

# SLOAN SCHOOL OF BUSINESS • COMMUNICATION PROGRAM

## STYLE IN MANAGERIAL WRITING

Source: <http://ocw.mit.edu/NR/rdonlyres/Sloan-School-of-Management/15-279Spring-2005/ACF5A522-587B-4ACD-994D-A90754638231/0/stylemangwriting.pdf>

What is style? We think about style in terms of the way we dress, how we furnish our homes, or the cars we drive. Sometimes we think of style as something superficial, even something that has as its primary function the masking of reality. At its best, however, style conveys a sense both of who you are and what your message is. Style is the way something is said, and the style of any one document comes from the intersection of your own voice and a knowledge of what the audience and the context demand. Just as certain fashions are “in style,” so specific ways of communicating may be in favor at different times and places.

Style depends upon choice and arrangement. In writing, your choice of words and their arrangement into sentences and paragraphs will determine the style of a document. In recent years, the favored style in managerial communication within U.S. business has stressed clarity, brevity, and directness. What follows are some guidelines for how to choose and arrange words to create a particular style that achieves the results you want.

### **Words Have Character**

In the organizational hierarchy, Joe Smith occupies the rung above you. Is Joe Smith your boss or your superior? Now, let’s assume Joe Smith is the company president. Does that make him the Head Honcho? the guy who calls the shots? the big cheese? The choice of any one of those words to the exclusion of the others will, of course, have an impact on the style of your document. Identifying Joe Smith as the “president of Acme Widgets” is very different from identifying him as “Joe Smith, Acme Widget’s head guy.” The words you chose will create a certain tone in your writing--forceful, passive, friendly, threatening, etc.

Words can differ in several ways. For example, they may be relatively more or relatively less formal, relatively more or relatively less abstract (more on this below). In addition, to being formal or informal, words can be colloquial, meaning they are used in everyday conversation; slang, colloquialisms that are usually outside of standard usage; or jargon, terms used by a specific group.

Most U.S. business writing is written at an informal level: that is, it is conversational without resorting to slang. (You might use slang if you were on very familiar terms with the reader, and you know he/she wouldn’t be offended. Similarly, use jargon only if you know the audience will understand these insider’s terms.) Writing in other cultures (e.g., Germany) may be more formal. Regardless of what level of words you chose, you need to be consistent. Don’t begin a memo with, “Pursuant to our discussion on December 9, I would like to inform you . . .” and end with “. . . so I think we’re on the same page in this matter, and I can’t wait to sew up the deal.”

Words also have both explicit or overt (denotative) and implicit or implied (connotative) meanings. Though the denotative meanings or words are usually agreed upon, connotative meanings can vary from reader to reader. As Maryann Piotrowski, author of *Effective Business Writing*, writes, “Therefore, you should be careful about your choice of words, especially in delicate or volatile situations. . . . You should try to make sure that the connotation of the words

you have chosen expresses the attitude you intend to convey, and the one your reader is most likely to understand.”

### **Sentences Have Rhythm**

Sentences can be short and choppy: *The president fired his top managers. The managers were distressed. The president was unmoved.* Or they can be long and windy: *Strategic planning is a process for developing a product, which is the plans themselves, and a process, again, a monitoring process for ensuring those plans are implemented and meet with the expectations, the goals, the objectives, or the results that we anticipated out of the plans.*

Rely too much on the first kind of sentence, and your writing will sound like a child’s primer. Use too many of the latter, and your readers may forget what they read at the beginning of the sentence before they get to the end, and, in time, they may simply refuse to plow through the verbiage. A good test to determine whether or not a sentence is too long is to read it aloud: If you are out of breath before you get to the end, there’s a good chance the sentence needs to be trimmed. A good rule to follow is to use mostly simple, declarative sentences (sentences in subject- verb-object order), particularly for important ideas or ideas you want to stress, but soften them with longer, slightly more complex sentences placed throughout the document.

### **Paragraphs Need Coherence**

You may remember a stern elementary school teacher who drummed into you the principle that each paragraph should contain one and only one idea. It was good advice. That means that every sentence in the paragraph should relate to and further that one central idea.

Most readers will look for the topic of the paragraph--the concepts that the writer will then develop--somewhere near the beginning of the paragraph, and that topic should be stated explicitly. “If you write a passage that does not seem to hang together, seems uncentered or out of focus,” Joseph Williams warns, “you may have made a promise but didn’t deliver, or you may have delivered on a promise you didn’t make.” (Williams, Joseph M., *Style. Toward Clarity and Grace*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1990, p. 94).

### **U.S. Business Looks for Simplicity and Clarity**

How can you achieve the style that seems to be in favor in the U.S. business environment (and seems to be gaining acceptance in other regions as well)? Here are three guidelines to help you:

**1. Identify actors and use verbs to name actions.** A sentence should be about *someone doing something*. Actors can be institutions, organizations, theories, etc.; actions can be physical movements, mental processes, feelings, etc. When readers can’t identify who is doing what in the sentence, it’s harder for them to pull out meaning.

For example, listen to the difference between, “Decisions in regard to the launch of the new product rest with senior management,” and “Senior management must decide whether or not to launch a new product.” We can understand what is going on in the first sentence, but how much simpler it is to get meaning when we know exactly who (“senior management”) is doing what (“deciding on whether or not to launch a new product”).

**2. Favor words that are simple, specific, and concrete.** Words can be relatively abstract (“We bought a *huge* tract of land for the new plant”) or relatively concrete (“We bought a *5,000-acre* tract of land for the new plant”). The linguist S. I. Hayakawa created what he called the “ladder of abstraction” to explain this characteristic of language. On the lowest rung are very specific

terms: Pat's IBM PC. As we move up and up the ladder, terms become more abstract and thus encompass more meaning: "computer" "office machine" "company property" "assets" "wealth." Using words at a high-level of abstraction is not a problem *per se*; human communication could not take place without abstractions. But your writing will be more precise and compelling--and your meaning will be clearer--if you use words that are as specific as possible. Don't talk about the company's assets if you mean Pat's PC!

**3. Make every word "tell."** This is advice from William Strunk, the author (with E. B. White) of the classic *The Elements of Style*. Strunk is trying to remind us that every word on the page must justify its existence; if a word doesn't further the reader's understanding of the message, then delete it--no matter how much you struggled to get it on the page. Strunk compares writing to building machine: Just as extraneous parts on a machine increase the possibility that the it will break down, so extra words in a sentence increase the possibility that the sentence will break down. And when sentences break down, readers lose valuable information. In addition, if you want your writing to be as clear and concise as possible, use these four types of constructions sparingly:

**3a. Nominalizations.** Nominalizations are verbs that have been turned into nouns as, for example, "discover" into "discovery," "move" into "movement," or "fail" into "failure." The use of nominalizations often forces you to violate the advice to write with strong subjects and verbs. NOT: *A review was done of the records of the personnel department.* BUT: *We reviewed the personnel department records.*

**3b. Stacked Nouns.** Stacked nouns occur when two or more nouns are used in a row unnecessarily. The use of stacked nouns often results in language that sounds stilted and confusing.

NOT: *Based on an extensive training needs assessment review. . .* BUT: *After we extensively reviewed our training needs . . .*

**3c. Redundancies.** Redundancies come in all shapes and sizes. Often words are doubled in English ("full and complete" "true and accurate"). Sometimes modifiers can be redundant ("personal beliefs" "terrible tragedy"). Or categories can. ("We decided to paint the office walls blue in color.")

**3d. Negative Constructions.** The affirmative usually states things more directly and concisely.

NOT: *Don't write in the negative.*

BUT: *Write in the affirmative.*

Your goal should be to make your writing as crisp and vigorous as possible in order to respect your reader's time and make the process of deciphering your meaning as simple as possible.

### **A Word on Grammar and Punctuation**

Grammar and punctuation, like other systems of rules and regulations, exist to bring order out of chaos and to bring us into focus for the rest of the world. (Think about how hard it would be to read anything without consistent rules of grammar and punctuation.) Just how serious the

repercussions of violating these social codes will be depends upon the attitudes of your superiors and the norms of your organization. Some managers can be hawk-like in these matters, and a misplaced semi-colon can translate into a black mark against you. One thing is for certain, though: No one ever suffered from producing documents that were free from all errors in grammar and punctuation.

In the end, listen to yourself, read you own work. Is your logic evident? Does the rhythm of your prose allow you and your audience to follow your thoughts? Shape your sentences to lead your audience forward, relying on length and arrangement of words, variety, and level of diction to create the style that will result in achieving the purpose you have defined for yourself.

With integrity and expression, you can reach the universal appeal of style, based on self-awareness, self-discipline, and practice. You can do this by mining your own unique views and habits, plus mastering the conventions of language and social intercourse. Style rarely comes easily, and when you've achieved it, people often don't grasp the work you did to get it. But the ability to intertwine your own personality with the demands of audience and context is a skill that will serve you well.

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