

## **Writing for Business**

### **Lecture 4: The Three-Step Writing Process; Writing Business Messages**

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By the end of this lesson, you should be able to:

- a) Describe the three-step writing process
- b) Plan and write business messages using the three-step writing process

#### **1.0 Introduction**

Welcome to Lecture 4. Last week, we looked at barriers to effective communication. We learned of the three broad barriers to effective communication, that is, sender-related barriers, receiver-related barriers and channel-related barriers. We also learned that we can classify communication barriers as: physical or environmental; physiological; semantic or language; personal; emotional; socio-psychological; cultural; and organizational barriers. Other factors can also interfere with effective communication and these include intercultural differences and listening. We need to overcome these barriers to communicate effectively. For example, we can listen to understand and deliberately take notes. Lastly, we learned about the ethics of business writing where we are required to observe ethical principles in our writing. For example, we should avoid plagiarism.

Today, we will focus on the three-step writing process and discuss the writing process in detail.

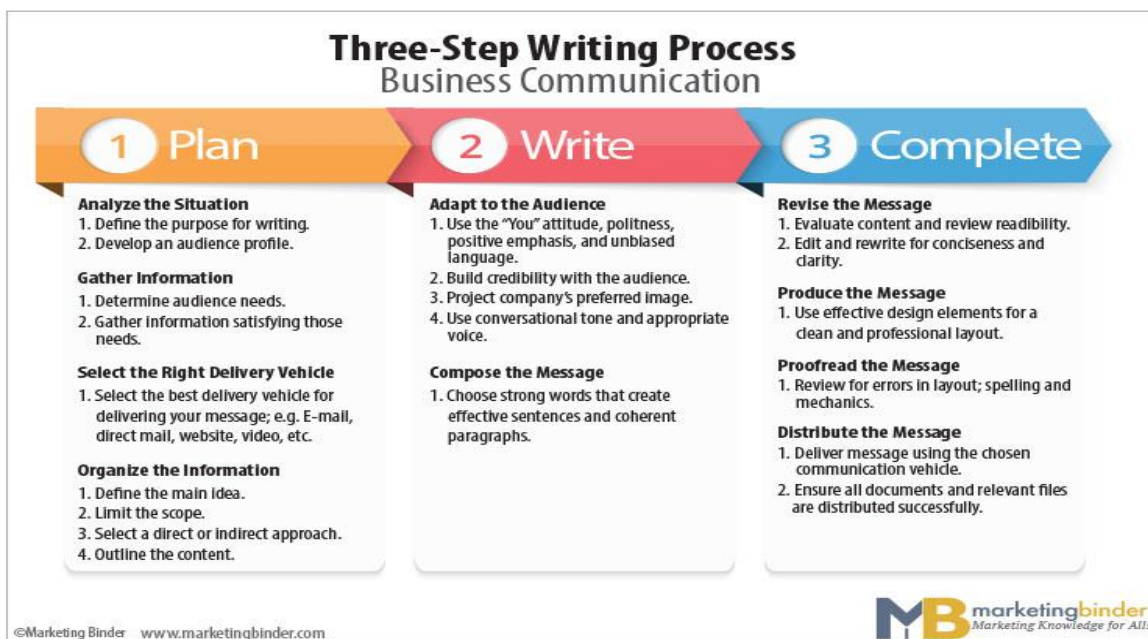
#### **1.1 The Three-Step Writing Process**

Successful, professional writing is not haphazard. Instead, the writer plans meticulously before engaging in writing, in a process that involves a sequence of structured steps. You need to plan, brainstorm, think, pre-write, compose, rewrite, revise, analyze, proofread, and so on before you can arrive at a satisfactory document ready for dispatch. I recommend that you develop an outline of ideas to help guide and focus your writing. Williams (2020) opines that writing is more than just the act of physically writing out words. Thus, it is important to understand the writing process very well to gain more control over it. Williams (2020) suggests three main writing steps you can use to write well and these steps are represented in the diagram below:

## The Writing Process



Williams' (2020) writing process involves the 'prewriting' step where you plan your writing; the 'write' step where you write your first draft; and the 'revise' step where you improve your draft. However, we will examine the three-step writing process suggested by Bovee and Thill (2012). These authors also suggest three main parts: Plan (Pre-writing), Write (Composing), and Complete (Post-writing) as represented below:



Let us examine them one by one:

### 1.1.1 Plan

Imagine you are soon wedding the love of your life in a colorful ceremony. Do you just wake up on the material day and head to church, mosque, temple, synagogue, etc.? Of course, not. In some

communities and depending on individuals, planning begins way before. Take the Kenyan case, generally. There are so many stages those intending to wed must pass through before the final wedding. First, the gentleman needs to formally visit the lady's home accompanied by his age mates to get to know the family. Several weeks or even months later, the lady visits the gentleman's home, accompanied by her parents and other relatives to be introduced to the family and her soon-to-be-new place. Next, the gentleman, accompanied by the elderly from his side, visits the lady's place to pay dowry and make an official, formal request for a wife. Some communities have other ceremonies in between before the wedding finally takes place. Now, before the wedding happens, there are more high-gear preparations involving the wedding venue, clothes, cake, photography and videography, food, decorations, and so on.

If all that goes towards planning a wedding, what makes us think less of planning an annual report? The same meticulous steps are followed in planning and writing business documents. Bovee and Thill (2012) suggest four steps to follow in the planning phase: analyze the situation, gather information, select the right delivery vehicle and organize the information. Let's discuss them below:

#### **1.1.1.1 Analyze the Situation**

This step involves defining the purpose for writing and developing an audience profile. Let's take the example of a non-profit organization that is supported by donors. Your organization agreed to provide quarterly feedback on the progress of the project(s) to the sponsor. Before penning anything, you must define the purpose for writing, which in this case is to give an account of the money. Even though your audience is known, you still need to analyze it. For example, Donor A has been sponsoring your organization for the last five years, and you have been writing similar reports to the same donor. You might think there is no need to conduct a thorough audience analysis, but I say never take any chances. Perhaps the CEO of the sponsoring organization is a new person. You need to research him/her and find out what kind of person he/she is. The new CEO may have a preference of the kind of reports they wish to receive.

#### **1.1.1.2 Gather information**

Next is to gather information which consists of determining the needs of the audience and how to satisfy audience needs. In our example of the non-profit organization, audience needs include getting complete information about the non-profit's full operations involving the donated cash. Donor A only needs to know if the non-profit fulfilled all they said they would and how they did it. Continued support of the non-profit by Donor A depends on how well it can account for every donated dollar.

#### **1.1.1.3 Select the right delivery vehicle**

The third thing is to determine the right vehicle with which to deliver the message. The communicator must consider the best channel. For example, he/she has the option of email, memo, proposal, face-to-face, video, website, letter, report, and so on. Whether the donor is local or international, the communicator must still seriously consider the best medium, which is a formal report. Formal reports are written documents that present information, analysis and

recommendations on a specific subject. They communicate the results of research, investigations or surveys and can be written for both internal and external audiences. Further, they are often used in academic, scientific and business contexts. These reports are usually longer and more detailed than other types of business documents, such as memos or emails.

#### 1.1.1.4 Organize the information

Fourth, the communicator needs to plan how the information gathered from research will be organized. Organization involves defining the main idea, limiting the scope, selecting the approach (direct or indirect), and outlining the content. Defining the main idea is important so that you categorize your report into main point, supporting points, examples, etc. The scope must also be limited so that you do not engage in unnecessary writing. For instance, I mentioned that your report is quarterly, meaning we have limited our content to the last three months. Since your report aims to provide detailed information for Donor A's consumption, the report is direct- there is no need for niceties and buying time to deliver negative news. As usual, the rule of thumb is to always create an outline before you begin writing. An outline helps you to organize your thoughts and order your writing.

#### 1.1.2 Write

##### Adapt to the audience

The second step of the writing process is to write which involves adapting to your audience as well as composing the message. Adapting to the audience means being sensitive to the audience's needs since most people only attend to communication they think will benefit them. If they think you do not care about their needs, they will not pay attention.

- One way to show audiences that you care is by using the 'You' attitude which in essence involves the reader and makes them feel a part of the process. The 'You' attitude is audience-centered communication which takes care of the audience's wishes, hopes, preferences and interests. Bovee and Thill (2012) suggest that the simplest way to use the 'You' attitude is to replace terms like 'I' 'me' 'us' and 'ours' with 'you' and 'yours' as demonstrated below:

Tuesday is the only day that <b>we</b> can promise a quick response to purchase order requests; <b>we</b> are swamped the rest of the week.	If <b>you</b> need a quick response, please submit <b>your</b> purchase order requests by Tuesday.
<b>We</b> can offer MP3 players with 50-70 or 100 gigabytes of storage capacity.	<b>You</b> can choose an MP3 player with 50-70 or 100 gigabytes of storage capacity.

Using the 'You' attitude shows the audience that the communication is about them, not you, the sender. However, Bovee and Thill (2012) advise that using 'You' may not always work. There are times the 'You' attitude can sound condescending, authoritative and rude. For example:

**Wrong:** You did not bring in your goods on time for packaging hence the delay.

**Right:** The goods were not delivered on time for packaging.

So, using ‘You’ should not only be about the pronoun, but about you displaying a genuine interest in the audience.

- Being polite (choosing words carefully to reflect politeness) is another way to demonstrate that you care for your audience. You must maintain standards of etiquette no matter how provocative the client might be. You have heard of the saying, “The customer is king,” meaning you must be courteous to your customer at all times and this will ensure a successful communicative environment. Venting out your frustrations to your customer, colleagues, and other stakeholders should not arise because you will jeopardize the goodwill your company enjoys. Bovee and Thill (2012) advise that we demonstrate diplomatic skills through emotional intelligence and offer the following example:

**Wrong:** Once again, you have managed to bring down the entire website through your incompetent programming.

**Right:** Let’s review the last website update to explore ways to improve the process.

Bovee and Thill (2012) opine that written communication requires more tact than oral communication because in the latter, the tone of voice and facial expression can help soften the spoken word. However, you may offend someone in writing and may never know that you offended them.

- Ensuring positive emphasis is another way you can adopt to your audience to demonstrate care. In life, and as demonstrated over the daily, global news, there seems to be more bad than good news. I often tend to think most people get drawn into bad news faster than in the good, and some people actually thrive in chaotic situations. Not so in the business world. While we can never hide negative news, we must always find something positive to accompany the bad news. Making the effort to emphasize the positive in the midst of negativity will help foster a good relationship with your audience. So, avoid a negative tone even when you must deliver negative news. Here is an example:

**Wrong:** It is impossible to fix your curtains today.

**Right:** Your curtains will be ready on Wednesday. Meanwhile, can we send someone over to fix temporary ones today?

Try not to focus on the mistakes or shortcomings of your audience or using words that can offend. Instead, you can emphasize solutions to problems or use euphemisms (words that deliver the message in softer ways). For example, instead of ‘disabled people’ you can use ‘people abled differently.’ However, Bovee and Thill (2012) caution against overuse of euphemisms because they can be misused. They can be annoying when people are forced to ‘read between the line’ and unethical if they hide the truth. For example, avoiding to use the words ‘lay off’ when the company wants to fire some employees. Consider the following quotation:

“If you are considering using a euphemism, ask yourself this question: Are you trying to protect the reader’s feelings or your own feelings? Even if it is unpleasant, people generally

respond better to an honest message delivered with integrity than they do to a sugar-coated message that obscures the truth.” (Bovee & Thill, 2012).

- Using unbiased language can also assist with adapting to audience needs. It means you have not discriminated against any group of people. It means avoiding unfair and unethical language because it groups people based on their personal features like race, disability, gender, age, ethnicity, and so on.

Biased language can be realized through gender-discriminatory language such as ‘chairman.’ You can avoid pronouns like ‘he’ or ‘she’ and use ‘they’ or refer to them as ‘chairperson.’ In some cases, all genders are referred to as ‘he,’ while in others, women prefer to be addressed as ‘Ms.’ instead of ‘Miss’ or ‘Mrs.’

Biased language can also be realized through race, and this can show discrimination against a particular race or ethnicity. For example, ‘Nigger,’ or ‘Please, give that Somali the report to go through before handing it in.’

Disability should never arise in business communication, unless it’s relevant in that communication. Avoid using terminologies like ‘retard’ or ‘cripple.’ Also, recognize the person in a person living with disability and not his/her disability. For example, instead of ‘blind employee’ use ‘employee with visual impairment.’

Age bias can come in when we mention age, yet it has no relevance to the communication. For instance, I notice that today we rarely put our age on our curriculum vitae because that may cause bias in a prospective employer, who may dismiss us without listening to us. When referring to people who are advanced in age, we can use age-responsive terms like ‘senior citizen’ instead of ‘old people’ because the former carries some respect around it. The opposite can also be the case when we dismiss a younger person with claims of inexperience.

- You also need to build credibility with your audience by being ethical. Being ethical means you communicate only the truth. For example, if you did not attain a certain percentage that you promised (like to raise literacy levels to 75%), do not falsify data to impress the donor. If the truth were found, you would lose credibility and trust is difficult to regain once lost. Being ethical also means not succumbing to plagiarism (presenting someone else’s work as though it were yours). Plagiarism can be deliberate or not, and in the case of the latter, the onus is on you to cite your sources properly and carefully, write a reference list, paraphrase, and so on to avoid it.

Bovee and Thill (2012) propose the inclusion of the following characteristics that can help you build credibility:

- Honesty
- Objectivity
- Awareness of audience needs
- Credentials, knowledge and expertise
- Endorsement

- Performance
- Sincerity

So, state your communication with authority to convince the reader of your credibility. Words like ‘hope’ and ‘trust’ as the authors demonstrate below, can erode your credibility:

**Wrong:** We trust that this recommendation will be helpful.

**Right:** We are pleased to make this recommendation.

Remember, it takes a long time to build credibility, which, however, can collapse like a stack of cards. People take great exception to issues of trust and may be unforgiving if your company is dishonest, so spend time developing and sustaining credible communication.

- Building positive relationships with your audience involves projecting your company’s preferred image in your writing. Every company desires to create and maintain a certain image that endears it to its publics. Mistakes like grammatical errors, plagiarism, carelessly done work, and so on impact negatively on a company’s image. Hence, most companies have developed communication style guides for harmony.
- Style is about the words you choose to use and how you use those words to develop sentences and paragraphs. It creates an overall impression in your writing, and choosing the right words will create a positive or even colorful message. You also need to ensure to use a conversational tone and appropriate voice. Tone can either be formal or informal, and you need to determine the appropriate time for its use. For example, using a formal tone with colleagues daily may make you sound stiff. On the other hand, unnecessary jokes, pompous language, intimate language, bragging, etc. can cause problems with your clients who are better served by a formal tone.

Bovee and Thill (2012) advocate for the use of plain language, which represents simplicity and an unadorned style that allows easier understanding, thus showing respect to the audience. Plain language can help companies be more productive and more profitable because employees will spend less time trying to figure out confusing messages. Look at the example below by Bovee and Thill (2012):

We can continually exist to synergistically supply value-added deliverables such that we may continue to proactively maintain enterprise-wide data to stay competitive in tomorrow’s world.

- The type of verb you select affects the tone of your writing. Look at the following sentences:

**Active:** Myra sent the boss an email.

**Passive:** An email was sent to the boss by Myra.

In the first sentence, the emphasis is on the subject ‘Myra’ who performs the action, while the object ‘the boss’ receives the action. In the second sentence, the subject ‘an email’ receives the

action. The active voice is preferred because it represents strong, livelier, interesting, direct and easy to read writing. The passive voice on the other hand is cumbersome, longer and vague. However, there are cases when the passive voice may be the better option, for example, in diplomacy where you want to avoid pinpointing anybody.

### **1.1.3 Compose the message**

I have always advised people to just write without worrying about mistakes. This is out of personal experience. When we set out to write, we think it's a difficult task and don't quite know how to begin. Usually, the beginning is tough, but once you put pen to paper, the ideas start flowing, and you don't want to stop to correct this and that. Just continue writing. The revision and corrections will come later.

You must have heard of writer's block (where the mind stops producing words to write). This should not deter you. There is plenty of advice out there on how to overcome mental block, such as stopping and listening to music, jogging, watching TV, jogging your brain, playing games, etc. You can even stop writing and spend the time working on the non-text sections of your writing like videos, podcast, tables, charts, etc.

In composing the message, avoid wrong word usage or making grammatical mistakes because they touch on your credibility. It shows you lack knowledge of grammatical rules or that you lack respect for your audience. The audience may also decide not to trust information from a company that appears uninformed.

Choosing powerful words entails understanding denotation (literal, dictionary meaning) and connotation (implicit, associative meaning). We are advised to be careful how we use connotations because they may carry positive, neutral or negative meanings. For example, 'aged' may mean 'vintage' (positive), 'old' (neutral) or 'decrepit' (negative). We also need to balance between abstract and concrete words. Abstract words tend to be intellectual, bookish and philosophical while concrete terms refer to tangible things you can see, touch and see. Bovee and Thill (2012) advise that we minimize on abstractions, and instead create a blend. For instance, state the concept in abstract terms, then follow it up with concrete terms like 'sizable loss' to an actual figure that represents the loss.

Choosing powerful words also involves finding words that communicate well such as choosing familiar words, avoiding clichés and buzzwords and using jargon carefully. Find examples of these on page 159 from Bovee and Thill (2012). Further, consult the thesaurus and dictionaries as much as possible. You can also visit [www.visuwords.com](http://www.visuwords.com).

Composing the message also involves writing effective sentences. You can do this by choosing from the four types of sentences: simple, complex, compound and compound-complex. You can also have a healthy mix of these sentences because too many simple sentences make it difficult to comprehend relationships in those sentences, while only having a series of compound, complex, and compound-complex sentences makes your writing a mouthful and difficult to understand.

Composing the message involves creating unified, coherent paragraphs by using topic sentences, supporting sentences and transitions/connectors.

Additionally, you can use technology to compose and shape your message. Read more about these from page 174-175 from Bovee and Thill (2012).

### **1.1.3 Complete**

#### **1.1.3.1 Revise the message**

The ‘Complete’ phase involves revising, producing, proofreading and distributing the message. When you revise the message, evaluate the content and review its readability. Does the content contain exactly what you want to say? Readability means that the report is clear, concise, and error-free; that the reader will not have trouble reading the document. It’s imperative that you edit and rewrite the words, sentences or paragraphs for conciseness and clarity.

#### **1.1.3.2 Produce the message**

Producing the document means checking that the design elements have been used effectively for a clean and professional layout. For instance, the figures and tables are well-arranged, are the right size, labeled and correspond to the content they refer to.

#### **1.1.3.3 Proofread the message**

Completing the message also means proofreading. In journalism, we call it the last line of defense, hence ought to be undertaken carefully. In proofreading, one corrects the errors in layout, grammar, spelling and mechanics. For instance, check to ensure that all the punctuation marks have been used correctly; there is not a single misspelt world; and that there are no errors in the layout and visuals.

#### **1.1.1.4 Distribute the message**

Distributing the message is the last step and it simply means to deliver your information to Donor A using the vehicle you chose at the beginning. In our case, we chose a report, so we must deliver a report that is informative, credible, and professional to our funding partner. Some vehicles like reports contain other files and documents often attached, such as questionnaires used in a research, maps, video, audio files, etc. All these should be submitted together successfully.

### **1.2 Homework**

Read Bovee and Thill (2012) from page 124- 210 and attempt as many exercises as you can. Then discuss the possible answers with your seatmate.

### **References**

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