

The Seven Traits of Effective Business Writing

What makes writing effective? Ask that question, and you'll receive a hundred different answers—clear sentences, correct spelling, good details, a professional voice, no dropped words, nice-looking letterhead, no logical errors, a great anecdote. . . . Effective writing is subjective, right?

Wrong. The hundreds of things that make writing effective are summed up in just seven traits. Here is the trait-based profile of writing that works:

The Traits of Writing

Ideas (developing and supporting a strong main point)



Organization (arranging your ideas in the best order)



Voice (addressing your audience effectively)



Words (choosing the best nouns, verbs, and modifiers)



Sentences (using smooth-reading sentences)



Correctness (following the rules for language use)

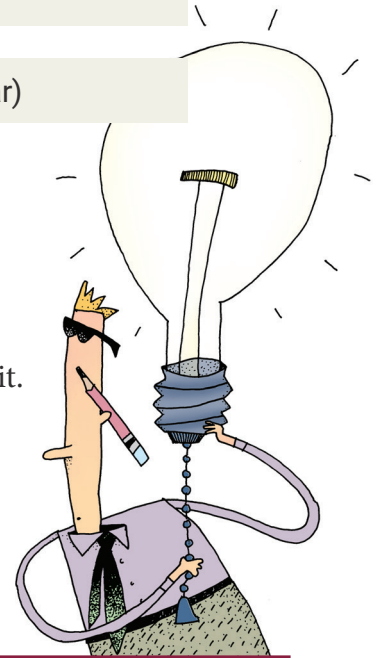


Design (using an easy-to-read format that makes ideas clear)

How Can the Seven Traits Help Me?

You can use the seven traits in four main ways:

- To **guide writing**, focusing on the first two traits as you plan, the top three as you draft, the top five as you revise, and the final two as you edit.
- To **diagnose problems**, helping you pinpoint a specific trait that needs improvement.
- To **discover solutions**, matching each problem to a clear remedy.
- To **discuss writing** with others, using a common language.



Write for Business

Trait 1: Ideas

Effective ideas begin with a clear main point—a sentence that names your topic and expresses your purpose (your reason for writing about it). Construct a clear main point by following this formula:



To support your main point, you need to provide details that clearly explain it. You should use different types of details for different reasons in your writing:

Type of Detail	Reason	Example
Use facts and statistics	to prove something.	The current system requires callers to wait through six options before they hear the feature that handles 90 percent of calls: the catalog-request service.
Use sensory details	to engage the reader.	The “on hold” music is too loud, it bristles with static, and it loops abruptly in the middle of a trumpet solo.
Use anecdotes	to connect to life.	Once, our president’s wife was waiting on hold when the system hung up on her.
Use quotations	to appeal to authority.	President Blastovich said, “We need to reconsider our public face, and our phone system is an important part of that public face.”
Use definitions	to explain terms.	We could provide service 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, if we hired an off-site call center with an automated system capable of understanding speech.
Use predictions	to imagine the future.	If we update our phone system, our customer satisfaction rating should rise, as should the number of catalogs sent and orders received.

Qualify Your Ideas

Your main ideas and support should be plausible. Overly positive or negative words (such as *best*, *worst*, or *never*) make statements hard to prove and details hard to believe. Words and phrases like those listed below can qualify your ideas, lending credence to them.

almost	many	often	tends to
frequently	maybe	probably	typically
likely	might	some	usually

Trait 2: Logical Organization

Before you begin writing, consider how your reader will respond to your message. Then choose either a direct or an indirect organizational approach.

Most Messages

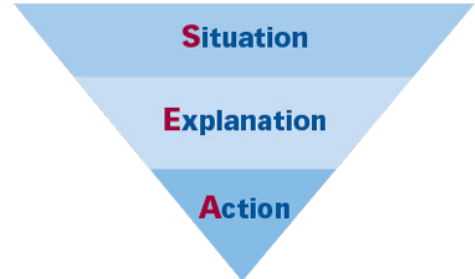
If your reader is likely to respond to your message as good or neutral news, be direct. Use the **SEA** formula:

Situation + Explanation + Action.

Situation: Start with your main point (topic and purpose).

Explanation: Support the main point with key details.

Action: Let the reader know what to do with the information.



Bad-News Messages

If your reader will likely be unhappy or angry with your message, be indirect. Use the **BEBE** formula:

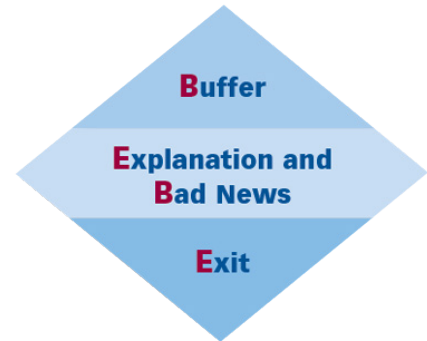
Buffer + Explanation and Bad News + Exit.

Buffer: Use a neutral statement to connect with the reader.

Explanation: Build toward the bad news.

Bad News: State the bad news honestly (your main point).

Exit: Establish the future relationship you want.



Persuasive Messages

When your reader may be indifferent or even resistant to your message, be indirect. Use the **AIDA** formula:

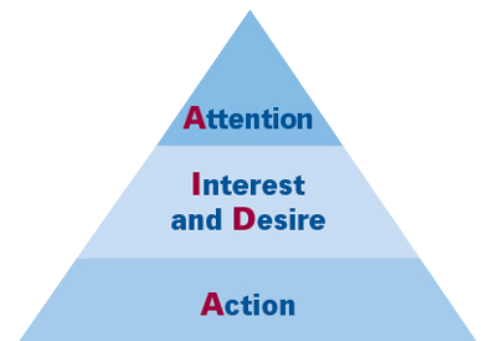
Attention + Interest and Desire + Action.

Attention: Grab readers' attention.

Interest: Build curiosity about your position.

Desire: Connect your position to readers' needs.

Action: Inspire your readers to take specific action (your main point).



Trait 3: Voice

Voice in speech or writing reveals a wealth of information about each part of the communication situation, as shown in the following chart.

<p>1. Sender: Voice reveals personality and position. Business-like voice is positive and professional.</p>
<p>2. Message: Voice reveals attitude about the main point. Business-like voice is confident and in control.</p>
<p>3. Medium: Voice reveals the sender’s mastery of the medium. Business-like voice is natural.</p>
<p>4. Receiver: Voice reveals the sender’s relationship with the receiver. Business-like voice is courteous.</p>
<p>5. Context: Voice reflects the history of the situation. Business-like voice is engaged and practical.</p>

Most often, business writing should use a semiformal voice—natural and easy for readers to comprehend. But some topics or audiences call for a formal or an informal voice.

Tone	Characteristics	Example
<p>Formal</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • messages to some people outside your company • bad-news messages with legal implications 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • No contractions • Few personal pronouns • Serious, objective tone • Specific terminology 	<p>The goal of <i>Write for Business</i> is to help businesspeople become better writers and communicators.</p>
<p>Semiformal</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • messages to coworkers and equals • familiar people outside the company 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Occasional contractions • Personal pronouns • Conversational, welcoming • Terminology accessible to a general audience 	<p>Today’s business environment requires you to communicate quickly and easily with a global audience, and our materials will help you do so.</p>
<p>Informal</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • lists, questions • emails and memos to close colleagues • messages to close friends 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Frequent contractions and personal pronouns • Appropriate humor • Some jargon, slang 	<p>Hey JT, Could you please make 12 copies of the stipends report for the finance meeting Thursday a.m.? See ya then! —Craig</p>

Trait 4: Words

Business writing doesn't need big words—just precise ones. A precise word is fresh, clear, energetic, fair, and respectful. Precise words express your meaning in the most direct way. Use these tips to incorporate precise words into your business writing.

- **Replace or clarify general words.** Choose specific nouns, vivid verbs, and strong modifiers.
- **Rewrite unprofessional expressions.** Slang terms and clichés weaken your writing.
- **Avoid “business English.”** Use plain English instead of overly technical or trendy words.
- **Use fair, respectful language.** People want respect, and it's your job to demonstrate it.
- **Eliminate wordiness.** Cut unneeded words and irrelevant information.

Wordy	Concise
advance planning	planning
a majority of	most
are of the opinion that	believe
ask the question	ask
assembled together	assembled
at the conclusion of	after/following
at the present time	now
based on the fact that	because
both together	together
close proximity	close
combine together	combine
completely unanimous	unanimous
connect together	connect
consensus of opinion	consensus
despite the fact that	although
due to the fact that	because
during the course of	during
end result	result
few in number	few
filled to capacity	filled
final conclusion	conclusion
final outcome	outcome
first and foremost	first/foremost
for the purpose of	for
for the reasons that	because

Wordy	Concise
free of charge	free
in connection with	about
in light of the fact that	since
in order to	to
in spite of the fact that	although
in the vast majority of	in most
in view of the fact that	because
it is often the case that	often
it is our opinion	we believe
joint cooperation	cooperation
join together	join
main essentials	essentials
make reference to	refer to
meet together	meet
mutual cooperation	cooperation
on a daily basis	daily
on the grounds that	because
over again	again
personal opinion	opinion
pertaining to	about
present status	status
prior to	before
repeat again	repeat
until such time as	until
with regard to	about

Trait 5: Sentences

Sentences should vary to create a pleasing rhythm. Try these tips for creating variety:

- **Vary beginnings:** Start with an introductory word, phrase, or clause.
- **Vary lengths:** Use long, medium, and short sentences.
- **Vary types:** Use statements, questions, and commands.

Sentence Types

A statement tells something about a person, a place, a thing, or an idea.	The fourth-quarter earnings report has improved.
A question requests information from the reader or listener.	Does the report reflect the company's new marketing effort?
A command starts with a verb and tells people what to do, using the understood subject <i>you</i> .	Review the report in detail.
An exclamation expresses emotion or surprise.	This is a great report!
A conditional shows that one circumstance depends on another.	If the first-quarter earnings continue to improve, we should reinvest.

Sentence Combining

When sentences are short and choppy, you can improve your writing by combining them. Remove the repeated bits and reword the rest as a single sentence.

Choppy: We made a bid. It was on November 6. Rankin has not responded yet.
Combined: Rankin has not yet responded to the bid we made on November 6.

Sentence Expanding

If a sentence lacks information, expand it using the 5 W's and H. Answer the questions *who?* *what?* *where?* *when?* *why?* and *how?* and insert the answers into the sentence.

Uninformative: The bid was made.

Who made the bid? **What** was the bid about? **Where** was the bid made? **When** was the bid made? **Why** was the bid made? **How** was the bid made?

Expanded: On November 6, Devlin Call Center emailed a bid to Rankin Industries, offering its voice-recognition service to provide Rankin with customer service 24 hours a day, 7 days a week.

Transitions and Linking Words

Transition words and phrases act as road signs for readers, signaling how ideas are linked. Note how the different words and phrases below connect ideas in different ways.

Words That Show Location

above	behind	by	near	throughout
across	below	down	off	to the right
along	beneath	in back of	on top of	under
among	beside	in front of	onto	with
around	between	inside	outside	within
away from	beyond	into	over	without

Words That Show Time

about	before	later	soon	tomorrow
after	during	meanwhile	then	until
afterward	finally	next	third	when
again	first	next week	till	yesterday
as soon as	immediately	second	today	

Words That Compare Things (Show Similarities)

also	in the same way	likewise
as	like	similarly

Words That Contrast Things (Show Differences)

although	however	on the one hand	still
but	in contrast	on the other hand	yet
even though	nevertheless	otherwise	

Words That Emphasize a Point

again	importantly	most	to emphasize	truly
for this reason	in fact	the main point	to repeat	

Words That Conclude, Summarize, Recommend

all in all	because	in conclusion	therefore
as a result	finally	in summary	to sum up

Trait 6: Correctness

An error-free document reflects well on the writer and avoids distracting the reader. Watch for these errors:

Sentence fragment: Make sure each sentence has a subject, a verb, and a complete thought.

Error: Because lightning damaged our server. **All** of our shipments were delayed.

Corrected: Because lightning damaged our server, **all** of our shipments were delayed.

Dangling/misplaced modifier: Place modifying words and phrases next to the words they modify.

Error: **I've provided** contact information for three colleagues **in the attachment**.

Corrected: **In the attachment, I've provided** contact information for three colleagues.

Comma splice: Do not join two sentences with only a comma. Use a semicolon, or use a comma and a conjunction (*and, but, or, nor, for, so, yet*).

Error: Matt wrote to Mrs. Jensen, **the** issue is resolved.

Corrected: Matt wrote to Mrs. Jensen, **and the** issue is resolved.

Missing comma in a compound sentence: Place a comma right before the conjunction (*and, but, or, nor, for, so, yet*) in a compound sentence.

Error: The shipment went out today **and** Sara will report when it arrives.

Corrected: The shipment went out today, **and** Sara will report when it arrives.

Missing comma after introductory phrase: Place a comma after long introductory phrases.

Error: Because of the hurricane **we** backed up all of our servers.

Corrected: Because of the hurricane, **we** backed up all of our servers.

Nonparallel construction: Make sure items in a series have the same form.

Error: Lynn **explained the problem, the solution, and she thanked Mr. Franklin**.

Corrected: Lynn **explained the problem, offered a solution, and thanked Mr. Franklin**.

Pronoun agreement error: Make sure pronouns agree with the words they replace.

Error: **Each client** has a right to track **their** order.

Corrected: **All clients** have a right to track **their** orders.

Verb agreement error: Use singular verbs with singular subjects, and use plural verbs with plural subjects.

Error: **She and he agrees**.

Correct: **She and he agree**.

Usage error: Make sure that easily confused words are used correctly.

Error: The team **sighted to** reasons for the delay.

Corrected: The team **cited two** reasons for the delay.

Trait 7: Design

Effective page design is attractive and easy to read, and it reflects positively on the writer and the organization. When designing a document, do so with purpose. The form that words take on a page should relate to the function of the words.

The diagram illustrates the design of a memo. On the left, seven callout boxes are connected by a vertical line to the corresponding parts of a memo on the right. The memo is titled "Memo" and includes a header with "Date:", "To:", "From:", and "Subject:" fields. The main body of the memo is divided into sections: "The Problem", "The Solution", and "Next Steps". The "Next Steps" section contains a bulleted list. The memo concludes with a request for feedback.

Format shows what kind of message you are sending.

Fonts make text readable.

Paragraphs group related ideas together.

Headings help readers navigate through your message.

Lists show that ideas are parallel.

White space breaks text into digestible chunks.

Memo

Date: January 22, 2020

To: David Shapfield

From: Tasha Jones

Subject: Centralizing Deliveries

To ensure prompt delivery of packages, I propose that we centralize our shipping procedure.

The Problem

Currently, couriers such as UPS, FedEx, and DHL deliver to the shipping department, while the USPS (United States Postal Service) delivers to the receptionist. This division means that some important packages are delivered to the front desk and may take a day or more to reach the shipping department.

The Solution

If USPS deliveries also came to the shipping department, all deliveries would be tracked in a central location. Also, because the mailroom is part of the shipping department, the mailroom could ensure prompt delivery of all envelopes and packages.

Next Steps

If you would like me to make this change, I will

- contact the USPS to change our delivery point,
- contact the receptionists to inform them of the change,
- coordinate the switchover in the mailroom and shipping department, and
- monitor the new approach, reporting the results to you.

Please let me know if you would like me to make this change.