you begin

Ask yourself the following questions:

1. What do I want to achieve by this letter or business document?
2. What do I want the reader to do

or know after he/she has read it?

3. How should I best structure the writing?
4. Am I selling an idea, trying to persuade the reader, or instructing or informing the reader?

All of these points concern the reader.

The reader is more important than the writer. Always think of your reader before you begin to write.

## The Writing process

The biggest cause of problems is the failure to clarify thoughts before starting to write, together with failing to edit and proofread correctly.

## The right points in the right order

The next step is to ORDER the material

1. What **ACTION** do you, the writer, want?
2. What **REACTION** should the reader have?

It is important to think of the reader – what are his or her needs? The answer to these questions will influence the order in which you present your ideas.

Broadly, there are two types of written message:

**FACTUAL**, INSTRUCTIONAL or  
INFORMATIVE

**PERSUASIVE**, SELLING or  
INFLUENCING

Each of these requires a specific structure, and you must decide which is relevant to your aim.

## Using a plain English approach

The main advantages of plain English are:

- It is faster to write
- It is faster to read
- You get your message across more often, more easily and in a friendlier way.

## Good writing tips

- Organise your thoughts, structure each section, page, and paragraph correctly.
- Simplify complex subjects and keep topics short and to the point.
- Highlight the main point with heading and placing at the beginning.
- Break-up the page visually and do not “Talk past the point.”

- Make sure your document, email, report or letter is error free and accurate.

**George Orwell's five rules for using language to express thoughts:**

1. Never use a long word where a short one will do.
2. If it is possible to cut out a word, always cut it out.
3. Never use the passive where you can use the active.
4. Never use a foreign phrase, a scientific word or a jargon word if you can think of an everyday English equivalent.
5. Break any of these rules sooner than say anything outright barbarous.

**Seven tips for better writing**

1. Keep It Short and Simple – KISS
2. Try to express, not impress
3. Get in and get out
4. Keep it short - Short words, short sentences, short paragraphs work. Trust me.
5. Think: are you on the offence or defence?
6. Deliver a clear message
7. Style and tone



## Proofreading and editing

Proofreading is defined as creating error-free copy. Editing goes beyond proofreading.

Editing requires:

- More analysis
- More clarity, conciseness, coherence, and effectiveness
- Rewriting
- Changing sentences and the meaning of sentences

## Rules of effective editing

### WORDS

- Correctness, use of

### SENTENCES

- How you structure them

### ACTIVE/PASSIVE VOICE

- Answering the question 'by whom'

### PARAGRAPHS

- Keeping to one theme
- No more than six sentences

- Sign-posting

### PUNCTUATION

- Do you use it to provide pauses, emphasis and variation?

## Proofreading

Tips for effective proofreading

- Make sure you have a good knowledge of punctuation and grammar.
- Avoid distractions.
- It can help if you read the piece aloud.
- Give yourself frequent breaks.
- Be methodical.
- You need to concentrate on reading one word at a time. Do not rush.
- Do not rely on proofreading on screen.
- If you can, get someone else to do a final proofread of important documents.

## Language – key points

- Be reader-friendly, rather than pompous and unnatural.
- Write, as you would speak face-to-face.
- Use short words wherever possible.
- Use words whose meanings are precise and not open to doubt.
- Beware of jargon/technical/professional words.
- Try to keep long words below 10% of the total.

### Sentence length

Sentences should ideally be about 10-15 words long. More than this and ideas can become clouded. You can keep sentences short by:

- Keeping to one unit of thought per sentence.
- Using active verbs.
- Avoiding unnecessary words or phrases that add nothing to the meaning.

- Replacing conjunctions (and, but) and commas with two sentences.

### Sentence structure

- Active voice: Writing which uses the active voice is clear and direct. The active voice forces us to say exactly what we mean. We have to clarify **who took** or **should take** the action. The active leaves the reader with complete understanding and avoids ambiguity and vagueness.
- Passive voice: Writing which uses the passive avoids being specific, leaves room for manoeuvre and is slower to read and understand.

### The Clarity Index

Long words and long sentences make things more difficult to read. It is possible to measure this by the 'Clarity Index'. First, work out the average sentence length and second, find the percentage of long words. Add them together. Keep the clarity index under thirty.

## **Circumlocutions**

Circumlocutions are roundabout expressions often used to inflate the writer's importance, to conceal the facts, to be in fashion or a bad habit. Avoid the

- unnecessary use of passives,
- unnecessary use of negatives,
- preference for abstract words,
- over use of stock formulas and verbal traps.

## **Paragraphs**

Clear paragraphing presents the contents of your message in progressive and readily comprehensible stages.

## Quick checklist

- Stop and think before you start writing. Make a note of the points you want to make in a logical order.
- Prefer short words. Long words will not impress your readers or help your writing style.
- Use every day English whenever possible. Avoid jargon and legalistic words, and always explain any technical terms you have to use.
- Keep your sentence length down to an average of 15 to 20 words. Try to stick to one main idea in a sentence.
- Use active verbs as much as possible. Say 'we will do it' rather than 'it will be done by us'.
- Be concise.
- Imagine you are talking to your reader. Write sincerely, personally, in a style that is suitable and with the right tone of voice.
- Always check that your writing is clear, helpful, human and polite.

## Email best practice

- Send less informal emails – do not email in place of conversation all the time
- Send emails to the right people at the right time
- Use email to send longer documents via PDF
- Error free and no mistakes – double-check dates, names, details, etc.
- Email writing style – be friendly and formal – write as you talk
- Beware of legal issues and security issues – nothing is secure
- Do not forward whole message trail
- One topic per email
- Less CC and BCC
- Keep emails to around 25 lines maximum otherwise put into a document
- Standard fonts, no colours
- No text speak, slang or emoticons

## Email – advanced points

1. Do you state what your email or letter is about in the first paragraph?
2. Do you use a clear subject and heading within the body of the text?
3. If you are answering a letter, do you refer to the date and reference number?
4. Read your letter aloud. Does it sound natural and genuine?
5. If appropriate, do you show a sense of humour and flair?
6. Is the email or letter specific? How could you improve the document?
7. Do you use the active voice instead of the passive?
8. Is the email letter the right length? Not too short, but not over long?
9. Do you use emphasis, for example, using bold or underlining important words?
10. Is the email or letter perfect, free from all typing, spelling and grammatical errors?
11. Do you exaggerate or try to pass off opinions as facts?
12. Is it clear and honest?
13. Does it contain any unnecessary information or content?
14. Are the content and points in the right sequence or order?
15. Does it end with a clear summary and action?
16. Does it have the correct close, with your full contact details?