

Getting Down to Business

Writing Clear Corporate Correspondence

By Dianna Booher

Are you having trouble drafting an important letter? If so, you're not alone. When I ask participants in our writing workshops to list problems they encounter in letter writing, I most frequently hear "getting started" and "knowing exactly what I want to say." Effective letters and email don't just happen. They take thought and planning.

One of the most important keys in writing business letters is knowing the audience and writing to their uniqueness. Know their hot buttons—how best to inform, educate, or persuade them.

Vendors: Don't just say "no." Maintaining good relationships with vendors is crucial. You may not need a vendor today, but you may be on their doorstep begging next month. For example, suppose the quality of your current vendor's product declines, and you can't find a good part anywhere else.

Accordingly, always explain the reason for turning down a vendor in a positive and direct manner. For example, if the vendor's price is too high, explain that you've chosen another vendor for your project because new suppliers meet your budget and timeline.

Peers: Don't equate courtesy with vagueness. Be specific. When writing across department lines, people fear to sound too demanding. As a result, they become vague. For example, instead of writing, "I need this report by April 15," they write "I need this report ASAP." The peer's interpretation of "ASAP" may be very different from yours.

Be explanatory, not arbitrary.

Boss: Cut to the chase. Always state your bottom-line message first so that your reader doesn't have to read half-way through the letter to find its essence. For example, say, "I recommend that we purchase the XYZ software at the price quoted by Vendor X." Then explain the reasons for your recommendation. For example, "I have examined the software of Vendors X, Y, and Z, and I believe that Vendor X's product not only fits into our budget, but is also superior for the following reasons"

Your writing characterizes you in much the same way your voice does. Consider your own reaction to a phone call from someone you've never met. Your telephone-voice characterization of the person may be highly inaccurate, as you've probably discovered after meeting him or her in person. Nevertheless, most of us continue to jump to inaccurate conclusions. Make sure that people don't jump to invalid conclusions about your technical competence because of poorly written letters and emails.

Your writing is a reflection of your company's character on the page. Let's say you're communicating with a customer regarding the workings of a particular product. If your letter is disorganized and unclear, the customer may very well have doubts about both your product and your company. Consider the image you portray each time you hit the "send" button.

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Dianna Booher works with organizations to increase their productivity and effectiveness through better oral, written, interpersonal, and cross-functional communication. She is a keynote speaker and the author of more than 40 books (22 on communication) including The Voice of Authority, Booher's Rules of Business Grammar, Speak with Confidence, and Communicate with Confidence. Dianna is CEO of Booher Consultants, a communication training firm offering programs in presentations skills, business writing, and interpersonal communication.

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Successful Meetings Magazine named her to its list of “21 Top Speakers for the 21st Century.” Executive Excellence Publishing also named Dianna to its “Top 100 Thought Leaders” and “Top 100 Minds on Personal Development.” www.booher.com or call 800.342.6621.

For more on business writing, see E-Writing: 21st-Century Tools for Effective Communication (Simon & Schuster/Pocket Books) by Dianna Booher.