

Better
Business
English

How to
Write
Effective
**Business
English**

The essential toolkit for composing
powerful letters, e-mails and more,
for today's business needs

Fiona Talbot



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Fiona Talbot



London and Philadelphia

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First published in Great Britain and the United States in 2009 by Kogan Page Limited

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120 Pentonville Road
London N1 9JN
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www.koganpage.com

525 South 4th Street, #241
Philadelphia PA 19147
USA

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ISBN 978 0 7494 5520 0

British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data

A CIP record for this book is available from the British Library.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Talbot, Fiona.

How to write effective business English : the essential toolkit for composing powerful letters, emails and more, for today's business needs / Fiona Talbot. -- 1st ed.

p. cm.

ISBN 978-0-7494-5520-0

1. English language--Business English--Study and teaching 2. Business communication--Study and teaching 3. English language--Textbooks for foreign speakers. 4. Business writing. I. Title.

PE1479.B87T35 2009

808'.06665--dc22

2009016900

Typeset by JS Typesetting Ltd, Porthcawl, Mid Glamorgan
Printed and bound in India by Replika Press Pvt Ltd

Dedication

I would like to thank my family, friends and clients for their support throughout my career. It is a wonderful fact that, by sharing experiences and lessons learnt, we all learn from each other, to our mutual benefit.

Special thanks must go to my dear husband, Colin. I would like to dedicate this series to him – and to my son, Alexander, and my daughter, Hannah-Maria. And to my mother, Lima.

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Preface

How this series works – and what it is about

There are three books in the series, designed to improve your confidence and competence in writing English for global business. They are designed on three levels, to fit in with the three stages in the business cycle.

My central philosophy is this: writing business English effectively for international trade is about creating clear, concise messages and avoiding verbosity. But the fewer words you write, the more important it is that you get them right.

Book I: How to Write Effective Business English

This book assumes that you know English to intermediate level and provides effective guidelines. It deals with real-life

scenarios, to give you answers that even your boss may not know.

It uses a system that also gives you the building blocks to take you to the next level in the cycle of success, set out in Book 2.

Book 2: Make an Impact with your Written English

This book will take you a further step forward in your executive career.

You will learn how to use written word power to promote and sell your messages, as well as ‘brand you’. You will learn how to make your mark writing English, whether for PR, presentations, reports, meeting notes, manuals etc. And for cyberspace, where English is today’s predominant language.

You will learn how to deal with pressing challenges that you need to be aware of. And how to write English that impresses, so that you get noticed for the right reasons.

Book 3: Executive Writing Skills for Managers

This book deals with the English business writing you need at the top of your career and focuses on writing as a key business tool.

It gives amazingly valuable tips on harmonizing the English that you and your teams use (for example, for evaluation performance) – tips that you quite simply have not seen before. It also introduces the concept of Word Power Skills 2.0 – for unified English business writing that keeps everyone in the loop.

The importance of business English today

Increasingly, English language is the language of choice used in multinational gatherings. It may not be the predominant language of the group, but is the most likely to be understood by the majority – at least at a basic level – so becomes a powerful tool for communication and inclusion.

You may have to unlearn some things you learnt at school

Writing English for business today is highly unlikely to be the same as the writing you were taught at school or university. Apart from getting your punctuation and grammar right, the similarities often end there.

This series works with the business cycle

The series highlights the essential role business writing plays at every stage in your career path – and alongside the cycle of business in general. Figures 1 and 2 show how this works. I describe below how it relates to the three phases.

Phase one: joining an organization or setting up your own business

English business writing needs at the outset of your career: a CV, letter, job application, start-up plan or business plan, routine business writing tasks.

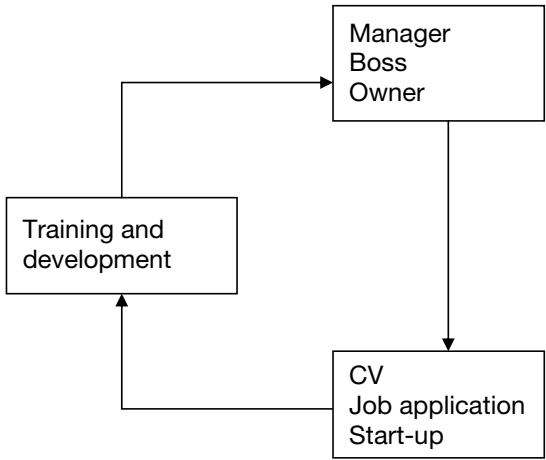


Figure 1 The business cycle: from the individual’s perspective

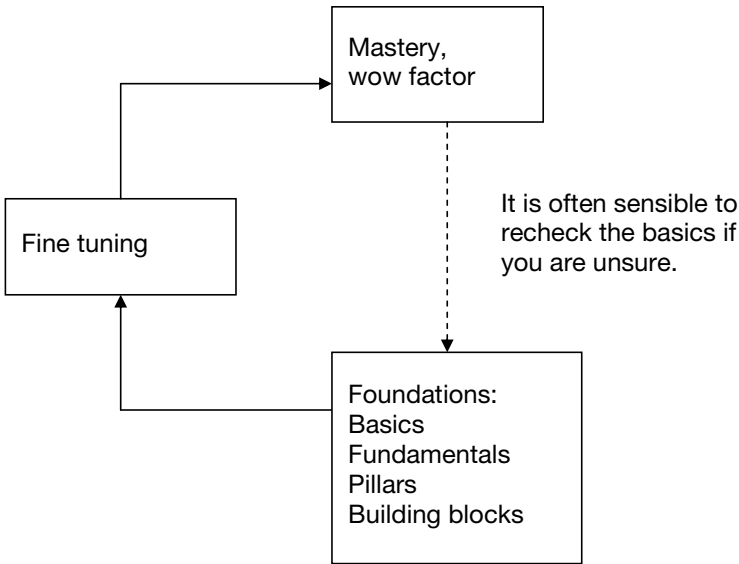


Figure 2 The business cycle: from the business writing perspective

As you start your career, you need to understand how to get the basics right. You need to understand how to write correctly, how spelling, punctuation and grammar matter. You will not get to the next phase in your career – the pitching phase – without getting the basics right.

Phase two: you develop through knowing how to harness word power

Your developing English business writing needs; making impact in everything you write in English; personal self-development or other training.

Great business English writing will generate ideas and sparks that capture readers' attention and take your career forward. Powerful writing can sell your proposals so well – weak writing can do the exact opposite.

Phase three: mastery of written word power enables you to shine and lead

English business writing needs at the height of your career: mastery of written word power required for leadership, to shine as a manager, boss and/or owner.

You do not get to the top by blending in. You have to build bridges, shape outcomes and lead through word power. You need to express your ideas in writing – so use business English that makes readers want to buy in.

The series is an easy, indispensable, comprehensive guide

It is an essential tool kit to keep by your desk or take on your travels. Dip in and out of it as and when you need the answers it provides, to help you shine in all stages of your career.

So each of the three books aligns with the business cycle and supports your development and perfection of writing English for business to gain the competitive edge – because the development of the written word goes hand in hand with, or even is, the business cycle itself.

Get results!

Just take a look at my methods, focus on the elements that apply to your business writing and make sure they become an intrinsic part of your real-life performance.

This series does not take you away from your job: it focuses on your job and uses word power as a free resource. All you have to do is harness this – and enjoy the benefits of immediate results and sustainable improvements.

Good luck on your journey to success!

Fiona Talbot
TQI Word Power Skills
www.wordpowerskills.com

Introduction

This book is an essential guide to keep with you, by your desk or on your travels. It provides a wealth of answers to help you impress.

Look on it as your introduction to being the best! By the time you reach the end, you will be more confident and more competent in writing English. You will be developing a key transferable skill, because English is the global business language of today.

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Why you need to write

Defining readers, customers and audience

Throughout this book I use the terms readers, target readership, customers and audience interchangeably. I use ‘customer’ both in its most common usage as a person who buys goods or services from a business, and in the broadest sense of signifying a person that you deal with in the course of your daily work. So the term applies just as much to internal colleagues, suppliers, those in the public sector etc as it does to those who are external buying consumers.

Your audience can be anyone and everyone

I use many practical examples and scenarios in this book that relate to standard sales or customer pitches. Because we are all consumers in our private lives, we can easily relate to and understand these examples. What I would like to stress is that the concepts apply equally to every scenario in the list that follows. Think of lobbying; think of politics; think of charities; think of fundraising; think of promotions.

Why we write in business

People sometimes think of business writing as a ‘soft’ skill. In fact, you may see communication generally classified as a soft skill, as opposed to the ‘hard’ skills of finance, law, IT etc. But I think this description is misleading. After all, people drive processes. And how do they do this? By communication. The label ‘soft’ can give the impression that business writing is an easy option, which it certainly is not. Business writing can impact on the whole business cycle; it can win business, it can lose business and it can communicate the framework by which results can be achieved.

This is why, at the outset of my training workshops, I always take time to ask people why they actually write in their job and what outcomes they seek, individually and as teams. I ask my clients to write down why they need to write in their businesses. And the following aspects of business writing always come top of the list:

- to inform or record;
- to cascade information;

- for compliance;
- to seek information;
- to write specifications;
- to achieve a standard;
- to write reports with recommendations;
- to persuade;
- to promote services.

Usually far lower on the list (and sometimes only when prompted by me, on the lines of ‘Aren’t there any other reasons?’), they record such things as:

- to engage interest and involve;
- to get the right results;
- to sell;
- to support customers;
- to improve life for customers;
- to eat, breathe and live our vision.

Notice how the most inspirational aspects of writing are the ones that are listed as an afterthought.

Why is this? Maybe companies need to focus more on how powerful business writing can be and how their employees need to think creatively about how best to harness this virtually free resource. Think about what writing really means for your company and which aspects of your business it covers.

Readers judge writing for what it is

There is no doubt: the written word is unforgiving. When I read, I judge what I see written for what it is. If I am looking for products or services, what I see can be what I think I get. If it is your writing, I will judge both you as an individual and your company on the basis of how you expressed yourself at that point in time.

It is amazing how many written messages can lead to confusion and misunderstanding – even when a company is writing in its native language. Poor writing can also lead to customer complaints. At the least, these complicate relations with customers – even though we may still be able to convert a complaint to a positive experience.

The worst scenarios are where customers walk away from the companies concerned, and tell others about the bad experience they have received or think they have received. That is the impact that ineffective writing can have. It becomes quite clear that if, as customers, we do not understand or like what supplier A is writing, we prefer to buy from supplier B, who cares enough about our needs to get the message right. And if this takes less time, so much the better.

No body language signals in writing

When we communicate face to face, people around us attach a lot of importance to the signals given by our body language. These are said to account for 55 per cent of the impact we make when giving a talk. Our voice can account for perhaps 38 per cent – and our words just 7 per cent.

This is because, in face to face communication, unlike writing, we do not need to focus just on words. We can ask if we are not sure what is being said. We can look for clues from the

speaker's facial expression or tone as to the gravity or levity of the subject matter. These will help our understanding and focus our attention (or not!).

But with writing, unless the writer is there in front of you, time will elapse before you can get the answers to any questions you have. That is, if you have the time or inclination to ask questions. At the very least, it means that writers need to think twice, spellcheck – in fact, double-check – that their words are saying what they mean them to say.

A state of flux

Business writing is in a state of flux. So is the way English is used in business, as I discuss in Chapter 3. One thing you will notice as a direct result is that business writing in English is becoming increasingly diverse in style. Different styles may even coexist within the same company. It can be bewildering for reader and writer alike. Generally speaking, the move in business English writing is not only towards more 'people' words, but also towards more informality.

This can be a special challenge for cultures that place great emphasis on hierarchy, where people of senior grades are treated with noticeably more deference and respect than those in junior grades. Informality can also be a challenge for nationalities where there is a distinction between a familiar and a formal form of the pronoun 'you'. As an example, French makes a distinction between '*tu*' (informal) and '*vous*' (formal), as does German with '*du*' and '*Sie*'. Such cultures can try to compensate for this lack of distinction by writing more elaborately for what they see as the 'formal you' as opposed to the 'informal you'. This does not necessarily work.

Your checklist for action

- Recognize writing as a fundamental skill for you as an individual and for your business.
- Develop and improve your writing at every opportunity throughout your career.
- Remember that English business writing – in its many forms – is your most common route to market. Be the best.

2

Defining business English

English is a major language of commercial communication. It is also the world's language of the internet and of global access to knowledge. Business English is the name given to the English used for dealing with business communication in English – though you will find many variants, as I will shortly explain. This can present unexpected problems unless you understand how to design your communication to give you the best chance of success, whatever the variety of business English used by your target audience.

‘Standard’ and ‘variant’ English

A particularly interesting fact is that there are more non-native speakers of English than native English speakers. As I write, the UK government estimates that more than 1 billion people

speak English, and projections indicate that by 2020 2 billion people worldwide will be learning or teaching English. So we can see that English is certainly no longer the preserve of the nation that gives the language its name. It belongs to no single culture; instead it is something that acts as a bridge across borders and cultures.

Years ago when I first worked abroad, I saw the commercial need to help multinationals seize the competitive edge in their use of English as a global business language. It was then that I realized how puzzled both foreigners and native English speakers can be by the way English is used. Often it is because non-native English speakers use it in unconventional ways. It is also often because people do not realize that UK or British English is not exactly the same as the many other variations of business English that exist. These include US or American English, Australian English, Caribbean English, Indian English, Irish English, Singapore English and South African English. You can see how extensive the list is.

Business communication is crucial to success. So if people are puzzled by that communication, this will have an adverse effect on results. We cannot pretend this does not matter, because getting the right messages out and receiving the right answers are the lifeblood of commercial success. I found it helped my clients communicate effectively cross-culturally when I showed them how to follow some norms of commonly accepted 'standard' English. This not only helped mutual comprehension but also secured buy-in to their business objectives, from internal as well as external customers.

So what is meant by 'standard' English? I use the expression to mean the English routinely described in mainstream English dictionaries and grammar books. To describe the many variants of English, such as those I have mentioned, is clearly outside the remit of this series. Naturally you and your company will know which you will wish to use at any one time. By and large, it is true to say that the standard English I

use throughout this book is likely to be intelligible to users of the other variants.

I do need to mention at the outset that, unless I indicate otherwise, the spelling and grammar used in the series are the UK English variety requested by my publishers, to follow their house style. One of the challenges in writing UK English is that there can be more than one correct way of spelling certain words. Just to list a few examples: recognize and recognise, minimize and minimise, judgment and judgement, e-mail and email can all be used correctly in UK English. Some people give explanations for these differences that are too simplistic, saying that ‘recognize’ indicates an American English spelling. But this is only part of the picture – and you will find more on variant spellings later in the book.

So there are times when I may refer to US English as well, where there are clearly divergent spellings or meanings. It is, however, beyond the remit of this series to highlight spelling and grammatical differences between UK and US English in comprehensive detail.

This observation takes me to my next point. Whenever we write and whatever we write, we must understand the conventions we need to follow, if we are to please our target readers. This has to be the best starting point from a business perspective. If necessary, explain at the outset the convention you are following, so that you avoid unfounded or unnecessary criticism. One thing is sure: if someone can find grounds for criticizing writing, they will. So steal their thunder and, if you are asked, be able to name not only which variant you are using but also why.

Do try to be consistent in this, because consistency in approach underpins a strong, quality-conscious corporate image. You undermine this if some people in your company use UK English spellcheck and grammar check and others use US English versions. It happens all the time, often without people realizing. Active decisions are needed here.

This series gives you practical help to succeed in opening doors to international trade by means of your writing. I focus on the successful experiences of companies who have used the methods I show. These users are both native and non-native speakers of English. This is because both groups share common problems when writing English for business. This may perhaps surprise you, as will the fact that the same solutions can apply.

Just as the series is not about ‘taking you back to school’, it is not even necessarily about gaining the proficiency of a native English speaker. As you have seen, I have already hinted that not all native speakers are proficient! Instead, the series is all about reaching the level of competence you need in order to succeed in everything you write. The objective is that you never need to feel insecure again. Quite the reverse: you will feel confident, simply by knowing what to do and how to do it. A large part of this new-found confidence will come from understanding how simply expressed facts are understood best and impress the most, even with complex subject matter.

The whole series reinforces messages (a proven way to help you learn) and uses a building-block approach. So if a topic is introduced in one book of the series, it may be approached from a different angle in another. It really is as simple as that. All you need is a systematic approach and willingness to succeed. If you are ready, let’s go!

Defining native and non-native English speakers

For ease of reference, when I refer to native English speakers I mean anyone who speaks any variety of English as their first language.

The ways in which non-native English speakers learn English can be categorized broadly as: English as an acquired language (EAL), English as a foreign language (EFL), English for speakers of other languages (ESOL), all of which are self-explanatory, and English as a second language (ESL). In the ESL category, learners are likely to be in a setting where the main or official language is English but their native tongue is not. It can be a confusing term when used to describe someone who is actually learning English as a third or fourth language, as can be the case.

There is some debate within academic circles as to which expression (or others) should be used. As this is not an academic but business-oriented book, I choose to use a different convention here. So throughout this book you will find that I use:

- the term native English (NE) speaker or writer to denote a person whose first language is English, and native English (NE) writing to refer to their writing;
- the term non-native English (non-NE) speaker or writer to denote a person whose first language is not English, and non-native English (non-NE) writing to refer to their writing.

Common problems with English for global business

The fact that English is used so extensively for global business yields quite a surprising result. It means that written business English will ultimately be directed more at a non-native English (non-NE) audience than at a native English audience. As well as there being different varieties of English, there are, in effect, sub-varieties directly caused by mixing English with