

Tone

The best way to write your letters is in your own natural style. Having said that, there may be occasions during which you want to modify your natural style to better fit the occasion and your audience. For instance, if you are a naturally upbeat, cheery person, you would want to use a more somber tone in a condolence note.

Let's look at four basic options for letter tone — forceful, passive, personal, and impersonal — including how and when to use each.

FORCEFUL TONE

Forceful tone is used when addressing subordinates or others who, basically, have to do what you tell them to do. You are not asking them; you are ordering them in no uncertain terms — which you can do, because you have the power.

This does not, however, give you license to be cavalier or crude. Indeed, the real skill is in getting people to follow your commands without harboring ill will toward you. To achieve a forceful tone in your writing:

1. Use the active voice.
2. Be direct.
3. Take a stand.
4. Avoid hedge phrases and weasel words — language that equivocates rather than speaks plainly and directly (e.g., “might,” “may,” “perhaps”).
5. Be clear.
6. Be positive.
7. Don't qualify or apologize.

[For examples of forceful tone, see the section titled Collection Series in Part VIII.]

PASSIVE TONE

Passive tone is used when addressing superiors and others who, basically, you have to listen to and please — bosses, customers, clients. To achieve a passive tone in your writing:

1. Suggest and imply.
2. Do not insist or command.
3. Use the passive voice when possible.
4. Do not pinpoint cause and effect (e.g., solve the problem, but do not look to lay blame on the reader or anyone else).
5. Use qualifiers (for example, “might be,” “may,” “approximately,” “roughly”).
6. Divert attention from the problem to the solution.
7. Focus on the solution to the problem, rather than assigning blame.

[For an example of passive tone, see the letter titled “We Need to Hear From You” in Part VI.]

PERSONAL TONE

Personal tone is used when you want to give support or establish or improve a relationship. It is most appropriately used with people you know, rather than strangers, or at least with people whose situations you know about and empathize with. To achieve a personal tone in your writing:

1. Be warm.
2. Use the active voice.
3. Use personal pronouns (“I,” “we,” “you,” and so forth).
4. Use the person’s name.
5. Use contractions (we’ll, it’s, they’re, can’t).
6. Write in a natural, conversational style.
7. Write in the first person (“I”) and in the second person (“you”).
8. Vary sentence length.
9. Let your personality shine through in your writing.

[There are many examples of personal tone in Part II, Personal Correspondence.]

IMPERSONAL TONE

Impersonal tone is used when you either want to keep a relationship on a strictly professional level, or when you want to distance yourself from the other person or the subject at hand. Impersonal tone is also used when the relationship is adversarial, or to stress the urgency and serious nature of the situation being written about. To achieve an impersonal tone in your writing:

1. Do not use the person’s name.
2. Avoid personal pronouns when possible.
3. Use the passive voice when possible.
4. Write in the third person (for example, “the company,” “the vendor,” “the purchasing department,” “the client”).
5. Write in a corporate or formal style.
6. Be remote and aloof.

[For examples of impersonal tone, see the letters titled “Requests for Compliance” and “Request for Vendor Tax ID or Social Security” in Part IX.]

Layouts and Supplies

The appendix gives illustrations of the various formats and layouts for letters, memos, e-mails, and other documents. You can’t go wrong following these models.

Do not overly concern yourself with questions of precise style. The reader does not really care whether the left margin is $\frac{1}{2}$ -inch or $\frac{3}{4}$ -inch, as long as the letter is easy to read.

Here are a few quick rules for clear, easy-to-read letter layouts:

- Single-space copy; double-space between paragraphs.
- Indenting the first line of each paragraph five spaces makes the letter easier to read.
- Use generous margins — at least a half-inch bottom, top, and right, and maybe a little more on the left.
- Margins should be flush left and ragged right. Flush left means the first letters of each line are vertically aligned, creating a straight edge on the left. Ragged right means the right-hand border of the text is not neatly lined up.
- Do not try to cram too much text onto the page for the sake of keeping your letter to one page. It's better to either cut copy, or spread the copy out onto a second page.
- Sign in blue ink. It makes the live signature stand out more.
- Enclose your business card, unless you are sending a personal letter.

TYPE STYLES, FONTS, AND SIZES

Use a plain, simple type for body copy. Times Roman is clean and a favorite with many PC users. You can use New Courier or Prestige Elite, which gives the look and feel of a letter typed on an IBM Selectric typewriter. Many older readers associate this look with a personal letter versus computer fonts, which look more impersonal.

Type size depends on the style selected. For New Courier, you can use 9- or 10-point type. For Times Roman, 11- or 12-point type is better.

Boldface and italic fonts can be used for emphasis. Bullets or numbers help set lists apart and make them easy to scan.

For longer documents, you might consider breaking up the text into short sections, each with a boldface subhead.

LETTERHEAD

You can type your name, return address, and other contact information at the top of every letter on a plain sheet, or have letterhead made up by a printer. Many people have personal letterhead; virtually every business also uses preprinted letterhead, adding the company name and logo at the top.

Before you have your business letterhead printed, look at the layout prepared by your graphic artist or printer. Some layouts that take a creative approach may be graphically

bold, but take up much space that could otherwise be used for letter text. Therefore you can fit far less copy on a single page than you would like, and are forced to use a second sheet (second page) to continue.

Much better is to have a letterhead design that allows maximum space for letter text. That way even if you have a lot to say, you can fit it comfortably on one page.

“Second sheets” are pages of letterhead designed specifically to be used as the second and third pages in a multipage letter. Some people use the same letterhead for every page, but this is unnecessary, unwieldy, and unusual. Most people use second sheets that have no printing on them, but are of the same paper stock of their letterhead. That way, the first and subsequent pages are all on the same stock.

Speaking of paper stock, your best bet is white, off-white, or cream colored. These light colors allow major contrast between the paper and the black type. Letterhead that is gray, medium brown, red, or another dark color makes it difficult for your reader to photocopy or fax your letter, which many people want to do.

Enclosures

We want to keep most of our letters to one or at most two pages, but sometimes we have a lot more than one or two pages worth of information to convey.

To solve this problem, you may want to limit your letter to an overview or summary, and put the details in one or more enclosures. These may be documents you write. Or you might enclose documents already produced by other sources.

Beware of overwhelming your correspondent with paper and information. People are busy today. Do they really need all that stuff you are cramming into the envelope? Or would it be better to condense it in a one or two-page summary, and offer to send more details if they are interested?

When you are discussing a topic in an e-mail, do not send the “enclosures” or supplementary materials as attached files unless you know the recipient and he knows you. People are rightfully wary of opening up attached files from strangers, for fear of getting a computer virus.

An alternative to attaching files to an e-mail message is to post the supplementary information on a Web site, and then to embed links to the Web site’s general URL or, even better, to the specific Web page you want the person to read in the person’s e-mail message. They can just click on the link to instantly access the supplementary material.

OUTER ENVELOPES

The most common choice for business correspondence is the #10 [*see Glossary*] envelope. A standard 8½- by 11-inch piece of letterhead, folded twice horizontally into three sections, fits perfectly in a #10 envelope.

If you have bulky enclosures, you may want to use a “jumbo,” or 9- by 12-inch envelope. This allows you to enclose literature and other materials without having to fold them.

For personal mail, you can use either a #10 envelope or a smaller, Monarch [*see Glossary*] envelope. The Monarch envelope has a slightly more personal touch, since businesses rarely use it. Monarch envelopes and stationery work well for short letters; for longer correspondence, standard #10 letterhead (fitting #10 envelopes) give more room for text.

On the back flap or in the upper left corner of the front of your envelope (known as the “corner card”), have your name and address for your personal letterhead. For your business letterhead, have your company name and address.

When you are sending correspondence or enclosed material that the customer requested, use a red rubber stamp with the words “Here is the information you requested” on the front of the envelope. This is an indication that the recipient asked you to send the letter and it is not unsolicited.

STAMPS, METERS, PREPRINTED INDICIAS

There are three ways to handle the postage for your letter: stamps, meters, and preprinted indicias (preprinted postal permits).

The main thing when sending business letters is you want your letters to look like individual correspondence, not direct mail. The reason? Personal mail gets read, while promotional mail often gets tossed in the trash.

The postage stamp is the best choice for doing this. If you want to get extra attention, try using an unusual stamp, such as a commemorative. Another technique that gains attention is to use several stamps of smaller denominations instead of a single stamp for the correct amount.

Second-best to stamps is a postage meter. Enough businesses use postage meters for individual correspondence that it has an acceptable look and does not smack of advertising.

Least desirable is a preprinted indicia. Since so many mass mailers use indicias in their direct mail campaigns, your reader might think your personal letter is direct mail (if you have used an indicia) and mistakenly toss it.

Even if your letter is direct mail and you are sending it bulk rate, a little-known fact is that you can use a third-class stamp instead of an indicia. This gives your direct mail a more personalized look, and hence a better chance of being opened and read.

Overcoming Writer's Block

Writer's Block isn't just for professional writers; it can afflict executives and managers too. Writer's Block is the inability to start putting words on paper, and it stems from anxiety and fear of writing.

Here are a few tips to help you overcome Writer's Block:

- Break up the writing into short sections, and write one section at a time. Tackling many little writing assignments seems less formidable a task than taking on a large project all at once.
- Write the easy sections first. If you can't get a handle on the main argument of your report or paper, write the close. This will get you started and help build momentum.
- Write abstracts, introductions, and summaries last. Although they come first in the final document, it doesn't make sense to try to sum up a paper that hasn't been written yet.
- Avoid grammar-book rules that inhibit writers. One such rule says every paragraph must begin with a topic sentence (a first sentence that states the central idea of the paragraph). By insisting on topic sentences, teachers and editors throw up a block that prevents you from putting your thoughts on paper. Professional writers don't worry about topic sentences (or sentence diagrams or grammatical jargon or ending a sentence with a preposition). Neither should you.
- Sleep on it. Put your draft in a drawer and come back to it the next morning. Refreshed, you'll be able to edit and rewrite more effectively and with greater ease.

Letter-Writing Advice from Lewis Carroll

Lewis Carroll is best known as the author of *Alice in Wonderland*, but he was also an avid letter writer, especially personal letters to friends and colleagues.

In 1890, he wrote a small pamphlet with his advice on how to write better letters. An abbreviated and slightly edited version appears below.

Some of his advice, dated and charming, will give the twenty-first century reader a chuckle. But much of the author's letter-writing advice is still relevant and useful more than a century later.

How to Begin a Letter

If the letter is to be in answer to another, begin by getting out that other letter and reading it through, in order to refresh your memory, as to what it is you have to answer, and as to your correspondence's present address.

Next, address and stamp the envelope. "What! Before writing the letter?"

Most certainly. And I'll tell you what will happen if you don't. You will go on writing till the last moment, and, just in the middle of the last sentence, you will become aware that time's up!

Then comes the hurried wind-up-the wildly-scrawled signature . . . the hastily-fastened envelope, which comes open in the post . . . the address, a mere hieroglyphic . . . the horrible discovery that you've forgotten to replenish your stamp supply . . . the frantic appeal, to every one in the house, to lend you a stamp . . . the headlong rush to the post office, arriving, hot and gasping, just after the box has closed . . . and finally, a week afterwards, the return of the letter, from the Dead-Letter Office, marked "address illegible."

Next, put your own address, in full, as the top of the note-sheet. It is an aggravating thing — I speak from bitter experience — when a friend, staying at some new address, heads his letter "Dover," simply, assuming that you can get the rest of the address from his previous letter, which perhaps you have destroyed.

Next, put the date in full. It is another aggravating thing, when you wish, years afterwards, to arrange a series of letters, to find them dated "Feb. 17", "Aug. 2", without any year to guide you as to which comes first. And never, never put "Wednesday," simply, as the date. That way madness lies!

How to Go on With a Letter

Here is a golden rule to begin with. Write legibly. The average temper of the human race would be perceptibly sweetened, if everybody obeyed this rule!

A great deal of the bad writing in the world comes simply from writing too quickly. Of course you reply, "I do it to save time." A very good object, no doubt: but what right have you to do it at your friend's expense? Isn't his time as valuable as yours?

Years ago, I used to receive letters from a friend — and very interesting letters too — written in one of the most atrocious hands ever invented.

It generally took me about a week to read one of his letters! I used to carry it about in my pocket, and take it out at leisure times, to puzzle over the riddles which composed it — holding it in different positions, and at different distances, till at last the meaning of some hopeless scrawl would flash upon me, when I at once wrote down the English under it; and, when several had been thus guessed, the context would help one with the others, till at last the whole series of hieroglyphics was deciphered. If all one's friends wrote like that, life would be entirely spent in reading their letters!

This rule applies, specially, to names of people or places — and most specially, to names of people or places — and most especially to foreign names. I got a letter once, containing some Russian names, written in the same hasty scramble in which people often write “yours sincerely.” The context, of course, didn’t help in the least: and one spelling was just as likely as another, so far as I knew: it was necessary to write and tell my friend that I couldn’t read any of them!

My second rule is, don’t fill more than a page and a half with apologies for not having written sooner!

The best subject, to begin with, is your friend’s last letter. Write with the letter open before you. Answer his questions, and make any remarks his letter suggests. Then go on to what you want to say yourself.

This arrangement is more courteous, and pleasanter for the reader, than to fill the letter with your own invaluable remarks, and then hastily answer your friend’s questions in a postscript. Your friend is much more likely to enjoy your wit, after his own anxiety for information has been satisfied.

In referring to anything your friend has said in his letter, it is best to quote the exact words, and not to give a summary of them in your words, A’s impression, of what B has said, expressed in A’s words, will never convey to B the meaning of his own words.

This is especially necessary when some point has arisen as to which the two correspondents do not quite agree. There ought to be no opening for such writing as “You are quite mistaken in thinking I said so-and-so. It was not in the least my meaning,” which tends to make a correspondence last for a lifetime.

A few more rules may fitly be given here, for correspondence that has unfortunately become controversial:

- Don’t repeat yourself. When once you have said your say, fully and clearly, on a certain point, and have failed to convince your friend, drop that subject: to repeat your arguments, all over again, will simply lead to his doing the same; and so you will go on, like a circulating [repeating] decimal. Did you ever know a circulating decimal to come to an end?
- When you have written a letter that you feel may possibly irritate your friend, however necessary you may have felt it to so express yourself, put it aside till the next day.
- Then read it over again, and fancy it addressed to yourself. This will often lead to your writing it all over again, taking out a lot of the vinegar and pepper, and putting in honey instead, and thus making a much more palatable dish of it!
- If, when you have done your best to write inoffensively, you still feel that it will probably lead to further controversy, keep a copy of it. There is very little use, months afterwards, in pleading “I am almost sure I never expressed myself as you say: to the best of my recollection I said so-and-so”. Far better to be able to write “I did not express myself so; these are the words I used.”

- If your friend makes a severe remark, either leave it unnoticed, or make your reply distinctly less severe: and if he makes a friendly remark, tending towards 'making up,' let your reply be distinctly more friendly. If, in picking a quarrel, each party declined to go more than three-eighths of the way, and if, in making friends, each was ready to go five-eighths of the way — why, there would be more reconciliations than quarrels!
- Don't try to have the last word! How many a controversy would be nipped in the bud, if each was anxious to let the other have the last word! Never mind how telling a rejoinder you leave unuttered: never mind your friend's supposing that you are silent from lack of anything to say: let the thing drop, as soon as it is possible without discourtesy: remember 'speech is silver, but silence is golden'!
- If it should ever occur to you to write, jestingly, in dispraise of your friend, be sure you exaggerate enough to make the jesting obvious: a word spoken in jest, but taken as earnest, may lead to very serious consequences. I have known it to lead to the breaking-off of a friendship.

Suppose, for instance, you wish to remind your friend of a sovereign you have lent him, which he has forgotten to repay — you might quite mean the words "I mention it, as you seem to have a conveniently bad memory for debts", in jest: yet there would be nothing to wonder at if he took offence at that way of putting it.

But, suppose you wrote "Long observation of your career, as a pickpocket and a burglar, has convinced me that my one lingering hope, for recovering that sovereign I lent you, is to say 'Pay up, or I'll summons yer'" he would indeed be a matter-of-fact friend if he took that as seriously meant!

- When you say, in your letter, "I enclose cheque for \$5", or "I enclose John's letter for you to see", leave off writing for a moment — go and get the document referred to — and put it into the envelope. Otherwise, you are pretty certain to find it lying about, after the post has gone!

How to End a Letter

If doubtful whether to end with 'yours faithfully', or 'yours truly', or 'yours most truly', etc. (there are at least a dozen varieties, before you reach 'yours affectionately'), refer to your correspondent's last letter, and make your winding-up at least as friendly as his: in fact, even if a shade more friendly, it will do no harm!

A postscript is a very useful invention: but it is not meant to contain the real gist of the letter: it serves rather to throw into the shade any little matter we do not wish to make a fuss about.

For example, your friend had promised to execute a commission for you in town, but forgot it, thereby putting you to great inconvenience: and he now writes to apologize for his negligence.

It would be cruel, and needlessly crushing to make it the main subject of your reply. How much more gracefully it comes is "P.S. Don't distress yourself any more about having omitted that little matter in town. I won't deny that it did put my plans out a little, at the time: but it's all right now. I often forget things, myself: and 'those, who live in glass-houses, mustn't throw stones', you know!"

Persuasion in Print

A recent TV commercial informed viewers that the U.S. Post Office handles 300 million pieces of mail every day. That's a lot of letters. And letters are an important part of communicating with your customers, coworkers, and colleagues.

But how many letters actually get their messages across and motivate the reader? Surprisingly few. In direct-mail marketing, for example, a 2 percent response rate is exceptionally high. So a manufacturer mailing 1,000 sales letters expects that fewer than 20 people will respond to the pitch. If high-powered letters written by ad-agency copywriters produce such a limited response, you can see why letters written by busy business executives (who are not professional writers) may not always accomplish their objectives.

Failure to get to the point, technical jargon, pompous language, misreading the reader — these are the poor stylistic habits that cause others to ignore the letters we send. Part of the problem is that many managers and support staff don't know how to write persuasively.

There is a solution, stated as a formula first discovered by advertising writers, and it's called **AIDA**. AIDA stands for Attention, Interest, Desire, and Action — a sequence of psychological reactions that happen in the mind of the reader who is being sold on your idea. Briefly, here's how it works.

1. First, the letter gets the reader's attention with a hard-hitting lead paragraph that goes straight to the point or offers an element of intrigue.
2. Then, the letter hooks the reader's interest: The hook is often a clear statement of the reader's problems, needs, or wants. For example, if you are writing to a customer who received damaged goods, acknowledge the problem and then offer a solution.
3. Next, create desire. Your letter is an offer of something: a service, a product, goodwill, an agreement, a contract, a compromise, a consultation. Tell the reader how she will benefit from your offering. That creates a desire to cooperate with you.
4. Finally, call for action. Ask for the order, the signature, the donation, the assignment.

What follows are actual examples of how each of these steps has been used in business letters.

ATTENTION

Getting the reader's attention is a tough job. If your letter is boring, pompous, or says nothing of interest, you'll lose the reader. Fast!

One attention-getting technique used by successful writers is to open with an intriguing question or statement — a “teaser” that grabs the readers’ attention and compels them to read on. Here’s an opening teaser from a letter written by a freelance public relations writer to the head of a large PR firm:

Is freelance a dirty word to you?

Even if you hate freelancers, you can’t help but be curious about what follows. And what follows is a convincing argument to hire the writer:

Is freelance a dirty word to you?

It really shouldn’t be, because in public relations, with its crisis-lull-crisis rhythm, really good freelancers can save you money and headaches. Use them when you need them. When you don’t, they don’t cost you a cent.

Use me. I am a public-relations specialist with more than 20 years’ experience in all phases of the profession. MY SERVICES ARE AVAILABLE TO YOU ON A FREELANCE BASIS . . .

Another freelance writer might use a more straightforward approach:

Dear Mr. Mann:

Congratulations on your new business. May you have great success and pleasure from it.

I offer my services as a freelance public relations writer specializing in medical and technical subjects.

Here, the writer gets attention by opening with a subject that has a built-in appeal to the reader namely, the reader’s own business. Most of us like to read about ourselves. And just about everybody would react favorably to the good wishes expressed in the second sentence.

INTEREST

Once you get the reader’s attention, you’ve got to provide a “hook” to create real interest in your subject and keep them reading. This hook is a promise — a promise to solve problems, answer questions, or satisfy needs.

The hook is often written in a two-paragraph format: The first paragraph is a clear statement of the reader’s needs, while the second shows how the writer can satisfy these needs. Here’s the hook from a letter written by a job seeker to the vice president of one of the television networks:

To stay ahead, you need aggressive people willing to take chances. People who are confident, flexible, dedicated. People who want to learn who are not afraid to ask questions.

I am one of those people — one of the people you should have on your staff. Let me prove it. Start by reading my résumé. It shows I can take any challenge and succeed.

What better way to hold people's interest than to promise to solve their problems?

Here's an example of a two-paragraph (two-line) hook from a successful fundraising letter:

Some day, you may need the Red Cross.
But right now, the Red Cross needs you.

A principal rule of persuasive writing is: Remember that the reader isn't interested in you. The reader is interested in *the reader*. And because we want to hear about ourselves, the following letter was particularly effective in gaining and holding this author's interest:

As you may already know, we have been doing some work for people who have the same last name as you do. Finally, after months of work, my new book, **THE AMAZING STORY OF THE BLYS IN AMERICA**, is ready for printing and you are in it!

The Bly name is very rare and our research has shown that less than two one thousandths of one percent of the people in America share the Bly name

DESIRE

Get attention. Hook the reader's interest. Then create the desire to buy what you're selling, or do what you are asking.

This is the step where many businesspeople falter. Their corporate backgrounds condition them to write business letters in "corporatese," so they fill paragraphs with pompous phrases, jargon, clichés, and windy sentences. Here's a real-life example from a major investment firm:

All of the bonds in the above described account having been heretofore disposed of, we are this day terminating same. We accordingly enclose herein check in the amount of \$22,000 same being your share realized therein, as per statement attached. Not withstanding the distribution to you of the described amount, you shall remain liable for your proportionate share.

Don't write to impress — write to express. State the facts, the features, and the benefits of your offer in plain, simple English.

Give the reader reasons why he or she should buy your product, give you the job, sign the contract, or approve the budget. Create a desire for what you're offering. Here's how the manager in charge of manufacturing persuaded the president to sign a purchase order for a \$20,000 machine.

I've enclosed a copy of my report, which includes an executive summary. As you can see, even at the low levels of production we've experienced recently, the T-1000 Automatic Wire-Wrap Machine can cut production time by 15 percent. At this rate, the machine will pay for itself within 14 months including its purchase price plus the cost of training operators. We've already discussed the employees' resistance to automation in the plant. As you know, we've held discussion groups on this subject over the past three months. And, an informal survey shows that 80 percent of our technicians dislike manual wire-wrap and would welcome automation in that area.

Benefits are spelled out. Anxieties are eliminated. The reader is given the reasons why the company should buy a T-1000. (And the president signed the order.)

ACTION

If you've carried AIDA this far, you've gained attention, created interest, and turned that interest into desire. The reader wants what you're selling, or at least has been persuaded to see your point of view. Now comes the last step — asking for action.

If you're selling consulting services, ask for a contract. If you want an interview, ask for it. If you're writing a fundraising letter, include a reply envelope and ask for a donation. In short, if you want your letter to get results, you have to ask for them.

Here's a letter from a customer who purchased a defective can of spray paint. Instead of just complaining or venting anger, she explains the problem and asks for a response:

Recently, I purchased a can of your Permaspray spray paint. But when I tried using it, the nozzle broke off. I cannot reattach this nozzle, and the can, though full, will have to be thrown away.

I am sure your product is generally well packaged; my can was probably a one-in-a-million defect. Would you please send a replacement can of white Permaspray? I would greatly appreciate it.

An exchange of business letters is usually an action-reaction situation. To move things along, determine the action you want your letter to generate and tell the reader about it.

Formulas have their limitations, and you can't force-fit every letter or memo into the AIDA framework. Short interoffice memos, for example, seldom require this degree of persuasiveness.

But when you're faced with more sophisticated writing tasks — a memo to motivate the sales force, a mailer to bring in orders, a letter to collect bad debts — AIDA can help. Get attention. Hook the reader's interest. Create a desire. Ask for action. And your letters will get better results.

Special Considerations for Writing about Technology

The modern business writer today is virtually forced to write about technology and technical matters because we live in a technological age. Three situations generally exist that are troublesome in this regard.

1. The first is a technician, such as an engineer or scientist, writing for a nontechnical reader, such as a consumer, patient, or executive. The main error is to assume the layperson has the same level of education, understanding, and interest in the topic as would a fellow technician.

Technicians are interested in technical details. Executives don't care about the technical details; they are more focused on bottom-line results.

2. When writing scientist-to-scientist, overuse of jargon is not an insurmountable problem (though it may make for dull reading), because the recipient of the letter knows the same language you do.

Or do they? Technology is so specialized today that the knowledge and background of one computer programmer versus another, or one civil engineer versus another, that technician A is not familiar with half the concepts and terms used by technician B. Do not assume that the reader knows everything you do. It is better to overexplain and be absolutely clear, than to underexplain and risk leaving the reader in the dark.

3. The third situation is a layperson writing to a scientist.

The problem here: The writer does not understand the technology, and spends a lot of time teaching it to himself. Not desiring to put that education to waste, he explains it to the reader.

Problem is, the reader already knows it. Technical people want technical information, not popular science. You need to find out what is new and important, and communicate that; the techie already has the foundation.

Below are time-tested tips for writing about technical subjects in a variety of situations:

- **Be technically accurate.** Being accurate means being truthful. Technical readers are among the most sophisticated of audiences. Technical know-how is their forte, and they'll be likely to spot any exaggerations, omissions, or "white lies" you make.

Being accurate also means being specific. Writing that a piece of equipment "can handle your toughest injection molding jobs" is vague and meaningless to a technician; but saying that the machine "can handle pressures of up to 12,000 pounds" is honest, concrete, and useful.

And, just as a stain on a sleeve can ruin the whole suit, a single technical inaccuracy can destroy the credibility of the entire promotion. All the persuasive writing skill in the world won't motivate the industrial buyer if he feels that you don't know what you're talking about.

- **Check the numbers.** Many of us were relieved to finish school because it meant we could finally get *away* from having to deal with numbers; all the math whizzes in our class went on to become computer programmers, accountants, and media buyers. But to write about many technical subjects, you've got to approach those members with a new-found respect.

Just think of the disaster that would result if a misplaced decimal in a sales letter offered a one-year magazine subscription at \$169.50, ten times the actual price of \$16.95. You can see why this would stop sales cold.

Well, the same goes for technical writing. Only, in technical writing, a misplaced decimal or other math mistake is less obvious to us, since the material is so highly technical.

You would suspect an error in a mailer that advertised a \$169.50 magazine subscription. But could you say, at a glance, whether the pore size in a reverse osmosis filter should be 0.005 or 0.00005 or 0.0005 microns? (How many of us even know what a micron is?) Yet, to the chemical engineer, the pore size of the filter may be as crucial as the price of the magazine subscription. Get it wrong, and you've lost a sale.

All numbers in technical writing should be checked and double-checked by the writer, and ideally also by your technical people.

- **Be concise.** Engineers and managers are busy people. They don't have the time to read all the papers that cross their desks, so make your message brief and to the point.

As Strunk and White point out in *The Elements of Style*, conciseness "requires not that the writer . . . avoid all detail and treat his subjects only in outline, but that *every word tell*."

Avoid redundancies, run-on sentences, wordy phrases, and other poor stylistic habits that take up space but add little to meaning or clarity. For example, don't write "water droplets condensed from atmospheric vapor and sufficiently massive to fall to earth's surface" when what you're talking about is "rain."

- **Simplify.** The key to good technical writing is to explain complex concepts and products clearly and directly. Avoid overly complicated narratives; write in plain, simple English. In the first draft of a letter about a pollution control device, the author wrote:

It is absolutely essential that the interior wall surface of the conduit be maintained in a wet condition, and that means be provided for wetting continually the peripheral interior wall surface during operation of the device, in order to avoid the accumulation of particulate matter about the interior surface area.

Here's how, after rewriting, he simplified this bit of technical gobbledygook to make it more readable:

The interior wall must be continually wetted to avoid solids buildup.

- **Understand what is really important to the reader.** By talking with a few knowledgeable engineers, you can quickly grasp what aspects of a technical topic are of greatest interest to your audience.

Because the subject matter is highly technical, you can't rely on your own feelings and intuition to select the key points. The benefits of buying a kitchen appliance or joining a record club are obvious, but how can a layman say what features of a multistage distillation system are important to the chemical engineer, and which are trivial?

- **Know how much to tell.** As discussed, different types of readers seek different levels of technical information. If you're writing for top management, keep it short and simple, and pile on the benefits. If you're pitching to technicians, be sure to include plenty of meaty technical information.

Here's a description of a "Dry FGD System" (a large piece of industrial equipment) from a promotion aimed at plant engineers:

The average SO₂ emission rate as determined in the outlet duct was 0.410 lb/106 Btu (176 ng/J). All emission rates were determined with F-factors calculated from flue gas analyses obtained with an Orsat analyzer during the course of each test run.

This will satisfy the technically curious buyer who wants to know *how* you determined your product specifications, not just what they are. But managers have little time or interest in the nitty-gritty; they want to know how the product can save them money and help improve their operations.

By comparison, a letter on this same Dry FGD System aimed at management takes a lighter, more sales-oriented tone:

The Dry FGD System is a cost-effective alternative to conventional wet scrubbers for cleaning flue gas in coal-fired boilers. Fly ash and chemical waste are removed as an easily handled dry powder, not a wet sludge. And with dry systems, industrial and utility boilers can operate cleanly and reliably.

- **Don't forget the features.** By all means, stress benefits when writing to executives. But don't forget to include technical features as well. In the industrial marketplace, a pressure rating or the availability of certain materials of construction often mean the difference between a use or no-use decision.

Although these features may seem boring or meaningless to you, they are important to the technical reader. Yes, discuss the bottom-line benefits. But be clear about what features deliver these benefits. Features and their benefits are often presented in "cause and effect" statements, such as:

Because the system uses L-band frequency and improved MTI (moving target indication), it can detect targets up to 50 times smaller than conventional S-band radars.

No mechanical systems or moving parts are required, which means that Hydro-Clean consumes less energy and takes less space than conventional pump driven clarifiers.

The geometric shape of the seal ring amplifies the force against the disc. As the pressure grows, so does the valve's sealing performance.

A tip: If you routinely write about a technical topic in which you are not an expert, go to the bookstore and buy a children's book on the subject. It will make everything crystal clear and understandable to you. Most specialized disciplines also have dictionaries of their terms; purchase one of these as well.

