UNIT 1 Overview

Functions of business correspondence

Efficient communication is the key to success in any business. Whether you are trying to sell a product, answer a query or complaint from a customer, or convince your colleagues to follow a certain course of action, good communication often means the difference between success and failure. Imprecise, clumsy or long-winded business documents will give others a poor impression of you or your business. You will even be misunderstood or ignored because of those poorly-written documents. In contrast, clear and precise writing will be enjoyable to read, and is likely to evoke the response you want.

Almost all important business activities are envisioned, planned, implemented and analyzed in some form of written words. These forms include letters, reports, memos, e-mails, faxes, minutes and so on. Collectively, they are the hard-copy paper trails recording the proposals, activities and results of countless business transactions. It is true that various innovations in the field of modern communications have reduced the need for written documents, but there are still many times when it is better to have something in written form, especially in the business world.

Indeed, one technical innovation, the fax (short for *facsimile*), has to some extent brought business writing back into fashion. A few years ago, if you needed a quick answer to a query or complaint, you might have phoned the person concerned. Today, many people would send a fax. It is as fast as making a phone call, while leaving you a written record of communication.

There are four functions of business correspondence in writing. Let's look at them one by one.

To retain a permanent record

A conversation can be forgotten, misremembered, misunderstood or even deliberately twisted. But if something is written (and if it is well written), everyone who reads it will be sure to get the right information. There are many circumstances in which a permanent written record is not only desirable, but essential. Here are a few examples:

- · a report which might need to be referred to in the future
- a memo which sets out a new procedure and which should be available for new and existing staff to refer to
- a letter which constitutes some form of agreement and which can be used as evidence in a court of law
- a letter of complaint, or a letter replying to a complaint, both of which may need to be referred to if the dispute cannot easily be resolved

In all these cases and many others, it is important to have a permanent record of the communication, either for reference or to resolve a dispute or misunderstanding later.

To provide a basis for discussion

Should a subject come up for discussion at a meeting shortly? If so, it can be very useful to put together a discussion document setting out the facts of the case, and perhaps even giving your own views and arguments.

This saves time at the meeting; instead of having to relate all the facts, you can go straight on to discussing the implications, hearing people's opinions and reaching decisions. It also gives people time to study the facts, so that they come to the meeting prepared to give their views.

A discussion document of this sort can be anything from a 50-page report to a brief memo or letter, depending on the subject and its complexity.

To clarify a complex subject

Some subjects do not lend themselves easily to spoken communication. Let us say, for example, that you want to show that over the last few years your peak sales period has gradually shifted from February/March to April/May. You could sit across the table from your colleagues, quoting a string of figures at them, but it is likely that no one would absorb them or grasp their significance. On the other hand, a memo setting out the figures in a certain graphic form would have an immediate impact.

Even if you do not have a lot of figures to present, there are subjects which are better shown in a written form, simply because they are too difficult to absorb all in one "bite."

To send the same message to a number of people

It will often be quicker, and usually cheaper, to send memos or letters if you want to get the same message across to a number of people. You can, of course, phone each head of department and tell them about the meeting. But by sending a memo, you have saved yourself much time,

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and can be sure that each individual knows exactly when and where the meeting is, and what you want to discuss.

Similarly, if your company moves, it is time-consuming and expensive to phone all your customers and suppliers to inform them. It is much easier to write a standard letter announcing a change of address like the one below and mail it to them.

JOHN BROWN DIY SUPPLIES

25 King Street, Compton, Larkshire Tel. (0890) ××××

21 February 2009

To all our customers and suppliers,

We are delighted to tell you that we are moving to larger and more central premises, with easier access and more parking. We will therefore be in an even better position to serve our customers, and to handle deliveries from our suppliers.

As from 1 March, our address will be: 27 Union Street, Compton. Our telephone number remains the same.

Yours sincerely, (Signature) John Martin Proprietor

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Criteria for effective business writing

Writing, in a business context, is an important element of the image we project in our work environment. For this to be positively effective three criteria need to be considered for each document we produce: the information must be effectively controlled; the language must be carefully structured; and the immediate impact must be unmistakably appealing. To be successful on all three counts requires a systematic approach which allows you, as a writer, to think before you plan, plan before you write and revise what has been written.

Information control

Language control

Presentation techniques

ALL ADD UP TO A

SUCCESSFUL DOCUMENT

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Information control

To have effective business writing, the initial consideration will need to be focused on information control:

- What facts are included?
- How are they arranged or sequenced?

The *information content* of any document will generally complement reader expectancy. If it does, assimilation is easier and, of course, if it does not, the reverse applies. In the business world we know who writes to us, either by name or designation or company, and that triggers off a number of predictive operations which are usually correct. These reactions to written discourse are an essential part of our receptive operations and make it easier for us to assimilate information quickly.

Since your readers use such techniques, you as a writer should really exploit the phenomenon. You should ask yourself: Given the circumstances, what do my readers need to know? Any additional facts to those presenting a succinct answer to this question will mar the effectiveness of your document in terms of information content.

The second element of the information control criterion is *information sequence*. When you have all the information you need at your fingertips, you can start marshaling your arguments and points you want to make. You must present what you want to say in a coherent, logical way; otherwise you will either lose your readers through boredom or misunderstanding, or you will not make your point effectively. But what is a logical order? What is the best way to achieve a logical progression through your document? There are five ways in which you can assemble your points. Choose the one which best suits the document you are writing, the readers it is aimed at and the result you want to achieve. Your options are:

- in chronological order
- building up an argument by deduction, induction, or both
- in the same order as the document to which you are replying
- · in ascending order of importance
- in descending order of importance

Language control

After giving consideration to the information control, then examine the writer's language control:

- Is the style appropriate for a business text?
- Does the writer use a respectful tone?
- Are there any grammatical errors?

Once you know your readers, you can decide what sort of language you need to use. Should it be technical or non-technical, formal or informal, simple or complex?

The degree of "technicality" or "formality" can vary according to the readers you are addressing. The nature of your readers will also dictate how simple your language should be. Business English should never be very complex, but you can sometimes introduce fairly complex concepts, if you feel that your readers will understand them. Whatever language you decide is appropriate for your readers, there are two things you should never do in any circumstances:

- You should never be rude or abrupt.
- You should never be emotional.

Presentation techniques

Once you are satisfied that no anxiety has been occasioned by the use of wrong information and improper language, the business document should undergo the final scrutiny—presentation techniques:

- Does the document look attractive?
- Are indentations correctly used?
- Is the numbering/lettering system consistent?
- Are labels (e.g. subheadings) meaningfully applied?
- Can you quickly find the information that interests you?

If techniques of presentation are not applied to create an attractive document and make it easy for your readers to find specific information, then the document will not be effective. But if you have a positive feeling on these issues, then the document is effectively written: It projects a successful business image.

The way that you present your document can help or hinder your readers' understanding. A poorly laid out communication will usually be difficult to follow, but by giving a little thought to its appearance, even if the basic words and structures are the same, you can actually make it easier to read.

Poor layout can also reflect badly on you. Although business communication is generally becoming more informal, there are still certain right ways of doing things; if you do not follow them, your work will look slipshod and unprofessional to others.

Words and tone in business writing

There are two basic elements to good style in business writing: the tone you use and the words you use. Both are important in giving your document the right quality and in achieving the reaction you want.

Although the tone of your letter partly depends on which words you use, it also depends on how you use them. If you set out to be friendly, for example, you will express yourself in a way which gives that "feel" to your letter. If you are not pleased about something, you will choose forms of expression which make that clear, just as you do when you are speaking, but always remember to be polite.

Sincerity

We need to adopt different tones of voice for different kinds of communication, just as we do in speech. So, for example, a letter apologizing for an error needs to be apologetic and conciliatory, a sales letter enthusiastic, a letter demanding payment forceful. The key to the achievement of the right tone is to think of the reaction you want, and to adopt the most appropriate tone.

Not only will your tone change according to the nature of your document, it will also be different for different readers. So, for example, you may ask yourself "Who is in charge?" If you are asking a favor, your tone will not be the same as it will be if you are making a demand. For example, you might write a memo to your Managing Director as follows:

I wonder whether you would agree to the company paying for the staff's Christmas party this year.

You might, on the other hand, write as follows to a supplier who has made an error:

This is the third time I have had to write to you about this matter. I am afraid that if I do not receive a satisfactory reply within the next week, I shall be forced to take the necessary legal action.

However, no matter what you are writing and who it is addressed to, in order to get your tone right, you should always be sincere. Therefore, when you are writing a sales letter, replying to an enquiry or making a complaint, you must believe in what you are saying, and that belief must come through in your writing. Think before you write something: Do you really mean it? And when you have written it, read it through and see whether you *sound* as though you mean it. Look at the following passage:

We acknowledge with thanks receipt of your recent communication, and enclose a copy of our catalogue as requested. Should you have any queries, the undersigned

will be pleased to assist you.

Reading this, do you get the feeling that the "undersigned" really will be pleased to assist you? It doesn't much sound like it, does it? The language is so stiff and formal that it becomes merely a form of words, without real meaning. Now look at the next passage:

I would like to thank you most sincerely for taking the time to write to us, and for giving us the opportunity to serve you. Here is your very own personal copy of our catalogue, to browse through at your leisure. If you have any queries, I would love to help you. I'll be waiting for your call.

This writer goes too far in the other direction. The tone is too gushing, too good to be true. First, if you are being sincere, the last thing you want to do is *say* so. If you have to tell people that you are being sincere, then you have failed in getting your sincerity across in your writing. Second, do you really believe that someone is sitting there, just waiting for your call? And is there anything special about having your "very own personal copy" of a catalogue rather than just a "copy"?

Now see how you can say the same thing simply, straightforwardly and yet with sincerity:

Thank you for your letter. I am pleased to enclose our latest catalogue, for you to browse through at your leisure. If you have any queries, I would be happy to help, so just give me a ring.

This letter is not over-formal, but nor does it gush. It does not give the impression that the writer is merely using a form of words because it is the "done" thing, but it also does not sound as though he or she is trying too hard. In other words, it sounds sincere.

Clarity

Your document should be as clear, as precise and as direct as possible. Your tone, the way you use your words and sentences, can usually help to achieve this. Test your writing for clarity with this questionnaire:

- If a particular point is unusual or especially important, have you tried to emphasize it by expounding on it? This is the wrong way to create emphasis. It's much better to use short, one-sentence paragraphs, repeat the word or the idea once or twice in short sentences, or even use underlining or block capitals if necessary. But do not become bogged down in long explanations. That will have the opposite effect.
- Have you used any vague expressions? You should not, for example, use terms like "a significant increase." How big is "significant"? It could mean almost anything. If you know

the amount of the increase, then state it. If not, then just say "an increase."

- Have you used any euphemisms? At best euphemisms use more words than a direct statement and at worst they can be misunderstood. Don't say "Profits showed a negative trend" when you mean "We made a loss," or even when you mean "Profits were down on last year." Not only does it sound as though you are trying to hide something, but as we have just seen, it could mean either of two things.
- Can any of your words be understood more than one way? If you use the word "sales," for example, is it clear whether you mean sales volume or sales value? And can your readers tell whether an expression like "improvement in profitability" means increased profits or higher profit margins?
- Can any of your sentences be understood in more than one way? For example, do not say "I need to know what our costs will be by the end of the month" if you mean "I need to know by the end of the month what our costs will be." The two sentences mean two different things.

Brevity

One of the cardinal rules in business communication is brevity. Business people don't want to waste time reading through pages of superfluous verbiage. They want information, and they want to be able to absorb it as quickly as possible.

One way of achieving brevity, of course, is to use as few words as you can. You should not, however, let brevity get in the way of clarity. If shortening your document makes it incomplete or difficult to follow, then leave it as it is. Nor should you choose brevity before politeness. If using fewer words means omitting some of the courtesies, it is not worth it.

There are three main causes of wordiness in business communication:

- **Circumlocution.** This means using a long expression when a short one will do. For example, do not say "I have caused enquiries to be made with a view to establishing the reasons for our inability to supply your order." This can be said quite simply, in much fewer words: "I have enquired into the reasons why we were not able to supply your order." Some people think that circumlocution adds weight to their correspondence. It does not. All it does is make it sound pompous, and add to the length.
- Vague qualifiers. These are adjectives and adverbs that do not mean anything. These include "really," "good," "nice" and various other words which are usually used because the writer cannot be bothered to think of anything more precise or simply because they are handy "filler." What, for example, is a "really productive meeting"? How much more productive is it than just a "productive meeting"?
- Padding. This means expressions which serve no useful purpose but just to fill the document. These include expressions like "It should be noted that..." and "I must say that..." In business communication, you should keep the words simple. The more complex

your words become, the more likely you are to be using words with which your readers are unfamiliar. And never use a word unless you are sure you know exactly what it means. The main reason why people use long, complex words is that they think they look impressive. Do not be tempted by this; they are not impressive, but long-winded.

There are three common faults (except in business contracts or tendering documents) which will make your document long-winded, and which should therefore be avoided: jargon (technical language), tautology (unnecessary repetition), unnecessary abstract nouns.

There are another three faults which will make it look sloppy, and these too should be avoided: clichés, slang, abbreviations.

The unique importance of e-mails and faxes

With the number of new computer users rising exponentially every year worldwide, e-mail has become part of everyday life for many people in the business world. E-mail has been so popular because it allows for almost instant communication and from the very beginning it looked like a great alternative to the previously known types of business correspondence, such as letters, memos, notices and announcements.

E-mail is a written message sent from one computer equipment to another. It can be forwarded, saved, or deleted. E-mail saves business money when compared to the cost of long-distance phone calls, and it also preserves a record of the communication automatically, which is normally not the case with a telephone call. A true convenience, e-mail enables you to send a message to a colleague down the hall or on the other side of the world.

A fax is a document sent over a telephone line. In many corporate environments, standalone fax machines have been replaced by "fax servers" and other computerized systems capable of receiving and storing incoming faxes electronically, and then routing them to users on paper or via an e-mail (which may be secured).

Although businesses usually maintain some kind of fax capability, the technology has faced increasing competition from Internet-based alternatives. However, fax machines still retain some advantages, particularly in the transmission of sensitive material which, if sent over the Internet unencrypted, may be vulnerable to interception. In some countries, because electronic signatures on contracts are not recognized by law while fax contracts with copies of signatures are, fax machines enjoy continuing support in business.

Writing e-mails

The formality, style, and language used in an e-mail message depend on its purpose (whether

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it is for external or internal communication) and the relationship between the sender and the recipient. The formality can vary from extremely informal to very formal as seen in a business letter, but watch out that you do not use your normal informal style or expression you use with your friends or private relations in your formal communication with other companies when you represent your company.

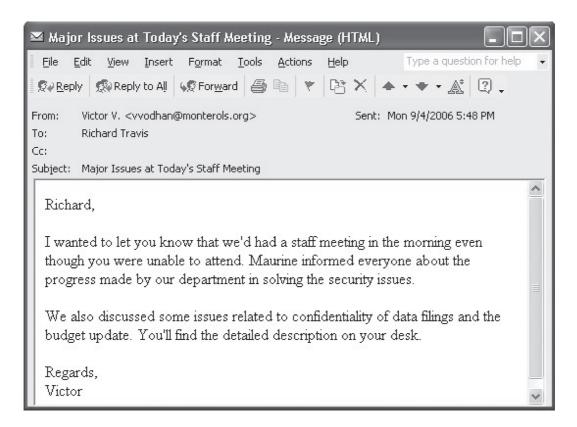
E-mail is a combination of informal speech (even in business), formal written communication and instant delivery. Before e-mail only the fax has been a type of business correspondence capable of delivering itself, but e-mail is quicker and easier. No wonder faxing is often being substituted by sending e-mail, and after the appearance of faxing via computer e-mail has been practically merging with faxing (or rather absorbing it).

Major elements of an e-mail message

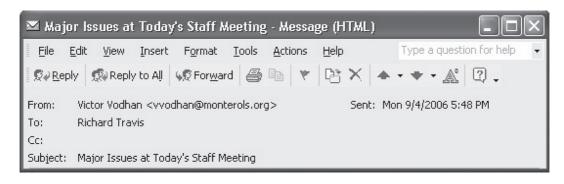
An e-mail message usually has these elements: the header, the greeting, the body, the closing and the signature.

The header

In the image below you can see that an e-mail message has a header which is not very different from that of a memo or a fax (or rather, a fax cover page).



Major elements of an e-mail header are the *From:* (the addresser), To: (the addressee), Cc: (carbon copy) and Subject:. The most important part of the header is the subject line which should contain a key piece of information. Remember that some people get hundreds of e-mail messages a day. What compels them to open yours? A good subject line, of course. But it is recommended that you always put your full name in the *From:* field. So, the more normative header for the above message would look like this:



There are two reasons for this:

- First, putting your full name is much more professional, especially when your message goes outside your organization.
- Second, very often the e-mail address that is displayed in the above image near the person's name can be hidden. So, "Victor V." sounds somewhat "mysterious" and some e-mail readers could just ignore it.

The greeting, the body, the closing and the signature

The e-mail message doesn't contain any new elements different from business letters, memos and faxes. But still, there are some peculiarities.

The greeting in an e-mail message is usually informal. It's either "Hi" or "Hello" with or without the recipient's name, or just the recipient's name. Very often "Dear all" or something similar is used in internal messages to a group of recipients. But the level of formality in using the recipient's name in the greeting is important. Be careful and do not become too informal too quickly.

When writing the body you should try to be clear and structure the message well. Never type things in all small case or all caps.

In the image on the previous page, we can see that the closing of the e-mail is very simple, just one word: "Regards." And the signature, "Victor."

But as you have noticed, this example is an internal message. Now let's look at a message going to a recipient in a different company. In this case you should use an extended e-mail signature that includes the contact information. You probably have found that there is no other place for contact information in an e-mail message.



As you may find, the organizational pattern of e-mails is almost the same as that of newspaper articles. Arrange information according to a descending pyramid—most important detail first, then second most important, third, etc. Then if busy readers stop reading after the first few paragraphs, they still have the main point. Keep paragraphs short, nothing longer than three lines in the introductory paragraph and five lines in the body paragraphs. Double space between paragraphs. Although e-mail is the easiest type of business correspondence nowadays, before putting your fingers to the keyboard, think about what your reader needs to know. Remember, an e-mail message can be printed and you can be held responsible for the information given.

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Writing faxes

Faxes should be prepared with the same care you would use in writing a letter. Keep your fax as brief as possible—a long fax diminishes its sense of urgency—and watch for spelling and grammar errors. Here are a few guidelines for preparing faxes:

- When sending a fax to a large organization, always include a cover sheet containing:
 - a) the name of the sender
 - b) the receiver's fax and phone numbers
 - c) the number of pages being sent
 - d) a phone number to call in case there is trouble receiving the fax
- When faxing a one-page message prepared on letterhead and containing the sender's full
 address to a small business, there is no need to attach a cover sheet, as there should be no
 doubt at the receiving end who the fax is directed to.
- When you use a cover sheet, ensure that it has an appropriate design. A basic fax cover sheet with a professional black and white design can be used for any fax job; it includes sender and recipient information fields. A good cover sheet includes a logo or slogan that is reproduced clearly on fax paper, giving you another opportunity to reinforce the identity of your company. Don't use your regular letterhead if it has embossing or metallic type; these devices won't be reproduced effectively by fax. If you are in doubt about the quality of your faxes, send one to yourself and check the results.
- The cover sheet of your fax can be used to personalize your message. Therefore, you could handwrite it if you wish rather than type it. Be sure to sign it.
- Type the accompanying message. Documents are not always as clear as the original ones when faxed; an entire fax written in pen could be difficult to read.
- Check the appearance of your fax. Make sure there is a margin of at least three-quarters of an inch so words will not get cut off.
- Proofread. Faxes are legally binding documents. If you quote a price or send contractual information, make sure it is accurate.

Exercises

Review Questions:

- 1. When do you need to put business communication in writing?
- 2. What are the three criteria for effective business writing?
- **3.** What contributes to good business writing style?
- 4. What is the organizational pattern of an e-mail?
- 5. Why is fax still particularly important to today's business world?

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Task-based Exercises:

1. Identify two aspects for each of the three criteria you have examined in this chapter where the following short report fails to support the arguments you have been studying. (The context of the report: The head of the training section in one of the banks in Europe was asked to evaluate the proposition that no one from the bank should be sent abroad on training courses in future. On completion of his "operational task" he decided to write a report recommending that the Europe Bankers Training Centre should be approached to implement these courses.)

To: Vice President of Personnel REF: FGS/12
From: Head of Training Date: 6 October 2009
Subject: Provision by EBTC for Future Training Courses

1. Terms of Reference

During last month's management meeting, it was proposed that all future training courses should be held at the Europe Bankers Training Centre (EBTC), and that employees should no longer be sent on external courses. I've been asked to review the advantages and disadvantages of this proposal, and to present my recommendations for the bank by 10 October 2009.

2. Advantages of the Proposal

- a. Where a group of employees is concerned, it is considerably cheaper to hold an EBTC course than to send a large number of individuals on external courses.
- b. Professionals and consultants at EBTC can be asked to make a course specific to our bank's needs.
- c. In case of a true emergency, employees remain in Europe and can easily be recalled.

3. <u>Disadvantages of the Proposal</u>

- a. In certain cases a particular specialist course is needed by only one or two employees per year. It is then more effective to send employees to an external course than to arrange for EBTC to set up this programme for us in Europe.
- b. Past experience has shown that departments frequently call employees away from EBTC courses unnecessarily. This can greatly reduce the effectiveness of the course for these personnel.
- c. Many employees report that they receive great professional benefit from contact with other participants on external courses.
- d. Bank personnel will miss an opportunity to enjoy themselves abroad.

4. Recommendations

- a. When a substantial number of employees require the same course, then EBTC programmes should be held.
- b. Employees must still be sent on external courses when it is more effective to do so.

5. Conclusions

Although there are obvious advantages of EBTC programmes, a proposal to completely reject the use of external courses would seem to have as many disadvantages, in particular the cost of providing highly specialist courses for a small number of staff.

2. Revise the letter below to give it a more natural, conversational style. Eliminate clichés like "enclosed please find," and rewrite stuffy sentences.

August 12, 2009

Personnel Services Officer North Coast Community College District 2154 Ridge Drive Bend, OR 91783

Dear Personnel Services Officer:

Enclosed please find my resume and supporting materials in response to your advertised need for a College Communications Coordinator at Woodhill College.

In lieu of a complete written statement which provides my perception of the role of college communications coordinator I've enclosed reprints of two articles I authored which convey my general feelings about the importance of providing quality educational opportunities which are accessible to as many people as possible.

Briefly, I would add that it is incumbent on spokespersons for public educational institutions to vigorously address the complex public policy and budgetary issues which too often result in decreased tangible fiscal support to public educational institutions.

In addition, it is obviously of primary importance for these same public institutions to make the public aware of the services they provide in order to develop, build and maintain the public participation and support that are essential for the growth of strong and viable public educational institutions.

I would enjoy an opportunity to explore these and other ideas with your organization's leadership and hope to be invited to an interview for that purpose.

Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely, (Signature) Richard Lufkin

3. Revise the memo below. The memo's number one fault is *wordiness*. Cross out unnecessary words and sentences. Also, substitute familiar words for big words. Make the tone of the memo more conversational.

TO: All employees

FROM: Randy Plunkett, Director

DATE: October 3, 2008 RE: Contributions

It has recently been brought to my attention that only a small percentage of employees are contributors to the Family Relief Fund supported by the Personnel Department. This fund

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is the source of money for the alleviation of employee hardship and emergencies which happen from time to time to employees.

It is hoped by this management that encouragement and motivation will be offered by each of you in supporting this worthwhile endeavor. Unless the level of contributions reaches a significant increase soon, a decline will be apparent in the formerly strong contribution level of all employees.

It is understood that no employee or person should be forced to make a contribution to this fund. However, since we believe that a true belief in their community and a desire to see the problems of employees met face-to-face by workable solutions are shared by most employees of Bidwell & Sons, we are certain that undue or inappropriate persuasion techniques will not be needed by the management staff.

You may leave your contributions with Sandy in the Personnel Department office. Thank you for your generosity in supporting this valuable cause.

4. Read the following letter which sounds formal and unfriendly, and rewrite it to get close to a conversational tone and make it sound friendlier, more likely to achieve the reaction you want.

CARSTAIRS CLOTHING COMPANY

43 Gorton Road Marsby MB2 4HY Tel. (0921) 14×××× (24 hours)

Our ref: CP/TS 26 August 2008

Mrs. A. Maxwell 13 Thrixton Crescent Charterborough LT14 6TU

Dear Madam:

We are in receipt of your letter of 15 August regarding the return of a dress, item number 456732. On investigation, it appears that the dress was indeed received. Your account has therefore been credited with the appropriate amount.

We are only able to entertain claims for compensation if actual financial loss has been incurred. This is quite obviously not the case in this instance.

Yours faithfully, (Signature) Catherine Porter Customer Relations Manager

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- 5. Suppose you are working for a printing company and have received instructions to print business cards for Ms. Wang, the Marketing Manager at Forest Guard Corp. The design work has been done and you need confirmation from Ms. Wang. Write a fax message according to the information given.
- 6. Here is an e-mail sent by the Administrator of the Financial Department of one company to the Sales Manager of the same company. If you were the recipient of the message, how would you feel? Improve the e-mail by making necessary changes in three aspects: style, format, and spelling.

From sallyturner@rightway.com
To johnwong@rightway.com
Subject REMINDER!!!

John,

Apprciate if you would consider and bear in mind that I am no longer responsible for dealing with petty cash. Some of your staffs keep bringing their vouchers to me, but this responsibility has been taken over by Martin in Accounts. He is the one who should be contacted henceforth for all petty cash matters.

Your cooperation is appreciated in making sure all your staffs know about this. BRgs/Sally