

Semester X (B.Com LL.B.)

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Twelve Rules for Better Letter Writing

Better writing can result in proposals that win contracts, advertisements that sell products, instruction manuals that users can follow, billboards that catch a driver's attention, stories that make us laugh or cry, and letters, memos, and reports that get your message across to the reader. Here are 12 tips on style and word choice that can make writing clear and persuasive.

1. PRESENT YOUR BEST SELF

Your moods vary. After all, you're only human. But while it is sometimes difficult to present your best self in conversation, which is spontaneous and instant, letters are written alone and on your own schedule. Therefore, you can and should take the time to let your most pleasant personality shine through in your writing.

Be especially careful when replying to an e-mail message you have received. The temptation is to treat the message as conversation, and if you are irritated or just outrageously pressured and busy, the tendency is to reply in a clipped and curt fashion — again, not showing you at your best.

The solution? Although you may be eager to reply immediately to e-mail so you can get the message out of your inbox, a better strategy for when your reply is important is to set it aside, compose your answer when you are not so time pressured, and read it carefully before sending.

A Tip: Never write a letter when angry. If you must write the letter when angry, then put it aside without sending it, and come back to it later. You will most likely want to throw it out and start over, not send it at all, or drastically revise it.

Remember, once you hit the Reply button, it is too late to get the message back. It's out there, and you can't retrieve it. Same thing when you drop a letter in the mailbox (it's actually a felony to reach into the mailbox and try to retrieve the letter!).

2. WRITE IN A CLEAR, CONVERSATIONAL STYLE

Naturally, a memo on sizing pumps shouldn't have the same chatty tone as a personal letter. But most business and technical professionals lean too much in the other direction, and their sharp thinking is obscured by windy, overly formal prose.

The key to success in business or technical writing? *Keep it simple.* I've said this before, but it bears repeating: Write to express — not to impress. A relaxed, conversational style can add vigor and clarity to your letters.

Formal business style

The data provided by direct examination of samples under the lens of the microscope are insufficient for the purpose of making a proper identification of the components of the substance.

We have found during conversations with customers that even the most experienced of extruder specialists have a tendency to avoid the extrusion of silicone profiles or hoses.

The corporation terminated the employment of Mr. Joseph Smith.

Informal conversational style

We can't tell what it is made of by looking at it under the microscope.

Our customers tell us that experienced extruder specialists avoid extruding silicone profiles or hoses.

Joe was fired.

3. BE CONCISE

Professionals, especially those in industry, are busy people. Make your writing less time-consuming for them to read by telling the whole story in the fewest possible words.

How can you make your writing more concise? One way is to avoid redundancies — a needless form of wordiness in which a modifier repeats an idea already contained within the word being modified.

For example, a recent trade ad described a product as a “new innovation.” Could there be such a thing as an *old* innovation? The ad also said the product was “very unique.” Unique means “one of a kind,” so it is impossible for anything to be *very* unique.

By now, you probably get the picture. Some common redundancies are presented below, along with the correct way to rewrite them:

Redundancy	Rewrite as
advance plan	plan
actual experience	experience
two cubic feet in volume	two cubic feet
cylindrical in shape	cylindrical
uniformly homogeneous	homogeneous

Many writers are fond of overblown expressions such as “the fact that,” “it is well known that,” and “it is the purpose of this writer to show that.” These take up space but add little to meaning or clarity.

The following list includes some common wordy phrases. The column on the right offers suggested substitute words:

Wordy phrase	Suggested substitute
during the course of	during
in the form of	as
in many cases	often
in the event of	if
exhibits the ability to	can

4. BE CONSISTENT

“A foolish consistency,” wrote Ralph Waldo Emerson, “is the hobgoblin of little minds.” This may be so. But, on the other hand, inconsistencies in your writing will confuse your readers and convince them that your information and reasoning are as sloppy and unorganized as your prose.

Good writers strive for consistency in their use of numbers, hyphens, units of measure, punctuation, equations, grammar, symbols, capitalization, technical terms, and abbreviations. Keep in mind that if you are inconsistent in any of these matters of usage, you are automatically wrong at least part of the time.

For example, many writers are inconsistent in the use of hyphens. The rule is: two words that form an adjective are hyphenated. Thus, write: first-order reaction, fluidized-bed combustion, high-sulfur coal, space-time continuum.

The *U.S. Government Printing Office Style Manual*, Strunk and White’s *The Elements of Style*, your organization’s writing manual, and the appendix of this book can guide you in the basics of grammar, punctuation, abbreviation, and capitalization.

5. USE JARGON SPARINGLY

Many disciplines and specialties have a special language all their own. Technical terms are a helpful shorthand when you're communicating within the profession, but they may confuse readers who do not have your special background. Take the word, "yield," for example. To a chemical engineer, yield is a measure of how much product a reaction produces. But to car drivers, yield means slowing down (and stopping, if necessary) at an intersection.

Other words that have special meaning to chemical engineers but have a different definition in everyday use include: vacuum, pressure, batch, bypass, recycle, concentration, mole, purge, saturation, catalyst.

A good working definition of jargon is, "Language more complex than the ideas it serves to communicate." Use legitimate technical terms when they communicate your ideas precisely, but avoid using jargon just because the words sound impressive. In other words, do not write that material is "gravimetrically conveyed" when it is simply dumped. If you are a dentist, do not tell patients you have a procedure to help "stabilize mobile dentition" when what it really does is keeps loose teeth in place.

6. AVOID BIG WORDS

Some writers prefer to use big, important-sounding words instead of short, simple words. This is a mistake; fancy language just frustrates the reader. Write in plain, ordinary English and your readers will love you for it.

Here are a few frequently occurring big words; the column on the right presents a shorter — and preferable — substitution.

Big word	Substitution
beverage	drink
dentition	teeth
eliminate	get rid of
furnish	give, provide
incombustible	fireproof
prioritize	put in order
substantiate	prove
terminate	end
utilize	use

7. PREFER THE SPECIFIC TO THE GENERAL

Your readers want information — facts, figures, conclusions, and recommendations. Do not be content to say something is good, bad, fast, or slow when you can say *how* good, *how* bad, *how* fast, or *how* slow. Be specific whenever possible.

General

a tall building
plant
heavy equipment
unit
unfavorable weather conditions
structural degradation
disturbance
high performance
creature
laboratory apparatus

Specific

a 20-story building
oil refinery
equipment weighing over 10 tons
apartment
rain (snow, etc.)
a leaky roof
riot
95% efficiency
dog (cat, etc.)
test tube

8. BREAK UP YOUR WRITING INTO SHORT SECTIONS

Long, unbroken blocks of text are stumbling blocks that intimidate and bore readers. Breaking up your writing into short sections and short paragraphs — as in this book — makes the text easier to read.

If your paragraphs are too long, go through them. Wherever a new thought starts, type a return and start a new paragraph.

In the same way, short sentences are easier to grasp than long ones. A good guide for keeping sentence length under control is to write sentences that can be spoken aloud without losing your breath (do *not* take a deep breath before doing this test).

9. USE VISUALS

Drawings, graphs, and other visuals can reinforce your text. In fact, pictures often communicate better than words; we remember 10 percent of what we read, but 30 percent of what we see.

Visuals can make your technical communications more effective. The different types of visuals and what they can show are listed below:

Type of visual	This shows . . .
Photograph or illustration	. . . what something looks like
Map	. . . where it is located
Exploded view	. . . how it is put together
Schematic diagram	. . . how it works or is organized
Graph	. . . how much there is (quantity) . . . how one thing varies as a function of another
Pie chart	. . . proportions and percentages
Bar chart	. . . comparisons between quantities
Table	. . . a body of related data
Mass and energy balances	. . . what goes in and what comes out

In the days when letters were written on typewriters, the idea of using visuals was out of the question. Today, software makes it relatively easy to add a chart, table, or graph to your letter. Why not do so, if it helps get your point across in a clearer and more persuasive fashion?

10. USE THE ACTIVE VOICE

Voice refers to the person speaking words or doing an action. An “active verb” stresses the person doing the thing. A “passive verb” stresses the thing being done.

In the active voice, action is expressed directly: “John performed the experiment.” In the passive voice, the action is indirect: “The experiment was performed by John.”

When possible, use the active voice. Your writing will be more direct and vigorous; your sentences more concise. As you can see in the samples below, the passive voice seems puny and stiff by comparison:

Passive voice

Control of the bearing-oil supply is provided by the shutoff valves.

Grandma’s apple pie was enjoyed by everyone in the family.

A good time was had by all.

Fuel-cost savings were realized through the installation of thermal insulation in the attic.

Active voice

Shutoff valves control the bearing-oil supply.

Everyone in the family enjoyed Grandma’s apple pie.

We all had a good time.

The installation of thermal insulation in the attic cut fuel costs.

11. ORGANIZATION

Poor organization is the number one problem in letter writing. As editor Jerry Bacchetti points out, “If the reader believes the content has some importance to him, he can plow through a report even if it is dull or has lengthy sentences and big words. But if it’s poorly organized — forget it. There’s no way to make sense of what is written.”

Poor organization stems from poor planning. While a computer programmer would never think of writing a complex program without first drawing a flow chart, he’d probably knock out a draft of a user’s manual without making notes or an outline. In the same way, a builder who requires detailed blueprints before he lays the first brick will write a letter without really considering his message, audience, or purpose.

Before you write, plan. As mentioned in the prewriting planning discussion earlier in this part, you should create a rough outline that spells out the contents and organization of your letter, memo, report, or proposal.

By the time you finish writing, some things in the final document might be different from the outline. That's okay. The outline is a tool to aid in organization, not a commandment etched in stone. If you want to change it as you go along — fine.

The outline helps you divide letters and larger writing projects into many smaller, easy-to-handle pieces and parts. The organization of these parts depends on the type of document you're writing.

There are standard formats for writing meeting minutes, travel reports, and many other business memos and letters. You can just follow the models in this book (see Appendix A).

If the format isn't strictly defined by the type of letter you are writing, select the organizational scheme that best fits the material. Some common formats include:

- **Order of location.** For example, a report recommending where to acquire new warehouses and parts depots based on the distance from the central manufacturing operation and the location relative to key accounts.
- **Order of increasing difficulty.** Instructions often start with the easiest material and, as the user masters basic principles, move on to more complex operations.
- **Alphabetical order.** A logical way to arrange a letter about vitamins (A, B, B1, and so on) or a directory of company employees.
- **Chronological order.** Presents the facts in the order in which they happened. Trip reports are sometimes written this way.
- **Problem/solution.** The problem/solution format begins with "Here's what the problem was" and ends with "Here's how we solved it."
- **Inverted pyramid.** The newspaper style of news reporting where the lead paragraph summarizes the story and the following paragraphs present the facts in order of decreasing importance. You can use this format in journal articles, letters, memos, and reports.
- **Deductive order.** Start with a generalization, and then support it with particulars. A lawyer might use this method in preparing to argue a case before a judge.
- **Inductive order.** Begin with specific instances, and then lead the reader to the idea or general principles the instances suggest. A minister might talk about different problems in the church caused by flaws in the building before asking for contributions to build a new roof.
- **List.** This section is a list because it describes, in list form, the ways to organize written material. A recent mailing from an electric company to its business customers contained a sheet titled "Seven Ways to Reduce Your Plant's Electric Bill."

Once you have an outline with sections and subsections, you can organize your information by putting it on index cards. Each card gets a heading outline. Or — using your personal computer — you can cut and paste the information within a word-processing file.

12. LENGTH

Whenever possible, keep your letter to one page. Today's busy readers really appreciate seeing that everything is on one side of a sheet of paper. Even Winston Churchill used to require of those serving under him that they express their concerns on no more than one side of a single sheet of paper.

If you have more to say, you can go to a second page, and possibly a third. No more than that. Exceptions include sales letters marketing products by mail (those can run four to eight pages or more) and family Christmas/holiday letters.

For ordinary business correspondence, if your letter is taking up more than one side of two or three sheets, consider splitting the content between a shorter letter and an attachment or enclosure, such as a report.

The art of being concise in your letter writing can require considerable effort in the rewriting and editing stage. Philosopher Blaise Pascal once wrote to a friend and apologized for sending a long letter. He said, "I would have written a shorter letter, but I didn't have the time."

Proofreading Tips

It may be unfair, but people judge you by the words you use. They also judge you by whether you spell those words correctly, which is why proofreading is so important.

In today's computer age, nearly everyone has spell-checking capability — often as part of an e-mail or word-processing program. You should run your copy through the spell-checker, but doing that alone is not enough. Recently an executive at a Big Six accounting firm sent a letter he had spell-checked to an important client, only to discover that he had described himself as a "Certified Pubic Accountant"!

Proof everything you write, but be aware that the more times you write and rewrite a document, the less able you become to proof it effectively. For this reason, you should have "volunteer proofreaders" lined up — coworkers, assistants, and colleagues — who can proof your letters on short notice.

If you have to proofread a document you have already written, rewritten, and read several times, here's a way to catch typos despite your reading fatigue: Proofread the document *backward*. Doing so forces you to read each word individually, and eliminates the natural tendency to concentrate on the whole sentence and its content. Result: You proof each word more carefully, and catch more typos.