Writing Skills

Many people are intimidated by writing. Even so, there are times when writing is the best – and sometimes the only – way to communicate and to get your message across. This document contains useful hints on what to consider when writing letters or other documents.

Write With Necessary Caution...

When writing, be mindful of the fact that once something is in written form, it cannot be taken back. Communicating in this way is more concrete than verbal communications, with less room for error and even less room for mistakes, so you must take care to consider not only the message but also spelling, grammar, punctuation, writing style and actual wording.

Technology provides a great deal of assistance when writing a memo, letter or report, because most software has reliable tools that can check and correct misspelled words and incorrect grammar use. But always remember that these tools are not foolproof and you must use them in conjunction with, and not instead of, your own knowledge in this area.

The Importance of "Style"...

Some of the most basic tips to remember when writing include:

- Avoid the use of slang words
- Try not to use abbreviations (unless appropriately defined)
- Steer away from the use of symbols (such as ampersands [&])
- Clichés should be avoided, or at the very least, used with caution
- Brackets are used to play down words or phrases
- Dashes are generally used for emphasis
- Great care should ALWAYS be taken to spell the names of people and companies correctly
- Numbers should be expressed as words when the number is less than 10 or is used to start a sentence (example: Ten years ago, my brother and I…). The number 10, or anything greater than 10, should be expressed as a figure (example: My brother has 13 Matchbox cars.)
- Quotation marks should be placed around any directly quoted speech or text and around titles of publications.
- Keep sentences short

While the above tips cover the most common mistakes made when writing letters, memos and reports, they do not cover everything you need to know to ensure your written communications are accurate and understood.

Many sources available to assist with writing style, including Oxford's own Writing and Style Guide (produced by the Public Affairs Directorate. Another popular and very useful guide is "The Elements of Style", by Strunk and White, which is clear, concise and easy to use.

Letter Writing Hints

When writing letters, it is best to address the letter to an individual. When beginning the letter with a personal name ("Dear Ms Lau…") you should end it with an appropriate closing, usually "Yours sincerely". If you cannot obtain an individual's name and have to start with "Dear Sir", "Dear Madam" or even "To whom it may concern", then you should end a letter with "Yours faithfully".

For normal business letters, your letter should start with an overall summary, showing in the first paragraph why the letter is relevant to the reader. It's not a good practice to make the reader go past the first paragraph to find out why the letter was sent to them.

The body of the letter needs to explain the reason for the correspondence, including any relevant background and current information. Make sure the information flows logically, ensuring you are making your points effectively.

The closing of the letter is the final impression you leave with the reader. End with an action point, such as 'I will call you later this week to discuss this further'.

Report Writing Hints

When writing a report or a committee paper or a briefing paper, as with a letter, you need to have a structure which helps the reader.

Most reports have a three-part format. A traditional approach will use:

- Outline – providing a summary of the issue and options
- Argument – covering the options in detail
- Conclusion – making a recommendation

Oxford committee papers now tend to follow the following format:

- Summary – outlining the situation
- Decision required – setting out the options, the decision required and the timescale
- Further information – giving background detail which will inform the decision-making

Remember to use clear, concise language and objective prose; passive rather than active sentences are often helpful in this context.

Finally, for the sake of your readers and of the environment, try to ensure that your reports are a maximum of two sides of A4 (plus appendices if necessary)

The Importance of Careful Proofing

Perhaps the most important thing to remember when writing for work purposes – whether you are writing a letter, a memo, a report or even an email – is to check it thoroughly when it is completed. Even when you think it is exactly what you want, read it one more time.

Use the grammar and spell check on your computer, paying very close attention to every word highlighted. Do not place total faith on your computer. Instead, you should have both a printed dictionary and thesaurus nearby to double-check everything your computers editing tools highlight, as these tools are not foolproof.

When checking your written communications make sure the document is clear and concise. Is there anything in the written communication that could be misinterpreted? Does it raise unanswered questions or fail to make the point you need to get across?

Can you cut down on the number of words used? For instance, don't use 20 words when you can use 10. While you do not want to be curt or abrupt, you do not want to waste the reader's time with unnecessary words or phrases.

Is your written communication well organized? Does each idea proceed logically to the next? Make sure your written communications are easy to read and contain the necessary information, using facts where needed and avoiding information that is not relevant. Again, outline the course of action you expect, such as a return call or visit.

Close appropriately, making sure to include your contact information. While this may seem obvious, it is sometimes overlooked and can make your written communications look amateurish, which will diminish the effect of your message.