

STYLES OF BUSINESS COMMUNICATION

When communicating with others in a business setting, it's important to be flexible and adjust your communication style to fit the situation and the audience. Communication with employees will generally require a different tone than communication with customers. Communication styles vary based on the mode of communication. Spoken and written word can be received differently, depending on their delivery styles. Communication styles must be focused on those receiving the message.

+ Writing Styles

Written communication takes many forms in business, including proposals, sales letters, emails and contracts. Writing a proposal requires a more formal style in tone and in format. Formal communications styles in writing involve adhering to proper writing styles according to established guides as well as formatting the document for readability. Written communication focused on sales or promotions are less formal and more persuasive in their writing style. Liberty can be taken with writing rules in informal written communication style, when it is appropriate for the receiver of the message.

+ Presentation Styles

The communication style for presentations will also depend on the situation and the audience, but, in general, simpler is better for grabbing and keeping the audience's attention. Business people who attend a presentation, are seated and listening to a speaker need to be engaged to maintain interest. When you present information on the slides for your presentation in a simple, straightforward style, you also keep the audience from being focused on reading those slides and encourage them to focus on you as you speak.

+ Speaking Styles

Your speaking style also needs to be appropriate for the situation and for your audience. If you are in a business meeting negotiating a contract, your speaking style will need to be formal, professional and persuasive. If you are networking at a business environment, your communication style should be informal and friendly, speaking at a level that engages others and instill a sense of trust. Your communication style can also be direct or subtle, depending on whether you need to emphasize a point or persuade your audience.

Body Language

Body language, the way you act physically when you speak or give a presentation, is a component of business communication styles. Speakers who wave their arms, put their hands in their pockets or otherwise use their body to convey a message, can say more with their body language than with their words. Body language can become a business communication style in and of itself. Be aware of how you stand, where you place your arms and what you do with your hands with speaking or giving a presentation. Even if you use the correct communication style otherwise, your body language might send a different message.

Style in Written Communication

One way to examine written communication is from a structural perspective. Words are a series of symbols that communicate meaning, strung together in specific patterns that are combined to communicate complex and compound meanings. Nouns, verbs, adjectives, adverbs, prepositions, and articles are the building blocks you will use when composing written documents. Misspellings of individual words or grammatical errors involving misplacement or incorrect word choices in a sentence, can create confusion, lose meaning, and have a negative impact on the reception of your document. Errors themselves are not inherently bad, but failure to recognize and fix them will reflect on you, your company, and limit your success. Self-correction is part of the writing process.

Another way to examine written communication is from a goal's perspective, where specific documents address stated (or unstated) goals and have rules, customs, and formats that are anticipated and expected. Violations of these rules, customs, or formats—whether intentional or unintentional—can also have a negative impact on the way your document is received.

Colloquial, casual, and formal writing are three common styles that carry their own particular sets of expectations. Which style you use will depend on your audience, and often whether your communication is going to be read only by those in your company (internal communications) or by those outside the organization, such as vendors, customers or clients (external communications). As a general rule, external communications tend to be more formal, just as corporate letterhead and business cards—designed for presentation to the “outside world”—are more formal than the e-mail and text messages that are used for everyday writing within the organization.

Style also depends on the purpose of the document and its audience. If your writing assignment is for Web page content, clear and concise use of the written word is essential. If your writing assignment is a feature interest article for an online magazine, you may have the luxury of additional space and word count combined with graphics, pictures, embedded video or audio clips, and links to related topics. If your writing assignment involves an introductory letter represented on a printed page delivered in an envelope to a potential customer, you won't have the interactivity to enhance your writing, placing an additional burden on your writing and how you represent it.

A. Colloquial

Colloquial language is an informal, conversational style of writing. It differs from standard business English in that it often makes use of colourful expressions, slang, and regional phrases. As a result, it can be difficult to understand for an English learner or a person from a different region of the country. Sometimes colloquialism takes the form of a word difference; for example, the difference between a “Coke,” a “tonic,” a “pop, and a “soda pop” primarily depends on where you live. It can also take the form of a saying, as Roy Wilder Jr. discusses in his book *You All Spoken Here: Southern Talk at Its Down-Home Best*. Wilde, J., Jr. (2003). *You all spoken here: Southern talk at its down-home best*. Athens: University of Georgia Press. Colloquial sayings like “He could mess up a rainstorm” or “He couldn’t hit the ground if he fell” communicate the person is inept in a colourful, but not universal way. In the Pacific Northwest someone might “mosey,” or walk slowly, over to the “café,” or bakery, to pick up a “maple bar”—a confection known as a “Long John doughnut” to people in other parts of the United States.

Colloquial language can be reflected in texting:

“ok fwiw i did my part n put it in where you asked but my ? is if the group does not participate do i still get credit for my part of what i did n also how much do we all have to do i mean i put in my opinion of the items in order do i also have to reply to the other team members or what? Thxs”

We may be able to grasp the meaning of the message, and understand some of the abbreviations and codes, but when it comes to business, this style of colloquial text writing is generally suitable only for one-on-one internal communications between co-workers who know each other well (and those who do not judge each other on spelling or grammar). For external communications, and even for group communications within the organization, it is not normally suitable, as some of the codes are not standard, and may even be unfamiliar to the larger audience.

Colloquial writing may be permissible, and even preferable, in some business contexts. For example, a marketing letter describing a folksy product such as a wood stove or an old-fashioned popcorn popper might use a colloquial style to create a feeling of relaxing at home with loved ones. Still, it is important to consider how colloquial language will appear to the audience. Will the meaning of your chosen words be clear to a reader who is from a different part of the country? Will a folksy tone sound like you are “talking down” to your audience, assuming that they are not intelligent or educated enough to appreciate standard English? A final point to remember is that colloquial style is not an excuse for using expressions that are sexist, racist, profane, or otherwise offensive.

B. Casual

Casual language involves everyday words and expressions in a familiar group context, such as conversations with family or close friends. The emphasis is on the communication interaction itself, and less about the hierarchy, power, control, or social rank of the individuals communicating. When you are at home, at times you probably dress in casual clothing that you wouldn't wear in public—pajamas or underwear, for example. Casual communication is the written equivalent of this kind of casual attire. Have you ever had a family member say something to you that a stranger or co-worker would never say? Or have you said something to a family member that you would never say in front of your boss? In both cases, casual language is being used. When you write for business, a casual style is usually out of place. Instead, a respectful, professional tone represents you well in your absence.

C. Formal

In business writing, the appropriate style will have a degree of formality. Formal language is communication that focuses on professional expression with attention to roles, protocol, and appearance. It is characterized by its vocabulary and syntax, or the grammatical arrangement of words in a sentence. That is, writers using a formal style tend to use a more sophisticated vocabulary—a greater variety of words, and more words with multiple syllables—not for the purpose of throwing big words around, but to enhance the formal mood of the document. They also tend to use more complex syntax, resulting in sentences that are longer and contain more subordinate clauses.

The appropriate style for a particular business document may be very formal, or less so. If your supervisor writes you an e-mail and you reply, the exchange may be informal in that it is fluid and relaxed, without much forethought or fanfare, but it will still reflect the formality of the business environment. Chances are you will be careful to use an informative subject line, a salutation (“Hi [supervisor’s name]” is typical in e-mails), a word of thanks for whatever information or suggestion she provided you, and an indication that you stand ready to help further if need be. You will probably also check your grammar and spelling before you click “send.”

A formal document such as a proposal or an annual report will involve a great deal of planning and preparation, and its style may not be fluid or relaxed. Instead, it may use distinct language to emphasize the prestige and professionalism of your company. Let's say you are going to write a marketing letter that will be printed on company letterhead and mailed to a hundred sales prospects. Naturally you want to represent your company in a positive light. In a letter of this nature you might write a sentence like “The Widget 300 is our premium offering in the line; we have designed it for ease of movement and efficiency of use, with your success foremost in our mind.” But in an e-mail or a tweet, you might use an informal sentence instead, reading “W300—good stapler.”

Writing for business often involves choosing the appropriate level of formality for the company and industry, the particular document and situation, and the audience.
