

## **Business Writing – Formal or Informal?**

### Understanding What Writing Style is Appropriate

If you want to candidly look at business writing, you need to consider two important goals of this type of work:

**First**, the paramount goal of business writing is to convey appropriately, accurately and efficiently information in a business or professional setting.

**Second**, while it may not be the primary goal of business writing, it nonetheless is important: Business writing is a means through which you can establish your own professional credibility and work to advance in your own career.

In order to satisfy both of these goals and objectives, you need to make certain that you are undertaking your business writing in an appropriate fashion. One of the primary considerations that you need to keep in mind is understanding and appreciating whether a formal or an informal writing style is more appropriate for the circumstances. Through this article, you are provided an overview of which style of writing – formal or informal – is most suitable to your own business and professional circumstances.

### A Brief History of Business Writing

Over the course of many generations, there was only one acceptable way to communicate in a business setting: formally. Business writing historically always was undertaken in a formal style. An informal approach to business or professional writing never was unacceptable – even if the parties to the business communication knew each other well.

Beginning in the late 1960s and carrying forth into the 1970s, there was a strong reaction to the constraints of formal business writing. During this era, a literal backlash occurred in many professions and businesses and in many different areas around the world.

At this time, formal business writing nearly became unacceptable in many locales and with many businesses. Employees were encouraged to write informally. The fact is, however, that this revolt against formal business writing was rather short lived.

By the dawn of the 1980s, a sort of détente was reached between the advocates of formal writing and those that preferred a more informal approach to business communication. As will be discussed in a moment, this status quo has carried forth essentially to this day.



## Understanding Your Business or Professional Niche

By the 1980s, when considering the debate between proponents of formal and proponents of informal writing, something of an agreement was reached as to when formal and when informal writing would be deemed acceptable. In this regard, a primary consideration was made to the particular business, profession or industry in which the business writing was being undertaken.

By way of example, in the legal field, generally speaking formal writing is considered to be the appropriate standard. However, if business writing is to be undertaken in the advertising arena, a more informal approach is considered to be more acceptable. (As will be discussed in a moment, no matter the industry, attention must also be paid to relationships when it comes to selecting a formal or an informal writing style.)

The fundamental factor is to closely consider the industry in which you are a part of when it comes to making a decision as to how formal or how informal you can be in your business communications and writing. You need to be aware of and conform to this industry or business related standards and practices in order to ensure that you are writing and communicating in an effective manner.

## Understanding Relationships

As mentioned a moment ago, relationships are also important considerations when it comes to determining whether a formal or whether a more informal writing style is appropriate. For example, generally speaking it is more appropriate for a superior to communicate more informally with his or her subordinate. In other words, the boss can be more chatty with his or her staff. However, when it comes to communication from a subordinate to a superior, a more formal approach is the best course. (Perhaps the primary exception to this rule is when a superior invites a subordinate to in fact be more informal in such communications.)

Another relationship that needs to be closely examined when it comes to determining writing style is that with clients or customers. Once again, the industry in which you are involved will dictate the style of writing to be employed. In addition, if you have a more established relationship with a particular client or customer you can ease up on formality over time. However, in the final analysis, when there is a question as to how you should approach a client or customer when it comes to a business related communication, you would be best served erring on the side of being more formal.

## Understanding Topicality

A final consideration to bear in mind when it comes to formal versus informal writing is the topic of communication that is being transmitted. On some level, this consideration even transcends industry and relationship. Topicality is a primary consideration when it comes to determining whether a formal or an informal style is most appropriate.

For example, if you are charged with preparing a memorandum for the annual company picnic, writing



such a communication in a formal style would be wholly out of place. On the other hand, if you are charged with writing to a client about a pending legal problem, using an informal style in such a communication would be equally misplaced.

In short, in determining the style of writing to employ – formal or informal – when it comes to a business communication, you need to pay attention to and examine the topic that will be discussed within the confines of the communication itself.

### Don't Go Off Point

In your effort to strive for formality or informality, as the case may be and require, do not venture off the point or subject of the communication. In many instances, when a writer is trying to adapt to a particular writing style, he or she will add materials within a document or memorandum in an effort to conform to a particular style. In the end, this extraneous material will serve no purpose and will only unduly lengthen a communication for no true purpose.

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