

# A Brief Guide to Professional Writing

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If you are like most DeVry Addison students, you'll take Professional Writing (English 227) in your 5<sup>th</sup> or 6<sup>th</sup> term. But you may be asked to write in the business context long before that. This brief guide is intended to get you through those assignments.

In this document, we can only introduce you to some of the fundamental concepts of professional writing—concepts you'll work on in more depth in your courses. Therefore, **TAKE THE ADVICE OFFERED ONLY AS GUIDELINES.** When you get to your English 227 class or to your workplace, your instructor or supervisor may give you more specific suggestions about how they want you to write.

## **What is professional writing?**

Professional writing is writing done in a workplace context to enable and support the work of a company (i.e., buying, selling, producing goods and providing services, making profits, etc.). To facilitate that work, professionals have to communicate with each other, and they have developed a number of formats and conventions to make the exchange of ideas go more smoothly.

Professional people typically write to

- inform—share information with—their audience; and/or
- persuade—build goodwill with or enlist the help of—their audience.

They typically communicate through the following formats:

- Forms (e.g., time cards, billing invoices, inventory tracking forms, etc.)
- E-mail messages and memos (typically to an audience inside the business)
- Letters (typically to an audience outside the business)
- Reports
- Proposals

## **How is professional writing similar to / different from the kind of writing you have done before?**

Whenever you encounter a new situation, your brain recalls relevant past experiences to give you some idea of what to do in the new situation. However, it usually happens that some aspects of the past experiences transfer to the new, but not all. The trick is to

learn which aspects transfer and which do not. For those aspects that are so different that you cannot transfer your experiences, you have to learn how to approach them.

In the case of writing in a professional context, your brain recalls past writing experiences. For most students, that past experience is school writing, such as essays for an English class. Let's look at how a typical school essay is similar to and different from writing a business memo.

Typically, School Essays ...	Typically, Business Memos ...
<b>Similarities</b>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Are written through a process of planning, drafting, revising, and publishing (handing in).</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Are sometimes written through a process of planning, drafting, revising, and publishing (sending).</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Require writers to use such cognitive tasks as describing, summarizing, illustrating, comparing/contrasting, determining cause &amp; effect, identifying problems &amp; solutions, evaluating, etc.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Require writers to use such cognitive tasks as describing, summarizing, illustrating, comparing/contrasting, determining cause &amp; effect, identifying problems &amp; solutions, evaluating, etc.</li> </ul>
<b>Differences</b>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Are written to a general audience—you are expected to include enough background information so essays are meaningful and relevant to any reader at any time.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Are written to a specific audience but may also be read by multiple audiences—you are writing to a specific person or group familiar to you and to your purpose for writing, so you may not have to fill in a lot of background information. Your memo is often meaningful and relevant only for a short time.</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Are written to fulfill a variety of purposes, such as to inform, to persuade, to entertain, to express one's views, etc.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Are written for a limited number of purposes, usually to inform (to share information) and to persuade (to build goodwill with superiors, colleagues, and customers).</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Are written on a variety of topics, depending on purpose.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Are written on a limited numbers of topics, namely those that further the work of business.</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• State a main idea and develop it with more specific verbal details. Essays may be long, broad in scope, and they may take awhile to get to the point.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• State a main idea and develop it with more specific verbal and/or graphic details. Memos are brief, limited in scope, and to the point.</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Are written in a variety of tones, depending on purpose.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Are written in a polite, respectful, formal tone.</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Are written individually, though with feedback from readers.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• May be written collaboratively.</li> </ul>

In other words, professional writing is typically more focused on the specific context of business, but in general, you use the same thoughtful, organized process to generate a business text as you do a school essay.

### What does professional writing look like?

To make communication easier, businesspeople have developed a number of conventional formats, such as the business letter, the memo, the e-mail message, and the report. Below is a discussion of each of these formats.

Remember, however, that regardless of the format, the content of a business text requires you to use the same cognitive tasks as you might in school writing. Therefore, for example, if you are writing a memo in which you compare/contrast two products, you can use the same organizational patterns you might use in a school essay—except that you need to attach memo headings to the beginning.

Also remember that these formats are just guidelines. The company that you (eventually) work for might have its own style of writing memos, letters, reports, or forms. When you write for that company, by all means, use its style.

### How is professional writing formatted?

Just as there are some similarities and differences between school writing and professional writing *in terms of purpose*, there are similarities and differences *in terms of formatting*.

Typically, for Essays, You ...	Typically, for Memos, You ...
Similarities	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Use an easy-to-read font, such as Times New Roman or Arial.</li> <li>• Use an easy-to-read type size—10 or 12 point is standard.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Use an easy-to-read, professional-looking font, such as Times New Roman or Arial.</li> <li>• Use an easy-to-read type size—10 or 12 point is standard.</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Use standard margins—the default margin of MS Word is 1.25 inches on each side.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Use standard margins—the default margin of MS Word is 1.25 inches on each side.</li> </ul>
Differences	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Double-space.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Single-space.</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Indent the first line of each paragraph 5 spaces.</li> <li>• Don't insert blank lines between paragraphs.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Start each line at the left margin. <i>This is called block style.</i></li> <li>• Use blank lines to separate paragraphs.</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Use conventional paragraphs.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Use conventional paragraphs AND bulleted lists, headings/subheadings, tables, charts, etc. to make information easy to find and to read.</li> </ul>

#### ***What does a memo look like?***

See p. 8 of this handout for some advice about formatting memos.

#### ***What does a business letter look like?***

See p. 9 of the handout for some advice about formatting letters.

#### ***What does an e-mail message look like?***

No doubt, you're familiar with e-mail messages because you have sent and received hundreds of them from your family and friends. But e-mails in a professional context

are different, mainly because your relationship with your audience is different. In a professional context, you have a professional (formal, distant) relationship with your audience, so your language has to be more formal.

In Informal E-mail Messages ...	In Formal E-mail Messages ...
Differences	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Use the sender's first name in the greeting or no greeting at all.</li> <li>• May simply end without a closing or name.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Use the sender's title and last name in the greeting.</li> <li>• Close with the sender's name and title.</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Do not need much background information because your family/friends will know what you are writing about.</li> <li>• Use informal language and slang.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Require enough background information so your audience will know what you are writing about.</li> <li>• Require formal language.</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Use informal spelling [<i>thru, u</i>, etc.] or emoticons [:-), lol, etc.].</li> <li>• Do not worry about capitalization and punctuation.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Use standard spelling (<i>through, you</i>, etc.)</li> <li>• Do not use emoticons.</li> <li>• Use standard capitalization and punctuation.</li> </ul>

See p. 10 of the handout for more advice about formatting formal e-mail messages.

***Memos, e-mail messages and letters have similar purposes; how are they different? Which formats do you use in which situations?***

Memos	E-mail Messages	Letters
Similarities		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The purpose is to inform or persuade the audience.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The purpose is to inform or persuade the audience.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The purpose is to inform or persuade the audience.</li> </ul>
Differences		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Audience is usually <i>internal</i> to the workplace.</li> <li>• Audience may be broad.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Audience may be either <i>internal or external</i> to the workplace.</li> <li>• Audience may be a specific group or person.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Audience is usually <i>external</i> to the workplace.</li> <li>• Audience is usually specific.</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Use a To + From + Date + Re: heading and no closing</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Use a To + From + Date + Subject heading, and esp. if the audience is external or formal, a closing.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Use a Dear ____ greeting and a Sincerely + signature closing</li> </ul>

***What are the different parts of a report?***

The purposes and formats of reports are so varied that we could write another whole pamphlet just on reports. Generally speaking, reports are “factual accounts that objectively communicate information about some aspect of the business” (Thill & Bovée, 1999, p. 265). But reports can be written for internal or external audiences, can be informational or analytical, routine or special.

It is difficult in this brief guide to give you examples of every kind of report, so we have created another document on just one example: the proposal. Please see our separate handout, *A Brief Guide to Proposal Writing*, for information on basic proposal writing.

### **Why is it important to revise and proofread your professional writing?**

Just as you are graded on the quality of your writing in a school essay, you are judged by the quality of your writing in the workplace. Your readers will notice if your writing is not clear and well-organized or does not follow standard, formal grammar; this will probably lower their impression of you. Because you also represent your company to an external audience, poorly constructed professional writing will lower their impression of both you and your company.

In a 2001 study, businesspeople were asked how they responded to writing that did not follow conventional grammar (Beason, 2001). The majority responded that they found the mistakes annoying, which in turn, caused them to lower their estimation of the writer. The respondents said they thought the writer was too lazy or careless to write well, and they wondered if they would be lazy and careless at conducting business as well. They were less likely to want to pursue business opportunities with the writer.

So, it is extremely important that you take the time to read what you have written to make sure it is clear and easy to understand. You should read it at least twice yourself—at least once for the content and once for the grammar—and ask someone else to read it as well.

When you are reading for content, check to make sure you

- have enough background information for your readers to understand the purpose of your text and the ideas in it.
- have enough details or reasons to support your points.
- Have not left out any words. It's especially important that you do not omit negative words, because that changes the meaning significantly.

Revise any paragraphs you think will be unclear to your audience.

When you are reading for grammar, check to make sure you have used formal spelling, grammar, and punctuation.

Using the spell check and grammar check functions are the first two steps of the proofreading process, but you cannot stop there because, unfortunately, these functions may not catch the most common mistakes. They will not catch, for example,

- homonyms—e.g. *there* vs. *their* vs. *they're*. Do you have the right spelling for the context?
- informal language—e.g., *come up with* vs. *estimate* or *forecast*. Are your words appropriate to a formal context?
- punctuation mistakes, such as sentence fragments. Are your sentences complete sentences? Have you punctuated them correctly?

Because the grammar check may not call your attention to these kinds of mistakes, the third step in proofreading is always to read your writing yourself—or have someone else read it.

***It's hard for me to find my mistakes when I proofread; what can I do to be a better proofreader?***

If you are like most people, you find it hard to proofread your own writing. That may be in part because you are reading too fast to really “see” the words on the page. You have to “see” the words to judge whether they are spelled correctly or are grammatical. To help yourself focus on each word, it helps to slow down your reading. Some ways to slow down are the following:

- Read your paper aloud. You cannot talk as fast as you can read, so you are forced to read more slowly.
- Follow along with a pencil as you read silently. Your pencil doesn't move as fast as your eyes, so it forces you to slow down.
- Use a sheet of paper to expose your text line by line. Again, your hands do not move as fast as your eyes, so you are forced to read more slowly.
- Read one sentence at a time from the end of the text to the beginning. This takes each sentence out of context, so you are more likely to focus on the words and not the meaning.

Another reason you may find it hard to proofread your writing is that it “sounds” all right. We naturally project sound onto our words when we read. This enables us to connect written words to concepts stored in memory, but it may also be misleading. For example, you may not notice that your words are too informal for the context because you hear people saying them all the time. Or you may not notice the spelling of homonyms, because the “sound” of the word is fine. You can't simply “turn off” the “sounds” you project as you read, so it is useful to learn how to harness the “sounds” to help you identify errors. Some ways to use sound in proofreading are the following:

- Read your paper aloud. This will also alert you to places where you stumble because the sentence structure is awkward or you have left some words out. These are places to revise.
- Associate certain words with “alarm bells.” When you hear the sound of homonyms, for example, you should stop and check the spelling to see if it is right for the context. Or, if you have trouble with sentence fragments containing *because*, that word might also be an alarm bell for you.

Also, if you know you have trouble with certain words, such as *because*, try using the Search function to help you find those words so you can check more easily that you used/spelled/punctuated them correctly.

**Where can you go to get more help than this brief guide can provide?**

If you need more help, here are two resources to consult:

- the Writing tutors at the Academic Support Center.  
Find out their current schedule by calling ext. 8365, stopping by Room 244,  
or checking the Web at  
[http://add.devry.edu/Academic\\_Support\\_Center.html](http://add.devry.edu/Academic_Support_Center.html)
- the online advice from the OnLine Writing Lab (OWL) at Purdue University.  
OWL is probably the best writing center in the nation and is a useful resource  
for many writing topics. For an index of topics on business writing, check the  
Web at <http://owl.english.purdue.edu/handouts/pw/index.html#sub6> and  
<http://owl.english.purdue.edu/workshops/pp/index.html#business>

## Sample Memo

**MEMO**

TO: Linda Shepich

FROM: Doug Gerard  
Erin Medina  
Pearl Ferguson

CC: Board of Directors

DATE: 10/11/01

Re: Proposal to Reduce Plastics Department Safety Stock

The title can be centered or justified with the left margin.

The heading should include TO, FROM, DATE, and SUBJECT followed by a colon and the appropriate information.

As you know, Naïve is moving in to the Nagilluc facility. The effect of these two companies merging into the same facility is a scarcity of space. Currently Nagiluc has sufficient space to meet its own inventory needs comfortably but the entrance of an additional company will impose a problem. As Naïve moves into the facility, there will not be enough space for both companies to store inventory comfortably. In order to accommodate both of these companies' inventory demands for space, there must be a reduction of Nagilluc's safety stock.

The first paragraph summarizes the attached report and introduces the memo's purpose.

We propose a four-step process for addressing this problem. The implementing of these four steps will bring about the following benefits to both of the companies:

1. Additional space for both of the companies' inventories.
2. Carrying costs for Nagilluc's plastics department's safety stock will be reduced.
3. A need for expansion of the factory will not be necessary.
4. ABC analysis will determine the most pertinent parts in the plastics department at Nagilluc.

The second block paragraph contains specific details that develop the purpose and provide further explanation. The information is organized in a numbered list.

Please read through the enclosed detailed report of the problem, solution proposal, and scope of the project at your earliest convenience. We would like to meet with you to discuss the proposal next Wednesday.

The final paragraph refers to the attached report to conclude the memo and requests a specific action from the reader.

Unlike a letter, a memo contains no greeting or salutation and no complimentary close. Paragraphs are separated by a blank line and justified to the left margin.

## Sample Business Letter

10543 South Ave.  
Melrose Park, IL 60164

April 5, 2002

Paul's High Performance  
3715 Commerce Street  
Jackson, MI 49203

Dear Sir or Madam:

I am considering the purchase of one of your stage two drag pack Mustangs. I have a few questions about the stage two and would appreciate your prompt response.

- 1) What is the minimum octane gasoline that I could safely use in the stage two?
- 2) What is the peak horsepower level at the rear wheels?
- 3) Does the Lentech transmission option include an SFI approved bell housing?
- 4) Are the sub frame connectors welded in or bolted in?

If possible, I would like to receive the requested information by April 30. Thank you in advance for your prompt reply.

Sincerely,

Evan Jones

The headings include the writer's address, followed by the date and the receiver's name and address. The addresses and date are separated by a blank line.

The greeting is followed by a colon. The greeting includes the recipient's title and last name, if known; if not known, use Sir or Madam.

The opening states the letter's purpose, its main idea.

The body block paragraphs provide specific details that support, explain, and develop the purpose stated in the first paragraph. The paragraphs are separated by a blank line.

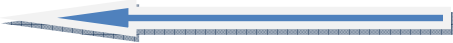
The closing is followed by a comma, then the sender's signature. They are separated by four blank lines.

The conclusion paragraph sums up the letter by referring to the purpose and setting up a time for a response.

If another document will be included with the letter, this can be indicated by including Enclosure after the writer's name.

### Sample E-mail Message


**From:** Abel Willing <aWilling@baileys.com>  
**Sent:** Friday, October 04, 2002 10:34 AM  
**To:** I. Eat <ieat@aol.com>  
**Subject:** New Flavors



The sender's name should always appear at the end of the text of the e-mail message.

Dear I. Eat:

We are happy to tell you that we do make a Light Low Fat Bailey's Frozen Yogurt in a rocky road flavor. Hopefully, your local supermarket will soon be carrying it. If not, let your supermarket know that you would like to see this great new flavor on the shelf.



E-mail messages to superiors or individuals outside the organization should contain a greeting. E-mail messages are usually brief and to the point. The first line in this message addresses the customer's question. The courteous attitude and friendly style demonstrated in the greeting and closing paragraph leave lines of communication open.

Thank you for taking the time to send us your e-mail message. If you should have any more questions or comments about our products, please contact us again.

Sincerely,

Abel Willing



Bailey's Customer Services

The sender's name should always appear at the end of the text of the e-mail message.

Adapted from Beason, L. (2001). Ethos and error: How business people react to errors. *College Composition and Communication*, 53, 33-64. / Lamarre, Helene. (2001). *Student Writing Guide: DeVry Institute of Technology DuPage Campus*. Unpublished manuscript. / Madraso, J. (1993). Proofreading: The skill we've neglected to teach. *English Journal*, 82(2), 32-41. / Rosen, L. M. (1998). Developing correctness in student writing. In C. Weaver (Ed.), *Lessons to share on Teaching Grammar in Context* (pp. 137-154). Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann. / Thill, J. V. & Bovée, C. L. (1999). *Excellence in business communication* (4<sup>th</sup> ed.). Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall.

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