Creating Businesslike Messages

Chapter Learning Objectives

- Recognize the ***distinctive business style*** as **goal directed**, **task structured**, **efficient**, and **polished**.
- Recognize the rhetorical elements that support a ***business image*** that is **audience-centered, active, polite**, **objective**, and **competent**.
- Recognize the ***situational requirements*** implied by the immediate and anticipated **audience** and a communicator's choice of **communication medium**.

The Businesslike Style

The single most important characteristic of communication in a business setting involves its *purposefulness*. Ideal classroom communication might be an exploratory discussion that wanders into new and unfamiliar territory to facilitate student discovery and learning. Social communication is less about sending messages than creating deeper and broader relationships. In contrast, business communication is judged on the basis of how well it accomplishes some business task. Further, communication represents a huge cost to a business. Meetings cost millions of dollars in staff time. Written documents are enormously expensive to create (Cover, Cooke, & Hunt, 1995). The true costs of multiple phone calls or emails to get the right information probably can't be calculated. Clarity, predictability, and efficiency of communication reduce its costs in time, effort, and money.

In other situations, desirable communication might be *creative* or *open* or *warm*, the best business communication is *goal directed, structured* to accomplish the *task*, *efficient* in length and focus, and often highly *polished* because so much care has been taken to hone the message into its final form. In a way, ideal business communication is invisible. The necessary information is communicated to those who need it, completely, on time, and without any effort required to understand it. The format, structure and style of businesslike communication all work together to make the message completely expected and routine; people can focus on their work, sometimes not even realizing that communication has even taken place.

Goal-Directed Communication: Analyzing the Situation

The purpose of a communication can be quite complex when the complexity of a business organization is taken into account. The communicator has an intention, of course, that drives the creation of a message. A service rep must leave a message, for example, to ask a supervisor to call. That seems like a simple task, but the service rep in such a situation has both immediate and long range goals, as well as both personal and organizational objectives. The immediate goal might be to get the supervisor to make a phone call, but a long range goal might be to have the supervisor realize that there is an ongoing merchandise problem that needs to be corrected. The service rep might also have a personal need for recognition as an outstanding provider of customer service.

Further, most communication is directed at multiple audiences who also have both short and long term interests. The message to the supervisor might be sent in an electronic format that is copied to everyone who works with the same merchandise problems and later incorporated into a company intranet of customer service information. In fact, some potential audiences for a communication might be future readers of a document who have goals and interests that didn't even exist when the message was first created. Finally, each person involved, present or future will have a different interpretation of the situation.

An effective communicator will create a message that is responsive to *all* the various goals of each and every potential audience, with all the various goals. This requires that a message include enough information that each of these potential audiences can accomplish its own specific task. In the example above, the supervisor needs to know what to call the customer about, along with a phone number and best time to call. The intranet writer needs to know the problem along with the potential solutions. The service rep's ideal message will thus include all that information—along with the reasons that personal recognition is warranted for excellent customer service! Everyone who eventually sees the message must perceive it as being responsive to the situation, accomplishing the appropriate communication task with adequate and accurate detail in response to the assignment or request, using the expected communication form (Rogers, Ho, Thomas, & Cheng, 2004 391).

A successful communicator must therefore begin each communication task with

- an assessment of all the potential audiences,
- an evaluation of each audience's expectations of the communication event, and
- a judgment of how each audience is likely to interpret a message now and in the future.

Task-Oriented Organization: Structuring the Ideas

Completing any task in the most effective manner generally involves having a clear goal, marshalling the necessary resources, and implementing some appropriate behavior. Because the business environment is task oriented, virtually all its communication incorporates those three elements into a standard three-part structure:

1. ***Define the task***
2. ***Provide the required information***
3. ***Specify the required action***

Define the Task

The first part of any message is designed to make sure that everyone involved understands its goals. This is usually done with an introduction that specifies what information is being provided and for what purpose. In a quick phone call, an initial sentence might define the task in just a few words: "Hey, Mike. We need to get together and resolve these purchase orders for Gwen." In other cases the task situation can be complex, requiring clarification of the specific **message topic,** the **task** and its **purpose**, as well as the **business relationships** of those sending and receiving the message.

What is the topic of the communication?

> Terry and George played phone tag for a day or two as they left voice mails about "the upcoming sales presentation." When they got together on Thursday afternoon to finalize their slides, they realized Terry had been gathering information for Monday's presentation to Hunt-Wesson, while George had pulled up the logos for Snappy Tom, a client they would be meeting on Wednesday.

Especially when clarifying feedback isn't available, the message should start with a clear and complete topic description.

What is the task to be completed?

> Sara and Fran met over lunch to discuss "ways of repairing the parking lot." After lunch, Sara looked over Fran's notes and realized her colleague hadn't written down any of the quotes or job specifications needed to create a cost comparison, but instead had made a list of the various options for landscaping, handicapped access, and "prize" parking spaces for employee awards, which would still have to be prioritized and costed before they could be presented to their supervisor.

Knowing which information is valuable requires knowing what it will be used for. Starting with that task clarification helps everyone pay attention to the important details.

What is the business purpose?

> Jason's boss asked him to prepare a memo "to spell out the pros and cons of the three potential vendors for the mold testing equipment." Jason spent most of the day locating the pricing information from each company, the shipping costs from their various locations, and the sensitivity levels each vendor's testing kit would support. When the boss read the memo, he wasn't happy: "I already knew the product specs. I needed contract terms and a summary of transition factors to decide whether we should terminate with Boden Labs and move to one of the other two."

Virtually any task fits into some larger organizational purpose. The conversation that doesn't clarify the "big picture" can leave participants with an incomplete picture of how the task needs to be done.

What is the relationship of the communicators?

> "Can you help me out with this? I need information on the Feldman contract." The girl standing in front of Joan seemed nice enough, but she wasn't about to release confidential client information to some college intern doing a research project. "Sorry," Joan responded, "you'd have to talk to Mr. Rauch," naming a vice president she knew would be out of the country for most of the month. Later that afternoon, Joan's supervisor asked her whether the controller's new assistant was having any difficulty locating information for the long-planned update on the Feldman contract.

Work gets done within a web of organizational relationships. Unless those relationships are clear, many communicators will play it safe and release as little information as possible.

The task definition can take the form of a first sentence in a phone call or voice mail, the first paragraph of a memo or email, or the first few minutes of a formal presentation. These first few words or sentences are thus too important to waste on introductory stories, previews, or attempts to convince the other person that he or she should listen. In a business context, communication is assumed to be relevant to some task, and audiences expect to be guided quickly toward the right task context so they can easily understand the rest of the message.

Give the Facts

Once the purpose of the communication is understood by all participants, the second part of the message provides the reader or listener with the information, ideas or issues necessary to accomplish that purpose. Obviously, the exact information included will vary widely, but its structure will reflect the purposeful business orientation with ***focus*** on the task at hand, ***consistency*** in form to facilitate efficient reading or listening, and a structure that is ***appropriate*** for effectively using the information.

Stay focused.

> Shawna sifted through mountains of printouts to write a memo on the office supply costs for the facilities department. The summary of her findings came to about five pages, which she knew was too long for a typical memo. Although she knew she could include some of the facts as worksheets or exhibits, the choice of exactly *which* facts to include in the main memo would depend on the purpose of gathering the information. If the supervisor would be making changes in the types of supplies kept on hand, the data about actual usages over time seemed to be the main focus. If the question was whether costs had gone up in general, a summary of expenditure categories seemed to be a better focus. Shawna realized she needed to verify her supervisor's purpose before she could write an acceptable memo.

Although a great deal of information might be discovered as a project is being completed, its inclusion is only relevant when it pertains to the goal of the specific communication being prepared.

Be consistent.

> Because this was the fourth background memo Shawna had written for her supervisor's decision, she already knew the order he liked to see things: first the objective facts, then a summary of questionable or missing data, then an explanation of how these facts fit into the overall decision. As she reviewed her summary, Shawna realized there were a couple of areas where there was very little complete information. For those points she made the normal section for "Known Facts" but just wrote one sentence that started, "Verifiable data was not available regarding…."

Business functions work more smoothly when a process is in place, and the more consistent a communication process, the more "invisible" it is to its users. Method, content and structure should always conform to the expectations set by the normal patterns of the communication event.

Chose an appropriate format.

> Although she knew her supervisor would be looking for certain types of information in the "normal" places, Shawna still had to decide how to format the appendices she would be including with her memo. Because she wanted her supervisor to be able to compare the actual impact of changing various supply items, she decided to create a table that compared the numbers of people using each item as well as total usage and costs.

Appropriateness is always determined in terms of a specific audience, goal, and set of available resources. See specific assignments for guidelines on structuring information for various purposes.

Selecting the content and structure of the information creates the heart of any message. Especially in jobs that are part of the "information economy," this is where the worker "adds value" to data, turning it into information that can be used by others in the organization. A client's specific request or a standard report format might guide a communicator toward focus, consistency and appropriateness, but in the end, the best way to present information is always the way that makes it easiest for its user to do the desired task.

Identify the Required Action

The third component of any businesslike message is an action statement that clearly positions the information within the organization's flow of productive work. Often the last agenda item or paragraph or sentence, the action statement shifts the focus of the message from the information itself to what happen as a result of having the information. The reader or listener typically needs to know ***who*** does ***what***, by ***when*** as a consequence of the communication.

Who will use this information?

> Shawna included her action statement right at the beginning, in the memo's summary paragraph. Her supervisor would be making the decision with the help of several senior clerks whose input needed to be acknowledged. The sentence she wrote began, "I have summarized the 2000-2004 supply purchases so that you, Rosa, Kevin, and Michelle can…"

The immediate audience is generally the communicator's first priority, but most business documents and even many oral presentations are distributed or filed for use by an extended audience.

What will the information be used for?

> It used to bother her that memos always started with a restatement of something everybody already seemed to know, but having lived through a few misunderstandings she now realized how much better it was to make sure everyone was in agreement about the business purpose. Her sentence continued, "….make some decisions about reducing the office supply inventory…."

The task specified as part of the communication context will presumably guide the reader in choosing the information to include, but any reader should be able to understand why the choice was made.

When is the action expected?

> In this case, no one was reporting back to Shawna, and as far as she knew her part of this task was now complete. Just the same, by including time frames in all their action steps her department had found that everyone was able to keep better track of everything that was going on. Shawna ended the sentence, "…at your meeting next week."

A clear statement of expectations will prevent misunderstandings and frustration.

An action step might include clarifications of the exact follow-up action to be taken, a persuasive appeal to encourage a particular action, or even instructions in how to perform the expected action. The lack of a clear action step suggests that the information itself irrelevant or extraneous to anyone's organizational purposes.

Efficient Language: The Clear and Concise Message

There is no question that in purely practical terms, clear writing allows users to get a job done more quickly and more effectively (Kimble, 1996-1997) Clear and concise language is generally achieved by using words and structures that allow the most information to be transferred with the fewest words. Communicators need to be careful to use language that everyone understands, avoiding jargon, for instance, when not everyone will be familiar with the terms. A good communicator will try to use **specific language,** with a **straightforward** use of words in a careful and appropriate **structure**.

Specific Language

Language is described as exact and concrete when it refers to a particular object in the universe, but vague or abstract when it refers to an idea or class of things. A message is harder to misinterpret when it refers to a specific thing, or action, or event. A phone call that begins, “Hey Bill; I need to talk to you about the new building,” could easily confuse a contractor who has crews working on several new buildings at the same time. Work projects and processes are often given names, codes or contract numbers to avoid such confusion, and a better communicator would use the specific language available, saying something like, “Hey Bill; I need to talk to you about the Hawthorne plumbing contract 84-C; I think Theresa sent you the plans for it yesterday.”

Exact Language Use the most exact name of every person, place or thing in the message. A table can illustrate the difference between vague words, which could be taken in multiple ways, from generic words and specific words that refer to just one thing.

Message Content	**Vague words**	**Generic words**	**Specific words**
Who?	Management	the regional manager	Jim Mitchell
What?	review	evaluate performance	verify that discount classification criteria have been met
When?	Soon	annually	every January
Where?	at a convenient location	at the office	in Jim Mitchell’s office
How much?	the proper amount	published minimums	sales of at least $4K
How many?	Some	the agreed amount	five

A memo that says, for example, “Management will review your performance soon,” is likely to raise more questions than it answers. A whole series of phone calls or emails might follow so that people could clarify the situation. In fact, such a vague statement could be easily misinterpreted, giving rise to rumors that “the new vice president is coming into fire everyone who isn’t meeting his standards.” Had the memo provided specific information in the first place, everyone could make plans for “Jim Mitchell’s January review to insure that sales had reached at least $4000 in each product category.”

“Sharp” could mean many things; instead a good communicator might select a more precise word like angular, cornered, pointed, pyramidal, spied, jagged, knife-edged, prickly, spiny, needlelike, tapered, thorny, toothed, horned, or barbed.

Concrete Language Specificity is also enhanced by selecting the words that convey the most meaning in terms of the physical senses. A picture might be worth a thousand words, but a few words that create a picture in the hearer’s mind are worth quite a bit. “Red,” for instance, says much less than “the red of a Campbell’s soup can.” The word “fuzzy” could mean “seen through a uniform haze of blue, which gives an overall color to the picture but causes edges to seem unimportant.” It could also mean “covered with broken lines of static, which stretch across the picture from top to bottom,” or “each hair of the rabbit is finely detailed so that he appears real. You can almost feel how soft and downy his little tail would be.” Using the words “red” or “fuzzy” is easier, but communication is more effective with descriptive, concrete language.

Build on mental images to tap into the audience's sensory memories, providing minor changes to fill in or adjust the image to convey the information. Instead of "blue with purple stripes," a speaker might say, "imagine the vivid blue of a calm Hawaiian ocean with streaks of eggplant-purple….. " A technician describing a machine design might start, "Imagine a birdbath placed upside down on top of a pickup truck…."

Straightforward Language

As you might expect, the focus on getting a task done leads to messages that are stripped of extraneous emotional content or relationship cues. The result can be communication that might seem "impersonal" or even "rude" in a social context. The temptation can then be to add words to make the message sound "friendlier" or "more polite," but those extra words are likely to create misunderstanding or distract from the business purpose of the communication. Business language should be direct and straightforward, avoiding flowery structures and obscure words. Sometimes a letter or report is a contractual agreement, and a company's legal council or regulatory agencies might require certain words and phrases, but good writing is always designed to convey information clearly.

Even federal business regulators have begun to insist that writers select the clear, easy to understand words over the big, fancy ones.

These paragraphs "mean" the same thing, but they convey very different meanings. Businesses are urged, and in some cases required, to use straightforward language when providing financial information to their shareholders (Securities and Exchange Commission).

NO PERSON HAS BEEN AUTHORIZED TO GIVE ANY INFORMATION OR MAKE ANY REPRESENTATION OTHER THAN THOSE CONTAINED OR INCORPORATED BY REFERENCE IN THIS JOINT PROXY STATEMENT/PROSPECTUS, AND, IF GIVEN OR MADE, SUCH INFORMATION OR REPRESENTATION MUST NOT BE RELIED UPON AS HAVING BEEN AUTHORIZED.

You should rely only on the information contained in this document or that we have referred you to. We have not authorized anyone to provide you with information that is different.

Straightforward language is clear because it uses ***everyday words***, ***active voice***, and ***personal pronouns*** that speak directly to the reader.

Everyday words The "normal" words used in conversation are most easily understood by business colleagues. Short, common Anglo-Saxon words like "help", "drive" or "try" are clearer than longer words that come from Latin or Greek like "assist", "navigate" or "attempt."(Olson) Watch out for strings of words that mean the same thing as a single short word; use the shorter version:

A string of words….	Can become just one….
during the course of	during
eliminate the possibilities of	prevent
at an early date	soon
at this point in time	currently or now
in the event that	if
are as follows	are
afford an opportunity	allow, permit
accompanied by	with
for the purpose of	for
in the meantime	meanwhile

in few cases	seldom
with regard to	about
in compliance with your request	as requested
on the grounds that	because
in view of the fact that	because
was of the opinion	believed, thought
for the purpose of	to
during the time that	while
due to the fact that	because
to the effect that	that
in terms of	of

Active voice Active voice describes a particular grammatical structure in which the first subject or "actor" in a sentence is doing the "action" described by the primary verb:

> Passive voice: The computer **was taken** to the trash bin by **Joe**.
>
> Active voice: **Joe took** the computer to the trash bin.

The second sentence is easier and faster to read because the reader doesn't have to "hold" the concept of computer in his or her brain until the rest of the sentence explains what to do with it. For this reason alone, active voice creates clearer communication.

Active voice is also more efficient communication because the structure typically provides more information in fewer sentences. Passive voice allows a sentence to avoid naming "who" does the action. For clarity, that information would then need to be provided in a second sentence—or perhaps in a second memo or phone call.

> Passive voice: All distributors' sales total will be reviewed. **Management** will be the reviewers.
>
> Active voice: **Management** will review distributors' sales totals.

Personal Pronouns The natural-sounding "I," "you," or "we" is appropriate in most business memos and letters. Don't try to sound smarter or more important by using complicated language; the simple, straightforward approach is most businesslike.

> Impersonal: "Midwest Manufacturing Corporation marketing personnel wish to set an appointment with representatives of Pioneer Purchasing Company for a meeting regarding the proposal made by Midwest Manufacturing."
>
> Personal: "**Our** sales representatives would like to meet with **you** next week to discuss **our** proposal."

Straightforward Speaking

Although oral communication can seem easier to produce than written communication, speaking in a clear and straightforward way is actually quite difficult. Most people do not speak as clearly as they think they do (Thompson, 87), and when asked to be more clear, they tend to simply give the same give the same instructions more slowly or louder. Clear oral language requires that a speaker monitor listeners' reactions and accommodate any difficulties they might have.

Observe signals of understanding. An audience that is comfortable with information will look relaxed, make eye contact with the speaker, and respond positively with a nodding of the head, a lean forward, or relevant questions. When the listener looks down or away, scowls or squints, the speaker should repair the content or language of the message for clarity.

Use a single, complete sentence for each piece of information. The average adult listener can only hold about sixteen words in short term memory. If the listener hasn't found a place to connect the incoming data with something in long-term memory by the end of that long sentence, the new information cannot be processed. So as not to lose listeners lost in rambling talk, an effective speaker will break paragraph-sized ideas down into sentence-sized pieces, pausing after each to verify understanding.

Don't repeat a point to clarify it. The audience that didn't understand a point will not generally understand it any better the second time. When the listener indicates confusion, a speaker needs to use *different* words or examples when rephrasing the message. If that doesn't work, ask the listener what concepts he or she *does* understand, and then use an extension or analogy to build on them.

Slow down. Speakers can think more quickly than listeners can comfortably absorb information. This means they can sound slow to themselves, even when speaking at a perfect rate for listeners. A speaker should consciously keep the rate slow, using the "extra" mental time to think through a clear sentence before saying it, read audience feedback during the pauses, and anticipate the listener's questions, confusions and frustrations.

Make notes Prepare an outline of oral remarks and limit them to only three or four key points. Listeners simply can't remember more than that without printed handouts or notes. Written notes are even useful during informal conversations to keep a speaker from rambling or to remember carefully prepared the structure and language.

Structured Language

Clear communication places information in a direct, straightforward order, using **sentence structure**, **paragraph structure**, and **transitional markers t**o help an audience follow the train of thought.

Sentence structure

A clear and concise style is most easily achieved when using a direct sentence structure that avoids using any excess words or phrases. Direct sentences are easier to read and more "friendly" and conversational. They are also easier to write, with fewer complexities of grammar and punctuation. Direct sentence structures are typically shorter, as well. A good rule of thumb says that a sentence of more than ten words long is likely to sound "complicated" to a business listener. A writer can also avoid sentences that spill across more than one line.

While just aiming for short sentences can help clarify information, the result can be choppy or redundant without some attention to *which* words are included. For example, a good communicator would try to avoid "filler words" that don't relate directly to the business task of the message:

> ***"I feel that** we should go ahead with this project."*
>
> Since the focus of business information should always be facts and objective, rational reasons, the words "I feel" are extraneous and inappropriate. A better sentence would simply say,
>
> *"We should go ahead with this project."*

*“**The reason** we are recommending this product is because focus groups have loved it.”*

Since you are giving the reasons, there is no reason to also preview the notion that you will be giving reasons! Changing the sentence to active voice also makes it clearer:

“We recommend this product because focus groups have loved it.”

An even more direct sentence, appropriate when providing a summary paragraph of key points, might even eliminate the reasons to support your claim, which could be provided as an attachment:

“We recommend this product.”

“There are three key principles of email that are followed in this organization.”

“Pointer words” can be eliminated when the meaning of the sentence is perfectly clear without them.

“Three key principles of email are followed in this organization.”

Another technique to clarify sentence structure involves using adjectives in place of longer phrases. Nearly any phrase starting with a little word like “of,” “to,” “in,” “that,” or “by” can be replaced with a single word that means exactly the same thing:

The committee seldom considered grievances **of a controversial nature**.

The committee seldom considered **controversial** grievances.

The skids were stacked **in an unsafe manner**.

The skids were stacked **unsafely**.

All letters that contain information **about proof of purchase** must be forwarded to the assistant **in charge of marketing**.

All **proof-of-purchase** letters must be forwarded to the **marketing** assistant.

Sometimes whole sentences can be replaced with just a couple of adjectives:

We will be holding the regional sales meeting next month. **The meeting is held annually** to update salespeople about new products. **New products are an important element of company growth**.

We will hold the **annual** sales meeting next month to update salespeople about **growth-producing** new products.

Meetings were held last week. **Teams involved included marketing, sales and accounting**.

Marketing, sales and accounting teams held meetings last week.

Finally, pay close attention to the full meaning of the words used, and eliminate any redundant words that only say something the word already implies:

They wished to purchase draperies that were blue ***in color***.

Every manager is asked to plan ***ahead*** for the summer’s production.

We will ask every department to purchase only the ***basic*** essentials.

Production will resume ***again*** in July.

> The meeting will be kept brief ***in duration***.
>
> The department heads have been asked to cooperate ***together*** in this project.

Similarly, avoid including the same information in more than one sentence or more than one paragraph. Except when it is included in a summary section, information should only appear once in a business document or presentation.

Clear paragraph structure

In general, business readers prefer short, straightforward paragraphs that place the topic sentence first, followed by supporting detail or reasoning. Here's a draft of Sandy's description of a problem she and Chris experienced in a recent team project:

> Chris and I worked late on Wednesday afternoon to prepare a fourteen page report, including figures, table and bibliography. We had worked all day, hoping to prepare a document that met the expectations of our supervisor. As we finally wrapped things up, our project colleagues, Jamie and Kelly, showed up. Jamie and Kelly had been assigned to work with us, although Chris and I had asked to be allowed to work on the project alone. As we had expected, Jamie and Kelly were not available to help on Wednesday, when the project needed to be completed. Worse, when they did show up, they began to pick apart the work that Chris and I had already done, complaining that it did not meet the project requirements. Chris and I are very upset with our colleagues' behavior.

Notice how the reader must wait until the *last* sentence in the paragraph to find out the writer's point. That was the "topic sentence" and should have been placed *first*. Also, once the reader realizes the point of the paragraph, the "background" sentence in the middle becomes extraneous. It might be important information that should be included in another paragraph somewhere in the document, but causes this paragraph to "lack unity" because it includes information not related to its main point. A clearer paragraph would start with the point, and then support it:

> Chris and I are very upset with our colleagues' behavior. Chris and I worked late on Wednesday afternoon to prepare a fourteen page report, including figures, table and bibliography. As we finally wrapped things up, our project colleagues, Jamie and Kelly, showed up. Jamie and Kelly were not available to help when the project needed to be completed. Worse, when they did show up, they began to pick apart the work that Chris and I had already done, complaining that it did not meet the project requirements.

Transitional markers

The technique varies with the mode of communication, but clear messages always include signals to indicate that a new idea is being introduced. In an oral presentation, "signposting" inserts short sentences to guide an audience through the logic of a message as well as short summaries of main points as each is completed. In written documents, short directional words, sentences or paragraphs are provided to avoid confusion. Emphasis words can alert the listener that an upcoming piece of information is especially important: "The most important factor is…." "This last part is especially significant…"

Not all transitions are verbal. Physical cues also alert the hearer that information is important: full-face contact, eye contact, leaning forward and active gestures all communicate to a listener that important information is being conveyed. Similarly menu slides or graphics such as checkmarks, color changes or process diagrams can provide visual cues to guide an audience through a presentation.

Sometimes clarity depends as much on the conceptual order of the words as on the words themselves. When guiding people through a set of ideas, their understanding of specific concepts can depend on the order in which those concepts appear. Sequence can be as simple as numbering the steps in a process as "first…, second…and third….," or providing data in the same order each time it is named. When complex ideas are being presented, people can apprehend new information when the descriptions are provided in the same order that humans typically explore a new concrete object: purpose, physical characteristics, and then dynamic qualities.

Purpose: What is this thing is used for?

Understanding requires a context for the upcoming information, and we typically perceive new things first in terms of their usefulness. ***"The smoker is used for cooking food."***

Physical Characteristics:

Verify the object's shape and size. New things are understood at the most basic level in relation to the physical human form. ***"It's a cylinder, about the size of a large kitchen trashcan."***

With a comparison or contrast the thing to something already known. By taking advantage of what we already know, people can guess a great deal about a new object. ***"It looks just like a regular gas barbeque, except the cylinder around the grill is turned on its end.***

Visual sense is primary and used first. Our fastest and most comprehensive sense, visual information about composition, color, texture and orientation is helps orient the rest of the information about a new object. ***"The cylinder is shiny silver, and it sits on short fat black legs of roughly formed iron."***

Followed by tactile details. Information about the objects weight, shape and sound help determine how the thing works. ***"The top half of the cylinder slides off with a swooshing sound, and snaps back into place when given a firm shove."***

Dynamic Qualities: Finally, describe what happens over time.

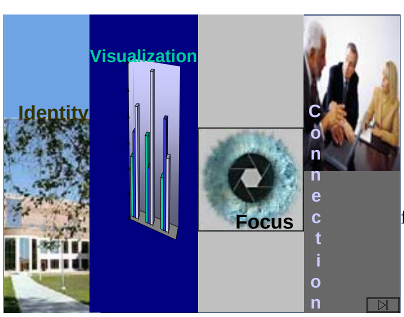
Once comfortable with a sense of what something "is," a person seeks information about its motion, operation, and duration. ***"We leave the smoker on the deck so that we can use it easily, but take it inside every winter."***

Imagine how confusing the description would be if it were provided in the opposite order—or in a random order! Even with concrete terminology, a description that had begun with, "We take the smoker inside each winter," would need to be read again for that piece of information to make any sense to a reader who finally finds out at the end what the thing is used for.

Graphic Markers

Graphic design of the presentation slides can also be an effective tool to guide the audience through the presentation, providing listeners with visual "signposts" to keep track of where the speaker is going and to *see* how all the ideas fit together.

A **menu slide** provides some sort of visual marker or cue for each idea—a color, graphic or image—that can be repeated in a simplified or abbreviated way, on each slide in that section of the speech. As each idea is discussed, the presenter returns to the menu, helping the audience to see the connections and reinforcing the entire overview after each point (Schatz, 1997 33).



Menu slide

Novice speakers will often provide a literal "menu" with a printed preview of the speech agenda, but a more professional speaker will take advantage of the visual capabilities of the software. Running heads, color and graphic images can all be used as visual signposts to help an audience understand how the ideas being presented relate to each other.

Slide titles perform an important signposting function when they summarize the specific point or idea the speaker is trying to make. Titles are headlines, both informative and dynamic (Heimes, 1997), with only the bare essentials beyond that. An ugly reality of presentations is that most of the audience is not paying full attention. It ought to be possible for a listener's mind to wander back to the presentation, see the slide title, and know exactly where the speaker is in his or her progression of ideas. Good titles are brief but pithy. "The flowery and subtle have no place on a slide" (Schatz, 1997 34). The key point should jump out at the audience as they see the image (Fine, 1998), with text effects, symbols and graphics drawing attention to key words or ideas (Heimes, 1997) or summarizing the conclusion to be drawn from data {Wilder, 1999 #365 36}.

Polished Communication: Professional Expectations

Professional communication is not merely efficient; it also reflects high production standards and careful preparation to achieve a polished level of competence. To some extent, this level of professionalism simply reflects the amount of focused attention given to business communication. An email to a key client or a memo to a boss are important to a person's career, and the competent worker will take the time he or she needs to consider the goal, structure the content, and clarify the language. With this much careful attention, many little details that create "polish" will be given attention as well.

Beyond simple attention, however, the reality is that much of the communication produced in a corporate environment is created by paid professionals who have been hired because they have particularly high levels of communication expertise. These writers, graphic artists, and media specialists set a standard of excellence that permeates the business culture. When advertisements or public relations messages go to thousands of customers at a cost in the millions of dollars, great care is taken with their production. Mundane memos or emails might not cost as much money, but their audience has come to expect the same level of "professionalism" with respect to ***language use***, ***visual design***, and ***personal presentation.***

Language Use

Business English, whether in U.S., British or Indian dialect, is consistently and compulsively perfect with respect to grammar, spelling and punctuation. Although the style is often informal, there is no tolerance for error. Common tools like spell checkers and grammar checkers are used extensively, but there are many details that require human attention. In a professional environment, no documents—even simple emails—are sent without careful proofreading, and the most conservative rules of grammar or punctuation use are followed.

Written communication is generally held to a somewhat higher standard than oral communication, but some oral errors tend to mark the speaker as "illiterate" or "lower class." Some errors are status markers. Non-standard verb use, a lack of subject-verb agreement, double negatives, and errors in subject-pronoun agreement, in particular, are perceived as "uneducated" grammatical structures (Hairston, 1981; Weaver, 1996). Care should be taken to avoid highly recognizable mispronunciations like "off-ten" for "often" or "new-cue-lar" instead of "nuclear" that mark a person as unprofessional (Stoddard & Perry, 1998).

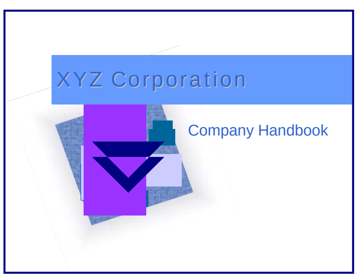
To some extent, professional language use is simply a function of education and social maturity. Teenagers affect a colorful patois, but the "beat" language of the fifties, the hippie lingo of the sixties and the eighties' Valley Girl cadences were not the language patterns of college-educated adults. A culture's language fads change, but a business professional generally avoids the slang or speech patterns of the day. Another way to look at it recognizes that business professionals are actually adopting a different slang; they have simply replaced the peer pressure to speak like teenagers with peer pressure to speak like an adult.

On the other hand, professionalism is also a practiced attention to the details of communication. High quality work is sometimes less about talent and more about the willingness to work a little harder to make sure it's high quality. Unfortunately, there are a great many people who don't take the time to polish their work. "We're pathetic." is the way one Fortune columnist describes businesspeople. "In theory, no e-mail, memo, résumé, or report should ever have typos…Yet everyday communications are infested with mistyped words and grammatical errors" (Schrage, 2001). An average of 30% of the spreadsheets in use have errors built into their formulas and macros (Raymond Panko, U of HI, cited by Schrage, 2001) and probably 90% have data entry errors. What this all means is that the person who takes the time to insure accuracy gets a great deal of credit for having an outstanding eye for detail and unusually high standards!

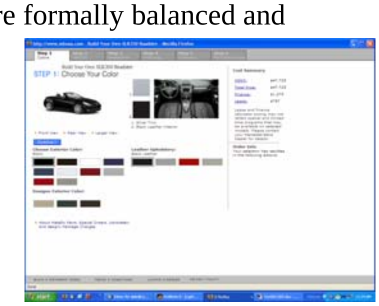
> In one study, students did *worse* at a proofreading task when they used a grammar and spell checker, failing to look for errors that the technology didn't catch and making arbitrary changes because the software had highlighted a piece of text for review (Galleta, 2003).

Visual Design

Styles change somewhat, especially in marketing communication, but business visuals are characterized by a look that is sometimes described as crisp, elegant, and clear. Crispness is the visual corollary to direct, concise language, with a visual look that emphasizes straight lines rather than curves, and strong vertical lines rather than a softer centered look. Business visual tend to be simple and uncluttered—even minimalist—with just a few colors, and carefully positioned images or graphics.

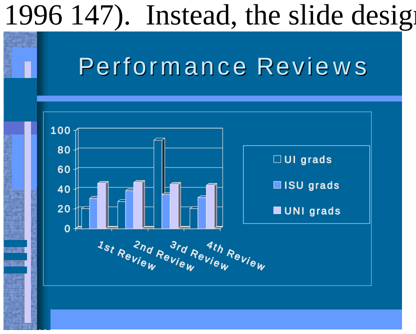


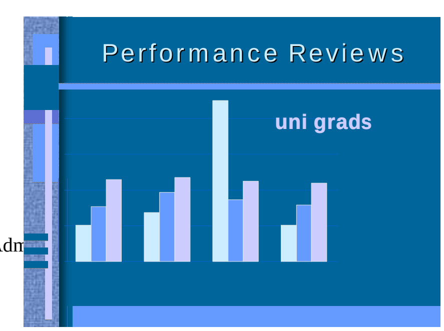
Presentation slides show a generous use of space, with plenty of room for images, and straight, clear edges. Fuzzy imagery or blended colors will often be used in a background design, but the main message should "jump out" at the audience (Heimes, 1997).



(Mercedes Benz, 2005) Centered pages are formally balanced and can work well as the "front door" of a website, but content pages usually project a more utilitarian image with elements lined up along a strong but imaginary line, generally at the left margin (Niederst, 1996).

To create a more professional looking slide, a speaker might minimize or even eliminate boxes, boundaries or lines that limit the image (Toogood, 1996 147). Instead, the slide design opts for consistency in size, color and arrangement (Heimes, 1997; Terberg, 2001) Reduce the visual image to the concept. An audience will not remember the numbers, but it will remember the idea represented in a "nearly naked graph" (Toogood, 1996 151)





The business look is also conservative and upscale—pinstripe suits, solid oak boardrooms, and leather. The look tends toward traditional elements with design that is rooted in classical principles of unity and balance. The look is "elegant" and "simple" rather than "jarring" or "flashy" (Heimes, 1997).

Principles of Elegant Design Although professionally trained designers will usually be called on for major projects, any competent communicator is expected to have a trained eye when it comes to seeing whether a document, slide or invitation "looks professional enough" to send to a client. Learning some of the basic principles can help every communicator in a business environment [Williams, 1994 #4468].

Unity Visual design should set elements together to create relationships between parts and a sense of the whole. (Penrose, 39). Each part of a page, or each page in a larger document or presentation, should look like it belongs to all the rest of the parts. Creating a sense of unity provides a way to combine data visually and produce and understanding of relationships that otherwise would have been missed (Groade).

Balance refers to the relative amount of "stuff" on either side of a center line. Formal, symmetrical balance positions elements on either side of a horizontal or vertical center line; the effect is pleasing but can become monotonous. Informal balance keeps the size of elements the same, but varies their placement on either side of a center line. This adds interest but can create a sense of unease and/or clutter if done poorly. Heavy items and colors should 'ground' the scene rather than 'float' freely.

Balance includes both words and pictures, and even the distribution of verbal to non-verbal information. Many written documents and most oral presentations will include a certain amount of visual information as well as text, and neither should overpower the other. In a written document, for example, space devoted to figures should not exceed the space devoted to text. If an illustration, table or graph needs more than a ½ page, it should be placed on its own page or included as an appendix. In an oral presentation, visuals should stay on the screen long enough to allow a complete discussion of the information being presented. If using a flip chart or white board, the speaker should balance the time writing words with the time spent focusing on the discussion.

Contrast involves creating clear differences between various elements of a design. Contrast can help to differentiate ideas, and it can draw interest by highlighting those differences. Contrast can be created with changes in text, color, size, or style. Changing from one typeface to another, for instance, will create contrast between two sections of text and cause a reader to perceive them as different from each other. Contrasts must be clear and noticeable; avoid small changes that create elements that are only similar, neither completely different nor exactly the same.

Repetition Repeated visual elements—color, shape, texture, spatial relationships, line thicknesses, sizes—can be used to develop organization of the information. Repetition across multiple pages or slides will also strengthen the unity among various parts of the communication. Some speakers swear by color-coordinating their outfits with the color scheme of their slides, a form of repetition that audiences find appealing as well.

Alignment Perhaps the most important design element involves the visual alignment of elements. Every element on the page should have some visual connection with another element on the page, avoiding the sense that anything is "floating" freely in visual space. In most business documents, this means that all elements are lined up along strong horizontal and vertical lines. Anything that "doesn't line up" is easily noticed and quickly corrected by anyone who has a practiced eye for business documents.

Proximity Items relating to each other should be grouped together. This helps to organize the information, providing white space that creates boundaries between categories of data (Williams, 1994 p 14). While this seems obvious, it reflects such a deeply ingrained cognitive process that it can sometimes be hard to see as an organizational tool. Instead, designers will sometimes talk about creating a page that is "clean" or "uncluttered," referring to the sense that a few clusters of information are easier to apprehend than a page with many equal elements. The key is to realize that each of the visual clusters should represent some kind of conceptual category as well.

The third element of visual design involves a focus on clarity. Businesslike design is never arbitrary or opaque; there is little patience for edgy creativity or a concern for "art for art's sake." Instead, principles of proximity and alignment, in particular, are used so that the visual design clarifies the meaning of a document. Information is broken into manageable chunks, grouped in useful ways, and then positioned for easy understanding

Jo Anne Tarver at Winthrop University recommends that writers observe the "2AM" rule: would my reader be able to use this document to complete the task at 2am with no one around to help or answer questions?

An important design element of written communication is the typeface. Size of the type is the first consideration, with 11 point type the easiest to read for a sustained time (Baker, 2001). Using just one type family, without much variety in style, size, weight, will created a harmonious page, but is also sedate, quiet and formal, a little boring. Sometimes different fonts, sizes or styles are introduced to add interest to a document, but these are design choices and "combining different typefaces should enhance the communication, not confuse it" (Williams, 1994 8). The selection of a typeface can have a significant effect on the clarity and mood of the resulting document:

Color use is also an important aspect of visual design. Color is attractive, and readers are more likely to pay attention to documents or visuals with color. Color should be chosen systematically to enhance communication, taking into account cultural perspectives on color as well as the demands of the information to be displayed and the medium being used to display it.

Cultural Perspectives on Color The generally conservative and conventional business culture tends to prefer conservative blue, black and green. For most U.S. business audiences, blue and green "connote wisdom and trustworthiness" while gold projects "a sense of power, prestige and confidence" (Wilder, 1999 30). U.S. audiences associate green with money, red with fear, danger or financial loss (Hanke, 1998 47).[1] Black "connotes finality," making it effective for financial reviews, and black can be interspersed "as a means of arresting the emotional flow of the presentation" but pure brown "connotes uneasiness and passivity (Hanke, 1998 49), and green is

[1] When speaking to an audience outside the United States, don't forget that color meaning is often cultural. Red, evokes financial losses in the U.S. but signifies power in China

thought to stimulate interaction (Hanke, 1999). In contrast pink projects a "frilly" image and to many adults purple "implies immaturity and unimportance" (Hanke, 1999 49). Especially when using color for projection, pastels of any hue are generally "cheap" looking (Toogood, 1996 144) and don't convey the active orientation that more intense colors do.

Cognitive Effects of Color The use of color dramatically improves audience attention and retention (Robbins, 1997) and persuasive effectiveness over black-and-white visuals (Vogel, Dickson, & Lehman, 1986). Color can help the audience sort out the various elements of a slide (Hanke, 1998 45), with bright colors emphasizing information. The use of consistent colors can organize concepts or categories when the same color is used for all members of a class. A speaker might consistently use green boxes for a project's positives, for example, and red for its negatives. Even when the presentation is exploring the details of a particular subject, the color will cue the audience about how to interpret those details.

> Color choice is often guided by some connection to the corporate identity (Britz, 1999 A17-18), with the company's logo colors used throughout a document or presentation.

Technological Considerations In many situations, the use of color is constrained by the technology used to reproduce it. Color copy machines have widened the range of possibilities in documents, but a writer should still take legibility into account (Jones, 1997). Regardless of the author's imagination, a message is only the version that an audience can actually see. Even on a rough draft or "informal" document, poorly reproduced colors can convey an unacceptable tolerance for sloppiness.

When color is projected onto a presentation screen, the technology poses some additional issues. High contrast colors can seem to vibrate on the screen, and red does not project well to audience members at the back of a room. Bright white backgrounds are hard on the eyes and a light colored text on a dark background is easier to read (Hanke, 1998 45; Heimes, 1997; Wilder, 2000 30). Blue graphics against a black background look fuzzy, compared to red or green, for which we have more color receptors in the focal area of the retina.

> Fifteen to twenty-five percent of an average audience has some color blindness, creating some difficulty distinguishing red or brown from green, or purple from blue (Hanke, 1998 45).

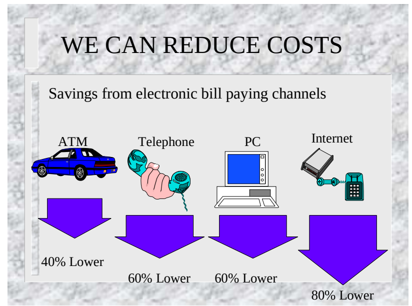
Images are obviously an important component of visual design. Artwork or photography can create an impressive impact, but the point is seldom the beauty or drama of the image itself. Instead, images are chosen for their ability to illustrate or clarify an idea, to help an audience visualize a projected or desired outcome that doesn't yet exist, or to create an emotional impact that enhances a communicator's rapport, credibility, or persuasiveness with an audience.

Graphs Because numbers are an important element of business information, their communication is also an important part of visual design. Graphs can make financial data clearer and easier to understand (Frownfelter-Lohrke & Fulkerson, 2001) and are used extensively business documents and presentations. As in any communication, graphs must be created so that information is clearly and accurately conveyed to an audience.

- Adequate and accurate titles and labels
- Data easily distinguished from other data and decorative features
- Focus maintained with simple design, color choice
- Correct representation of data with scales, proportional relationships, graphical conventions

Highlight specific pieces of information.

Graphic elements can be controlled so that the audience attends to the most important ideas. In a visual milieu, “Our eyes seek out the simplest, most obvious shapes first, then moving to the more complex shapes and patterns and finally to the text” (Hanke, 1998 51). Use the placement and motion of simple graphic shapes to focus the audience on the concepts you chose.



Down-arrow shapes are animated to emphasize the reduced costs of a new procedure.

Personal Presentation

An important element of professional communication is personal image, sometimes described as “executive presence” (Benton, ; Conlin, 2002) or “professional image construction” (Roberts, 2005). A “polished” presentation includes attention to businesslike ***body language,*** personal ***attire****,* and the physical ***artifacts*** of the business environment.

Body Language

Some business professionals—especially those in sales positions—work very hard to “read” body language, and use their own gestures, posture and eye contact to build credibility and persuasiveness. There is no such thing as “bad” non-verbal communication; your body is always communicating something. The question is whether you want to convey that particular message at that particular time. Business consultant Kare Anderson calls the body “a hologram of your being; a three-dimensional movie that is constantly on, showing others how you feel about yourself and the world” [Anderson]. The overall message a business person wants to project is a message of self-confident competence and engagement with others in the organization.

Competence: Various indicators of health and success are used to judge whether someone is competent enough to be useful to the community. Thus, a buff body and an expensive suit are more than simply arbitrary markers of status. They signal that the person is capable of acting in socially relevant ways. Human survival has always depended on a ability to decide whether a new acquaintance is capable of helping to fighting off enemies, able to make good trades with neighboring communities, or likely to be mooching supplies.

- In the modern world, an attractive haircut, makeup and clothing are key factors in judging whether someone appears capable of doing business successfully.
- Vocal qualities that indicate competence include a strong, well-supported volume (don’t forget to breathe), a dynamic, conversational rate (enthusiastic but not too fast to understand). Speakers with a monotonous tone, slow rate, and incorrect pronunciation are perceived as lacking in credibility (Fatt, 1999). In other words, it’s important to sound like you know what you’re talking about.

Power: Effective control of space is a strong indicator of power. People who sprawl or walk around the most territory have the most power, suggesting that they are not worried about attack from others around them.

- Indicators of power and authority include control of space (by touching others, things and moving around large amounts of territory), relaxation (especially lower body relaxation of knees and legs), purposeful gestures (without such extraneous gestures as self grooming or fidgeting), large silhouette (arms wide out to the sides), open-face (full facing body posture, chin and brow up, wide eyes, relaxed mouth—"readiness to communicate" cues).
- Shake hands first and firmly, making eye contact (Fatt, 1999) and with a friendly expression. Lean forward very slightly toward the other person, orienting your shoulders toward the other person. As you continue a conversation, remember that a face-to-face orientation is a power orientation; if you want to encourage agreement, sit or stand side by side instead, or walk together and talk while you are both facing forward.
- Relaxation connotes control over the situation. Relax your shoulder and arm muscles, in particular, so that you can move freely. Don't fidget with your things or yourself.
- Select clothing that is appropriate for the situation, attractive on you, but most importantly, makes you feel comfortable. You will find it hard to look relaxed and powerful if you are worried about your clothing, or tugging and scratching at the uncomfortable parts.

Calmness. In the fast-paced world of business, one important measure of your personal competence, power and control is your ability to remain calm and relaxed. "The actions of effective people do not seem rushed" and the person who is memorable, impressive, credible, genuine, trusted, and liked, doesn't "run around the track" for anybody (Benton, 136-137).

- Everyone is busy, and people don't trust those who are overworked, rushed, out of control. Show that you have the time to slow down and develop relationships. "Fast-talking" salesmen have their unsavory reputation because they give the signal that the information (or the sale) is more important than the person. Even in the business environment, "we are men and women with personal rhythms to be picked up and danced to" (Bing, 1999 59), and your calm, relaxed demeanor signals that you are ready to listen to them.

Sincerity: In the U.S. culture, eye contact indicates willingness to communicate.

- Attention gestures (which, for Americans means nodding the head, looking toward the speaker, taking notes, and making steady but not constant eye contact) indicate that you are communicating and sincerely listening.
- Remove sunglasses, hats and any other equipment that might interfere with eye contact. When interested in what another person has to say, people tend to turn their shoulders to face the person directly (Vargas, 1986 44).

Affinity: We tend to like and trust those who are "like us," so gestures that mimic those around you are perceived positively. Realize how easily we "pick up" the gestures of our family and friends, and how easily we are put off by someone who seems to move awkwardly or oddly.

- A discrepancy between words and gestures is perceived as dishonest. People will instinctively resist or react against rigidity (Anderson).
- Attractive people are judged more credible as well (Fatt, 1999).
- A forward leaning posture is associated with higher involvement (Knapp & Hall, 1992).

Business Attire

Proper business attire seems to be a continuing source of conflict, controversy and confusion for many workers, although there is really very little question about what constitutes "business attire." There are some business people who dislike wearing "the uniform" and thus any number of companies that allow—or even encourage—wearing some other style of clothing. The confusion arises when people are unsure of a specific organization means by "professional" or "business casual" or "appropriate" attire.

A professional look requires attention to the type of clothing expected at an event, the quality of the clothing itself, and its appropriateness to the wearer.

Expectations

Attire can be classified in terms of the formality of the event at which it will be worn. Regardless of the exact term a company uses in its own dress policy, the expected attire will nearly always conform to the rules within a given level. That is, men and women at the same level in the company will dress at the level of formality show here, and a person's attire would be considered "incomplete" or "wrong" if he or she wore items from two different levels at the same time. (Refer to the Business Communication website for specific rules and illustrations of proper business attire.)

Quality

Although the specific garments vary with the event, the single unifying element of business attire is price: professional attire is expensive. Business attire is sending a status message, not a fashion message. Even your casual dress at the company picnic should be expensive and conservative. As one high level executive put it, "Guys in cheap suits fail. Guys in expensive suits succeed"(Bing, 2001). Further, expensive clothing can require expensive upkeep. No matter how much a suit cost, it won't project anything but "loser" if it is stained, wrinkled, and missing a button. Dry cleaning, shoe repair and alterations are simply part of the cost of a proper wardrobe.

> "Confidence is the secret sauce in executive presence" (Conlin, 2002)

Good quality clothing is expected to last a long time, and is thus never "trendy" clothing. Much has been made of the "trend toward business casual" that employers touted as a way of attracting young, technically hip employees, but as the economy has begun to cool down again, traditional ways of judging a company's value—and a businessperson's credibility—have returned. A conservative, stable image is important for company success these days, and for the professional who works for it as well.

> With the rash of business failures guided by twenty-something B-school grads, the student who wants to get ahead must be more careful than ever to play by the rules. Anything less and, as one Fortune columnist put it, "you might as well wear a little sign around your neck that says, NO BUSINESS MODEL HERE, I'M JUST WINGING IT" (Bing, 2001 50).

Appropriateness

On top of negotiating the basic categories of business attire, the business professional must be prepared to switch gears, adjusting his or her attire to the specific demands of the day. Professionals are always tuned in to the environment. Proper business attire shows respect for yourself, your organization and your clients. The person who expects to be promoted, will wear what the boss wears to work. Even at companies that allow office attire for the "rank and file," or business casual for the "tech guys," management is probably dressed more formally (Knight Ridder Newspapers, 1999). Employees who want more responsibility…can't afford to dress casually just because everyone else does" [retail consultant Kathleen Flynn Fox quoted in [Knight Ridder Newspapers, 1999 #4363].

Generally, trying to make a client feel "more comfortable" by dressing down is precisely backward. It's a "power" move to dress like you can afford to be on the way to the golf-course instead of working. If you dress to show off your arrogant attitude, you'll make an enemy, not a friend. Even though your own office expects business casual attire, a client who drops by might be wearing corporate attire. Similarly, many workers lobby for more casual attire on the grounds that comfortable, easy to care for clothing makes them more productive. Companies have found that casual attire is indeed more energizing and creates a more comfortable atmosphere (Armour), but also undermines a sense of "professionalism." Although employees report higher morale and a better attitude, tardiness, absenteeism and "flirtations behavior" go up as well. Many telemarketers and telecommuters swear that they do better work when they are professionally dressed, even though no one at all can ever see them.

Many people keep a tie or jacket in the office, and the best business outfits are those that can be dressed up or down. Adding or subtracting a jacket and tie, or exchanging pumps for flats can allow you to dress appropriately whether you must run an errand to the executive offices or the production floor. A little more difficult is the transition from work to after-work events. You'll want to look polished and professional, but not like you're ready to negotiate a contract. A woman might wear a dress and jacket to work, rather than a suit, which can then be made dressy by removing the jacket and exchanging a daytime scarf for somewhat more interesting jewelry (Summerson, 2003 126). A man might select a suit with a softer fabric, allowing him to change to casual footwear and trade his jacket for a pullover sweater before heading out for the evening.

> **Be consistent in your style.** Even though a range of looks might be acceptable in the workplace, a person should pick a personal style that doesn't vary too wildly from day to day (Knight Ridder Newspapers, 1999; Summerson, 2003 124). It's the consistency of your persona that sends a message of reliability and trustworthiness, so pick an artsy or preppie or ethnic look if you like, but then stick with it. This is generally fairly easy for men who tend to view the wardrobe purchases as an investment in a "uniform" (Knight Ridder Newspapers, 1999), and probably a fairly boring, uncomfortable uniform at that. Women, on the other hand, are expected to project a stylish image, even at the highest corporate ranks. It can take some sophistication to develop a conservative and businesslike look that is also consistently elegant or dramatic or traditional.

Artifacts, Symbols and Signals

The use of space and physical objects in the environment are an important part of communication, and they can become particularly important in the hierarchical environment of a business organization.

Always send business correspondence in a letterhead envelope with a typed address. Plain envelopes and hand addressed envelope brand the mail as "unprofessional" …which is fine if you are a customer sending a letter to the customer service department of a company. If you are a businessperson, though, trying to make an impression on others, or a job seeker trying to cultivate a business image, your envelope should be considered your mail's "first impression." Dress your mail in a business suit!

Office Space

The placement of furniture can indicate status as well as control of the communication process. The central or front person is the controller of the information flow, and thus the holder of power with respect to task communication. Placing ones desk to face guests will indicate a higher level of control and power. To project a friendly, approachable message, a desk can be positioned so guests sit at its side, or join guests on a sofa.

> At one organization, a mid-level supervisor is allowed a maximum amount of square feet of a cubical space, no door, no private bathroom, no carpet and standard floor coverings. The next level manager gets a private office with twice the square feet and a window, but no carpet or private bath. At the next level, a section chief gets carpet in the office and an adjoining toilet. The top person gets a full private bath with a shower, carpet and five times the office space.
>
> "All hell broke loose" when a manager accepted enough used carpet from another division to cover all the floors in the building. The carpet was going to be thrown out otherwise, and it was less than six months old, but figuring out how to lay the carpet meant figuring out the status relationships for the entire department. It took two section chiefs, 22 managers and 50 supervisors about two days to realign all the office space. –George Muller

Personal Items

Items displayed in the office can communicate a person's interests, status, competence, and territorial ownership. People are rated higher on measures of authority and trustworthiness when they have aesthetic objects, such as plants and pictures, and professional objects, such as diplomas and plaques, in the office (Fatt, 1999). Items that might be considered "playful" or "cute" can mark their owners as more interested in the trite and trivial than in the business. Any racist, sexual or company negative indicators should never be placed in view.

Business people outside the office pay equal attention to the way they communicate with traveling equipment. Leather portfolios, calendars and briefcases are important signals of competence, status, and business-like preparation. Backpacks, loose papers, large purses or casual tote bags are inappropriate in a business environment.

Communicating a Businesslike Image

Efficient information transfer is always a priority, but success in the organization also requires a communicator to use a style that reflects the fundamental norms of a business culture. A highly-polished message could include all the right information and still be perceived as "rude" or "unprofessional" if it does not also exhibit attention to the ***reciprocal*** relationship with the audience, an ***action*** orientation, ***sensitivity*** to organizational relationships, and a reliance on ***objective*** evidence (See Chapter Four).

Reciprocity: The Audience-Centered Style

Co-workers understand themselves to be engaged in an ongoing trade in work resources, putting a price on each others' time, energy or knowledge with an unstated agreement that reciprocity of the relationships involves a fair exchange. This relationship is consistently supported with a discourse style that emphasizes the reciprocal relationship between a communicator and his or her audience.

Language should invite a customer or coworker to use the information with an indication of how it will be valuable to the *audience*. The result is communications that caters to the interests of the audience, and might even aim to "flatter" its audience, or appeal to its self-interest. Certainly there is a premium on communication that successfully negotiates the "conflicting purposes of sender and receiver" (Beaufort, 1999 52).

As a communicator "defines the situation" at the beginning of every communication, he or she is thinking about how the audience is going to find value in the message. Both partners in the information exchange need to define the topic in the same way, understand its importance, and agree that there is a business context that requires information, a decision or action. The communicator who consistently defines the situation to everyone's satisfaction before going on will gain a reputation as someone who "understands how we all feel" and whose communication adds value for everyone involved.

Even specific word choice sends a message. A writer, for example, can emphasize the way a whole group is involved in a topic by using inclusive pronouns such as "we" and "our" instead of "I" and "you," shared jargon or acronyms, and expressions that show a connection with colleagues or clients. Reciprocity is hindered, on the other hand, with a highly formal, aloof style that uses phrases like "it is known that" (Rogers et al., 2004). A trustworthy member of the business community uses an open, honest language style that demonstrates willingness to engage in a dialogue with the audience.

The ability to perform writing tasks that made a "contribution" to the organization has been identified as a particularly difficult issue for new workers (Rogers et al., 2004). Others in the organization will judge whether or not the communication was successful in "completing the task" (382), but recognize completion in terms of the listener or reader's task. A person who writes a memo, for instance, that doesn't provide the information requested is not given "credit" for having tried to do the task; the memo is simply not considered completed until it is *successfully* completed. It is considered the communicator's responsibility to provide information that will make that task possible, or else to provide a warrant for doing some other task.

Another way to conceptualize the issue is to see task orientation (contribution) on one end of a continuum with relationship (deference) on the other with ownership and objectivity in between (Rogers et al., 2004) All four need to be dealt with, however, as doing well in only one category can be just as bad as incompetence in all four. As one researcher puts in, "a response that succeeds in deference but is less successful in every other category might sound insincere. A response achieving contribution but failing in all other categories might sound rude. High ownership without the balance of the other issues might sound as though the writer were 'taking over' in some way" (Rogers et al., 2004 390)

The proper relationship tone achieves a balance of distance and intimacy as the communicator "suggests" a role for the receiver of the message, constructing an assumed relationship (Black, 1970), which the reader or listener can either accept or resist (Gibson, 1966). The business communicator is often creating a message for an unknown audience, making it necessary to imagine how the eventual audience will react to its tone (Russo, 2002).

Action: A Clear and Concise Business Style

The most obvious characteristic of business writing is the way it reflects the action orientation and bottom-line attitude of the business culture. The discourse of business is serious, dynamic, and enthusiastic.

Serious: Focused on Work

An action orientation means conveying a serious attention to the task at hand. The sense of "decorum" that conveys a serious business attitude is often described in terms of office manners: notice that the general rule is that communication style should always *facilitate work* and *avoid distractions from work:*

- ***Keep your voice down***; speak in conversational tones at conversational distances. The office is not a library, but it is not a social club either. People are trying to work, and professionalism in the office comes down to doing all the things that help others stay focused on their own tasks.
- ***Don't interrupt others*** who are working, or barge into their offices without knocking. (If the cubicle has no door, knock on the wall and ask if the occupant has a few moments.) Don't disrupt meetings with any kind of personal grooming, side conversations or multitasking.
- ***Maintain others' privacy*** by averting your eyes or "closing your ears" to things that don't pertain to you. Stand away from a person's desk when he or she is on the phone, out of earshot if possible. In a "cube farm" it can be impossible not to overhear a co-worker's phone calls, but civility requires that you pretend you don't know the information you've overheard until he tells you.

Even little things matter. From what kind of pen or pencil you carry (sensible and useful, if not elegant) to the things you post on your door (pragmatic and work centered). An email, for example, tells about the writer's personality as well as the content of the message. It should never come appended with a quote of the day, advertising, or cute graphics(Gregory, 2002), or use any of the cutesy signoffs that are so common in social electronic communication. Abbreviations like bfn (bye for now), ttfn (ta-ta for now),ttys (talk to you soon), or even foreign goodbyes—hasta, ciao, abraos—are just not appropriate. Pragmatic business people sign their real names and get on with the business at hand (Kelley, 1999).

Dynamic: A Sense of Urgency

One of the most difficult aspects of the businesslike style to communication is the "sense of urgency" that conveys a dynamic willingness to "do what it takes" to get the job done. Even though the job itself might require patient attention to details or careful consideration of risks and pitfalls, the successful business career is based on conveying a focus on the positive outcome, rather than on the negative or difficult steps along the way. People who don't display the proper action-oriented attitude are perceived as "lazy" or "irresponsible" and certainly "unprofessional."

A person's response to difficulties and barriers—the memos and phone calls made to insure that a tricky task does get completed—will make more difference in your career than your mistakes or successes on the "easy" day-to-day work.

- Responsiveness is often defined in terms of speed. As a student, you might think an assignment due a week after it is assigned assumes an unreasonable turnaround time. As a business person, you'll typically respond to requests for information within a few hours—and often within a few minutes.
- Responsiveness also means thinking ahead about the actions that you and your coworkers are trying to take. When you provide an answer, it should be complete and pro-active. Doing just what is asked is never enough; if you can anticipate what the other person really needs, provide it! Letting someone come back to you three times to get all the information, when you

knew what he or she really needed in the first place is unprofessional communication in a business environment.

- Communicate a willingness to take risks. Dynamism is often judged in terms of a person's commitment—a willingness to risk personal assets for the good of the group. Personal assets include time, money and personal reputation to support an action he or she advocates. The dynamic business person is thus the one who is willing to voice an opinion in a meeting or stand up for an unpopular decision.

> "Senior managers face much tougher deadlines for projects…To stay ahead, managers live with a strong sense of urgency. Consequently they expect you to respect their lack of time, set clear objectives, speak concisely and get straight to the bottom line" (Cook, 1998 30)

Sending the memo or making the phone call are only the first step in creating a dynamic communication style. Linguistic and vocal cues must also convey confidence and enthusiasm (DeGroot & Motowidlo, 1999)

- Avoid "vocal qualifiers" like "perhaps" or "we" or ending sentences with a questioning inflection (Conlin, 2002).
- Speak with enough volume to be heard, breathing deeply enough to support a whole sentence.
- Women, in particular, need to be sure their vocal pitch is low enough to convey self-confidence. High pitched squeals are universally perceived as danger signals and thus convey a lack of self-confidence.

Enthusiastic: Working with a Smile

A serious attention to work does not imply that a person is not happy. The message to be conveyed is enjoyment of the work. To some extent, this is simply because people prefer to work with happy, friendly people. The underlying message, however, is that a person who is happy is self-confident and likely to continuing doing the work in question.

- Smile. In general, most of the time, communicate with a pleasant expression. Certainly there are times when empathy or concern is best conveyed with a frown or grimaces, but for the normal course of work, the non-verbal message ought to convey positive regard for the work and the organization.
- The person having a "bad day" should refrain from communicating that to any but the closet friends in organization. The workplace is not the proper location to work out issues, gain psychological closure, or express bottled up emotions. Civility and good manners create a pleasant work atmosphere so that individuals can escape the stresses that keep them from being productive.
- Of course, a perpetual, insincere smirk or slightly mad grin is not advised. Too much smiling in serious business conversations, meetings and presentations can be taken to mean that you don't understand the situation. Women, in particular, should be careful not to project too "perky" an image, and a relaxed, pleasant expression just short of a full smile is generally safest.

Sensitivity: The Polite Business Style

A defining characteristic of business writing is its attention to the "politics" of both the audience's interests and the relationships of power that characterize a business organization.

Good business communication uses very specific language cues to display the speaker or writer's careful attention to organizational relationships. Attention should be given to the ***type*** of relationship and the relative ***status*** of the parties when choosing communication methods, formats, and language.

Respectful Cooperation

The first step in developing sensitivity to the protocols of an organizational structure is to understand that structure. An organizational chart can help visualize an organizational hierarchy, although informal chains of command, cross-functional reporting, and seniority or demographic characteristics can invest individuals with status that might not appear in the formal reporting relationships. Organizations will vary on the level of warmth, accommodation, and enthusiasm expected in relationships, but professional relationships are at least respectful and cooperative.

An important fact of business life is that all relationships are, at some level, permanent. Even disgusting co-workers, hated bosses, and political enemies are going to remain in the company or industry. They might, at some point in the future, hold the keys to something you want. Respect and cooperation—or at least the communicative signals of respect and cooperation—are valuable insurance for the future relationship.

Status Markers

The exact definition of respect and cooperation depend on the relative status of the parties as well as the cultural norms and protocols of the organization. Some groups encourage respectful egalitarianism across all levels, while others expect formal deference to those of higher rank (See Chapter One). All messages include markers, however, that should be carefully managed to achieve the correctly polite tone

Titles and Salutations

The way a message is addressed tells a great deal about the status of the parties to the communication. A memo might be addressed with full names and titles, or by team nicknames, and the choice says a great deal about the writer's relationship with the readers. Multiple recipients will also pay attention to how their names are listed, as that indicates how the writer understands their relationships with each other.

A person who is in the habit of calling his or her own supervisor by a first name, for example, will generally be careful to address a memo to "Mr." or "Ms." if any of the potential readers would have a more formal relationship. Similarly, a person is typically introduced formally ("I'd like you to meet Mr. Smith") so that he or she can offer the closer relationship ("Please call me John").

Keep in mind that professional respect is a mutual relationship. Mr. and Ms. are said with a positive tone, never as though afraid of the person or uncomfortable with the signal of organizational position. Often employees will adopt an alternative title for a superior, calling the boss neither Mr. Gates or Bill, but "Chief" or "Boss" or "Mr. G." Sometimes a group will adopt nicknames that acknowledge a special talent or organizational responsibility, calling a respected colleague "network dude" or "safety man."

Requests and Qualifiers

Professional communication invites cooperation to meet common goals rather than demand behavior. Even those who have the organizational authority to tell another person what to do or how to do it would typically use the language of a "request" ("I'd appreciate having this by Thursday") rather than that of an "order" ("Send this by Thursday"). Conversely, those who are communicating "up" the organizational hierarchy are expected to exhibit proper deference, an "acknowledgement of the superior's seniority in terms of power, organizational responsibility, and/or expert power" (Rogers et al., 2004 382).

Linguistic cues that connote respect include hedges ("data suggests"), soft modals ("would you mind", "may I") and qualifications with respect to the limits of personal opinion ("it seems to me that"), while professional communicators avoid absolutes ("are", "is") strong modals ("have to," "need to"), imperatives, challenging questions, confrontational statements, or condescending, insincere, or instructional statements(Rogers et al., 2004).

Organizational Interpretation

With both words and signals, any message begins with a context section that lets an audience know how to interpret the information that follows. Whether one is communicating with co-workers, upper management, external customers, or staff, an acknowledgment of the relationship will help others interpret the message correctly and facilitate the sometimes tricky aspects of organizational "politics."

In the end, sensitivity to the hierarchy means understanding that action is often defined differently by different people, and organizational status generally determines which perspective will guide the group's collective action. Even when there is a disagree over its importance, it is "the height of arrogance to disregard your superior's request altogether" (Rogers et al., 2004 383) and no communication can be considered responsive unless the writer "provides the information, analysis, solutions, or action requested/required, using the expected form for the situation" (383).

Establish Common Ground

Common goals, connections, background; don't assume others know you or your aims; be specific what it is you are trying to accomplish and how it fits in with what others are trying to accomplish.

Manners Still Matter

In situations where food and drink are served, politeness cues include the traditional social rules, as well as a few additional considerations for the organizational hierarchy

Who pays is generally determined by the relative status of those eating. The highest-ranking person is usually presumed to be the host. Your boss takes you out to lunch, not the other way around, unless the whole staff gets together to take the boss out for a birthday or other special occasion. Generally, sales people host potential clients, although excessive feasting can begin to look like a bribe.

Ordering and talking are done in a prescribed order. The host allows the guest to order first, then orders in the same price range. (A guest who is unsure of the appropriate price range will ask the host if he or she "recommends" anything on the menu, and then order something of comparable value.) In the U.S. placing the orders is the cue to turn the conversation to business topics. European or Latin American business people might wait until the meal is served, or even until dessert and coffee are brought to the table.

What you eat and drink tells a great deal about you as well. Don't be the first to order an appetizer or a drink. It's always safest not to drink at lunch (***especially*** if you must return to a customer-contact position), and limit yourself to one drink and a glass of wine at dinner. (If you are the guest, you need not drink just because the host does.) Enjoy what you order, but never ask for a doggie bag at a business meal.

Objectivity: Communicating the Facts

Because a premium is placed on objective decision-making, based on facts and figures, communication that emphasizes a reliance on facts and figures is perceived as most businesslike. Besides sticking to the facts and basing appeals on evidence (see Chapter 14), objectivity can be further enhanced with language:

- Use passive voice
- Removing pronouns, especially the needless "you"
- Use neutral words and transitions
- Use the existential "there" and "it" as the subject
- Make suggestions in the form of questions or requests
- Create numbered lists to remove a sense of authorship
- Avoid judgmental words or statements
- Create concrete, neutral descriptions and explanations
- Avoid absolutes

(Rogers et al., 2004 392)

In the academic world, it's often said that there is "no such thing as a stupid question," but in the business world there is such a thing as an appropriate or efficient question. Read the instructions first, then ask a teammate first, or a mentor. "Do your homework" so you don't ask the boss a question to which you're supposed to already know the answer.

Recognizing Situational Requirements

Given the general parameters of a businesslike communication style, the successful practitioner must further choose from among a multitude of communicative possibilities. Most messages could be sent by memo *or* by email *or* by phone. The number of ways a paragraph could be constructed is virtually infinite. The ways in which an idea could be explained or illustrated or supported are as varied as the ways information can be perceived. A communicator will thus need to recognize and respond appropriately to the ***situational requirements*** implied by the immediate and anticipated **audience**, and the communication **medium** selected.

Choices in Message Creation

For the person who is just entering the business community, trying to communicate "professionally" can seem impossible. It certainly is not easy; even the best writers among university graduates are generally unprepared to create messages with hierarchical sensitivity, responsiveness to audience concerns, fluency with expected formats, and an appropriately businesslike tone (Rogers et al., 2004). How is a person who has never been part of the business community supposed to know its rules about how to act and what to say?

Understanding the general culture of business provides a background for what is undoubtedly the hardest aspect of effective communication: choosing the most effective method of communication to accomplish a specific purpose in a particular situation. The new employee might be able to quickly learn the specific documents or events that are commonly found in the organization, but just following the format is not enough for success (Rogers et al., 2004). The harder matter is to know when to use each document, how to get the most mileage out of an event, or whether others will understand a technology in an expected way.

Audience Variability

A business person will typically communicate with many different audiences as part of the normal routine, and each one will be different in terms of interests, preparation, and receptiveness to the communication. Even though each audience is getting a report on the "same" customer focus groups, for instance, a marketing analyst will need to prepare very different messages for the marketing director, the package design team, and the production workers making the product.

Consider the audience's needs. A large part of being a good business communicator is in "translating" information into a form that others can understand and use. When people say, "tell me how it works," for example, they mean, "tell me what I need to do to make it work," and the speaker would tailor the instructions to that audience's level of knowledge and available resources. In the introductory context paragraph or remarks, the communicator should explain what he or she expects the audience to need and ask for feedback to verify that guess before continuing. A communicator needs to find out what listeners or readers will be doing with the information and what steps they don't already know.

Be particularly careful to translate technical or numerical information to audiences that come from a non-technical background. The accountant who uses technical terms to answer complicated tax questions or the market analyst who presents heavy statistical evidence can easily confuse a client who does not have the same business training. Most people understand quantities better than frequencies, frequencies better than percentages (Koehler, 1998), words better than numbers, and pictures better than words. If your purpose is to help people understand the *meaning* of the numbers, you will probably need to reorganize them into comparisons, composites and graphical relationships.

Consider the audience's state of mind. No matter how technically oriented your audience is, numbers simply take more effort and energy to understand than words or pictures. Give people pauses, pictures, graphics, refreshments or jokes—any visual, physical, or psychological breaks that will help them maintain their concentration on information.

Consider the audience's preparation. If possible, use common terms rather than industry jargon or technical terms, especially with people from other departments or companies or with new employees. Carefully examine the technical terms or industry jargon that you think you must use. In writing, you might explain industry terms or concepts where they first appear. A speaker should prepare clear, simple and straightforward definitions of each term ahead of time. You might decide to give some definitions in the document or presentation, but leave others in footnotes or handouts, and still others "in reserve" just in case you are asked. Be particularly careful to include "obvious" terms that you are very familiar with. Those are sometimes the hardest to define on the spot, and you never know when someone from the audience will ask about a term. When you are defining the terms, compare or contrast the ideas with something familiar to the audience and use examples whenever possible.

Effective communication in a diverse workplace includes making documents easy to read by anyone who needs the information. Well educated managers can't expect workers, customers, or international partners to learn the most elegant forms of English in order to get the information they need to do their jobs. Perhaps most important, a business reader is a busy person with little time to wade through inefficient writing. The good business writer thus takes the reader's need for information seriously and tries to make that information easy to find.

Ideally, business documents that must be widely read should be at least as easy to read as a newspaper or business magazine. If you are creating documents for customers or for entry-level workers, an even simpler style is necessary. Use the grammar checker of your word processor to score a document for readability. If it scores higher than you think appropriate for your targeted readers, take steps to make the document more reader friendly:

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