

## **IMPROVING STUDENTS' BUSINESS WRITING: A QUICK AND EASY METHOD**

Robert D. Bell

Assistant Professor, JD, CPA  
Department of Accounting and Finance  
College of Saint Benedict  
Saint John's University  
Collegeville, Minnesota

[rbell@csbsju.edu](mailto:rbell@csbsju.edu)  
(320) 363-2052

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# **IMPROVING STUDENTS' BUSINESS WRITING: A QUICK AND EASY METHOD**

## **ABSTRACT**

This paper provides a proven method for improving the quality of students' business writing with limited effort by the instructor and minimal use of classroom time. The paper includes two handouts developed over several years by the author which highlight common errors students make in their business writing. Students receive the handouts with every writing assignment and the instructor explains how to use the handouts. The paper also provides a checklist which students complete and submit to the instructor with their writing assignments. The checklist requires students to verify whether they reviewed and corrected their writing for the business writing structure and common errors described in the handouts.

## **INTRODUCTION**

Students typically enter college with little to no prior instruction as to what constitutes effective business writing. At the beginning of any business-related class, some students are further ahead than others with their knowledge and practice of implementing basic grammatical rules. The writing assignments turned in by these students initially receive higher grades than other students unless classroom time is spent before the first writing assignment to instruct on basic grammatical rules. Very few beginning students, however, have prior experience writing a business memorandum, letter, or email discussing financial matters which effectively utilize headers, bullet points, and brevity. Therefore, in most initial business writing assignments, the vast majority of students receive lower grades on their use of effective business writing structure unless the instructor spends classroom time before the first writing assignment to instruct on it.

When choosing not to dedicate any classroom time discussing writing expectations before the first writing assignment, the instructor ends up spending countless hours correcting common grammatical and structural business writing errors when grading the initial writing assignment. After that, in the absolute best case scenario, students understand the errors they committed and where they failed to utilize proper business writing structure. These students then retain this knowledge and implement it into subsequent writing assignments.

Of course this scenario rarely occurs. Instead, students either do not sufficiently understand the comments made on their assignment, or they do not remember it when they write their next writing assignment. The instructor then ends up writing the same comments over and over again, often to the same students.

## **RESEARCH QUESTION**

Is it possible to improve the quality of students' business writing with limited effort by the instructor and minimal use of classroom time?

## **FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION**

Yes, is it possible to improve the quality of students' business writing with limited effort by the instructor and minimal use of classroom time? The following is one proven way to do just that:

- Provide students with the two pages of “Writing Advice” attached to this paper with every writing assignment. (See Appendices A and B.)
- Explain the differences between guidelines and rules in writing, and make clear that failure to follow the Writing Advice will harm their grade.
- Require them to complete the attached checklist as part of their assignment. (See Appendix C.)

It makes no difference if the writing assignment is a research paper, a letter, a memo, an email or whatever. And it can be used in any type of class, with any level of student.

### **Writing Advice (Appendices A and B)**

The advice provided in Appendices A and B is an accumulation of knowledge gained by the author through teaching business-related classes, working in public accounting, and practicing law. The author has taught business writing skills in business-related classes for the past five years. In addition, prior to beginning teaching, the author worked in public accounting for four years—primarily doing research and writing memorandums—and a combined nine years practicing law with the U.S. Securities and Exchange Commission (SEC) in the Division of Corporation Finance and at two law firms in New York, primarily writing and reviewing memorandums and documents filed with the SEC.

Appendix A provides general business writing advice on the structure of business writing, as well as typical grammatical errors committed by students. By explaining to students from the outset the way to structure their writing assignment (e.g., with headers, short sentences and paragraphs), as well as highlighting the typical grammatical errors committed (e.g., periods outside of quotation marks and including “that” when unnecessary), the instructor greatly increases the quality of the business writing received by the student and significantly reduces the time spent correcting typical errors.

Appendix B specifically addresses how to write numbers in business writing. The advice provided in this document includes the types of numbers typically included in writing assignments in accounting and finance classes.

## **CLASSROOM IMPLEMENTATION — INSTRUCTIONS TO STUDENTS**

### **1. Guidelines Verses Rules**

The main explanation needed when handing out the Writing Advice is for students to understand that many of the “rules” in business writing (and in most writing) are simply guidelines. For example, there is no definitive rule for when a sentence or paragraph is too long or too short. But students should understand that a sentence lasting longer than two lines, or a

paragraph reaching half a page, is harder to read and will be viewed by the instructor with increased scrutiny.

Similarly, in business writing there is an increased use of headers, bullet points, and numbering. Knowing how to do this best takes practice. But again, the instructor tells them at the outset of the assignment that any writing turned in without any headers, bullet points, or numbering will be met with a critical eye.

## **2. Concrete Rules for the Assignment**

On the other hand, students should view certain pieces of the Writing Advice as black and white rules—at least for purposes of the writing assignment at hand. For example, a zero should always come before a decimal point if the number is less than one. And students should write the word *negative* in front of negative amounts they discuss rather than simply placing a dash in front of the number. (The instructor should not be left wondering if there is an ink spot from the printer on the paper.)

It is important for the instructor to emphasize that the Writing Advice is simply the criteria which will be used to grade this particular assignment. When they graduate college and enter the work world, they need to consider their current audience, as well as ask their employer which methodology to follow. For example, the Writing Advice requires students to spell out numbers zero through ten (save for a few exceptions), which is consistent with the *Gregg Reference Manual*. On the other hand, if the writing assignment were to meet the requirements of the *Associated Press Stylebook* (AP), students would spell out numbers zero through nine and begin with numerals at ten. Or if writing to meet the requirements of the *Chicago Manual of Style*, students would spelling out whole numbers one to ninety-nine.

By utilizing the Writing Advice, students learn to be attentive to the rules and structure of business writing. They also begin to develop an appreciation for the differences between guidelines and rules generally.

## **3. Checklist**

Appendix C provides a checklist which requires students to verify whether they reviewed and corrected their writing for the common errors and business writing structure described in the Writing Advice. The checklist forces students to at least attempt to implement the Writing Advice into each writing assignment, as well as aids students in their retention of the Writing Advice. The checklist also helps the instructor to avoid writing the same comments over and over again, often to the same students.

## **Grading**

The instructor may choose to include some of the Writing Advice into their grading rubric. Doing so is a helpful way of awarding points to students who are diligent in following the Writing Advice. In addition, certain concrete rules—such as zeros before decimals and punctuation when using quotation marks—also provides objective ways to grade a papers.

It is not necessary, however, for the instructor to include the Writing Advice into their grading regime to achieve results. Simply providing students with the Writing Advice, putting them on notice of what is expected for a writing assignment, and requiring them to return the completed checklist is enough to improve their writing. It is a quick and easy way to make students better business writers.

Electronic copies of the attachments (in MS Word) are available by clicking [insert website information here if applicable?].

### **Additional Advice**

The following is additional writing advice which the author was not able to include in General Business Writing Advice (Appendix A) due to the desire to keep the advice to one double-sided piece of paper. Instructors may wish to include this advice in other ways.

- **Continual, continuous.** *Continual* means frequently repeated. *Continuous* means without interruption.
- **Practical, practicable.** *Practical* means useful, not theoretical. *Practicable* means capable of being put into practice.
- **Manuel, manual.** One is the name of a Latin guy; the other is a book or something done with physical force.
- **Defined terms.** Capitalize the first letter of defined terms. Avoid defined terms when possible.
- **Ratio names.** Ratio names do not need to be capitalized. Only capitalize ratio names (if you choose) when you are showing manual calculations, never within the body of a paragraph.
- **Corporation.** This is a singular entity, not plural—the same as a person. Refer to a corporation or company as *it* or *its*, rather than as *they* or *their*.

## **CONCLUSIONS**

It is possible to improve the quality of students' business writing with limited effort by the instructor and minimal use of classroom time. The instructor need only provide students with the two Writing Advice handouts which highlight common errors students make in their business writing. Students receive the handouts with every writing assignment and the instructor explains how to use the handouts. The instructor also provides students with a checklist which they complete and submit to the instructor with their writing assignments. The checklist requires students to verify that they reviewed and corrected their writing for the common errors described in the handouts.

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## APPENDIX A

### GENERAL BUSINESS WRITING ADVICE

- **Start with your request or recommendation.** The purpose for your writing should abundantly clear from the start.
- **Use short sentences.** Of course if every sentence is too short then your writing will appear choppy. So use discretion. Rarely should a sentence exceed two or three lines.
- **Use short paragraphs.** How short? Sometimes one or two sentences is enough. Rarely should a paragraph exceed five to six sentences.
- **Use headers.** Guide the reader and break-up your writing by using headers. Headers are single words or short phrases that cover the material underneath it.
- **Use bullet points and numbers.** Use these to highlight critical information, steps, and lists.
- **Use ACTIVE VOICE!** Review each sentence and ask yourself whether it can be rephrased in the active voice. Avoid past tense and future tense when possible. Use “is” rather than “was.” Watch for words ending in “ed” and any form of “to be.”
- **Consider deleting “that.”** The word “that” can often be deleted without any loss in meaning and can make the sentence easier to read. That said, sometimes it is needed.
- **Use one space between sentences, not two.**
- **Use commas.** Write how you speak: if you pause when reading part of a sentence, it’s likely a comma goes there. Commas also help to break up longer sentences, which allows sentences to flow better, and allows you to look cool.
- **Don’t use contractions.** Contractions are not appropriate in formal business writing.
- **Get. Gotten. Got.** These words lack professionalism: avoid using them if possible.
- **Avoid colloquialisms.** Write professionally, without common slang or figures of speech.
- **Do not editorialize.** Do not write about what you are doing—just do it. For example, do not write, “Next I turned to calculated revenue.” Instead say, “Revenues are ....”

- **“Punctuation within quotes.”** Small punctuation (such as periods, commas and semicolons) go within the quotation marks. Large punctuation (such as question marks and exclamation points) go outside the quotation marks—unless they are part of the original quote, then they go within the quotation marks.
- **Semicolons.** Some business writers say semicolons are for novels; business writing is different. Use semicolons to the extent helpful to emphasize a point. But it is likely better to write two short sentences in business writing.
- **E.g. and i.e.** E.g. is Latin for “for example.” I.e. is Latin for “that is.” Always include a comma after these abbreviations—i.e., the same as you would if you were writing out the actual words.
- **However.** Some business writers say you should never begin a sentence with *however*. This, however, is not true. But you will notice that too many sentences begin with *however*, and that a sentence often flows better (and emphasizes your point better) when *however* is included within the sentence. Alternatives to *however* include: On the other hand; That being said; Conversely; Alternatively; To the contrary.
- **Therefore.** Similar to the advice above for *however*, too many sentences begin with *therefore*. Try to either include it within the sentence or exclude it.
- **Than, then.** *Than* is used when making a comparison. *Then* is used in a description of time.
- **Alot.** Not a word. People make this mistake a lot.
- **Irregardless.** Also not a word, irregardless of what you think. Use regardless or irrespective.
- **Between, among.** *Between* implies two persons or things. *Among* implies three or more.
- **Farther, further.** *Farther* refers to distance. *Further* means to a greater extent or degree.
- **Effect/Affect.** Scrutinize closely whether you are using these words correctly. Affect (a verb) means to influence. The War affected us. Effect (a verb) means to bring about. Policy effected change. Effect (a noun) means result. Talking had no effect on him.
- **Its, It’s, There, Their, They’re, Your, You’re.** Know the difference and always use these correctly!
- **To, too, two.** Always use these words correctly, too!

- **Which**. A comma is often required before the use of the word *which*. Use a comma before *which* when it is used to refer to a prior clause—e.g., She is a good writer, which I hope all my students become. Do not use a comma when *which* is defining something—e.g., The red tie which is on the bed. But ask yourself if it is more accurate to use *that* instead of *which*. See below.
- **That, which**. *That* is used more often than *which*. Use *that* with restrictive clauses. A restrictive clause is one that limits or restricts the subject in some way—e.g., The painting that was hanging in the foyer was stolen. Use *which* with nonrestrictive clauses. A nonrestrictive clause may tell us something interesting or incidental about a subject, but it does not define that subject—e.g., The painting, which was hanging in the foyer, was stolen.
- **Remove widows and orphans**. This is writers' lingo for saying print out your paper and make sure you do not have a header or one line of a sentence at the top or bottom of the page by itself.
- **Principal, principle**. *Principal* means a sum of money, or chief, main, premier, leading. *Principle* means a rule or fundamental truth.
- **Choose, chose**. You choose something in the present or future. You chose something in the past. Think of the two *O*'s of choose as eyeglasses—helping you to see forward.
- **Awhile, a while**. Use *awhile* when meaning “for a time.” A trick is to replace the word *awhile* with “for a while” and see if it makes sense. For example, “I’ll be in class for a while” is incorrect because you wouldn’t say “for” twice. The phrase *a while* is more often correct.

## APPENDIX B

### WRITING NUMBERS ADVICE

**Do not put two numbers next to each other.** Spell out the number that has the fewest letters.

*Incorrect:* The investor purchased 5 20-year bonds.

*Correct:* The investor purchased five 20-year bonds.

**Always put zeros in front of decimal places.**

*Incorrect:* Wilson Corp. had a debt-to-equity ratio of .75 for the current year.

*Correct:* Wilson Corp. had a debt-to-equity ratio of 0.75 for the current year.

**Always write the word *negative* in front of negative numbers.** Do not put a dash in front of negative numbers.

*Incorrect:* Last year, the company's cash flows from operations were -4.5 million.

*Correct:* Last year, the company's cash flows from operations were negative 4.5 million.

**Never start a sentence with a number.** Spell out the number or revise the sentence.

*Incorrect:* 18% of revenues were from international sales.

*Correct:* Eighteen percent of revenues were from international sales.

**Spell out numbers zero through ten (but see exceptions below). Numbers 11 and up should be written as numbers.**

*Incorrect:* The audit committee consisted of 2 members deemed to be financial experts.

*Correct:* The audit committee consisted of two members deemed to be financial experts.

***Exception #1. Use numbers when modifying time, unit of measure, or proportion.***

*Incorrect:* In the last five years, the IRS Code and Regulations have increased three inches.

*Correct:* In the last 5 years, the IRS Code and Regulations have increased 3 inches

***Exception #2. Be consistent in the same sentence.***

*Incorrect:* Of the 15 senior officers, only three officers have a degree in accounting or finance.

*Correct:* Of the 15 senior officers, only 3 officers have a degree in accounting or finance.

**Spell out numbers that are rounded or estimated.**

*Incorrect:* Total current liabilities for 2012 were approximately \$200,000,000.

*Correct:* Total current liabilities for 2012 were approximately \$200 million.

**Be consistent with the number of decimal places you use.**

***Incorrect:*** Delta's current ratio was 1.2 and 1.35 for quarters ended June 30, 2001 and 2002, respectively.

***Correct:*** Delta's current ratio was 1.20 and 1.35 for quarters ended June 30, 2001 and 2002, respectively.

**Use the number and percentage symbol when writing percentages.**

***Incorrect:*** The current year provision for income taxes is twenty percent of sales.

***Correct:*** The current year provision for income taxes is 20% of sales.

**Use a hyphen between a number and the word *year* when it modifies a noun.**

***Incorrect:*** The Treasury Department issued \$100 million in 20 year bonds.

***Correct:*** The Treasury Department issued \$100 million in 20-year bonds.

**Use numbers for decimals and fractions (see exception below).**

***Incorrect:*** EBITDA increased by only three hundredths of a percent this year and one-twelfth last year.

***Correct:*** EBITDA increased by only 0.03% this year and 1/12 last year.

***Exception:* Spell out simple fractions and use hyphens between them.**

***Incorrect:*** Gross margin for the current year is expected to be 2/3 lower than last year.

***Correct:*** Gross margin for the current year is expected to be two-thirds lower than last year.

**Hyphenate all compound numbers from twenty-one through ninety-nine.**

***Incorrect:*** Forty six employees were awarded bonuses for the current year.

***Correct:*** Forty-six employees were awarded bonuses for the current year.

**Ranges using percentages should use two (not one) percentage symbols following each figure.**

***Incorrect:*** The company's PP&E ranges from 15-18% of sales.

***Correct:*** The company's PP&E ranges from 15%-18% of sales.

**Ranges using dollars should use two (not one) dollar symbol following each figure.**

***Incorrect:*** The company's PP&E ranges from \$350-425 million each year.

***Correct:*** The company's PP&E ranges from \$350-\$425 million each year.

**Use the dollar symbol rather than write the word *dollars*.**

***Incorrect:*** XYZ Company's net income for the year ended was 4 million dollars.

***Correct:*** XYZ Company's net income for the year ended was \$4 million.

**Place the currency symbol in front of the value.**

*Incorrect:* The equipment costs either 8\$ million, 6.6€ million, or 6.4£ million.

*Correct:* The equipment costs either \$8 million, €6.6 million, or £6.4 million.

**Write out the country name and currency name for lesser known currencies.**

*Incorrect:* The seller in Marrakech is asking 1.7 million dirhams.

*Correct:* The seller in Marrakech is asking 1.7 million Moroccan dirhams.

**Write the country abbreviation in front the dollar symbol if using several dollar-based countries.**

*Incorrect:* Local sales in Canada were \$12.7 million, whereas they were \$14.2 million in Singapore.

*Correct:* Local sales in Canada were CAD \$12.7 million, whereas they were SGD \$14.2 million in Singapore.

**Use ordinal numbers (e.g., 1<sup>st</sup>, 2<sup>nd</sup>, 3<sup>rd</sup>, etc.) in dates correctly.**

*Incorrect:* The company is planning to buy the building on September 30<sup>th</sup>, 2015.

*Correct:* The company is planning to buy the building on September 30, 2015.

*Incorrect:* The company is planning to buy the building on September 30<sup>th</sup>.

*Correct:* The company is planning to buy the building on September 30.

*Correct:* The company is planning to buy the building on the 30<sup>th</sup> of September.

**There are three basic ways to write time correctly.**

*Incorrect:* 8:00AM, or 8:00am, or eight in the am.

*Correct:* 8:00 A.M., or 8:00 a.m., or eight o'clock in the morning.

**Use *noon* and *midnight* rather than 12:00 P.M. and 12:00 A.M.**

*Incorrect:* The funds from the common stock sale are set to transfer at 12:00 P.M.

*Correct:* The funds from the common stock sale are set to transfer at 12:00 noon.

## APPENDIX C

### WRITING CHECKLIST

[CLASS NAME]  
[SEMESTER/TIME]

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Your name

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Name of writing assignment

Before handing in your assignment, please indicate whether you reviewed and revised your work to address the Writing Advice you were provided, including the following:

Start with the recommendation?	Yes <input type="checkbox"/>	No <input type="checkbox"/>	N/A <input type="checkbox"/>
Use active voice?	Yes <input type="checkbox"/>	No <input type="checkbox"/>	N/A <input type="checkbox"/>
Remove unnecessary uses of “that”?	Yes <input type="checkbox"/>	No <input type="checkbox"/>	N/A <input type="checkbox"/>
Use short paragraphs?	Yes <input type="checkbox"/>	No <input type="checkbox"/>	N/A <input type="checkbox"/>
Use short sentences?	Yes <input type="checkbox"/>	No <input type="checkbox"/>	N/A <input type="checkbox"/>
Include headers?	Yes <input type="checkbox"/>	No <input type="checkbox"/>	N/A <input type="checkbox"/>
Include bullets and/or numbers?	Yes <input type="checkbox"/>	No <input type="checkbox"/>	N/A <input type="checkbox"/>
Remove widows and orphans?	Yes <input type="checkbox"/>	No <input type="checkbox"/>	N/A <input type="checkbox"/>
Use one space between sentences?	Yes <input type="checkbox"/>	No <input type="checkbox"/>	N/A <input type="checkbox"/>
Use commas?	Yes <input type="checkbox"/>	No <input type="checkbox"/>	N/A <input type="checkbox"/>
Remove contractions?	Yes <input type="checkbox"/>	No <input type="checkbox"/>	N/A <input type="checkbox"/>

Remove get, gotten, and got?	Yes <input type="checkbox"/>	No <input type="checkbox"/>	N/A <input type="checkbox"/>
Remove colloquialisms?	Yes <input type="checkbox"/>	No <input type="checkbox"/>	N/A <input type="checkbox"/>
Remove editorializing?	Yes <input type="checkbox"/>	No <input type="checkbox"/>	N/A <input type="checkbox"/>
Use correct punctuation for all quotes?	Yes <input type="checkbox"/>	No <input type="checkbox"/>	N/A <input type="checkbox"/>
Use <i>however</i> and <i>therefore</i> correctly?	Yes <input type="checkbox"/>	No <input type="checkbox"/>	N/A <input type="checkbox"/>
Remove two numbers next to each other?	Yes <input type="checkbox"/>	No <input type="checkbox"/>	N/A <input type="checkbox"/>
Use a zero in front of decimal points?	Yes <input type="checkbox"/>	No <input type="checkbox"/>	N/A <input type="checkbox"/>
Use the word <i>negative</i> in front of negative numbers when discussing them?	Yes <input type="checkbox"/>	No <input type="checkbox"/>	N/A <input type="checkbox"/>
Remove sentences that start with a number?	Yes <input type="checkbox"/>	No <input type="checkbox"/>	N/A <input type="checkbox"/>
Spell out numbers zero through nine, unless an exception applies?	Yes <input type="checkbox"/>	No <input type="checkbox"/>	N/A <input type="checkbox"/>
Spell out numbers that are rounded or estimated?	Yes <input type="checkbox"/>	No <input type="checkbox"/>	N/A <input type="checkbox"/>
Use consistent decimal places?	Yes <input type="checkbox"/>	No <input type="checkbox"/>	N/A <input type="checkbox"/>
Use the number and percentage symbol when writing percentages?	Yes <input type="checkbox"/>	No <input type="checkbox"/>	N/A <input type="checkbox"/>
Use a hyphen between a number and the word year when it modifies a noun?	Yes <input type="checkbox"/>	No <input type="checkbox"/>	N/A <input type="checkbox"/>
Use numbers for decimals and fractions, unless exception applies?	Yes <input type="checkbox"/>	No <input type="checkbox"/>	N/A <input type="checkbox"/>
Correctly use dollar symbol and percentages with ranges?	Yes <input type="checkbox"/>	No <input type="checkbox"/>	N/A <input type="checkbox"/>
Use the dollar symbol rather than write the word <i>dollars</i> ?	Yes <input type="checkbox"/>	No <input type="checkbox"/>	N/A <input type="checkbox"/>
Place the currency symbol in front of the value?	Yes <input type="checkbox"/>	No <input type="checkbox"/>	N/A <input type="checkbox"/>

Use country name and currency name for lesser known currencies?	Yes <input type="checkbox"/>	No <input type="checkbox"/>	N/A <input type="checkbox"/>
Write the country abbreviation in front the dollar symbol if using several dollar-based countries?	Yes <input type="checkbox"/>	No <input type="checkbox"/>	N/A <input type="checkbox"/>
Use ordinal numbers (e.g., 1 <sup>st</sup> , 2 <sup>nd</sup> , 3 <sup>rd</sup> , etc.) in dates correctly?	Yes <input type="checkbox"/>	No <input type="checkbox"/>	N/A <input type="checkbox"/>
Correctly write time in hours and minutes?	Yes <input type="checkbox"/>	No <input type="checkbox"/>	N/A <input type="checkbox"/>