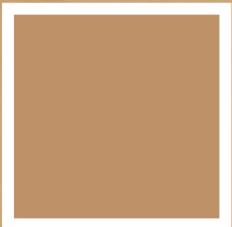


Professional Writing Today

A Functional Approach



by Sam Schechter
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Introduction

Welcome to *Professional Writing Today: A Functional Approach*! This book was written for CMNS 1115: Business Writing at Douglas College, but could also be a valuable textbook for many other undergraduate professional writing courses (and CMNS 1115 transfers as equivalent to many other post-secondary institutions, especially in British Columbia).

This book is available free of charge to any who wish to read it. It is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0 International License.

Thanks and acknowledgements need to be given to Rebekah Bennetch, Corey Owen, and Zachary Keesey, authors of *Effective Professional Communication: A Rhetorical Approach*, which is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0 International License, except where otherwise noted. Much of *Professional Writing Today: A Functional Approach* was adapted from their OER textbook.

Bennetch, Owen, and Keesey also acknowledge other works from which they have adapted, as well.

Readers of this text are encouraged to make use of it for their studies and beyond—and to report any typos they find by emailing the author at schechters@douglascollege.ca. Thank you!

PART I

INTRODUCTION TO PROFESSIONAL COMMUNICATION

1. Why am I Reading this Book?

If you're reading this sentence, chances are you're not going to be a communications major (but that's an excellent and growing field of study and it's a great option if you're interested). In all likelihood, you're an undergraduate student looking at a different field of study, such as computer information systems, accounting, nursing, social work, or some other field where communication is an essential skill, even if not the focus of your program.

Educational programs are made by experts in various fields of study. Those experts are convinced that communication skills are essential to the learning in your program. That's the real reason you're reading this book: communication is arguably the most important skill in today's professional workplace, regardless of your occupation.

Students studying criminal justice are often surprised to learn that police officers spend as much as one-third of their time writing reports. Anybody who has ever worked as a server at a restaurant will tell you that better communication with guests means better tips. Being a doctor is more than memorizing every body part, every disease, and every drug ever known; diagnosis and treatment depend heavily on listening to patients and communicating with them clearly. Their lives depend on it. The same can be true in many other communications contexts.

Every year, *Forbes Magazine* publishes a list of the top skills employers look for when recruiting candidates. This list changes a little bit every year, but one pattern is consistent:

employers want good communicators. Their list for 2021 includes 10 skills, at least half of which are clearly communication skills: thriving in a virtual environment, coping with ambiguity, the ability to coach (be that for peers, subordinates, or customers), problem solving through critical thinking, and adaptability (Forbes, 2020). On other similar lists, writing skills and public speaking skills are often featured prominently.

Professional Writing Today: A Functional Approach is designed to improve your communication skills, specifically in written communications, which you will need to succeed in your future career, whatever that may be.

Perhaps more importantly, the skills taught in this book will help readers earn future promotions in their careers. The person promoted to manage a team of accountants is probably not the best accountant and the person promoted to manage a team of computer programmers is not the best programmer; they're the best communicator. That's the skill that is absolutely essential for moving from entry-level jobs into management.

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2. What Communication Skills do I Need?

The list of skills that could be considered a “communication skill” would be extremely long—and with good reason! The list below is only a portion of what could be included.

Adapting	Crediting	Expressing	Interpreting	Negotiating	Postin
Analyzing	Debating	Facilitating	Interviewing	Networking	Presenting
Categorizing	Defining	Filming	Leading	Organizing	Printing
Coaching	Designing	Gesturing	Listening	Paraphrasing	Publishing
Commenting	Displaying	Highlighting	Managing	Persuading	Quoting
Copywriting	Documenting	Illustrating	Mentoring	Photographing	Reading
Correcting	Editing	Inferring	Moderating	Portraying	Re-enacting

All of these skills can be useful in today's professional workplace and many would be needed simply to be hired in the first place. The words above in **bold** are part of the learning in this book, but all communications skills in the list are valuable (and those not in bold can be learned in other communications courses, such as those focusing on interpersonal communications).

Thinking of your future career goals, which of the other skills noted above will you want to have? Take a moment to make your own personalized list; you can even add communication skills not listed above. How do you plan to acquire and/or improve those skills? How can you use those skills to make yourself more competitive in the labour market? Chances are,

there's another communications course that can help you with those. The more communication skills you have, the better you can perform in your career.

3. The Big Picture

Professional Writing Today: A Functional Approach is heavily focused on building specific skills and teaching you professional writing techniques that can be used in day-to-day workplace writing. However, we also need to keep “the big picture” in mind.

How does communication work as a process? How should people communicate with each other? What is expected of communicators in today’s workplaces? What cultural and interpersonal communications information do you need to thrive in a semi-social, multicultural workplace environment?

All of these questions—and more—need to be addressed before we can get into the details of professional writing.

Q: How does communication work as a process?

Every day, we receive messages, either in text or spoken form, that make us feel something. Maybe it made you excited or annoyed, happy or sad. But what specifically made you feel that way? Could you specifically articulate why the message made you respond in the way you did?

MacLennan’s Nine Axioms of Communication

This is where MacLennan’s (2009) *Nine Axioms of Communication* come in. They can help us understand how communication works and they can help us identify effective communication strategies and diagnose problems.

MacLennan (2009) defines an axiom as “a universal principle or foundational truth that operates across cases or situations” (p. 8). In other words, the axioms of communication are inescapable principles and we must always strive to be

conscious of them, whenever we engage in any sort of communication.

Here are all nine axioms listed out.

The Nine Axioms of Communication

1. Communication is not simply an exchange of information, but an interaction between people.
2. All communication involves an element of relation as well as content.
3. Communication takes place within a context of “persons, objects, events, and relations.”
4. Communication is the principal way by which we establish ourselves and maintain credibility.
5. Communication is the main means through which we exert influence.
6. All communication involves an element of interpersonal risk.
7. Communication is frequently ambiguous: what is unsaid can be as important as what is said.
8. Effective communication is audience-centred, not self-centred.
9. Communication is pervasive: you cannot not communicate

(MacLennan, 2009)

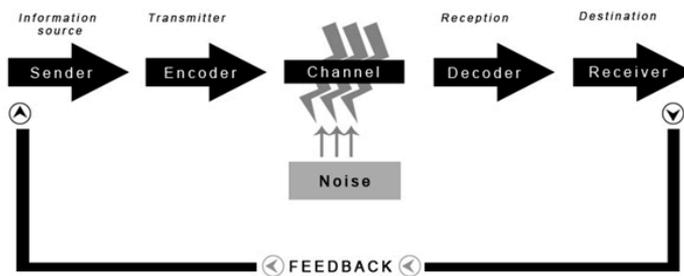
These axioms help you design effective messages, so that you better understand what you should say and how you should say it. Just as importantly, the axioms tell you what you should

not say and what you should avoid when designing and delivering a message.

Bear in mind that, while each axiom emphasizes a specific aspect of communication, the axioms are interconnected; therefore, attempting to ignore or downplay the importance of any of them can impair your ability to communicate effectively.

The Shannon-Weaver Model of Communication

Communication textbooks often adopt the **Shannon-Weaver model** (1948)—also known as the **transmission model**—to represent the linear process of communication, as shown in the image below.



SHANNON-WEAVER'S MODEL OF COMMUNICATION

In this linear model, a **sender** encodes information and, through a transmitter, sends it to a **receiver**, who subsequently decodes the message. According to this model, information seems to move in a simplified, linear manner, even though the process can be complicated by **noise**, which is information that is added unintentionally to a message during transmission, and **feedback**, which is information that the

receiver transmits back to the sender, sometimes without even realizing they are doing so.

This is a simple and elegant model of communication that can help you visualize the process anytime you're going to be communicating.

The first rule of communication is to know your audience and put them first. You can use this model to think about how to best encode your messages for them and how to send it to them. You can also think about what types of interference (noise) could prevent your message from being received, understood, or accepted. Finally, you can think about what feedback you'll look for when determining if your message was successful.

Q: How should people communicate with each other?

Clearly. Honestly. Transparently. Patiently. Thoughtfully. Fairly. Positively. Interactively. Respectfully. Ethically.

All of those are good answers; this section is focused on the last one: ethical communication.

Every one of us is responsible for how we communicate and what we communicate. This responsibility can be interpersonal, managerial, or even legal. Audiences have high expectations regarding ethical communication (even if they aren't always the most ethical communicators themselves).

Examples of unethical communication

If a business owner lies to potential investors about the state of the company's assets before inviting an investment in the company, that communication is both unethical (dishonesty) and illegal (fraud).

If a manager promises their employees that everybody will

get an equal raise, some employees will expect an equal raise in percentage terms and others will expect an equal raise in dollar terms. Lower-income employees will benefit the most from a raise that is equal dollar-to-dollar, but higher-income employees will benefit the most from a raise that is equal in percentage terms. This communication was unclear and falsely raising the hopes of employees is unethical.

If a casual acquaintance constantly sends text messages after you don't pick up on a call, you might feel annoyed or even harassed. Your acquaintance is being impatient and this form of harassment is unethical.

There are countless other examples of unethical communication. Identifying and understanding potential missteps is complex and requires patient, thoughtful analysis. Indeed, haste and/or carelessness are common causes of unethical communication.

Ethical communication

When you are communicating in a professional workplace, there's a strong expectation that you'll communicate ethically. There are a few core issues you'll need to understand, such as privacy, confidentiality, and the duty to communicate.

Confidentiality: Information is owned. The owner of that information gets to decide what to do with it. If you have information that is rightfully owned by somebody else, you need to know if that information is confidential (or perhaps merely private). Virtually all organizations have confidential documents, especially employee records, legal documents, and certain financial documents. If you're receiving confidential information, you have a duty to safeguard that information. Revealing confidential information, even accidentally, is unethical and can have serious repercussions, including legal consequences.

Privacy: Some information may not be confidential, per se, but it is nonetheless private. In a free democracy, voters are allowed to vote in private so that nobody can see how they marked their ballot. Ballots have no identifying marks to show how any particular person voted, but the tallies of votes are public information. If somebody tells you that they voted a particular way, that's not confidential information, but it was kept private (until the voter voluntarily chose to disclose the information). In a business setting, a lot of communication takes place in private, often even when it is not confidential. Violating the privacy of communications can also have terrible consequences, though, and is seen as unethical.

Duty to communicate: In some situations, you have an ethical and/or legal duty to communicate. If you are an accountant auditing the finances of another company and you detect irregularities in that company's records, you have a duty to report the matter. If you are a local government and you want to collect the annual tax roll, you have a duty to communicate the tax rate to residents.

Every industry and profession has its own set of communication responsibilities. Ethical communication relies on you knowing your obligations to various stakeholders and meeting them.

Q: What cultural communications information do I need to thrive in a socially complex, multicultural workplace environment?

Culture involves beliefs, attitudes, values, and traditions that are shared by a group of people. From the choice of words (message), to how you communicate (in person, in print, digitally, or otherwise), to how you acknowledge understanding with a nod or a glance (non-verbal feedback), to the internal and external interference, all aspects of communication are influenced by culture.

Culture is part of the very fabric of our thought and you cannot separate yourself from it, even as you leave home, defining yourself anew in work and achievements. Every business or organization has a culture and, within what may be considered a global culture, there are many subcultures or co-cultures. For example, consider the difference between the sales and accounting departments in a corporation. You can quickly see two distinct groups with their own symbols, vocabulary, and values. Within each group, there may also be smaller groups and each member of each department comes from a distinct background that, in itself, influences behaviour and interaction.

Intercultural communication is a fascinating area of study within business communication and it is essential to your success. One idea to keep in mind as you examine this topic is the importance of considering multiple points of view. If you tend to dismiss ideas or views that are “unlike culturally,” you will be less able to learn about diverse cultures. If you cannot learn, how can you grow and be successful?

Through intercultural communication, we create, understand, and transform culture and identity. One reason you should study intercultural communication is to foster greater self-awareness (Martin & Nakayama, 2010). Your thought process regarding culture is often “other focused,” meaning that the culture of the other person or group is what stands out in your perception. However, the old adage “know thyself” is appropriate, as you become more aware of your own culture by better understanding other cultures and perspectives. Intercultural communication can allow you to step outside of your comfortable, usual frame of reference and see your culture through a different lens. Additionally, as you become more self-aware, you may also become a more ethical communicator, as you challenge your **ethnocentrism**, that is, a tendency to view one’s own culture as superior to other cultures.

Q: How should people communicate with each other?

Interpersonal communication is complex and dependent on so many variables, such as those noted above.

The changing social, political, religious, sexual, artistic, and economic conditions of our world, country, region, and even organization need to be accounted for.

In North America, recent communication adaptations include declaring one's **pronouns** and making **territorial acknowledgments**. These were done to account for shifting expectations in society and to help account for historical wrongdoings.

The term “political correctness” is much maligned and even weaponized, but it really amounts to describing people in the terms by which they reasonably request they be described and being respectful in your communication about other people. However you may feel about the term or any of these issues, there are professional expectations that you'll be sensitive and respectful in your communications.

Many professionals find themselves in trouble because, when they communicate, they either do not know about certain sensitivities (especially when there's an expectation that they should know) or they stubbornly refuse to apologize for errors and to adapt to the shifting realities in which they live.

As professional communicators, we need to be able to use respectful, appropriate, and non-judgmental language to ensure that we are communicating clearly, respectfully, and ethically. Pay close attention to the issues that arise in politics and society around communication; learning opportunities abound and learning the easy way is much better than learning the hard way, which can involve a lot of unpleasantness for all.

Q: What is expected of communicators in today's workplaces?

Again, there are a lot of good answers here: ethical communication and sensitivity are discussed above. Adaptability, however, is the focus here, specifically adapting to new technologies.

The following sentence could have been written with earnest sincerity on any day in the last 175 years: "With the rapid expansion of global communications, businesses need to be able to adapt to new technologies and capitalize on the advantages they offer." This could have been said when the telegraph was invented. It could have been said when the telephone was invented. It could have been said when the television was invented. It could have been said when the internet was invented. It could have been said when video conferencing became popular during the Covid-19 pandemic. The point is this: you will need to adapt to technology. (Also, you might now realize that the sentence above is a cliché that speaks more to the writer's lack of knowledge than anything about today's business context.)

Good communicators stay current with changing technologies, whether that's new hardware (such as handheld devices) or new software (such as social media apps).

In this book, we'll focus on contemporary word processing and editing technology, especially Microsoft Word, which is an extremely popular and very effective program, available for both Apple and Windows computers. Google Docs, which is popular with students, is not used nearly as much in professional workplaces. However, many of the functions work in a similar, albeit simplified way.

In general, students would be wise to cultivate skills with the MS Office Suite, specifically Word, Excel, and PowerPoint, along

with common calendar apps, email programs, and social media, especially LinkedIn.

The Big Picture

For now, that's the big picture of communication in the professional workplace. Be sensitive to the environment in which you work, locally and globally. Account for differences in culture and put the needs of others before yourself. Adapt to new technology and learn to use it well. Communicate ethically.

Most of this book will focus on the details of written communication in today's professional workplace, but never lose sight of "the big picture."

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4. The Seven "C"s of Professional Writing

The seven “C”s are simply seven words that begin with “C” that characterize strong professional style. Applying the seven “C”s of professional communication will result in writing that can be described with these strengths:

- Clear
- Coherent
- Concise
- Concrete
- Correct
- Complete
- Courteous

CLEAR writing involves knowing what you want to say before you say it because a lack of clarity often comes from unclear thinking or poor planning; this, unfortunately, leads to confused or annoyed readers. Clear writing conveys the purpose of the document immediately to the reader; it matches vocabulary to the audience, avoiding jargon and unnecessarily technical or obscure language while, at the same time, being precise. In clarifying your ideas, ensure that each sentence conveys one idea and that each paragraph thoroughly develops one unified concept.

COHERENT writing ensures that the reader can easily follow your ideas and your train of thought. One idea should lead logically into the next through the use of transitional words and phrases, structural markers, planned repetition, sentences with clear subjects, headings that are clear, and effective and parallel lists. Writing that lacks coherence often sounds

“choppy” and ideas seem disconnected or incomplete. Coherently connecting ideas is like building bridges between islands of thought so the reader can easily move from one idea to the next.

CONCISE writing uses the fewest words possible to convey the most meaning while still maintaining clarity. Avoid unnecessary padding, awkward phrasing, overuse of “to be” forms (*is, are, was, were, am, be, being*), long preposition strings, vagueness, unnecessary repetition, and redundancy. Use active verbs whenever possible and take the time to choose a single word rather than a long phrase or cliché expression. Think of your word count like a budget; be cost effective by making sure every word you choose does effective work for you. Cut a word; save a buck! As William Zinsser asserts, “the secret of good writing is to strip every sentence to its cleanest components.”¹

CONCRETE writing involves using specific, precise language to paint a picture for your readers so that they can more easily understand your ideas. If you have to explain an abstract concept or idea, try to use examples, analogies, and precise language to illustrate it. Use measurable descriptors whenever possible; avoid vague terms such as “big” or “good.” Try to get your readers to “see” your ideas by using specific terms and descriptions.

CORRECT writing uses standard punctuation, sentence structure, capitalization, spelling, and grammar. Being correct also means providing accurate information, as well as using the right document type and form for the task. (Note that some of these points vary by country. For example, punctuation marks

1. W. Zinsser, “Simplicity,” [Online]. Available: <http://www.geo.umass.edu/faculty/wclement/Writing/zinsser.html>

and spelling varies between Canada, the United States, the United Kingdom, and other English-speaking countries. Use the style that your audience expects for their home country.)

COMPLETE writing includes all requested information and answers all relevant questions. The more concrete and specific you are, the more likely your document will be complete, as well. Review your checklist of specifications before submitting your document to its intended reader.

COURTEOUS writing entails designing a reader-friendly, easy-to-read document. It uses tactful language and appropriate modes of addressing the audience and avoids potentially offensive terminology and tone. Without courtesy you cannot be constructive.

In some cases, some of these might come into conflict: what if being too concise results in a tone that sounds terse or an idea that seems incomplete? **Figure 1** illustrates one method of putting all the seven “C”s together.

Figure 1

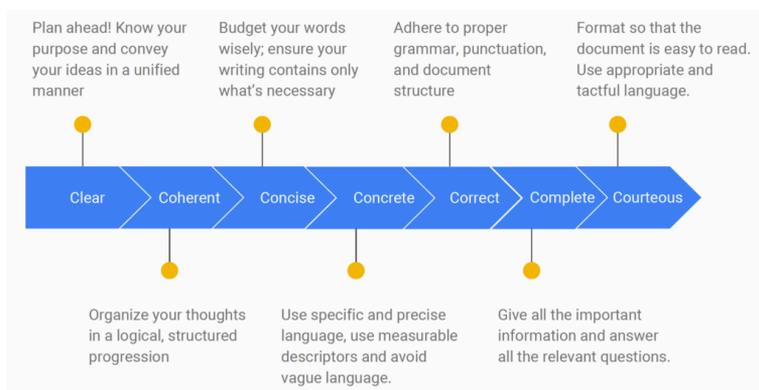


Figure #1: Putting all the seven “C”s together, created by Alyssa Zicari and Jenna Hildemann

Be mindful of the tradeoffs and always give priority to being **clear**: writing that lacks clarity cannot be understood and therefore cannot achieve its purpose. Writing that adheres to the seven “C”s helps to establish your **credibility** as a professional writer.

Here is a prioritization of the seven “C”s:

1. **Clear**: Plan ahead! Know your purpose and convey your ideas in a unified manner.
2. **Coherent**: Organize your thoughts in a logical, structured progression.
3. **Concise**: Budget your words wisely; ensure your writing contains only what’s necessary.
4. **Concrete**: Use specific and precise language; use measurable descriptors and avoid vague language.
5. **Correct**: Adhere to proper grammar, punctuation, and document structure.
6. **Complete**: Give all the important information and answer all relevant questions.
7. **Courteous**: Format so that the document is easy to read. Use appropriate and tactful language.

A note about writing tone

The subject of **tone** comes up frequently in this textbook, as it should. An important point to add here is that different documents and different audiences will require writers to employ different tone in their writing. This also means writing in different voices, such as the first person or third person.

In the first person voice, the document is written from the voice of the author, using “I” and “me” pronouns in the writing. For example, in this textbook, I have liberally used the first

person at times to better engage you (that's the second person) and draw you into the learning experience.

However, in many professional documents, only the third person is used; that's when the voice of the document never uses "I" or "me" or "you" or other first and second person pronouns. Instead, this author would refer even to himself using third person pronouns, with the same treatment to the reader (as can be seen in this paragraph).

Generally, letters are written in the first and second person, while reports are in the third person. Memos have some flexibility, but are best in the third person.

Other tone considerations have to do with emotional connection. Is the reader somebody you want to show affection or seriousness? Is the topic casual or important? Is the text offering praise or criticism? Does the document have a sense of urgency? Is the document giving instructions or asking permission? Considerations such as these will help a writer determine the tone they need to set in their document.

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5. Working in Teams

Working in teams is a fundamental skill of today's professional workplaces. Whether part of a team of peers, working across departments, supervising a team, or working across levels in an organization, teamwork is how organizations achieve results.

Any time you interview for a job, anticipate that you'll be asked about your teamwork skills and how you approach working in teams. The skills are that important; organizations want to make sure the people they hire are going to work well with others.

Advantages of working in teams

Successful organizations have found that the benefits of working in teams dramatically outweigh some of the drawbacks.

More bandwidth: The most obvious benefit of working in teams is that you have more people to complete the work; some tasks are too onerous for any one person to take on.

Coordination: Major organizations have a large number of departments. If your employer decides they want to change how they communicate financial information to shareholders, this would require a careful and thoughtful approach involving multiple departments: finance, legal, investor relations, public relations, communications, and possibly marketing, plus senior management, such as the CEO and COO. The best way to coordinate all of these areas is through a cross-functional team, with one or more representative from every department.

More expertise: With people coming to the team from different departments and backgrounds, they each bring different knowledge sets. The team can capitalize on the knowledge of people from each area to maximize results.

Better buy-in: When one person comes up with a plan, fewer people will feel committed to that plan. When a team of people from around an organization work together, liaising with their own departments and others in the organization, there is stronger organizational **buy-in** for the results. When the whole organization is committed to the team's work, the process will work better and achieve better results (at least, one hopes).

Better overall performance: The social support and positive pressure that comes along with teamwork can have important benefits. Nobody feels that they are alone in their task and everybody has people they can consult for advice. Most importantly, perhaps, the sharing of ideas naturally leads to the best ideas being advanced, with opportunities for all to provide advice, corrections, and additions to whatever the team is working on.

Disadvantages of working in teams

Unfortunately, not every part of teamwork is a happy utopia. There are several problems—all of which can be pre-empted or solved—that can crop up in team settings.

Free riders: In schools, these folks are sometimes called “slackers.” **Free riders** attempt to gain all the benefit of the team's work with no meaningful effort or contribution. Amazingly, these people exist in professional workplaces, but they are less likely to earn promotions or the respect of their peers. In school settings, these folks may achieve some short-term benefit from their behaviour, but they will learn less, have

more difficulty finding people who will work with them, and usually end up with lower grades in the end (if they even pass their courses). Taking a free-riding approach in school also sets a bad pattern for professional work; future employers and co-workers notice such behaviour and regret hiring such people.



One or more interactive elements has been excluded from this version of the text. You can view them online here: <https://pressbooks.bccampus.ca/communicating/?p=672#oembed-1>

Halo effect: Sometimes, there is a senior manager or star performer in a team—or perhaps merely a person everybody thinks is a star performer—whose ideas sound really good or perhaps whose ideas nobody is willing to challenge because of their status. This is known as the **halo effect**. When this person speaks, everybody simply goes along with what they say; that's not healthy for an organization or the decision-making process. Even the most high-ranking, senior person with the best track record can make mistakes or make problematic suggestions. Teams need to be mindful of this issue and always judge ideas on their merits, not on who's ideas they are.

Horn effect: The reverse of the halo effect is the **horn effect**. Here, there's a person whose ideas aren't taken seriously by the team, no matter how good the ideas are. This person may have made mistakes in the past or may be the newest person to the organization or may simply be unpopular. However, their ideas need to be considered on their merits, too.

Groupthink: If the horn effect and halo effect aren't impeding the team's thinking, your team may yet suffer from **groupthink**. This occurs when team members are afraid that putting

forward different ideas than those the team is currently adopting may cause conflict. Instead of challenging ideas, they “go along to get along” and nobody challenges ideas that may need to be challenged.

Coordination: Yes, coordination is one of the major benefits of working in teams, but it is also time consuming! A busy team can generate an enormous amount of email traffic. Also, coordinating schedules can be extremely difficult; every time you add a team member, that’s another schedule that needs to be coordinated.

Successful teamwork processes

Good teams don’t magically sparkle into existence; they need a shared commitment to a good teamwork process.

The most important part of successful teamwork is active communication. As soon as you know who’s in your team, exchange contact information and work out when your schedules mesh. Schedule your first meeting immediately, as that is often a time-consuming process that can cause unnecessary delays.

Active communication also means agreeing on how you’ll communicate, such as by email, text message, or social media messaging platform. Whatever you agree on, check those messages at least daily. Never let somebody in your team go without a response more than a day. If you see a message, respond, even if only to acknowledge. Teams that go silent suffer.

Make sure you all understand the project you’re working on and clearly set the quality benchmarks you want to achieve. Set goals and work towards those goals.

Plan your workload and keep notes of everything you agree to. Choose a place to share documents (students frequently choose Google Docs) and keep a schedule with the agreed-upon tasks, due dates, and responsibilities. Note timing points for checking in on the team's progress.

When scheduling, build internal due dates into your workflow; these are due dates that only your team knows about and that you set in advance of external due dates, which is when your work is actually due. **Tip: always plan to finish your team's work at least two days before it is due.** Planning on finishing your work the day it is due is extremely risky and stressful. Doing so also reduces your opportunity for quality control.

Also consider establishing roles for different people in the team. Somebody may be the most organized; they're a good person for coordinating the flow of information, but they can't be in charge of the whole project. You need somebody who is going to take the lead on task completion, making sure that everybody is hitting their targets. You may also need somebody to take the lead on research work, document design, presentation planning, and/or other necessary tasks.

Take a look at this excellent video from the University of British Columbia about how to succeed in teams.



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PART II

WRITING ESSENTIALS

6. The 15 Punctuation Marks

Fairly or unfairly, much of your professional writing will be judged based on how well it is written. Errors in punctuation stand out to many readers and suggest a lack of attention to detail or insufficient proofreading and internal document control. As such, this book places a heavy emphasis on being able to correctly use the 15 most common punctuation marks.

Let's take a look at them one by one.

. (period)

Pretty much everybody has mastered this one, except when it comes into contact with quotation marks. Some folks call it a “full stop,” but the term used in North America is a “period.” Also, note that the common practice is now to have only one space after a period.

” (double quotation mark)

Yes, the problem I see here most is that some people put the periods outside the quotation marks. Believe it or not, periods land inside quotation marks with one exception: when there's a citation after the quote, in which case the period would land after the citation. Here are two examples.

Sam said that “the period lands inside the quotation marks.”

For in-text citations, the Purdue Online Writing Lab directs writers to “include the author, year of publication, and page number for the reference” (n.d., para. 8).

Commas also land inside quotation marks, except when there's a citation. Interestingly, colons and semicolons always land outside the quotation marks.

With question marks and exclamation marks, there's a logic to it; if the question mark or exclamation mark is part of the quote, then it belongs inside the quotation marks. If not, it lands outside the quotation marks.

One sentence-ending punctuation mark lands at the end of a quote. Never include two, such as a question mark and then a period.

If you're wondering why periods and commas land inside quotation marks, I wish I could tell you there's some logic to it, but there's no logic; it's simply the rule in North America. I don't like telling students "that's just the way it is," but sometimes, well, *that's just the way it is*.

' (single quotation mark)

This is a very rarely used quotation mark; it is only for quotes within other quotes. That is, you're quoting one person who, in their comments, was quoting another person. Here's an example.

Carlos said, "my favourite quote is 'an eye for an eye leaves the whole world blind,' which was said by Mohandas Gandhi."

That's the only time you ever need to use single quotation marks ever again. The rest of the time it's double quotation marks all the way.

Students educated in Australia, Britain, or an education system created by British instructors (e.g., India) may have been trained to use single quotation marks much more often. Beware! Single quotation marks are barely used in North

American English. (Some folks continue to use them, especially in novels, but they're taking stylistic license.)

? (question mark) and ! (exclamation mark)

These characters are pretty easy, too. We've already mentioned the one exception about when they go inside or outside of quotation marks. One point I will make is that the exclamation mark is virtually unused in professional writing. There simply aren't that many times when it is justified by the text. I really wouldn't be surprised if they were entirely a relic of the past in 20-50 years.



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' (apostrophe)

This looks just like a single quotation mark and is often the same key on the keyboard; however, this is a totally different punctuation mark. It is sometimes called an "inverted comma," but this term isn't used much in North America.

I should also say that, at the post-secondary level, you should 100% master this punctuation mark.

Now.

For real.

This punctuation mark has two purposes: showing possession or showing omission of letters. This punctuation mark does

not indicate plurals (though, of course, plurals can have possession).

Fair or unfair, apostrophe errors are a red flag in the professional world for a low level of professional diligence. If you have apostrophe errors, they will be the first to be detected and they will demonstrate that you didn't have anybody else look at your work before considering it complete.

So, enjoy this Oatmeal article about when to use apostrophes: <http://theoatmeal.com/comics/apostrophe>.

; (semicolon) and **:** (colon)

Here's a mind-blowing revelation: semicolons are easier to use than commas.

Jennifer Lawrence: Mind Blown

Commas are much more difficult to use, but most people are more comfortable using them.

The rules on semicolons are relatively simple. Here's a video that provides an overview:



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Semicolons are used to link ideas when something stronger than a comma is needed. A semicolon has three main functions. Here are the first two:

Semicolon Rule #1

Use a semicolon to join closely related **independent clauses** into one sentence:

If the two independent clauses are closely related in content, then a semicolon may be appropriate.

Here is an example:

Scott was impatient to get married; Sharon wanted to wait until they were financially secure.

The subject in both sentences are both strongly related; indeed, in this case, they are engaged!

Semicolon Rule #2

Use a semicolon to link two sentences joined by a **transition word** (such as *however*, *therefore*, *finally*, or *moreover*)

Transition words are a great way to connect your sentences. Here is an example:

Canadian History is a rather dull class; **however**, it is a requirement for the elementary education program.

You may have noticed that, in both examples above, a semicolon works the same way a period does. If you could put a period there, then you can put a semicolon there—as long as both sentences are related. The semicolon simply connects the ideas more closely as part of one key idea and makes the pause between them a little shorter.

The main rule you must remember is that if you use a semicolon in this way, the clauses on either side of the semicolon must be complete sentences. You cannot use a semicolon to introduce a phrase or fragment.

Complete sentence; complete sentence.

Also remember that you cannot simply use a comma instead of a semicolon to link the two clauses; doing so would result in a **comma splice**.

Semicolon Rule #3

Use a semicolon to separate items in a complex list

where one or more of the items have internal punctuation

Take a look at this sentence:

After travelling the world extensively, I consider my favourite places to be Paris, France, Copenhagen, Denmark, Vienna, Austria, Kyoto, Japan, Dubai, UAE, and New York, USA.

Was it hard to read at all? It probably was because not everybody will know which of those places are cities and which are countries. They're grouped together, but it's confusing to read. This is where the third function of the semicolon comes in.

Here's a correct example:

After travelling the world extensively, I consider my favourite places to be Paris, France; Copenhagen, Denmark; Vienna, Austria; Kyoto, Japan; Dubai, UAE; and New York, USA.

In this case, the semicolon separates long, complex list items that contain commas within them. Without the semicolon, we have a complicated sentence that is difficult to read. In this

usage, the semicolon is sometimes known as a “super comma.” (Personally, I avoid this usage if I can.)

As with the semicolon, a colon is another type of punctuation that confuses a lot of people. Thankfully, it serves a simple purpose. Here is a video to review its use:



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COLON RULE

Use a colon to introduce amplification in the form of an example, explanation, quotation, summary, or list.

Keep in mind that when correctly used, colons are only placed where the sentence could come to a complete stop (*i.e.*, you could put a period there instead).

Amplification

The hurricane lashed the coastal community: within two hours, every tree on the waterfront had been blown down.

Example or definition

The tour guide quoted Gerald Durrell's opinion of pandas: “They are vile beasts who eat far too many leaves.”

List

Today we examined two geographical areas: the Nile and the Amazon.

Remember that when introducing a list, example/definition,

or quotation with a colon, whatever comes *before* the colon should be a complete sentence. You should not write something like this:

Today we examined: x

Three important objectives we must consider are: x

If these clauses cannot end in a period, they should **not** end in a colon. Whatever comes *after* the colon can be a fragment or list; it does not have to be a complete sentence.

, (comma)

This is by far the most difficult punctuation mark to master. However, if you start following what I'm saying above about dependent clauses and independent clauses, you'll see that a lot of them are joined by a comma.

In elementary school, you were told that a comma represents "a pause." That's what they told you because they didn't think they could explain the difference between an independent clause and a dependent clause. But, now that you're the post-secondary level, you're ready.

Commas are frequently used in lists, such as "the French flag is red, white, and blue." That's pretty easy.

The tricky part is being able to join an independent clause and a dependent clause and identifying when that is happening.

"I walked to the store."

That's an independent clause; it can stand as its own sentence.

"despite knowing it was probably closed."

That's a dependent clause; it cannot stand as its own sentence.

I can join them with a comma, though.

“I walked to the store, despite knowing it was probably closed.”

That comma isn't a pause. It's joining those two clauses and showing a relationship. If reading aloud, you would probably have a brief pause there, but that's a side effect of a comma, not the purpose of a comma.

Stop thinking of a comma as a pause and start thinking about it as a tool. (To see what erroneously happens when certain actors treat a pause as a need for a comma, look here: <https://pbs.twimg.com/media/CsZnEhEWAAxfsd?format=jpg&name=small>.) It is widely misused and often omitted, but commas are necessary to show relationships in sentences.

Commas can also be used like parentheses.

“I was going to the grocery store, list in hand, to buy ice cream, strawberries, and chocolate syrup.”

If I cut “list in hand” from the sentence, the commas on either side are not needed. (The rest of the text constitutes a complete sentence.) One of my students once told me that she called that a “drop in” clause; I love that term and still teach it today. Technically, those are called parenthetical commas, though.

Those are the three main uses for commas: lists, parenthetical clauses, and joining dependent clauses to other parts of sentences.

The article “Comma Quirk Irks Rogers” provides an example of how a punctuation error can have real world costs and consequences. One comma error in a 10-page contract cost Rogers Communication \$2 million dollars (Robertson, 2016). If you need further evidence, read about the case of the trucker's

comma that went all the way to the supreme court, resulting in a \$10 million dollar payout (Nast, 2017).

There is some debate about whether to place a comma before the “and” used before the final listed item. This comma, referred to as the Oxford Comma since it is required by Oxford University Press, is optional in many situations. For an optional piece of punctuation, the Oxford Comma has stirred up a surprising amount of controversy.

Here’s a video that explains that controversy, if you’re interested.



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() (parentheses) and [] (brackets)

Although “square brackets” (correctly called “brackets”) can be used as an aside within rounded parentheses (often mistakenly called “brackets,” which they are not), they are most often used for replacing words in quotes to show context.

“I was speaking to **[Sam]** about punctuation use in professional writing.”

What this tells the reader is that the text originally read as follows:

“I was speaking to **him** about punctuation use in professional writing.”

If I leave “him” alone, the reader won’t know who I’m talking

about. So, I amend the quote by changing “him” to “Sam” and putting “Sam” in brackets to show the amendment to the quote. This is very common among journalists, who ask a few questions and then decide only to use a quote from a later question. Because, by this time, the person being interviewed was using pronouns, the journalist has to edit the quote so the reader knows who the pronouns referred to.

Parentheses are used just as you think: to show information that is interesting or qualifying, but not critical to the sentence. They are also used to show citations; the period at the end of the sentence would follow the parentheses.

– (hyphen)

A hyphen is used to create a compound term.

For example, if two people have recently ended a romantic relationship, you might say they’ve gone through a “break-up.” As a verb, no hyphen would be necessary: “Jane and John are breaking up.”

However, turning that verb into a compound noun required a hyphen to show that the two words were being treated as a single term. This also comes up a lot with adjectives.

You may want to say that a person is detail oriented, but to do so as an adjective, you would say that they are “a detail-oriented person.” They aren’t a detail and they aren’t merely oriented; the two terms act as one to describe the person.

Hyphens are also used in numbers, such as “twenty-seven,” but we would almost always write “27” instead, so it doesn’t come up too much. (You would only write “Twenty-seven” if it was the first word of a sentence or a part of a proper noun.)

By the way, there are no spaces on either side of a hyphen; it touches the letters on each side.

— (dash)

Now, a dash looks like a hyphen and is sometimes formed by typing two hyphens in a row, but it performs a completely different task. In many respects, the dash performs a similar function to parenthetical commas (the “drop in” clause) or parentheses.

The dash sets information in the sentence aside for the reader.

“Sam wrote a lengthy reading module about punctuation—posted well before the first graded quiz—that helped me understand the 15 punctuation marks.”

Also, as with hyphens, there are no spaces on either side of a dash. It goes right up to the words on either side.

In terms of weight, I consider parenthetical commas to be the least disruptive to a sentence, followed by dashes, and then parentheses. As a writer, you need to choose how severe a disruption you want. With parentheses, the text is almost removed from the sentence. With dashes, the text is a strong aside. With parenthetical commas, the text is almost seamlessly included in the sentence.

... (ellipses)

These dots indicate that something has been left out of a sentence.

“The engineer had a number of objections to the plans as presented: materials, location, local bylaws...and, most of all, the cost.”

In the sentence above, I’m showing that there were more objections, but I’ve omitted them. Perhaps there were too many to list or perhaps they were less important, but I need to show you that they’ve been omitted.

If the ellipsis ends a sentence, add a fourth period to show that the sentence has ended and your next word isn't resuming the previous sentence.

Sometimes people want to use an ellipsis to show a pause or a trailing off on thought, but that's taking license with the punctuation mark. People do it, though...

/ (slash)

This is a seldom-used punctuation mark with a specific purpose. It shows that the text needs to change based on context. Below are the two most frequent examples.

“I want ice cream and/or strawberries.”

That means the person wants either or both of the food options. It's like programming code for a sentence.

“We're going to write a biography of every Canadian prime minister. Each one will focus on his/her time in public office.”

There have been prime ministers of Canada of two different genders, so the speaker is including two pronouns with a slash to show that the pronoun may change, depending on which prime minister is being discussed.

However, contemporary language is moving away from binary gender definitions to be more inclusive of gender diversity. As such, the expressions “he/she” or “him/her” are quickly going out of style because they suggest the old binary gender definition. There are more than two genders and professional writing needs to be inclusive of that. You can use “they” or “them” to be inclusive, which is the new trend in professional writing.

You may also have heard of the slash being called an “oblique”

or “forward slash.” It’s the same punctuation mark. The backslash is not a punctuation mark; it is only used in coding and mathematics.

So, those are the 15 punctuation marks. By the end of your first post-secondary writing course, you should be able to correctly use all of them.

Added help

If you’re looking for practice quizzes to help you study, you might find this to be a great website: http://www.grammarbook.com/interactive_quizzes_exercises.asp.

They have free practice quizzes with the answers available when you complete a quiz; they also provide explanations when you’ve made a mistake. There are a number of different quizzes for helping on different issues that you may wish to focus on for your own improvement.

Further, if you haven’t used *Grammar Girl*, this is just one example of the content on that website (dealing with commas): <http://www.quickanddirtytips.com/education/grammar/how-to-use-commas-a-summary>. That site has dozens of articles about different technical writing questions, such as homonym issues, different types of clauses, or punctuation usage. Any time you have a question, searching this site is a good way to go. (PS: Grammar Girl has actually gone downhill in recent years and is almost a clickbait website, so make the most of it, but turn off the ads. Gah. So many.)

I hope these added resources are valuable and, in some cases, mildly amusing.

In professional writing and at the post-secondary level, you should be able to use all 15 of these punctuation marks correctly. Misuse can change the meaning of a sentence in some unfortunate ways. And, fair or unfair, your work, both professionally and academically, will be judged for errors in punctuation.

The only way to master these writing tools is to choose to do so through study, observation, and practice. Notice when you see errors in your writing and the writing of others and start to read for form, not only content, and develop good writing habits. There's no shortcut. However, being able to identify and distinguish independent and dependent clauses will go a long way to helping.

For writers, a major milestone is the transition from reading for content to reading for form. As you study the craft of writing, you should be reading not only for the content in sentences, but also for the form of those sentences, themselves. I hope you're seeing how sentences are structured and punctuated and how writers use the tools available to show meaning, emphasis, nuance, and relationships. When you read, look beyond the meaning; look for the form and craft of writing itself. You'll learn so much by doing so.

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7. The Basic Elements of a Sentence

Unsurprisingly, you are required to submit written assignments for any professional writing course. Your own level of comfort in this area will be different from that of other students, but like all skills, writing is improved through practice. All of us have strengths when writing and all of us have areas we can improve.

We're going to start small right now and focus on sentence-level issues that can harm your writing. This way, we have a common language as we discuss this topic.

Let's start by going over basic grammatical terms that you will need to know for this section.

Clauses and phrases

When building anything, be it a car, a house, or even a sentence, being familiar with the tools you are using is important. For this course, grammatical elements are the main “tools” you use when building sentences and longer written works such as reports. As such, having some understanding of grammatical terminology in order to construct effective sentences is critical. If you would like to review some basic parts of speech (nouns, pronouns, articles, adjectives, adverbs, prepositions, and so on), see the **Parts of Speech Overview** at the Purdue OWL website. Now let's get into it!

The two essential parts of a sentence are the **subject** and the

verb. The subject is the topic being discussed; the verb conveys the action or state of being expressed in the sentence. When you combine these two elements, you get a **clause**. All clauses must contain both a **subject** and a **verb**.

Here are two simple examples of a clause.

(1) I walk.
(2) I eat food.

Both sentences have a **subject** and a **verb**, so they are **clauses**. There are two types of clauses in writing: an **independent clause** and a **dependent clause**.

There are also **phrases**, which lack either a subject or a verb or both, so they need to relate to or modify (i.e. change) other parts of the sentence. Don't worry about that too much, though. We are going to focus on **clauses** here.

Independent clauses, also called main clauses, can stand on their own as a sentence and convey an idea. Let's look at some examples.

Here is a sentence:

The engineers stood around the table looking at schematics for the machine.

Can you identify the **subject**, **verb**, **clause**, and **phrase** in that sentence? If not, that's okay.

Here's a break down of the difference parts of the sentence.

Independent Clause	Phrases
1. The engineers stood around the table	<u>looking at the schematics</u> <u>for the machine.</u>
(subject) (verb) (phrase)	(phrase) (phrase)

Notice the **independent clause** (The engineers stood around the table) is a complete idea. If we took at the phrase, the independent clause would work as a complete sentence. The **phrase** (looking at schematics for the machine) is not. It has a verb (looking), but not a subject, which is why it isn't a **clause**. It could not be a complete sentence on its own.

Dependent clauses rely on another part of the sentence for meaning and can't stand on their own as a sentence.

Here's an example:

After they discussed different options, they decided to re-design the components.

Can you identify the different parts we have discussed so far? Below is a break down of the sentence.

Dependent Clause	Independent Clause
2. After they discussed different options,	they decided to re-design the components.
Sub. Conj. (subject) (verb) (object)	(subject) (verb) (phrase)

Sentence 2 has one **dependent clause** and one **independent clause**, each with its own subject-verb combination ("they discussed" and "they decided"). The two clauses are joined by the **subordinate conjunction**, "after," which makes the first clause subordinate to (or dependent upon) the second one.

Being able to identify the critical parts of the sentence will help

you design sentences that have a clear and effective subject-verb relationship.

If you need some more guidance on **clauses**, please watch one or both of the videos below. The first video takes a humorous approach, while the second is more formal.



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Sentence structures

Sentence structures are how we combine **independent clauses**, **dependent clauses**, and **phrases** to create complete ideas in our writing. There are four main types of sentence structures: simple, compound, complex, and compound-complex. In the examples above, Sentence 1 is a simple sentence, while Sentence 2 is complex.

We will go over each sentence structure now.

SIMPLE SENTENCES have one main **clause** and any number of phrases. Below is the formula for a simple sentence.

subject + verb

The following are all examples of simple sentences:

- A simple sentence can be very effective.
- It makes one direct point.
- It is good for creating emphasis and clarity.
- Too many in a row can sound repetitive and choppy.
- Varied sentence structure sounds more natural.

Can you identify the **subject**, **verb**, and **phrases** (if any) in the above sentences?

COMPOUND SENTENCES have two or more main **clauses** joined by **coordinating conjunctions** (CC) such as *and*, *but*, *for*, *yet*, *nor*, *or*, *so*. A common acronym for remembering all of the conjunctions is FANBOYS. You can also connect them using punctuation such as a semi-colon or a colon. By **coordinating** the ideas, you are giving them roughly equal weight and importance.

Please note that these **coordinating conjunctions** are different from **subordinate conjunctions**, which show a generally unequal relationship between the clauses.

Below is the formula for a compound sentence:

subject + verb, CC subject + verb

The following sentences are all compound. The **coordinating conjunctions** are all in bold:

- A compound sentence coordinates two ideas **and** each idea is given roughly equal weight.
- The two ideas are closely related, **so** you don't want to separate them with a period.
- The two clauses make up part of the same idea, **so** they should be part of the same sentence.
- The two clauses may express a parallel idea **and** they might also have a parallel structure.
- You must remember to include the coordinating conjunction **or** you may commit a comma splice.

In formal writing, avoid beginning a sentence with a **coordinating conjunction**.

COMPLEX SENTENCES express complex and usually unequal relationships between ideas. One idea is "**subordinated**" to the main idea by using a **subordinate conjunction** (such as "while" or "although"). One idea is "dependent" upon the other one for logic and completeness. **Complex sentences** include one main clause and at least one dependent clause (see Example 2 above). Often, beginning your sentence with the dependent clause and placing the main clause at the end for emphasis is stylistically effective.

subord. conjunction + subject + verb (*this is the dependent clause*), subject + verb (*this is the independent clause*)

The following are all examples of complex sentences. **Subordinate conjunctions** are in bold.

- **When** you make a complex sentence, you subordinate one idea to another.
- **If** you place the subordinate clause first, you give added emphasis to the main clause at the end.
- **Despite the fact that many students try to use them that way.**
 - **x** NOTE: this last bullet is a sentence fragment and not a subordinate clause. Subordinate clauses cannot stand on their own.

Check out this link for a list of **subordinate conjunctions** if you would like to see more examples.

COMPOUND-COMPLEX SENTENCES have at least two **independent clauses** and at least one **dependent clause**. Because a **compound-complex** sentence is usually quite long, you must be careful that it makes sense; the reader can easily get lost in a long sentence.

Given the complex nature of the structure, let's look at a few examples and break them down into their parts:

Alphonse doesn't like action movies because they are so loud, so he doesn't watch them.

Independent Clause #1: Alphonse doesn't like action movies.

Dependent Clause: because they are so loud

Independent Clause #2: he doesn't watch them.

Although it will be close, I think we will meet the deadline and we will complete the project.

Dependent Clause: Although it will be close

Independent Clause #1: I think we will meet the deadline

Independent Clause #2: we will complete the project.

While our supervisor can be a bit of a jerk at times, he genuinely cares about the work and he wants to see us succeed.

Dependent Clause: While our supervisor can be a bit of a jerk at times

Independent Clause #1: he genuinely cares about the work

Independent Clause #2: he wants to see us succeed

Now that you have an idea of different sentence structures, let's focus on specific issues that can damage your writing. Below, you will find links to other chapters, each with its own specific writing focus. Since everyone's needs are going to be different, we want you to focus on **one** chapter that you think you need the most help with.

As you self-assess your opportunities for improvement, ask yourself the questions below. Consider focusing on any questions you don't feel confident you can answer the way you'd want to confidently answer it.

- Are your sentences often too short and not conveying complete ideas? (Sentence Fragments)
- Do you write in long, confusing sentences and not know how to break them up? (Run-On Sentences)
- When should you use the passive voice? Is a nominalization a good choice? (Verb Tense)
- Do you know how to use a semicolon or colon? (Punctuation)
- Have you ever been told that your writing needs to be trimmed down? (Achieving Conciseness)

Key Takeaways

- A sentence must have a subject and verb to form a complete idea.
- A clause has both a subject and verb. There are two types of clauses: an independent clause (which can stand alone as its own sentence) and a

dependent clause (which cannot stand alone as a sentence).

- Using a variety of sentence types, as well as using these types strategically to convey your ideas, will strengthen your style. Keep the following in mind:
 - **Simple sentences** are great for emphasis. They make great topic sentences.
 - **Compound sentences** balance ideas; they are great for conveying the equal importance of related ideas.
 - **Complex sentences**, when you use them effectively, show complicated relationships between ideas by subordinating one idea to another.
 - **Compound-complex sentences** can add complexity to your writing, but you need to make sure the writing doesn't lose the reader.
- Ultimately, using a combination of these structures will make your writing stronger.

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8. Sentence Fragments

In using a variety of sentence types in your writing, you will have errors. That's inevitable (but you can correct them, of course). One of the most common errors that writers make are **sentence fragments**.

The basics

In past writing assignments, your professor may have written the word "Fragment" or "frag" or even "not a complete sentence" on your paper. A sentence fragment is a sentence that is missing a **subject** or a **verb**. While the sentence may include a description or may express part of an idea, it does not express a complete thought and that is the issue.

Look at the example below:

Children helping in the kitchen.

The above example is a **sentence fragment**. It does not express a complete thought. If you read it out loud, it should sound like something is missing. In this case, a **verb** is missing.

Now, you might say, "Wait a minute, isn't 'help' a verb?" Well, often it is a verb, but in this case, it is not. What we have here is known as a **gerund phrase**. We'll explain this in more detail in a little bit, but, essentially, what that means is that the entire

phrase above serves as the subject for the sentence. That's right; multiple words can combine to make a single subject.

Thankfully, you can easily fix this type of fragment by adding the missing subject or verb. In the example, the sentence was missing a verb. Adding *often make a mess* makes this a complete sentence.

Children helping in the kitchen **often make a mess.**

Fixing the problem is that easy. If someone tells you there is a sentence fragment in your writing, first figure out whether you're missing a subject, verb, or both, and then fill it in.

Before we dive into different types of sentence fragments and how to fix them, here's a short video that will provide an overview.



One or more interactive elements has been excluded from this version of the text. You can view them online here: <https://pressbooks.bccampus.ca/communicating/?p=38#oembed-1>

Identifying sentence fragments

Let's get a little more technical now. We know that a sentence fragment occurs when a subject or verb is missing from a

sentence. Sentence fragments also occur because of some common errors, such as starting a sentence with a **preposition**, a **subordinate conjunction**, or a **gerund** ; don't worry, we'll explain those in a minute. If you use the four basic sentence structures when you write, you should be able to avoid these errors and avoid writing sentence fragments. Nevertheless, mistakes still happen, so knowing what to look for while you revise your work or the work of others is important.

Preposition fragments

Prepositions serve a lot of different purposes. These are words such as *in*, *on*, *at*, *of*, and *under* (and there are many, *many* more). Essentially, they are used to show relationships between words.

For example:

The dog is *under* the table.

“Under” is the preposition, as it shows where the dog is in relation to the table. For more background on what a preposition is, check out this link from Grammarly.

When you see a preposition in a sentence, check to see that it is part of a sentence containing a subject and a verb. If it is not connected to a complete sentence, it is a sentence fragment.

Here is an example of a **preposition fragment**:

After walking two miles.

In the above example, *after* is the preposition and we are also missing a subject. Who is walking the two miles?

Let's try this again.

After walking over two miles. Duc remembered his wallet.

Now we have two sentences. Does that fix the problem? We know who did the walking now. It's Duc.

Well, no, it doesn't. "After walking over two miles" is still a sentence fragment because it is missing the subject. Even if it's explained in the next sentence, it still doesn't work grammatically because it's not a complete idea.

Luckily, the problem is an easy fix. You can combine the sentence fragment with the second sentence.

The easy way is to replace the period with a comma:

After walking over two miles, Duc remembered his wallet.

You can also rearrange the sentence so the preposition

fragment goes at the end of the sentence. Just make sure you drop the comma.

Duc remembered his wallet *after* walking over two miles.

Is one version better than the other? Technically, no. As with all writing, the best approach depends on context. If you have an entire paragraph that starts with only prepositional phrases, it's going to look a little odd. Sentence variety is all about balance and mixing up the sentence structures in your writing. Use longer structures for less important content and shorter sentences for emphasis.

Subordinate conjunction fragments

Do you remember **subordinate conjunctions** from the chapter on sentence structure? Subordinate conjunctions include words such as *since, because, without, or unless*. As with **prepositions**, they serve many different purposes. For more background on how subordinate conjunctions work, check out this link from Grammarly.

Take a look at the incorrect example sentence below. In this case, *because* is the subordinate conjunction.

Because we lost power.

“Now hold on,” you might be saying, “you said at the start of this chapter that a sentence fragment is missing either a subject or a verb and that first sentence has both!”

You’re right. It does. There is a subject (we) and a verb (lost), but since the sentence begins with “because,” it does not feel like a complete idea. Read it aloud. It should sound like something is missing. Its incompleteness suggests that it’s a sentence fragment, and more specifically, a **subordinate conjunction fragment**. Fortunately, there is an easy fix. Let’s add another sentence just like last time.

Because we lost power. The entire family overslept.

Does something about this type of sentence seem familiar? It should. Structurally, it should remind you of the **prepositional fragment** we just fixed. Many writers will try adding another sentence to fix their sentence fragments, as in the example above, which is not actually fixing anything. The example above is obviously still wrong, but its similarity to the prepositional fragment example suggests how to fix it.

*Because we lost power, the entire family overslept.
The entire family overslept because we lost power.*

Be sure not to forget to include that comma between the two sentences if the subordinate conjunction starts the sentence.

Gerund fragments

Gerunds are a little more complicated. Essentially, when a word ends in “ing,” it can be either a noun, an adjective, or a verb. If the “ing” word is noun, or, in some cases, an adjective, then it is known as a gerund.

Let’s use the word “singing” as an example.

She is singing at the festival tonight.

In the above example, *singing* is combined with a helper verb (is) to make *is singing*. In this case, *singing* is being used as a verb.

Now look at this example.

Singing is what I was born to do.

Don’t be fooled! *Singing* looks the exact same, but it’s not being used as a verb anymore. It’s a noun. More specifically, it’s the subject of the sentence. Now it’s a **gerund**.

Let’s look at one other example with the word *working*:

Verb: I was working on my part of the report until midnight.

Gerund: Working on reports until midnight makes me tired the next morning.

In the first sentence, *working* has a helping verb (was), which means it's the verb form. In the second sentence, *working* is being used as the subject of the sentence, which makes it a noun. Therefore, it is a gerund.

If you need a little more help understanding gerunds, check out this link from Grammarly.

So what do these gerunds have to do with sentence fragments? Let's look at an example of a **gerund fragment**:

Taking deep breaths. Saul prepared for his presentation.

In that example, *taking* is the gerund. Does the first sentence make sense on its own? Does it sound like a complete idea?

No. It doesn't.

So how do we fix this? Well, like the other two fragment types we covered, we can combine the fragment with the next sentence by using a comma instead of a period.

Taking deep breaths, Saul prepared for his presentation.

You can also rearrange the order of the sentences. However, when you do that, you may have to add words so it makes sense.

Saul prepared for his presentation by *taking* deep breathes.

You can also change the gerund back into a verb by changing the structure of the sentences.

Saul prepared for his presentation. He *was taking* deep breaths.

Notice that we can tell *taking* is a verb now because it has a helping verb (*was*).

Sentence fragment review

As we've seen, **sentence fragments** can take many different forms. Fortunately, they are easy to fix. It's all a matter of knowing what to look for and making sure your fixes make sense.

If you would like to watch another video on sentence fragments, try this one:



One or more interactive elements has been excluded from this version of the text. You can view them online here: <https://pressbooks.bccampus.ca/communicating/?p=38#oembed-2>

Key Takeaways

- A **sentence fragment** occurs when it is missing either a **subject**, **verb**, or both.
- They can generally be fixed by adding the missing elements to the sentence. The most common issue is that a verb is missing.
- There are also different types of fragments: **prepositional fragments**, **subordinate conjunction fragments**, and **gerund fragments**.

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9. Run-on Sentences

Another common error in student writing is the **run-on sentence**.

The basics

Just as short, incomplete sentences can be problematic, lengthy sentences can be problematic, too.

As writers, we want to ensure our sentences always form a complete idea to avoid confusion for our reader. A “complete sentence” is also known as an **independent clause**, which we learned about in the previous chapter. Here’s an example:

I have to complete my project by tomorrow. It is worth 30% of my grade.

Both sentences are independent clauses. They both express a complete idea.

However, many people make mistakes when they incorrectly combine two or more independent clauses. This is what is known as a run-on sentence.

A **run-on sentence** can take two main forms. Read the examples below and see if you can identify what is wrong with each.

Example #1: I have to complete my project by tomorrow it is worth 30% of my grade.

Example #2: I have to complete my project by tomorrow, it is worth 30% of my grade.

Example #1 is known as a **fused sentence**. This means that two independent clauses are combined without any punctuation.

Example #2 is known as **comma splice**. This means that two independent clauses are incorrectly joined by a comma.

Look at two more examples below. Can you tell which one is a **fused sentence** and which is a **comma splice**?

Example #1: We looked outside, the kids were hopping on the trampoline.

Example #2: A family of foxes lived under our shed young foxes play all over the yard.

Example #1 is a **comma splice**. Example #2 is a **fused sentence**. Let's do some more practice identifying the two.

Fixes for run-on sentences

While **run-on sentences** are extremely common, they are also

easily fixed by using punctuation, **coordinating conjunctions**, or **subordinate conjunctions**.

Punctuation

A period and a semicolon are the most common punctuation marks used to fix **run-on sentences**.

A period will correct the error by creating two separate sentences.

Run-on: There were no seats left, we had to stand in the back.

Complete Sentence: There were no seats left. We had to stand in the back.

Using a semicolon between the two complete sentences will also correct the error. A semicolon allows you to keep two closely related ideas together in one sentence. When you punctuate with a semicolon, make sure that both parts of the sentence are **independent clauses**.

Run-on: The accident closed both lanes of traffic we waited an hour for the wreckage to be cleared.

Complete Sentence: The accident closed both lanes

of traffic; we waited an hour for the wreckage to be cleared.

Make sure that both ideas are closely related before you use a semicolon. If they are not related, you should not use a semicolon.

For example, a semicolon shouldn't be used in the following sentence because both ideas are not related:

Incorrect Semicolon Use: The accident closed both lanes of traffic; we ate fast food for dinner.

Now, you might be saying, "What if they ate fast food because of the accident? Wouldn't the two sentences be related then?"

In such a case, you may be right. But it falls on the writer to make that distinction clear to the reader. It's **your job** to make sure the connection between your ideas is clear. This can be done with **transition words**.

When you use a semicolon to separate two independent clauses, you may wish to add a transition word to show the connection between the two thoughts.

After the semicolon, add the transition word and follow it with a comma:

Run-on: The project was put on hold we didn't have time to slow down, so we kept working.

Complete Sentence: The project was put on hold; **however**, we didn't have time to slow down, so we kept working.

We can also apply this to our incorrect example above:

Incorrect Semicolon Use: The accident closed both lanes of traffic; we ate fast food for dinner.

Correct Semicolon Use: The accident closed both lanes of traffic; **therefore**, we ate fast food for dinner.

Coordinating conjunctions

You can also fix **run-on sentences** by adding a comma and a **coordinating conjunction**.

Remember, a **coordinating conjunction** acts as a link between two clauses.

These are the seven **coordinating conjunctions** that you can use: *for, and, nor, but, or, yet, and so*.

Use these words appropriately when you want to link the two independent clauses.

Run-on: The new printer was installed, no one knew how to use it.

Complete Sentence: The new printer was installed, **but** no one knew how to use it.

Subordinate conjunctions

Adding **subordinate conjunctions** is another way to link independent clauses. As with **coordinating conjunctions**, **subordinate conjunctions** show a relationship between two independent clauses. There are many different **subordinate conjunctions**. Check out this link to see a list.

Run-on: We took the elevator, the others still got there before us.

Complete Sentence: *Although* we took the elevator, the others got there before us.

In the example above, the run-on is a **comma splice**, which results from joining two complete ideas with a comma. In the correct example, the subordinating conjunction “although” appears at the start to show the relationship between the sentences. Now it’s okay to combine both sentences with a comma.

Here’s another example:

Run-on: Cobwebs covered the furniture the room hadn’t been used in years.

Complete sentence: Cobwebs covered the furniture *because* the room hadn’t been used in years.

In this example, the run-on is a **fused sentence**. We fixed this issue by inserting the **subordinate conjunction** “because” in between both sentences.

Key Takeaways

- A **run-on sentence** occurs when two or more independent clauses are connected without proper punctuation.
- There are two types of **run-on sentences**: a **fused sentence** and a **comma splice**.
- A **fused sentence** occurs when two independent clauses are combined without punctuation.
- A **comma splice** occurs when two independent clauses are combined with a comma.
- Both types of **run-on sentences** can be fixed by adding correct punctuation, a **coordinating conjunction**, or a **subordinate conjunction** to the sentence. The one that's best depends on the information the writer is trying to convey.

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10. Verb Tense

All starting writers struggle with **verb tenses**. More specifically, they tend to struggle with keeping the tenses consistent, especially in long documents.

If you've ever received feedback from a professor about "inconsistent tense" or "passive voice," then something is probably wrong with your verbs. Keeping **verb tenses** consistent will ensure your audience knows whether an event happened in the past, present, or future.

In this chapter, we will briefly review **verbs**, discuss different **verb tenses**, and finish off by discussing how to avoid the **passive voice** and **nominalizations**.

The basics

Verbs perform two tasks. First, they are the action of the sentence. They tell the reader what sort of action you, someone, or something, did.

I **walked** to the store.

In the above example, the verb "walked" tells the reader what kind of action brought you to the store. We know the person didn't run, skip, or saunter to the store; they walked.

Second, verbs tell the audience *when* something happened. This is where **verb tenses** come in. In the same example,

“walked” is in the past tense so we know the event happened in the past. There are three main tenses: present, past, and future. However, within those three tenses are several more.

In your writing, you will mostly be using **simple present**, **simple past** and **simple future**. The issue that most people run into, though, is being *consistent* with their verb tenses.

Maintaining consistent verb tense

Consistent **verb tense** means the same verb tense is used throughout a sentence or a paragraph. As you write and revise, make sure you use the same **verb tense** consistently and avoid shifting from one tense to another, unless there is a good reason for it.

Let’s look at an example. In the following box, can you see how the tense is inconsistent?

We will submit the report after I finished my section.

There are two different verb tenses being used here: **simple future** (will submit) and **simple past** (finished). Let’s fix this problem by keeping the tenses consistent.

Simple Future: We will submit the report after I finish my section
Simple Past: We submitted the report after I finished my section

As you can see, there are two ways to fix this problem. While both are now grammatically correct, the one you use will depend on what information you are trying to convey.

Now, in some cases, clear communication will call for different tenses. Look at the following example:

When I was a teenager, I wanted to be a firefighter, but now I am studying computer science.

In the above example, the writer talks about a past desire and their present situation. Whenever the time frame for each action or state is different, a tense shift is appropriate.

In the professional world, your coworkers will most likely not correct your **verb tenses** or call attention to grammatical errors, but keep in mind that these errors do have a subtle negative impact in the workplace, just as they do when applying for jobs and communicating with clients. If you keep making small mistakes like this, the receiver of your message may assume you do not pay attention to little details.

Simplifying verbs

Another issue that writers have is overcomplicating their verbs with extra words. In almost every instance, if you realize you can simplify your writing by taking out words, that is the best option. In regards to verbs, the issue typically stems from writers using **passive voice** and **nominalizations** in their writing.

Active voice and passive voice

Even when writers have consistent verb tenses, they often overcomplicate their writing by expressing the action in as many words as possible. One way they do this is by using the **passive voice**. Consider the following sentences, for instance. Which would you prefer to read?

PASSIVE VOICE

The candidate cannot **be supported** by our membership.

ACTIVE VOICE

Our members cannot **support** the candidate.

Most readers would prefer the second option. Why? Here, the **active voice** construction on the right uses two fewer words to communicate the same meaning. As a result, it is more direct than the **passive voice** construction. How does it do that?

First, let's define the two terms. **Active voice** is a sentence structure where the subject carries out the action. **Passive voice** is a sentence structure where the subject receives the action.

Essentially, the difference comes down to the **subject** and **verb**. Who is the subject of the **passive voice** sentence? It's not "the candidate" because the action of the sentence is not being done by them. The subject is "our membership" because they are the ones doing the supporting.

In the **active voice** sentence, "members" has been moved to the start of the sentence. It is clear that they are doing the action.

Both sentences are valid grammatically. You could use either format in your writing and the reader would understand what you are saying. However, the **active voice** is generally the better

one to use since active sentences tend to be shorter, more precise, and easier to understand.

There are legitimate uses of the **passive voice** though. When you want to deemphasize the doer of the action, **passive voice** is a good choice. Look at the example below.

Ten late arrivals were recorded this month.

In this example, the **passive voice** above doesn't place blame or credit, so it can be more diplomatic in some contexts. **Passive voice** also allows the writer to avoid personal references or personal pronouns (he, she, they) to create a more objective tone. Additionally, there are situations where the doer of the action is unknown, as in the following example.

Graffiti was painted on the side of our building last night.

We don't know who created the graffiti, so a passive form is useful here.

However, keep in mind that overusing the **passive voice** sounds unnatural and appears as an attempt to extend the word count or sound fancier and objective. Most readers prefer the **active voice** because the **passive voice** is either too wordy or too vague.

Nominalization

Another issue that overcomplicates writing is when writers turn the main action they describe into nouns, a process called **nominalization**. This involves taking a verb and adding a suffix such as *-ant*, *-ent*, *-ion*, *-tion*, *-sion*, *-ence*, *-ance*, or *-ing*, as well as adding forms of other verbs, such as “to make” or “to give.” **Nominalization** may also require articles (*the*, *a*, or *an*) before the action nouns. Consider the following comparisons of nominalized-verb sentences with simplified verb forms:

NOMINALIZED FORM

The committee **had a discussion** about the new budget constraints.

We **will make a recommendation** to proceed with the investment option.

They **handed down a judgment** that the offer wasn't worth their time.

The regulator will **grant approval of** the new process within the week.

He always **gives me advice** on what to say to the media.

She's **giving** your application **a pass** because of all the errors in it.

SIMPLIFIED FORM

The committee **discussed** the new budget constraints.

We will **recommend** proceeding with the investment option.

They **judged** that the offer wasn't worth their time.

The regulator will **approve** the new process within the week.

He always **advises** me on what to say to the media.

She's **passing** on your application because of all the errors in it.

You can tell that the simplified sentences have greater impact than those that use **nominalizations**. In all of the **nominalization** examples, more words are required to communicate the same meaning. When writing contains all three issues we've discussed (inconsistent verb tense, passive voice, and nominalizations), it becomes muddled and lacks the clarity that is expected in professional writing.

Parallelism (or parallel structure)

When constructing sentences, all parts need to work in parallel.

To understand parallel structure, let's first look at an example of *faulty parallelism*.

We need to buy apples, oranges, and I love bananas most.

Reading that quickly or even reading it aloud, you might not immediately notice the problem. However, if we break this sentence into three, the problem becomes clear immediately:

- We need to buy apples. (Good)
- We need to buy oranges. (Good)
- **We need to buy I love bananas most. (Problem)**

That last example clearly doesn't work; it should read "We need to buy bananas" or "We need to buy bananas, which I love most."

Good sentence structure demands that all parts in a sentence (often in a list) work together in parallel structure.

Here's an example of parallel structure working in a bullet list:

The engineer has identified four causes of the mechanical breakdown:

- low-quality materials,
- infrequent maintenance,
- inadequate lubrication, and
- heat stress.

That bullet list works in parallel. The way to check is to lead into

each bullet list with text that would make each line a complete sentence. Watch how:

The problem was low-quality materials. (Good)

The problem was infrequent maintenance. (Good)

The problem was inadequate lubrication. (Good)

The problem was heat stress. (Good)

All four of those sentences begin with the same three words, followed by the text from one line in the bullet list. This proves you have parallel structure in your bullet list.

Key Takeaways

- **Verb tense** helps you express when an event takes place.
- Maintaining consistency among **verb tenses** in your writing will ensure your communication is clear. While there are 12 different tenses in English, the three you will be using the most are **simple present, simple past, and simple future**.
- A more direct style of writing is almost always preferable. Therefore, it is often to best to avoid the **passive voice** and **nominalizations**.

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11. Paragraph Structure

Words and punctuation have the smallest portions of written meaning and sentences are the shortest complete units of meaning, but paragraphs are where ideas come to life in written communication. A strong paragraph structure organizes meaning for the reader, providing context, clarity, emphasis, relationships, and direction. Good paragraph structure and organization are fundamental to quality professional writing.

Different paragraphs perform different functions, notably introduction paragraphs, body paragraphs, and conclusion paragraphs. Paragraphs come in different lengths and can take different shapes, such as paragraphs that include a bullet list or numbered list.

This section will walk you through the process of creating quality paragraphs in your writing. Also see chapters on Using Outlines to Strengthen Writing, Achieving Conciseness, and Formatting the Report for more on creating quality paragraphs in your writing.

Paragraph content

If a sentence communicates one clear idea (or sometimes two) for the reader, the purpose of a paragraph is to bring sentences into conversation. That conversation could achieve any of the following tasks:

- Showing how one idea caused another (cause and effect)
- Showing a sequence of events (first this, then that)
- Comparing differences between two or more ideas

- Showing similarities between two or more ideas
- Expanding on an idea
- Providing reasoning for an idea
- Providing evidence for an idea
- Introducing a broader discussion
- Concluding a broader discussion

There could be other examples of a function a paragraph could fulfill, but hopefully you get the idea.

Paragraph organization

Paragraphs begin with a topic sentence, clearly indicating what the paragraph is about or setting the stage for one of the above relationships to be made.

After that, you'll find one or more sentences that continue the conversation.

Finally, you'll have a sentence that shows the relationship or larger idea that's being achieved.

Let's take a look at the first paragraph in this chapter as an example:

Topic sentence: Words and punctuation have the smallest portions of written meaning and sentences are the shortest complete units of meaning, but paragraphs are where ideas come to life in written communication. **Topic: writing paragraphs**

Continue the conversation: A strong paragraph structure organizes meaning for the reader, providing context, clarity, emphasis, relationships, and direction. **Conversation: benefit of paragraphs**

Larger idea: Good paragraph structure and organization are fundamental to quality professional writing. **Larger idea: importance of paragraphs in professional writing**

That paragraph has three sentences that show a clear, logical elaboration of an idea we're building on in this chapter. It functions as an introductory paragraph by letting you know what you'll be reading about in this chapter.

Paragraph length

There is quite a bit of debate about the length of paragraphs. In most professional documents, paragraphs are 3-5 sentences in length, but they can be longer if necessary and they can be shorter for emphasis. A one-sentence paragraph is showing the highest level of emphasis on the content because the writer is essentially suggesting that the content is so important that it needs to stand alone.

In academic documents and novels, paragraphs can stretch on almost endlessly. That's not appropriate for a professional document. On blogs, paragraphs are often 1-3 sentences and rarely longer. That's a style unique to blogs; it's not common in most professional documents.

As a writer, you'll need to make each unique paragraph work for the content it contains and the purpose it fulfills. That's part of the skill of writing.

Bullet points and numbered lists

Bullet points and numbered lists are subject to many style parameters, but few hard rules. The only "rule" this book

imparts is to be consistent. For example, when using bullet points, be consistent in these formatting options:

- Capitalization at the beginning of a line with a bullet point
- Use of punctuation (or no punctuation) at the end of the line of a bullet point
- The depth of indentation from the left margin to the beginning of each bullet point
- The depth of further indentation from the bullet point to the text to the right
- The hierarchy of bullet point formatting
 - Usually filled round bullets for the first level
 - Often hollow round bullets or smaller filled square bullets for the second level
 - Sometimes a single period-sized dot for the third level
- The use of tab marks and ruler functions or space marks (but never use space marks for formatting bullet points)

With both bullet lists and numbered lists, include an independent clause before a bullet list to create correct grammar and logical context. You'll see that both the lists above and below lead into the points with what could stand as its own sentence (independent clause). This gives clarity to the reader and avoids the appearance of "abandoned bullets."

Numbered lists should be consistent in the same ways, but there are also the style of numbering, such as these options:

1. Capitalized Roman numerals, as used in very large documents for major sections
2. Standard Arabic numerals, such as in this list
3. Capital letters
4. Lowercase roman numerals
5. Lowercase letters
6. Smaller Arabic numerals

The above numbered list is the usual hierarchy ordering for tiered numbered lists (where there are major sections, regular sections, sub-sections, and lesser and lesser sections in a document).

Some numbered lists instead use decimal points for the hierarchy, having no decimal point before the Arabic numeral for a major section, but a decimal before the numbered point for a regular section, and sub-section, and so on. The fourth sub-section in the third regular section, of the second major section of a document would then be numbered as such:

2.3.4: Example of a numbered hierarchy using periods

Bullet lists are used when every point is relatively equal and there is no chronology, prioritization, or other ordering needed. Numbered lists are used when a sequence, priority, or other ordering is useful to the reader.

Keep in mind that bullet lists should be used sparingly. Professional reports will rarely have more than one bullet list per page and rarely more than six bullet points per list. There should never be a bullet list or a numbered list with only one point.

For further guidance, see [this useful article](#).

Transitions

Readers expect that consecutive paragraphs will be part of an ongoing conversation. Sometimes, however, there's a need to shift from one area of discussion to another. This cannot be done without announcing that shift through the use of a transition word.

Most transition words show that the next paragraph is going

to add to the conversation in a new way, shift the conversation into a new direction, or show a contrast from the previous paragraph.

Here are some examples of transition words/phrases:

Transition word/ phrase	Meaning
Moreover, Further, In addition,	The new paragraph will add to the comments in the previous paragraph.
However, Although,	The new paragraph will show a contrast to the previous paragraph.
At the same time, Equally,	The new paragraph is going to show that there is more than one side to the story.
Nevertheless, Notwithstanding,	The content of the previous paragraph is an exception to the norm or needs to be acknowledged, but set aside from the broader discussion of the issue.
More importantly, As a point of emphasis,	The new paragraph shows reasoning or evidence that is higher priority than the previous.
Subsequently, Thereafter,	The events in the new paragraph come after the events in the previous paragraph.
Consequently, Therefore,	The actions of the previous paragraph caused the conclusions in the new paragraph.

By beginning a paragraph with one of those words or phrases, you signal the shift in discussion for your reader. This is an important part of quality writing.

If two paragraphs are too far apart for a simple transition word, you probably need to create a new section. With a section

heading (such as those you see above), you clearly communicate to the reader that a major topic shift is happening and what the new topic will be.

Introductions

Professional documents begin with an introductory paragraph, which should usually perform the same function in any document. A strong introduction answers why the document was written, why it was sent to the reader, what its purpose is, what content is to follow, and why the reader should, indeed, keep reading. That sounds like a lot, but it may only be 2-3 sentences, depending on the nature of the document. In a longer report, you may need 3-5 introductory paragraphs, with each paragraph answering one of those questions.

Conclusions

Conclusions do not restate the introduction!

Conclusions do not repeat the earlier content in the document!

A good conclusion explains the significance of the document now that the reader has read it. The conclusion should also indicate what happens next with the document (such as more research, forwarding the report for budget considerations, or setting up a meeting), the next steps are for the reader to take (if any), the ongoing role of the author (if any), and what the reader should do with the document (such as follow up with the author with questions).

Don't use a conclusion to repeat yourself; use a conclusion to add value for the reader and to look forward to the future.

12. Proofreading and Editing Skills

How readers judge your writing is fundamentally unfair.

Brilliant ideas are undermined by weak writing to the point that they are either not understood or, despite being understood, are dismissed because of how poorly they're being presented. That's not fair, but it is true.

Of all professional writing skills, proofreading and editing may be the most important, in no small part because you need to have mastered so many skills to be an effective proofreader and editor.

Whatever career you may find yourself in, an important pathway to promotion is going to be proofreading and editing skills. Managers need to be able to catch mistakes before the work of subordinates is passed up to superiors or out to clients or the general public. Managers need to safeguard the appearance of competence and professionalism; proofreading and editing skills are a part of that.

There are several steps one should take to effectively proofread and edit documents, whether their own documents or the documents of others, but the most important advice is this: slow down. When done well, proofreading and editing are slow-moving, patient tasks that require focus and repetition.

If there is one major achievement you take away from this chapter, let it be this: **you now need to move from reading for content to reading for form.**

Reading for content is the beginning of literacy; reading for

form is what capable communicators do. At this point in your education, you should now be moving beyond reading for meaning and looking at style, structure, language fundamentals (such as spelling, capitalization, punctuation, and grammar), and how the work is written. This is a major leap; now is the time to make the jump.

Seven steps for good proofreading and editing

1. Read the document once for meaning. Make notes about “big picture” content, research, and structure before you start proofreading for capitalization, grammar, spelling, punctuation, and other more detail-oriented issues.
2. After you’ve read and edited for content, start reading again to slowly proofread for smaller issues and text edits. You may end up reading parts of the document three or more times as part of this process.
3. Turn off features that automatically check spelling and grammar. You can’t completely trust these tools. They miss mistakes and they make mistakes. You need to be smarter and more knowledgeable than the computer. When you’ve gone over the document completely, turn the spelling and grammar checkers back on. Don’t trust them, but see if they spot anything that might need attention. If they flag an issue, make your own determination about whether the computer has made a good editing recommendation.
4. Don’t proofread or edit your own work immediately after you’ve written a document. Set it aside for at least a day (two days is much better) so that you can look at the document with fresh eyes. You’ll catch more of your own errors this way.

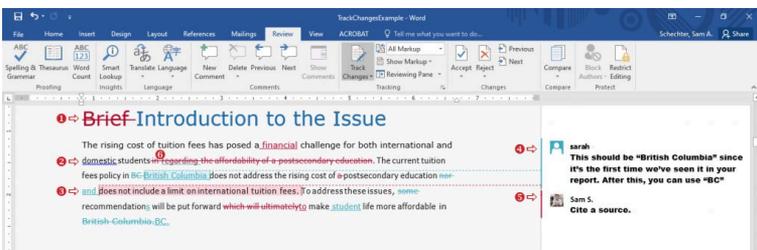
5. Go backwards. If you start with the last sentence of the document and then move backwards to the previous sentence and so on, all the way to the beginning of the document, you'll spot more errors in spelling, punctuation, capitalization, and grammar than you otherwise would. By breaking the flow of the meaning, you see more in the form of the writing.
6. Read aloud. Speak the words as you read them. If something is amiss, you will often hear the problem before you see it.
7. Edit with the track changes functions on.

Watch this video now.



One or more interactive elements has been excluded from this version of the text. You can view them online here: <https://pressbooks.bccampus.ca/communicating/?p=391#oembed-1>

As you can see from the video, there are a variety of settings and features available. For proofreading and editing, you generally want to be able to see all of your edits in line and comments off to the side. Look at the example below of an MS Word file that is being edited using the MS Word track changes functions.



Six points in the image are flagged with numbered red circles.

The first point (#1 in a red circle in the top left) points to the word “Brief,” which has been crossed out and turned red. That means an editor recommends deleting the text. However, the text is still visible as a tracked change so that everybody can see what the original version included and that an editor recommends deleting the word.

The edited text is in red, which means the edit was suggested by “Sam S.” If you look at note #5 on the right, you can see a note created by “Sam S.” and you can see a red bar before his note (reading “Cite a source”). That red bar queues the reader that his edits will be in red. If you hovered the mouse over one of his edits, a text box would pop up indicating who made the edit, as well.

Note #4 points to a comment added by “sarah.” You can see a dotted line runs from her comment to the words she’s commenting on in the middle of the paragraph. This helps the reader see exactly what she is talking about in the writing. You can see the same is true of the comment from “Sam S.” The text each person is commenting on is highlighted in their colour.

Note #3 points to a place where “sarah” has added text. It’s in her colour and it’s underlined. When text is deleted, it’s crossed out. When text is added, it’s underlined. That’s very clear for the reader and easy to understand.

As an aside, the track changes functions add the colours and underlining and strikethrough marks automatically. Neither “Sam S.” nor “sarah” actually made any colour changes. When the reader accepts and rejects these

changes, they will be in the same colour as the original document. The colours are to see the edits and are not actual changes in colours in the text of the document. Once you start using these features, you'll see how they work, but you'll need to experiment and practice to get used to the way it all works.

Note #6 is a bit trickier; this shows that "sarah" added the word "regarding" (as it's underlined in blue), but that "Sam S." later deleted the word in his editing.

Finally, note #2 shows that MS Word's grammar check thinks there is something wrong with the word "domestic." There's nothing wrong with that word, though! MS Word's grammar check software is making an error. That happens, so you need to be a better editor than the software.

After all of that, the most important advice is this: learn from your mistakes and from the mistakes of others. Every proofreading and editing task is a learning opportunity and a chance to improve your own writing.

In truth, people learn a lot less from the editing notes and proofreading corrections they receive than do the editors who made those notes and corrections. Editing the work of another teaches you more than you learn from the feedback you receive. That's what makes peer editing such a valuable learning opportunity.

Make a friend in every one of your classes and proofread each other's work. You'll learn so much more and you'll improve the quality of your writing along the way.

References

GCFLearnFree.org. (n.d.). *Word: Track changes and comments* [Video]. Youtube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=m7tmsWN6uH0>

PART III

STYLE: THE CRAFT OF SKILLED WRITING

13. Using Outlines to Strengthen Writing

When I create a document, I often note that the first sentence is my halfway point.

Before I can reach my first sentence, I need to research my topic, brainstorm ideas, and then create a detailed outline (which is the topic of this chapter). After my first sentence, I need to write the rest of the document, include my citations and references, proofread, edit, format, and polish (which includes design work, adding images, and making sure the document looks good aesthetically). Half of the work comes before the first sentence; half of the work comes after.

Too few students invest enough time before the first sentence, so this chapter teaches you how to use detailed outlines to strengthen your professional writing.

In teaching about detailed outlines, I want you to begin the process by envisioning an alien spacecraft orbiting the planet Earth. Yes, imagine some intra-galactic visitors are in a fancy spaceship circling the skies above us. These aliens are very fancy. Their technology is way beyond ours (after all, they travel between star systems) and they are very curious (much like humans), but they are very shy, so they don't want to make contact with us. These aliens have a mission: report to their home planet everything there is to say about planet Earth.

Everything.

That's a major task. It's also a very important task because not everybody from their home planet can travel all these light

years to see for themselves. So, our alien visitors will need to write an incredibly large report.

Imagine that: one document that encompasses all the available information about Earth.

These aliens can't simply sit down at their computers and start typing away. They need to be systematic and they need to be organized. Their friends back home can't simply read about Earth with topics in random order; that would be chaotic and confusing.

How can they organize such a vast amount of knowledge? With a detailed outline.

If you look at the table of contents for this OER textbook, you'll see that it's effectively a brief outline of the whole book. It's not detailed, but it does give useful information about the contents of the book and where to locate those contents. I often tell students that a detailed outline is effectively the first draft of the table of contents (but with more detail).

If a single book can be outlined, so can an entire field of study, such as botany or economics. If a field of study can be outlined, so can all the knowledge of the known world.

How would you create such an outline? What major categories would you create? What subcategories would you create? How many levels might you have in the hierarchy of information? (By "hierarchy of information," I mean that you have content first organized into major topics, then into sub-topics, then into specific areas of discussion, and then into points that need to be made in that discussion. The table of contents for this OER has a two-tier hierarchy. Some tables of contents have three levels; I have rarely seen a table of contents with four levels. However, a detailed outline could have as many levels as you need/want.)

If you want to maximize this learning opportunity, stop here and try to create a detailed outline for the report our alien visitors will need to write. You'll probably have at least four levels in the hierarchy (after all, there's a lot to say about Earth) and don't be surprised if you reach seven or more levels.

If you're going to complete this activity, stop reading now until you're done.

All done?

Great. Here's the big reveal (spoiler alert).

The document our alien visitors need to write has already been written. It's called an encyclopedia. You can find the detailed outline for Wikipedia here: <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:Contents/Outlines>. At some points, this outline has seven levels in its hierarchy, which provides an outline for over six million articles published in English on the website.

That's how one group of people thought we should organize all the information we have about planet Earth.

If somebody can make an outline for all of that information, you can make an outline for any assignment you're working on.

Creating an outline helps to give a logical structure to your work and it reduces the likelihood of unplanned repetition. With a detailed outline, you can even start placing your citations in advance so you know which source you'll use in which part of your work. This also helps ensure that you keep track of where you're citing each source in your writing.

As an aside, never write a document without citations, planning to go put the citations in after you've written the document. This is a recipe for disaster. If you lose track, you may accidentally plagiarize. Add your citations and references as

you're writing a document or, even better, when you're creating the detailed outline for your document.

Detailed outlines also save you time. When you have a clear, well structured outline, you're less likely to encounter writer's block because you know what you need to write about next. With a really good outline, you can start writing your content in a way that will make sense to you; the words should simply flow naturally at that point.

The time invested in creating a detailed outline is more than worthwhile. You'll have a better final document and you'll save time in the long run.

In terms of formatting a detailed outline, that's really up to you because you're probably the only person who will ever see it. If you use it to create your table of contents, you'll probably simplify and reduce to make the table more accessible to the reader.

However, writers frequently structure their detailed outlines something like this (and you'll note that I've included notes about where to place citations so that I can save time later):

I. Introduction

A. Purpose

B. Audience

1. Primary audience: students (cite Jones et al., 2021)

2. Secondary audience: teachers (cite Smith & Bains, 2020)

C. Context

1. Historical background (cite Chen et al., 2010, and Muskova & Ignatz, 2012).

2. Recent events (cite Sharma & Bains, 2022)

3. Popular opinion (cite Ipsos Reid poll, 2021)

D. Outcomes

II. Research methods

A. Secondary research

1. Academic journal articles

2. Trade publications

3. Government reports and statistics

B. Primary research

1. Surveys

2. Focus groups

3. One-on-one interviews

III. Results of research

A. Literature review

1. Discuss works by Nunes et al., 2020

2. Discuss works by De Tocqueville, 2017

3. Discuss works by Ibn Sina, 2016

B. Data analysis

C. Findings

1. Detailed outlines save time
2. Including citations in the outlines saves time and protects against accidental plagiarism
3. Detailed outlines help create better documents

IV. Conclusion

V. References

14. Achieving Conciseness

In many of your classes, you are probably used to trying to stretch out your writing to reach that 1,000-word goal for an essay. This is a habit you want to *avoid* in professional communication because professional audiences—employees, clients, supervisors, and others—prefer writing that is clear and, most importantly, **concise**. For our purposes, **conciseness** means using the fewest words possible to achieve the goal of communication.

What is the goal of communication? It is to ensure that your reader understands your intended meaning. Just ask yourself, if you were given the choice between reading a 500 word article and a 250 word article that both communicate the same meaning, which one would you prefer to read?

To be clear, there is nothing grammatically wrong with all the examples we will cover below. However, having perfect grammar doesn't mean a message is particularly well-written. The issue here is a matter of style—and style is perhaps the most important and most difficult skill professional writers need to master. Using the techniques listed below will keep readers focused on your message and help them interpret what you are saying more easily.

So, how do we make our writing more **concise**? Here are a few basic steps you can follow.

1. Mass-delete whatever doesn't belong

The first practical step towards trimming your document is a large-scale purge of whatever doesn't contribute to the purpose you set out to achieve. Such a purge is important because you don't want to waste time proof-editing anything that you're just going to delete anyway. However, this action is probably the most difficult one to take because it involves deleting large swaths of writing that may have taken some time and effort to compose.

Don't be sentimental about your own writing, especially with professional documents. If the writing is better without it, cut it.

A good rule is that, if the content could potentially sidetrack readers, whose understanding of the topic would be unaffected (at best) or overwhelmed (at worst) by its inclusion, those sentences, paragraphs, and even whole sections simply must go. Highlight, delete, and move forward.

(Save older versions of your work just in case you end up wanting to retrieve any of that later or use tracked changes technology to keep a record of what was deleted.)

2. Delete long lead-ins

The next way to be concise comes from deleting lead-ins. **Lead-ins** are the groups of words that you wrote to gear up towards your main point. In ordinary speech, we use **lead-ins** as something like throat-clearing exercises. In writing, however, these are often useless (at best) because they state the obvious. At worst, **lead-ins** immediately upset the reader by signaling

that the rest of the message will contain some time-wasting text.

Take the following the examples:

- I'm Jerry Mulligan and I'm writing this email to ask you to please consider my application for a co-op position at your firm.
- You may be interested to know that you can now find the updated form in the company shared drive.
- To conclude this memo, we recommend a cautious approach to using emojis when texting clients and only after they've done so first themselves.

They're all a bit long-winded, aren't they? Can you identify the **lead-ins**?

If not, here are the same examples with the **lead-ins** highlighted.

- **I'm Jerry Mulligan and I'm writing this email to ask you to** please consider my application for a co-op position at your firm.
- You **may be interested to know that you** can now find the updated form in the company shared drive.

- **To conclude this memo,** we recommend a cautious approach to using emojis when texting clients, and only after they've done so first themselves.

These **lead-ins** are unnecessary.

In the first example, the recipient sees the name of the sender before even opening their email. It's redundant for the sender to introduce themselves by name and say that they wrote this email. Likewise, in the third example, the reader can see that this is the conclusion if it's the last paragraph, especially if it comes below the heading "Conclusion."

In each case, the sentence really begins after these **lead-in** expressions and the reader misses nothing in their absence. Here's how they look with their **lead-ins** removed.

- Please consider my application for a co-op position at your firm.
- You can now find the updated form in the company shared drive.
- We recommend a cautious approach to using emojis when texting clients, and only after they've done so first themselves.

All three examples are improved by having their **lead-in** removed. If your writing has similar long **lead-ins**, delete them.

3. Pare down unnecessarily wordy phrases

We habitually use long stock phrases in our writing and speech because they sound fancy. However, length does not grant respectability. These phrases look ridiculously cumbersome when seen next to their more **concise** equivalent words and phrases, as you can see in Table #1 below. Unless you have good reason to do otherwise, always replace the wordy phrases with **concise** ones in your writing.

Table #1: Replace unnecessarily wordy phrases with concise equivalents

Replace These Wordy Phrases	with These Concise Equivalents
due to the fact that	because
not later than July 7	by July 7
at this present moment in time	now
in any way, shape, or form	in any way
pursuant to your request	as requested
thanking you in advance	thank you
in addition to the above	also
in view of the fact that	because
are of the opinion that	believe
afford an opportunity	allow
despite the fact that	although
during the time that	while
on a weekly basis	weekly
at a later date/time	later
until such time as	until
in the near future	soon
fully cognizant of	aware of
in the event that	if
for the period of	for
attached hereto	attached
each and every	all
in as much as	because

Again, the reader misses nothing if you use the words and phrases in the second column instead of those in the first. Also, **concise** writing is more accessible to readers who are learning English as an additional language.

4. Delete redundant words

Our writing and speech is also filled with redundant words in stock expressions. These prefabricated phrases aren't so bad when spoken, but are tiresome in their written form. Be on the lookout for the expressions below so that you are in command of your language.

Simply delete the crossed-out words in red if they appear in combination with those in blue:

- ~~absolutely~~ essential (You can't get any more essential than essential.)
- ~~future~~ plans (Are you going to make plans about the past? Plans are always future.)
- ~~small in-size~~ (The context will determine that you mean small in size, quantity, or otherwise.)
- ~~refer back to~~ ("Back" doesn't help the verb "refer" in anyway, so cut it.)
- ~~in-order to~~ (Only use "in order" if it helps distinguish an infinitive phrase, which begins with "to," from the preposition "to" appearing close to it.)
- ~~each and every~~ or ~~each-and every~~ (Alternately, write "all," as we saw in the Table #1 above.)
- ~~repeat again~~ (Is this déjà vu?)

5. Delete filler expressions and words

If you audio-record your conversations and make a transcript of just the words themselves, you'll find an abundance of filler words and expressions that you could remove without harming the meaning of your sentences. A few common ones that appear at the beginning of sentences are "There is," "There are,"

and “It is,” which must be followed by a **clause** starting with the pronoun “that” or “who.” Consider the following examples:

- | | |
|--|--------------------------------------|
| 1. There are many who want to take your place. | Many want to take your place. |
| 2. There is nothing you can do about it. | You can do nothing about it. |
| 3. It is the software that keeps making the error. | The software keeps erring. |

Other common filler words include the articles “a,” “an,” and “the,” especially in combination with the **preposition** *of*. You can eliminate many instances of “*of the*” simply by deleting them and flipping the order of the nouns on either side of them.

technology ~~of the~~ future **future technology**

Obviously, you can’t do this in all cases (e.g., changing “first of the month” to “month first” makes no sense). When proofreading, however, just be on the lookout for instances where you can.

The definite article “the” preceding plural nouns is also an easy target. Try deleting the article to see if the sentence still makes sense without it.

The shareholders unanimously supported the initiative.	Shareholders unanimously supported the initiative.
---	---

Though the above excess words seem insignificant on their own, they bulk up the total word count unnecessarily when used in combination throughout a large document.

Basically, you can’t really do much to fully eliminate bad ideas because they’re quite common.	You can’t do much to eliminate bad ideas because they’re so common.
--	--

6. Favour short, plain words and revise jargon or bureaucratic expressions

If you pretend that every letter in each word you write costs money from your own pocket, you would do what readers prefer: use shorter words. The beauty of **plain words** is that they are more accessible and draw less attention to themselves than big, fancy words, while still getting the point across. This is especially true when you are writing reports, which are often filled with unnecessary **jargon**. Choosing shorter words is easy because they are often the first that come to mind, so writing in plain language saves you time.

Obviously, you would use **jargon** for precision when appropriate for your audience's needs and your own. You would use the word "photosynthesis," for instance, if (1) you needed to refer to the process by which plants convert solar energy into sugars, and (2) you know your audience knows what the word means. In this case, using the **jargon** saves word space because it's the most precise term for a process that otherwise needs several words. Using **jargon** merely to extend the number of words, however, reduces the quality of your writing and tires your audience unnecessarily.

For business writing, simplifying language is more effective. Table #2 shows examples of commonly used, complicated, or bureaucratic expressions and their simpler alternative.

Table #2: Plain and simple language

Complicated or Bureaucratic Expression	Simpler Alternative
in lieu of	instead of
solicit	request
apparent	clear
as per your request	as requested
commence	begin or start
consolidate	combine
ascertain	determine
disseminate	distribute, send
endeavour	try
erroneous	wrong
facilitate	help or assist
inception	start or beginning
leverage	use
optimize	perfect
terminate	end
proximity	near
finalize	complete
subsequent	later
utilize	use

Source: Brockway (2015)

The longer words in Table #2 tend to come from the Greek and Latin side of the English language, whereas the shorter words come from the Anglo-Saxon (Germanic) side. When toddlers begin speaking English, they use Anglo-Saxon-derived words because they're easier to master and, therefore, recognize them as plain, simple words throughout their adult lives.

References

Brockway, L. (2015, November 3). *24 complex words—and their simpler alternatives*. PR Daily. <https://www.prdaily.com/24-complex-words-and-their-simpler-alternatives/>

Attributions

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15. Writing with Generative AI

ChatGPT, while advanced and capable of generating coherent and contextually relevant text, still has several limitations that make it inferior to authentic human writing. Here are some key ways in which ChatGPT falls short:

1. **Lack of True Understanding:** ChatGPT doesn't truly understand the text it generates. It lacks genuine comprehension and is simply predicting what words and phrases are likely to come next based on patterns in the data it was trained on. Humans possess deep understanding, emotions, and the ability to connect ideas in a nuanced and meaningful way.
2. **No Personal Experience or Creativity:** ChatGPT lacks personal experiences, emotions, and creativity that humans bring to their writing. It doesn't have genuine thoughts, feelings, or unique perspectives to draw from.
3. **Limited Contextual Awareness:** While ChatGPT can maintain a short-term context in a conversation, it can struggle with maintaining a deep, nuanced understanding of long conversations or intricate topics. It may sometimes provide responses that sound relevant, but are contextually incorrect or inappropriate.
4. **Inaccurate Information and Biases:** ChatGPT can generate inaccurate or outdated information since its responses are based on the data it was trained on. Additionally, if the training data contains biases, the model might inadvertently generate biased or prejudiced content.
5. **Unsatisfactory Flow and Coherence:** Although ChatGPT

can produce coherent sentences, it sometimes struggles with maintaining a natural flow of thought, resulting in responses that may seem stilted or disjointed compared to human writing.

6. **Limited World Knowledge and Creativity:** ChatGPT's knowledge is limited to what it was trained on up until September, 2021. It lacks access to new information and developments that have occurred since then. Moreover, while it can mimic creativity to some extent, its creative output is often based on patterns in the training data, rather than genuine imagination.
7. **Empathy and Emotional Depth:** Humans can infuse their writing with genuine empathy, emotional depth, and understanding of the human experience. ChatGPT lacks true emotions and can't empathize in the same way.
8. **Subjective and Aesthetic Judgments:** Humans can make subjective judgments about aesthetics, art, beauty, and emotions that go beyond the scope of ChatGPT's capabilities.
9. **Adaptation to Individual Styles:** Humans can adapt their writing to various styles, tones, and preferences of the intended audience. ChatGPT's style may sometimes be inconsistent or not align well with specific audiences.
10. **Errors and Misinterpretations:** While humans can often catch errors, ambiguities, or misunderstandings in their writing, ChatGPT can generate responses that are grammatically incorrect, factually wrong, or contextually inappropriate without realizing it.
11. **Dynamic and Evolving Responses:** Humans can engage in dynamic, evolving conversations, responding to changing contexts and adjusting their responses accordingly. ChatGPT may struggle to adapt to rapidly shifting conversational dynamics.

In summary, while ChatGPT is a powerful tool for generating

text and assisting with various tasks, it lacks the depth, authenticity, understanding, and genuine creativity that humans bring to their writing. It's important to recognize its limitations and use it as a complement to, rather than a replacement for, authentic human writing.

Everything above that line was written by ChatGPT in response to this prompt: "In what ways is ChatGPT inferior to authentic human writing?" The only edits above were to correct for punctuation errors (yes, ChatGPT messes up its punctuation sometimes).

So, if those are the problems, how can ChatGPT help professional communicators produce quality content?

Brainstorming

There's nothing I particularly disagree with up there and I doubt I would have thought of all those problems with ChatGPT on my own (though it was a bit repetitive at times).

That's the first hint about writing with ChatGPT. It's good at gathering a range of ideas that you might not have thought of all by yourself. ChatGPT is good at brainstorming.

The pressure to constantly dream up new content can be frustrating, especially as you get the feeling that you have already created similar content in the past. ChatGPT can help you come up with some new content ideas.

Outlining

Similar to brainstorming, ChatGPT will suggest an order for how information should be provided. It might need to be corrected, but it's a starting point for how to organize your longer content, such as a blog article. When creating outlines, it sometimes has problems in its organization and hierarchy; information that should be a subsection is presented as a major section and information that should be a major section is presented as a subsection. Also, content can easily be replicated across more than one section (ChatGPT has lousy memory).

Speed

Even the most prolific writers with the quickest fingers in the planet would be hard pressed to produce quality original content at faster than 50 words per minute. (Yes, folks can type faster, but as they do, their ability to focus on quality content goes down.)

On the other hand, ChatGPT can produce about 400 words of passable—though rarely great—content in a few seconds. But there's the problem again: a large amount of quickly available text is only good if the text is good; it's mostly in the range of "okay."

What does that mean for professional writers? ChatGPT can increase the speed of producing draft paragraphs. As noted above, ChatGPT loses the plot after a while, so you can't use it to produce a first draft of a long document, but you can use it to produce a few paragraphs, or perhaps one contained section, as seen above.

Given the problems, you'll need to re-write those paragraphs to inject emotion and examples. If stating information that needs to be cited, you'll need to verify the accuracy of the information, correct as necessary, and cite an authority for the relevant information. ChatGPT cannot be trusted to be factual or accurate. You'll need to make sure there's continuity from one section to the next. But you'll have a bit of draft material to work with more quickly.

Availability

Your generative-AI writing assistant never sleeps and never takes a day off. We mortal humans, on the other hand, need sleep and days off. Without that, our writing quality gets worse and worse.

Appropriateness

As a follow-up to the previous paragraph, ChatGPT never talks trash or drunk posts. The program is less likely to make embarrassing typos from fatigue or intoxication. For example, how easily can you post about your organization's public places, instead of its *public* places? Oops for you, but that's a mistake ChatGPT is unlikely to make.

A mistake ChatGPT will sometimes make, though, is to produce content that is politically problematic, such as reinforcing negative, sexist, or racist stereotypes. That must be accounted for and corrected.

Enhancing Vocabulary

In the same way that ChatGPT can help with brainstorming, it can help with rephrasing and vocabulary. The program can be asked to explain something better or with new word choices. In this way, it's like a thinking thesaurus.

Role Playing

If you're wondering how your audience might respond to a post, try asking ChatGPT. Ask the program how a well-defined audience (give some demographic and other information about the audience) would respond to content you've drafted. Try it out with a few different target audiences. Let this help you anticipate how people might engage with your content. Revise to get the results you want and see what happens.

So much of what is described above boils down to this: ChatGPT will save you time and effort, but you must intervene to ensure you're posting quality content. As the program wrote previously, "while ChatGPT is a powerful tool for generating text and assisting with various tasks, it lacks the depth, authenticity, understanding, and genuine creativity that humans bring to their writing. It's important to recognize its limitations and use it as a complement to, rather than a replacement for, authentic human writing."

For a much more in-depth look at writing with generative artificial intelligence, I recommend reading *GenAI Teaching and Learning Toolkit* by Gwen Nguyen.

Attributions

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OpenAI. (2023). *ChatGPT* (Version 3.5) [Large language model]. <https://chat.openai.com/chat>

16. Positive Writing

In many textbooks about professional writing, you'll find a chapter about delivering "bad news," which includes guidance to stay positive in your writing where possible. I agree, which is why this chapter is called "Positive Writing," which is the goal, rather than "bad news," which is the problem.

The intellectual shift to positive writing sounds simple, but it's actually quite a challenge.

For our whole lives, we have received messages in negative framing, whether that be from parents (No! Don't touch that!), educators (Stop talking or you'll be in detention!), religious leaders and texts ("Thou shalt not..."), businesses (No shirt, no shoes, no service!), or myriad others. Most rules and laws are in the negative frame, telling us what we *cannot* do and challenges we face are often defined in negative terms, such as "problems," "conflicts," or "mistakes."

Sometimes, we need to communicate in the negative frame for urgency, clarity, legal reasons, or other needs, but most professional messages can be communicated in the positive frame.

There are many ways to frame a message. For example, if I want my spouse to buy me ice cream, I could communicate that in any of the following ways:

- Please buy me ice cream. (imperative voice)
- We need more ice cream. (declarative voice, inclusive pronoun)
- Could you pick up more ice cream at the store? (interrogative voice)
- Ice cream! (exclamatory voice, subject and verb implied)

- Darling, sweetest, could you grab us more ice cream so I can make your favourite dessert tonight? (interrogative voice, inclusive pronoun, affectionate and transactional framing added)

The topic of ice cream requires little skill to stay positive (unless you're saying "Stop stealing my ice cream!"), but take note of how the same message can be packaged in different ways. (Also, a little marital advice, go with the last one on the bullet list for best results.)

So, what do we mean by "positive frame" and "negative frame"? Look at these examples:

Please close the door.	Don't leave the door open.
Let's talk about this in a future department meeting.	I don't want to talk about this now.
We'll need to develop a new path forward.	What we're doing now isn't working.
Our past work offers us opportunities to improve.	You've made mistakes that need to be fixed.
We'll need to repair this to get it working again.	This is broken, so we can't use it right now.

The examples on the left are all in the positive frame and the examples on the right are their counterparts in the negative frame. Each set communicates the same message, but the framing is different.

The switch from negative framing to positive framing is a major challenge and one that is easier acknowledged than achieved.

To think about how to make the switch, I often encourage students to explore the memos of "Tiger" Mike Davis, a man who once owned an oil drilling business in Texas. Some of his memos seem okay, but most of them are abhorrently negative.

Take a look at the memos titled “Idle Conversation” and “Celebrations of Any Kind” and also the one dated January 3, 1978, about typewritten documents. (You may also wish to read some of the others for a shocking laugh. Be warned, the language can be objectionable!)

Tiger Mike wrote these memos and sent them to his employees. They range from not that good to wildly unacceptable. Somebody saved these memos for decades and provided them to *Letters of Note* and I’m very glad they did because we can learn a lot from them.

With the January 3rd memo about typewritten correspondence, Tiger Mike is rude, authoritarian, and ominously threatening. However, he does have a point; professional correspondence should be typewritten. Can you imagine receiving official correspondence from your bank or your post-secondary institution that was handwritten? That would seem unprofessional and strangely casual.

With the “Celebrations of Any Kind” memo, the text is, once again, rude and authoritarian. It’s also passive-aggressive and mean-spirited. However, Tiger Mike has a fair point. If everybody at work stops for half an hour to have a little birthday party every time somebody has a birthday, that’s going to eat up a lot of staff time and staff time means staff wages, which are a major expense. In contemporary workplaces, employers often give employees gift cards for their birthdays. That seems like a lovely gesture, but what it really does is what Tiger Mike was seeking to achieve: having folks celebrate outside the workplace and after work hours.

Finally, with the “Idle Conversation” memo, Tiger Mike is, as always, rude and authoritarian, but in this one, he’s also outright threatening and abusive. Communicating this way to one’s employees is a terrible choice and one that is likely to result in a large number of resignations and even lawsuits.

However, once again, Tiger Mike has a point; gossip in the workplace can be toxic and it really isn't acceptable.

The major problem is this: Tiger Mike lives in the negative frame and all of his communication is anchored there.

These messages can be turned around, just as the messages in the negative frame above were easily shifted into the positive frame.

Let's look at how we could describe Tiger Mike's memo and what we could do in the positive frame to make the language more appropriate for the workplace.

Negative Framing (Tiger Mike)

Positive Framing (Professional Writers)

Rude

-Switch to->

Polite

Abusive

-Switch to->

Considerate

Threatening

-Switch to->

Supportive

Ominous

-Switch to->

Clear

Authoritarian

-Switch to->

Democratic

Discouraging

-Switch to->

Encouraging

Problem-oriented

-Switch to->

Solution-oriented

Withholding

-Switch to->

Generous

Passive-aggressive

-Switch to->

Welcoming

Most of Tiger Mike's memos can be moved from the negative frame to the positive frame with no loss of meaning, only a shift in framing.

If you want to challenge yourself, try the three above, along with some of the others, such as the memos titled "Office Furniture" and "Use of Front Conference Room." Be careful with this exercise; your first attempt may well still be in the negative frame.

Contemporary professional communication should be in the positive frame as much as possible. Always look for opportunities to switch your writing from negative framing to positive framing, except where negative framing is truly necessary, such as when delivering bad news.

Delivering bad news

Delivering bad news is an important skill. Especially if you rise into management, that will be a critical and delicate part of your job. Skilled communicators can protect and maintain a relationship while delivering bad news. The unskilled delivery of bad news can be disastrous, as can be seen in this case study about Better.com, a company best known for its CEO, who decided to fire 900 employees in a single three-minute Zoom call (Ignacz, 2022, p. 1). The result involved more people quitting, law suits, and other catastrophic consequences (Ignacz, 2022).

Reflecting on the text earlier on this chapter, you'll know that staying positive where possible is best. However, when delivering bad news, sometimes you need negative framing (but only a little bit).

When delivering bad news, you only need to use negative

framing once in all likelihood: the moment when you deliver the bad news.

The rest of the message can be in positive framing and with good reason. Every message has a certain relationship attached to it. The relationship could be exceptionally weak, as with broadcast advertising for a product you never use. The relationship could be exceptionally strong, as with family. When delivering bad news, you want to protect the relationship as much as possible.

There are a few ways to do this. First, stay positive where you can. Second, look for opportunities to speak to shared values or goals. Third, consider if you can make an alternative offer that could be seen as “softening the blow” of the bad news. As an example, if you need to send a letter notifying a job applicant that they haven’t been hired, you could let them know that their application will be kept on file for future consideration and encourage them to look at future job postings. Yes, you had to deliver bad news, but you can still work on strengthening the relationship, even in that moment—perhaps especially in that moment.

In terms of the structure of a bad news message, there are two general approaches: direct (rip that bandage off quickly) and indirect (gently pull the bandage off a little at a time). The direct approach hurts more, but for a shorter time. The indirect approach hurts longer, but maybe not as much.

Here’s my professional advice on delivering bad news, paragraph by paragraph:

1. Start the document with an introduction, as you would with any other professional document. Indicate the purpose of the letter (but don’t tell the reader the bad news yet), the reason the letter is being written, and the reason the letter is being sent to the reader. Provide the

context in this first paragraph. That might be only one or two sentences, but start there for clarity and to ease the reader into the letter gently.

2. Rip off the bandage. In one or two sentences, clearly communicate the bad news. This is the only place in the letter where you'll communicate the bad news, as you don't want to dwell on the issue or repeat yourself, especially on this point. Immediately pivot into a message that communicates something positive, such as appreciation, praise, or goodwill.
3. Build/protect the relationship. Focus on something positive that could still happen in the future. Be sincere in doing this. For example, if rejecting a job applicant whom you don't want to hire under any circumstances, don't tell them to keep applying. That's unfair, dishonest, and unethical. However, look for a chance to give the reader a positive reflection, even in the face of bad news.
4. Express thanks and wrap up the letter.

Here's an example of a letter that follows this structure (with annotations in red).

Starfleet Academy

www.federation.ca | 604-555-1701 | 74-656 Voyager Road, Burnaby, BC V3R 1A1

July 8, 2022

Kate Mulgrew
1701 Delta Avenue
Burnaby, BC V3B D9S

Dear Kate Mulgrew,

Re: Academic Integrity Review

This letter concludes a review that was prompted by an academic integrity report from Dr. Leonard McCoy, your instructor in CMNS 1115: Business Communication. In keeping with Academy policy #47, this letter advises you of the results of my review of the work you recently submitted.

Deliver bad news clearly, directly, and only once.

Upon inspection, many sentences in your work have been copied and pasted without quotation marks, citations, or references or, in some cases, have been paraphrased from the same sources, also without attribution. Such behaviour contravenes Academy policy #47; the result is that you will receive a score of zero for your assignment. I recommend that you review the Academy's policies and consult a tutor in the Learning Center to help ensure that all your future work meets the academic integrity expectations of the institution.

Pivot from bad news to positive message.

Starfleet Academy prizes ethical scholarship and strongly believes in academic honesty and integrity. By committing yourself to these standards, you stand to benefit from the academic rigor and pursuit of learning upon which you have already embarked. The Academy values your effort and learning and seeks to reward all students for their genuine achievement.

Reinforces the positive relationship

Thank you for your attention to this matter. Should you have any questions about this letter or Academy policies, please feel encouraged to contact me, your instructor, or a Learning Center tutor at any time. I wish you the best for your continued studies at the Academy.

Yours truly,
Kathryn Janeway
Kathryn Janeway, Associate Dean

Express thanks and conclude the letter. Includes goodwill ending.

This is only one way of delivering bad news. Every situation is unique and you need to judge each situation individually (as should be true of most writing tasks).

Staying positive is a challenge, but a skilled writer can build a relationship and protect it, even when delivering bad news.

References

Ignacz, K. (2022). Better.com should live up to its name: A case study of failed public relations practices. <https://pressbooks.bccampus.ca/communicating/wp-content/uploads/sites/1726/2022/07/Better-com-Case-Study.pdf>

17. Persuasive Writing

All communication is persuasive.

Sometimes, people will tell you that there is also communication to inform. This notion masks the intention of “communicating to inform,” which is communicating to persuade, but less obviously.

Consider all the ways in which a person can communicate and all the messages that could be communicated. Now try to name one that has no persuasive element.

A traffic sign is persuasive; it persuades you to stop or not to enter a road from a particular direction or to yield to oncoming traffic or to proceed below a particular speed. A stop sign isn't there merely to inform you that you'll cause an accident if you don't stop; it is persuading you to stop.

A grocery list is persuasive. If somebody hands you a piece of paper with the words “onions,” “carrots,” “beets,” and “potatoes,” they aren't merely informing you that they need those ingredients; they want you to buy the ingredients! (Sounds like borscht is for dinner.)

Even telling a loved one that they are, indeed, loved is persuasive. Saying “I love you” to a person isn't merely benign, passive information. The intention of speaking the words aloud is to persuade the person to feel loved and to feel confidence in that love (and perhaps that they should reciprocate that love to you).

There is nothing “wrong” with this. Acknowledging that all communication is persuasive is really only an acknowledgment that all communication has a purpose and that purpose is to

either change or sustain behaviour. Information is not neutrally imparted. If somebody truly achieved non-persuasive communication, I would wonder what purpose it served. If the answer is “none,” why was it sent? It’s useless to both the communicator and the audience.

We should also take the time to note the difference between *persuasion* and *manipulation*; the latter is persuasion through dishonesty, which is not what is being discussed here. (As an aside, good communication is fundamentally honest. Good communicators prize and defend honesty.)

If you don’t know what you’re trying to persuade your reader to do, keep doing, not do, or stop doing, then you aren’t clear about the purpose of your message. A message with no persuasion has no purpose.

There are many ways to persuade a reader; clear, rational, evidence-driven arguments are the best way, but there are a huge number of shortcuts that are worth learning about, too.

The following list explains a number of the most common persuasive devices that can be incorporated into professional writing.

Persuasive devices

1. **Address objections:** Even before an audience can contemplate rejecting a persuasive message, get in front of those objections by addressing them directly. As an example, if you’re afraid the audience will think you’re asking for too much, explain how manageable your request really is. Downside: you may plant new objections in the mind of the audience that they hadn’t yet considered.

2. **Anecdote:** An anecdote is a relevant and revealing short story, often only a few sentences, that provides an analogy or explanation for the reader. Anecdotes often provide an emotional context or narrative clarity that standard writing cannot achieve. Downside: anecdotes are not representative and are the weakest form of evidence. Your reader may be skeptical that your one story is an outlier.
3. **Appeal to community/region/country/loyalty:** When referring to an appeal to one's country, we use the word "patriotism," but there can be similar sentiments applied to one's home town, region, group of friends, school, or any other identifiable grouping. Sports teams frequently sell tickets based on an appeal to local loyalty and people almost always cheer for athletes from their home country during the Olympic Games. Downside: loyalty is actually a form of logical fallacy. Loyalty is the idea that you should set aside reason and evidence in favour of emotion and possibly a reciprocal trust for people in your established unit.
4. **Appeal to fear:** This is an extremely powerful motivator, which is frequently seen in politics. Most people vote *against* a politician they don't like, rather than *for* a politician they do like. As such, election campaign advertisements frequently emphasize what to fear about an opponent, rather than what to like about one's own candidate. Downside: this appeal is entirely in the negative frame and doesn't directly speak to the virtues of one's own ideas.
5. **Appeal to self-interest:** Sometimes known as an appeal to the "hip-pocket nerve" (because many people keep their wallet in their hip pocket), this is all about reminding the audience of the specific benefit to them that is separate from whatever altruistic or broader benefit they are supposedly supporting. As an example, in charity fundraising, communicators will frequently note that

donations are tax deductible, highlighting the financial return on what is supposed to be a charitable gift.

Downside: in some cases, such as charity, this may directly contradict the stated spirit of the broader persuasive appeal, which is probably to help others or a larger vision.

6. **Appeal to tradition:** This can include both cultural norms and conservative notions of “family values.” Many people are convinced that the way people have behaved in the past is the only way that they should behave; such appeals can be effective with the right audience. Downside: this appeal is based on a logical fallacy. Simply because people have behaved in a particular way in the past does not mean that it is the best way to behave now or in the future. Many people want to break with tradition and in many cases with very good reason.
7. **Appeal to vanity:** Yes, people like to be seen in the best possible light. Telling people that they will be recognized (or even adored) can be very persuasive. As an example, hospital fundraising often includes publishing the names of donors or even naming entire hospitals after donors to help them feel proud of their donations and to make sure that the donor’s peers know that the donation has been made (and a large one at that). Downside: this is a transparently shallow persuasive device. Some folks don’t want to be treated as if they are vain (even if they are).
8. **Attacks:** This persuasive device is more about persuading the audience what to *reject* than what to *embrace*. If you attack your competitor, the audience may reject them, making their connection with you more likely or stronger. This is linked to the appeal to fear above and is also commonly seen in politics. Downside: again, this persuasive device is entirely in the negative frame and doesn’t directly motivate the audience to do as you would have them do, but rather *not to do* what you would have them *not do*.

9. **Effective repetition:** You may remember this from studying literature, but it's a bit different in a professional context. Here, you work key points into multiple sections of a document and you work key words into multiple paragraphs. The reader should not notice that you're using this technique, but should internalize the emphasis. Downside: one cannot write in a way that *feels* repetitive; if that happens, the writing crosses into *ineffective* repetition. That's a disaster for a writer, as it tires the reader and motivates them to start skipping/skimming content. This device requires a fine balance that is more of an art than a science.
10. **Emotive language:** All decisions are based on emotion, no matter how hard people try to remove emotion from decision making (as with a cost-benefit analysis). This persuasive device adds emotional flare to an otherwise unemotional message. Downside: emotional language conspicuously shifts the discussion away from rational, evidence-based arguments. Many people will find it less persuasive, not more persuasive.
11. **Evidence:** When constructing an argument (which will be a persuasive argument, as all arguments are persuasive), including evidence shows not only that you are making a fair point that is wisely reasoned, but that there is real-world experience, statistics, facts, or findings that support what you're saying. A good argument is supported by well sourced evidence. Downside: presentations of evidence can be boring or complicated. For most audiences, evidence needs to be presented clearly, simply, and briefly.
12. **Hyperbole:** Use caution here! Yes, some audiences are moved by exaggeration, but (downside) others will note the unrealistic language and quickly reject it.
13. **Inclusive language:** This persuasive device draws the reader into the argument by making them part of the speaker's voice. As an example, we're working through this

list of persuasive devices and finding our footing, but we'll need to practice the application of these devices to make us skilled in the craft of persuasion. See what I did there? I made you, the reader, part of the writing by saying "we're working" and "our footing" and "we'll need" and "make us." The words "we," "us," and "our" all include you, the reader, in the argument I'm making. Downside: some audiences will consciously reject the inclusion, seeing themselves as separate from the writer and/or the message.

14. **Metaphor** and **simile**: These are similar to anecdotes (above), but instead of telling a story, they make a comparison, either directly (simile) or figuratively (metaphor). Comparison can be a useful tool in helping audiences visualize or emotionally connect with an argument. Downside: especially with metaphor, these devices can seem too poetic for professional use. (Similes are safer.)
15. **Promise**: This is one of the simplest and oldest persuasive devices. Tell the reader that you're putting your reputation on the line as part of the deal. People feel a lot of confidence when a person stakes their future credibility. Downside: if you break your promise, the audience may never trust you again and future messages will be rejected, regardless of merit.
16. **Reasoning**: People are hardwired to appreciate sound logic. Reasoning plays directly into that mentality. Downside: explaining one's rationale can be a long, time consuming task. The reasoning often needs to be simplified for audiences.
17. **Rhetorical questions**: This device invites the reader to reflect on a question and to move towards an obvious answer that furthers the writer's argument. As an example, one might ask a customer shopping for a car, "Do you need a new car?" Obviously, the answer is "yes," but it forces the customer to acknowledge that they are

going to buy a car and that they need to engage in the sales process to find the best solution to their consumer dilemma. Downside: this device should be used sparingly in professional communication, usually only in spoken language or in a sales situation. Using this device in a letter or memo would look contrived.

18. **Ticking clock:** This high-pressure device effectively sets a due date for your audience to take action. Missing the due date would mean a loss of benefit to the audience. The most used example is to tell the audience when a sale ends. (You can almost hear the radio announcer saying it now, “Don’t miss out. Sale ends Monday!”) This creates a sense of motivation for the audience to take the desired action now, as opposed to later. Downside: if the audience misses the due date, they may decide not to take the desired action at all or to wait until a future date (perhaps when there’s another sale).
19. **Use a copywriting formula:** This persuasive device is all about the structure of the argument you’re making. One time-honoured formula in sales is “AIDA”: gain **attention**, create **interest**, push for a **decision**, and motivate the desired **action**. This website provides a variety of other similar structures: <https://writtent.com/blog/9-sure-fire-copywriting-formulas-grow-audience>. Downside: this works well in short letters or verbal communication, but sustaining the formula over a longer document is more difficult.

There are many other persuasive devices that are not mentioned above, but these are among the most common.

Logical fallacies

One might say that the opposite of persuasion is rejection.

Including logical fallacies in one's persuasive messages weakens them and increases the likelihood that the audience will reject the message.

The website yourlogicalfallacyis.com provides guidance and examples about many of the most common types of logical fallacy (though it misses out on the red herring and the non-sequitur).

Some logical fallacies are so popular, people will even declare that they are using the logical fallacy in their arguments. The most common of such examples is the "slippery slope."

Learning about these logical fallacies is important for learning to avoid them. If your messages are built on logical fallacies, they will lose some or all of their persuasive appeal.

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PART IV

PROFESSIONAL CORRESPONDENCE

18. Professional Correspondence

A lot of your time as a professional will be spent communicating through letters, memos, emails, and text messages. Some of these forms of communication are probably more familiar to you than others; however, as a professional, you must understand how and when to use each format and why. Your employer will expect you to communicate effectively and build positive relationships with co-workers, clients, and the public.

To decide which format to use, consider the size and importance of your audience, your purpose for writing, and the complexity of the information being communicated.

For all correspondence, you should include four basic points of **protocol information**:

- The date the document was written
- A subject line that provides a summary or sense of purpose for the document
- The name(s) of the author(s), including their relevant job title(s)
- The name(s) of the recipient(s), including their relevant job title(s)

As always, before you write, consider your audience's needs and your purpose. Provide a brief introduction stating the purpose of the document, the reason for creating the document, the reason the reader is receiving the document, and the content that will follow.

Many employers will have standard templates that are used for letters and memos in their organization. If your employer has such a template, you'll follow that in-house style. However, there are generally accepted formatting and style trends for letters and memos that need to be followed. Some variation is acceptable, but remember that your reader should be able to quickly determine what they're looking at when they receive a file. The more time they spend thinking about the formatting of your document, the worse. (As an analogy, consider how much time you think about the quality of plumbing in your home. Generally, it only comes to mind when there's a problem. The reader should experience the benefit of good formatting, just as you experience the benefit of good plumbing, which is without thinking about it.)

Types of messages

Correspondence can serve many purposes. Here are a few reasons you may have to write these documents in your professional career. We will also provide some tips for each one.

Making a request

Whenever you make a request, whether in a **memo** or **letter**, remember to consider the **tone** of your words (see the Seven "C"s in Chapter 4 for more on this).

When you send a request, in all likelihood, this is a request your reader doesn't particularly want to receive. You need to make the document accessible, engaging, and persuasive (more on that later) to catch the reader's **attention** and **interest** and, hopefully, to motivate them to make a favourable **decision** and

take the desired **action**. (**A.I.D.A.** is a time-honoured persuasive structure commonly used in professional sales.)

Be concise and specific about what you expect your reader to do and provide the necessary information so that the reader can successfully fulfill your request.

Thank-you messages

Thank-you letters may feel like an old-fashioned way to communicate, but a well-written thank you letter can establish your **credibility** and professionalism. A hand written thank-you letter is always most appropriate, but a business thank-you letter may be printed on stationery or even sent by email for less significant expressions of gratitude.

A thank-you letter does not need to be long, but it should communicate your sincere appreciation to the reader and follow this advice:

- Be specific about what you are thanking the reader for. Avoid clichés and stock phrases.
- Include some details about why you are thankful and how you benefited from the reader's actions.
- End with a sincere compliment and repeat the thank-you.

“Good news” messages

Obviously, preparing a good news message (such as a message of congratulations, acknowledgement, and acceptance) is easier than preparing a negative message. However, care should be taken in all correspondence to maintain your **credibility** as a professional.

- Be specific about the achievement or award.
- Be sincere in your congratulations.
- Avoid using language that might sound patronizing or insincere.
- Connect the message to a higher mission or value that connects the writer and the reader.

“Bad news” messages

In the course of your professional career, you are going to need to write negative messages (such as messages of complaint or refusal) for a variety of reasons. **Tone** is very important here; comments should be made using neutral language and should be as specific as possible. The in the chapter about positive writing provides useful guidance here.

A thoughtful writer will remember that the message will likely have negative consequences for the audience and, although it may be appropriate to begin with a buffer sentence to establish rapport, get to the main point as quickly as possible. Keep your audience’s needs in mind; your audience will need to clearly understand your decision and your reasons for making such a decision.

Be clear and straightforward in your message, but also remember that this is a relationship you want to protect. Be courteous and considerate of your audience’s feelings. Protect your reader’s feelings with fact-based, non-judgmental, emotionally-neutral language.

Transmittal letters

When you send a report or some other document (such as

a resumé) to an external audience, send it with a cover letter (or sometimes a cover memo for an internal document) that briefly explains the purpose of the enclosed document and a brief summary. This book has later chapters that deal with cover letters for job applications and also for reports.

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19. Professional Memos

Memoranda, or **memos**, are one of the most versatile document forms used in professional settings. **Memos** are “in-house” documents (generally sent within an organization) to pass along or request information, outline policies, present short reports, or propose ideas. A company or institution typically has its own in-house style or template that is used for documents such as letters and memos. If not, use the most standard format available, as demonstrated below.

Memo format

The example below shows the standard memo style used by most organizations, with red annotations pointing out various relevant features. The main formatted portions of a memo are the logo or letterhead (which is optional), the header block where the **protocol information** is located, and the body of the memo.

Organization's logo

FOX & DOG, INC.

To: Amanda Banana, Vice President—Foxes
From: Charlie Daiquiri, Manager—Dogs
Date: July 13, 2022
Re: Quick Brown Foxes Jumping Over Lazy Dogs

**Protocol information,
including job titles**

Protocol information aligned vertically

The quick brown fox jumps over the lazy dog. The quick brown fox jumps over the lazy dog. The quick brown fox jumps over the lazy dog. The quick brown fox jumps over the lazy dog. The quick brown fox jumps over the lazy dog.

Brown Foxes **Section headings where beneficial, but not for introduction**

The quick brown fox jumps over the lazy dog. The quick brown fox jumps over the lazy dog. The quick brown fox jumps over the lazy dog. The quick brown fox jumps over the lazy dog.

The quick brown fox jumps over the lazy dog. The quick brown fox jumps over the lazy dog. The quick brown fox jumps over the lazy dog. The quick brown fox jumps over the lazy dog. The quick brown fox jumps over the lazy dog.

Lazy Dogs

The quick brown fox jumps over the lazy dog. The quick brown fox jumps over the lazy dog:

- Quick
 - Brown
 - Lazy
- Bullet list for key points where beneficial, usually 3-6 points**

The quick brown fox jumps over the lazy dog. The quick brown fox jumps over the lazy dog. The quick brown fox jumps over the lazy dog. The quick brown fox jumps over the lazy dog.

Jumping Over

The quick brown fox jumps over the lazy dog. The quick brown fox jumps over the lazy dog. The quick brown fox jumps over the lazy dog. The quick brown fox jumps over the lazy dog.

**Short, clear paragraphs
No indentation, line break after each**

Header block

The **header block** appears at the top left side of your memo, directly underneath the organization's logo. Sometimes the word "MEMO" or "MEMORANDUM" will appear between the logo and the header block, but the reader can see from the

format that the document is a memo, so it is often omitted. This section contains detailed information on the recipient, sender, and purpose. It includes the following lines:

- **TO:** give the recipient's full name and position or title within the organization.
- **FROM:** include the sender's (your) full name and position or title.
- **DATE:** include the full date on which you sent the memo.
- **SUBJECT or RE:** write a brief phrase that concisely describes the main content of your memo.

Note how the header leads are vertically aligned, as is the content that follows the leads (as pictured above).

When a memo is being sent to an external audience, as in a different organization, include the name of the external organization next to the audience's job title and your own organization next to your job title.

Place a horizontal line under your header block and place your message below.

Body text

The length of a memo can range from a few short sentences to a multi-page report that includes figures, tables, and appendices. Whatever the length, there is a straightforward organizational principle you should follow. Organize the content of your memo so that it answers the following questions for the reader:

1. **Introduction:** What is this document? What is its purpose? Why was it written? Why is it being sent to the reader? These questions could all potentially be answered

in two or three sentences. (Note: The heading “introduction” isn’t usually used in a memo because, well, what else would the first paragraph be? The heading is used in longer reports because the first section is not always the introduction.)

2. **Body paragraphs:** What does the reader need to know? Give enough information to answer any questions the reader might reasonably have, but no extra information the reader doesn’t need. Aim to be clear and concise (as always).
3. **Conclusion:** What action does the reader need to take next (if any)? What are the next steps or what happens with this issue next?

Advice about memos

As a general rule, the more memos you send, the less people will read them, so the subject line needs to make clear why a person should even read the first paragraph and the first paragraph should make clear why the reader should read the rest.

When receiving a memo, the key question to ask yourself is this: “what responsibility is the sender offloading to the reader?” That’s usually, at some level, the purpose of the memo: to transfer a responsibility from one person to another or to a whole group of people. As an example, if you receive a memo about submitting expenses before your employer’s fiscal year end, this shifts the responsibility for this task from the writer to the readers. Now you must fulfill this task by a certain due date if you want your expenses reimbursed.

Take note, sensitive and/or confidential information is generally not sent via memo.

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20. Professional Letters

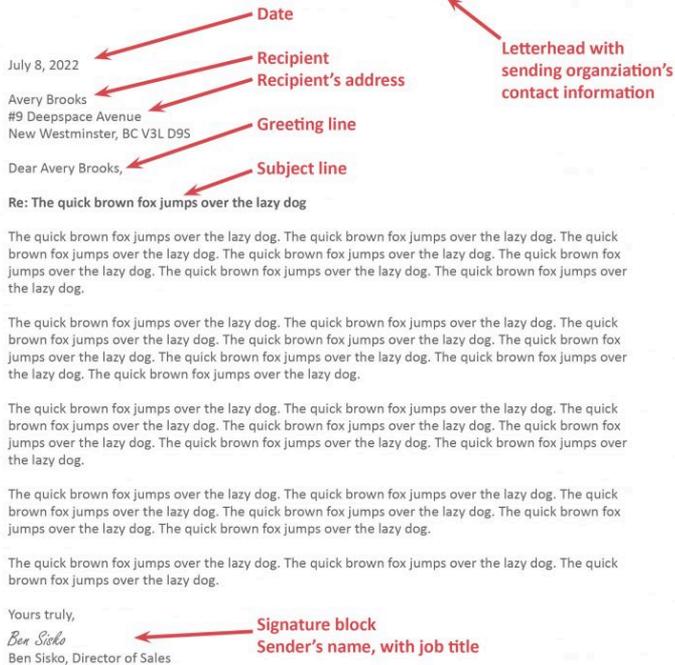
Letters are brief messages sent to recipients that are often outside the organization (i.e., external). They are often printed on letterhead, which includes the organization's logo and contact information, and they are usually limited to one or two pages. While email and text messages may be used more frequently today, the business letter remains an important medium for professional communication.

Letters are the most formal format for business correspondence and your **credibility** will be established by using a formal tone and a conventional format for the document.

Use a letter format for communicating with people outside of your own organization or for information that will be kept on file (such as an offer of employment) or may be needed for legal proceedings (such as a disciplinary letter). Your reader will expect a well written and well formatted document. The **full block letter format** is the most straightforward letter format. Professionals who produce their own correspondence using this format will appreciate its simplicity and consistency.

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www.federation.ca | 604-555-1701 | 74-656 Voyager Road, Burnaby, BC V3R 1A1



The full block letter format

A typical letter has nine main elements, which make up the **full block letter format**:

1. **Letterhead/logo:** sender's name and return address
2. **Date:** the date the letter was written
3. **Recipient's address block:** name the recipient(s), often including their job title and organization (not pictured above), plus the mailing address
4. **Salutation:** "Dear _____ " use the recipient's name (or a substitute if not known)
5. **Subject line:** an indication of the subject of the letter (usually begins "Re" with a colon)
6. **The introduction:** establishes the overall purpose of the letter
7. **The body:** articulates the details of the message
8. **The conclusion:** includes a call to action and indicates next steps
9. **The signature block:** includes the signature of the sender (sometimes omitted in digital documents), the name of the sender, and usually their job title

You can see how these elements are implemented in the example above. Keep in mind that letters represent you and/or your company. In order to communicate effectively and project a positive image, remember these guidelines:

- Your language should be clear, concise, specific, and respectful.
- Each word should contribute to your purpose.
- Each paragraph should focus on one idea.
- The parts of the letter should form a complete message.
- The letter should be free of errors.

Note that, in legal matters, letters are often hand delivered; this is done to verify that the receiver has received the letter and that can be presented with certainty in court.

For broadcast letters, as in form letters from businesses or fundraising letters, where hundreds, thousands, or even

millions of people are receiving the same letter, except for their name and contact information, names and address blocks can be left blank or coded with fields. That allows the user to merge a list of contacts (names and addresses) from a database with the form letter to create personalized form letters. MS Word has a feature called “Mail Merge” that performs this task well and allows as many fields as the writer would like. For example, for a fundraising letter, the amount being requested could be customized to be slightly more than the donor’s most recent donation in an attempt to push their contributions slightly higher.

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21. Text Messages and Emails

Text messaging, emailing, and posting on social media in a professional context requires that you be familiar with **netiquette**, or proper etiquette for using the internet. We have all heard the news stories about people who have been fired and companies that have been boycotted for making offensive or inappropriate social media posts. People have even gone to prison for illegal use of private messaging. The digital world may seem like a free-for-all, “wild wild west” with no clear



Photo #1: Team working together

rules or regulations; however, this is clearly a dangerous perspective for a professional to take, as the consequences for breaking tacit rules, expectations, and guidelines for professional communications can be very costly.

The way that you represent yourself in writing carries significant weight. Writing in an online environment requires tact, skill, and an awareness that what you write may be there for a very long time and may be seen by people you never considered as your intended audience. From text messages to **memos** to letters, from business proposals to press releases,

your written business communication represents you and your company: your goal is to make it clear, concise, constructive, and professional.

We create personal pages, post messages, and interact via online technologies as a normal part of our careers, but how we conduct ourselves can leave a lasting image, literally. The photograph you posted on your Instagram page or Twitter feed may have been seen by your potential employer or that insensitive remark in a Facebook post may come back to haunt you later.

Guidelines for Communicating Online

Following several guidelines for online postings, as detailed below, can help you avoid embarrassment later:

- **Know your context:**
 - Introduce yourself.
 - Avoid assumptions about your readers; remember that culture influences communication style and practices.
 - Familiarize yourself with policies on acceptable use of IT resources at your organization.

- **Remember the human:**
 - Remember there is a person behind the words; ask for clarification before making judgment.

- Check your **tone** before you publish; avoid jokes, sarcasm, and irony as these can often be misinterpreted and get “lost in translation” in the online environment.
 - Respond to people using their names.
 - Remember that culture, age, and gender can play a part in how people communicate.
 - Remain authentic and expect the same of others.
 - Remember that people may not reply immediately. People participate in different ways, some just by reading the communication rather than jumping into it.
- **Recognize that text is permanent:**
 - Be judicious and diplomatic; what you say online may be difficult or even impossible to retract later.
 - Consider your responsibility to the group and to the working environment.
 - Agree on ground rules for text communication (formal or informal; seek clarification whenever needed) if you are working collaboratively.
- **Avoid flaming: research before you react:**
 - Accept and forgive mistakes.
 - Consider your responsibility to the group and to the working environment.
 - Seek clarification before reacting; what you heard is not always what was said.

- Ask your supervisor for guidance.*
- **Respect privacy and original ideas:**
 - Quote the original author if you are responding with a specific point made by someone else.
 - Ask the author of an email for permission before forwarding the communication.

** Sometimes, online behaviour can appear so disrespectful and even hostile that it requires attention and follow up. In this case, let your supervisor know right away so that the right resources can be called upon to help.*

For further information on netiquette, check out the following links:

- Business Insider: Email etiquette rules every professional needs to know
- LinkedIn: Why is email etiquette important

Texting

Whatever digital device you use, written communication in the form of brief messages, or texting, has become a common way to connect. This is particularly true with **team chat applications**, such as Slack and Microsoft Teams, which are becoming increasingly popular with companies as a means for employees to quickly communicate with each other.

On these platforms, short exchanges are common as they are a convenient way to stay connected with others when talking on the phone or sending an email would be cumbersome. If you need a quick, brief answer right away, texting is often the best choice.

However, you also need to be mindful of the company culture and what is deemed “appropriate” on these platforms. For example, when people text their friends and family, they often send **gifs** as a way to communicate their reactions. Should you also do this at your company? It depends. Some companies are okay with it; some are not. Even if they are okay with you using gifs, there may be rules around the types of gifs that are sent. Pay attention to how others are communicating in these spaces and use that as a guide for your own communication style.

In summary, texting is not useful for long or complicated messages. When deciding whether a text or email is better, careful consideration should be given to the **audience**. Wouldn't it seem strange if someone sent you a text that was like an email?

Watch the short video below:



One or more interactive elements has been excluded from this version of the text. You can view them online here: <https://pressbooks.bccampus.ca/communicating/?p=50#oembed-1>

When texting, always consider your audience and your

company, and choose words, terms, or abbreviations that will deliver your message appropriately and effectively.

Guidelines for Effective Business Texting

If your work situation allows or requires you to communicate via text messages, keep the following tips in mind:

- **Know your recipient:** “? % dsct” may be an understandable way to ask a close associate what the proper discount is to offer a certain customer, but if you are writing a text to your boss, it might be wiser to write, “what % discount does Murray get on \$1K order?”
- **Anticipate unintentional misinterpretation:** texting often uses symbols and codes to represent thoughts, ideas, and emotions. Given the complexity of communication, and the useful but limited tool of texting, be aware of its limitation and prevent misinterpretation with brief messages.
- **Use appropriately:** contacting someone too frequently can border on harassment. Texting is a tool. Use it when appropriate, but don’t abuse it.
- **Don’t text and drive:** research shows that the likelihood of an accident increases dramatically if the driver is texting behind the wheel (“Deadly distraction,” 2009). Being in an accident while conducting company business would reflect poorly on your judgment, as well as on your

employer. (And we all want you to live a long, healthy, happy life, don't text and drive.)

Email

Email is familiar to most students and workers. In business, it has largely replaced hard copy **letters** for correspondence and it has mostly taken the place of **memos** for internal communication (Guffey,



Photo #2: Email Platform

2008). The email format was modelled after the memo format, but has morphed into an electronic memo-letter hybrid.

Email can be very useful for messages that have slightly more content than a text message, but it is still best used for fairly brief messages. Many businesses use automated emails to acknowledge communications from the public or to remind associates that periodic reports or payments are due. You may also be assigned to “populate” a form email in which standard paragraphs are used, but you choose from a menu of sentences to make the wording suitable for a particular transaction.

Emails may be informal in personal contexts, but business communication requires attention to detail, awareness that

your email reflects you and your company, and a professional **tone** so that it may be forwarded to any third party if needed. Email often serves to exchange information within organizations. Although email may have an informal feel, remember that when used for business, it needs to convey professionalism and respect. Never write or send anything that you wouldn't want read in public or in front of senior management.

As with all writing, professional communications require attention to the specific writing context and it may surprise you that even elements of form can indicate a writer's strong understanding of **audience** and purpose. The principles explained here apply to the educational context, as well; use them when communicating with your instructors and classroom peers.

Guidelines for Effective Business Emails

Open with a proper salutation: proper salutations demonstrate respect and avoid mix-ups in case a message is accidentally sent to the wrong recipient. For example, use a salutation such as “Dear Dr. X” (external) or “Hi Barry” (internal).

Include a clear, brief, and specific subject line: this helps the recipient understand the essence of the message. For example, “Research proposal attached” or “Electrical specs for project Y.”

Close with a signature: identify yourself by creating a signature block that automatically contains your name and business contact information.

Avoid abbreviations: an email is not a text message and the audience may not find your wit cause to ROTFLOL (roll on the floor laughing out loud). There is a huge leap in formality between a text message, social media post, and an email. When in doubt, be more formal in an email.

Be brief: omit unnecessary words.

Use a good format: divide your message into brief paragraphs for ease of reading. A good email should get to the point and conclude in three small paragraphs or less.

Reread, revise, and review: catch and correct spelling and grammar mistakes before you press “send.” It will take more time and effort to undo the problems caused by a hasty, poorly written email than to take the time to get it right the first time.

Reply promptly: watch out for an emotional response—never reply in anger—but make a habit of replying to all emails within 24 hours, even if only to say that you will provide the requested information in a particular time frame.

Use “Reply All” sparingly: do not send your reply to everyone who received the initial email unless your message absolutely needs to be read by the entire group.

Avoid using all caps: capital letters are used on the Internet to communicate emphatic emotion or yelling and are considered rude. This is known as “shouting” at your reader.

Test links: if you include a link, test it to make sure it is working.

Note the size of email attachments: audio and visual files are often quite large; be careful to avoid exceeding the recipient's mailbox limit or triggering the spam filter. You may need to upload large files to a shared folder where the reader can access the file with a link.

Give feedback or follow up: if you don't get a response in 24 hours, email or call. Spam filters may have intercepted your message, so your recipient may never have received it.

Tip: add the address of the recipient last to avoid sending prematurely. This will give you time to do a last review of what you've written, make sure links work, make sure you've added the attachment, and so on, before adding the sender's address and hitting send.

The sample email below demonstrates the principles listed above.

From: Bill Gates <bill@microsoft.com>

To: Human Resources Division <hr@microsoft.com>

Date: September 12, 2021

Subject: Safe Zone Training

Dear Colleagues:

Please consider signing up for the next available Safe Zone workshop offered by the company. As you know, our department is working toward increasing the number of Safe Zone volunteers in our area and I hope several of you may be available for the next workshop scheduled for Friday, October 9.

For more information on the Safe Zone program, please visit <http://www.cocc.edu/multicultural/safe-zone-training/>

Please let me know if you will attend.

Bill Gates

CEO

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Photo #1 by Annie Spratt on Unsplash

Photo #2 by Stephen Phillips on Unsplash

PART V

APPLYING FOR A JOB

22. Before you Apply for a Job

Employment materials are some of the most important—and most challenging—pieces of writing you will ever undertake.

The aim of this chapter is to ease your mind and demystify the job application process by giving you some core principles to follow. With these principles, you can create a **job package** that will make you a more desirable candidate to potential employers.

Whether you are applying to be an administrative assistant or an engineer, a web developer or a caregiver, many of the strategies are the same. As you read through this chapter, keep the following principles in mind:

- The more customized your materials are, the more successful they will be; generic materials are unlikely to capture an employer's attention.
- Your materials should not demonstrate why this job would benefit you. Instead, they should show how you, as a unique candidate, can benefit your potential employer.
- Your materials should not simply list every job you've ever held, but instead emphasize transferable skills, making an argument for how your past accomplishments prepare you for the job you are applying for.

Tailoring your materials to a specific **audience** is to work smarter, rather than harder. In fact, tailoring is one of the core principles of professional writing. Imagine yourself in the position of a hiring manager. Would you be more likely to hire a candidate whose generic résumé looks like it has been

sent to dozens of similar employers? Or would you be more likely to hire a candidate who has researched your business and understands what the job entails?

The answer is pretty obvious, isn't it?

Finding a job

Finding a suitable job opening itself can be a time-consuming process. Here are a few resources to get you started:



Photo #1: Making a plan

- **Job boards:** for entry-level jobs and corporate jobs, sites such as Indeed, CareerBuilder, Glassdoor and Monster are very accessible, high volume sources of job postings.
- **Industry-specific lists:** look for lists of jobs in specific industries, such as non-profits (Charity Village), municipal government (CivicInfoBC), or media (MediaBistro).
- **Profession-specific lists:** if you have a clear career path and specific credentials or experience, a profession-specific job board may be best for you, such as the Partnerships Job Board for libraries or the association for Chartered Professional Accountants. With the latter, there's a catch; you need to be a member (or at least a student member) of the organization to see the job postings. That's a required qualification, so it's behind a password-protected page. However, for folks in accounting, that's probably the very best place to look. Regardless of your field, you can probably find a profession-specific job board if you look.

- **Company, organization, and government websites:** visit the employment section on websites of companies you admire; search federal, provincial, regional, and city websites for job postings.
- **Professional recruiters:** Some companies outsource the preliminary stages of the hiring process to recruitment firms (sometimes known as “headhunters”). In Canada, major recruitment firms include Randstad, Robert Half, Hays, Angusone, and McNeill Nakamoto. There are dozens of others, too. Their websites all list specific jobs they’re recruiting for, but you won’t know who their client is at least until you are picked for an interview.
- **Your own network:** talk to classmates, friends, past employers, and professors or visit LinkedIn to search for openings at companies in your network.
- **Your educational institution:** visit your college or university placement office/career center and attend job fairs. Many students end up working for their post-secondary institutions and those institutions often employ thousands of people in a wide range of occupations (not only instructors).

Many job seekers also use Craigslist or Kijiji to look for work; just be aware that these postings often lack detail and may come from headhunters or placement agencies, rather than from the direct employer.

Once you have found a job, make sure to print and/or save a copy of the job posting or job description. You will use this document to help you tailor your application materials and prepare for your interview. Because companies often delete the job posting once they have received sufficient applicants, you need to save your own copy. Keep a folder with all job postings you’ve applied for. You’ll want to review the posting again if you are contacted for an interview. If you didn’t save the

posting, you won't have it later and other applicants will have an obvious advantage if they did save a copy.

Conducting a self-inventory

Know what you have to offer as a potential employee. As you work on your **résumé**, you may worry that you have nothing valuable to include or you may worry that you are "bragging." One way to get over these hurdles is to allocate time to a **self-inventory**.

Brainstorm your skills, accomplishments, and knowledge by asking yourself the following questions:

- What did you accomplish at a past or current work, school, or volunteer position?
- What transferable skills have you learned?
- What would you tell a friend or family member you were proud of having achieved there?

Start writing down skills and **action verbs** that describe your experiences and accomplishments, and don't worry about putting them into a résumé format yet.

Some students believe they have no job experience, but that's virtually never true. If anybody has ever paid you to perform a task, even if only a few dollars (or other currency), that's job experience. If you're taking a post-secondary course, that means you have education.

The challenge is professionalizing the language to communicate the value you bring to the workforce.

Exercise: Self-Inventory

Let's take a moment to brainstorm some skills and **action verbs** that you can use in your **job package** assignment for this course. The best way to do this is to browse a skill list such as the one below.

Complete the following steps:

1. Scan the groupings of skills (communication skills, creative skills, financial skills, etc.) for **action verbs** related to skills you have or work you have done.
2. Write down the categories of **skills** you have (again, communication skills, creative skills, financial skills, and so on) and the action verbs that describe skills you have or work you have done (e.g., analyzed, performed, calculated, advocated).

For example, you probably have done quite a few team projects in school already. You could probably pick “communication skills” and “collaborated.”

Communication/ People Skills	Creative Skills	Management/ Leadership Skills
Collaborated	Combined	Assigned
Communicated	Created	Coordinated
Developed	Developed	Decided
Edited	Drew	Improved
Incorporated	Illustrated	Led
Proposed	Planned	Managed
Suggested	Revised	Oversaw
Synthesized	Shaped	Recommended
Translated	Crafted	Reviewed
Facilitated	Conceived	Supervised
Mediated	Established	Delegated

Adapted from *Creating Resumes I* by Roads to Success, licensed under CC BY-SA 4.0.

For an additional list of action words for your job package, check out your college's or university's career center.

As you gather information about your work history and skills, double check that your information is accurate and current. Gather dates of employment, dates of trainings, lists of activities you have been involved in, academic awards,

achievements, and special projects. If you're having trouble remembering the information, ask former coworkers or managers about your significant workplace contributions.

Researching your potential employer

As we've already discussed, you must adapt your **job package** materials to your potential employer. Of course, to know your audience means you will need to first take the time to do a little research. Research your potential employer as



Photo #2: Looking for work

well as the job for which you're applying. The easiest way to research a potential employer is to visit the company's website.

Look for an "About Us" page or a "Mission Statement" and observe how the company describes its goals and values.

Try to answer the following questions about the company or organization:

- Who does this company serve?
- Who are this company's partners or competitors?
- What technologies would I use at this company?
- What is the tone of this company's materials (formal, conservative, humorous, "cutting edge")?
- How would you describe this company's brand?

Here are a few more ways to research a company:

- Search for its name on LinkedIn and other social media sites.

- Browse for news articles about the company or press releases written by the company.
- Speak with friends or colleagues who work for the company.
- Call the company to request an informational interview.

This may seem like extra work, but this research can help you analyze the needs of your audience and, as a result, better market yourself as a solution to those needs.

As you research, look for ways to connect with the company:

- What do you admire about the company?
- Where do your values and interests overlap with those of the company?
- What makes this company a good fit for you and you a good fit for them?

Try to summarize your connection to the company in one sentence.

Researching the potential job

To research the job itself, take advantage of the job posting you found. The job posting is your secret weapon; in this document, you are told what the employer is looking for in a candidate.

Exercise: Researching the Job

The job posting will give you insight into the company's needs. Obviously, the solution is you! The best way to figure out how you can solve that problem is by scouring the job posting and making connections to the words in it.

You want to get into a conversation with the document as you go over it, so you will need a way to annotate the posting. Either print it out or copy and paste it in a document editor, such as Microsoft Word. Once you have the document ready, take the following steps:

1. Highlight or underline any qualifications that you hold—any skills you have, technologies you've used, and so on.
2. Make note of any past achievements that relate to any of the preferred qualifications. For example, if the job description seeks a candidate who can diagnose and solve technical problems, write down an example of a specific time in which you did so in a professional or academic setting.
3. Circle any **keywords** you might use in your own materials. Using the same terms as a potential employer demonstrates to that employer that you are able to “speak their language.”
4. Note any questions/uncertainties and any qualifications you do not have in order to decide what to highlight and what to downplay in your materials (as well as what you need to learn more about).

Any content you find through this process can be discussed in your application materials. You may not

end up using all of the content you generate, but you want options when trying to appeal to your prospective employer.

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23. Cover Letters

In the era of social media, the idea of writing a **cover letter** to introduce your résumé may seem outdated. However, the **cover letter** (also known as an **application letter**) still serves a few critical functions. If your résumé is characterized by *breadth*—giving a broad overview of your qualifications—the cover letter is characterized by *depth*—choosing a few most significant qualifications to cover in detail.

Even more than that, your résumé tells the reader that you *could* do this job. Your cover letter entices them to call you for an interview so they can discover why you are the right person who *should* do this job.

Your cover letter is the first writing sample your employer will see from you that is in paragraphs rather than bullet points. Marketing your unique qualifications and how you will fit in with the culture of the company can best be done in written paragraphs. An effective cover letter will create a picture of you as a potential employee and inspire a potential employer to learn more about you.

Keep the following points in mind as you write your cover letter:

- Your cover letter is essentially an argument for why you should be granted an interview.
- Make sure to support the claim that you are qualified for the position with *evidence*.
- Demonstrate your authority by speaking in detail about your qualifications and *show* the reader that you have the skills and abilities necessary to do the job at hand. The more detail you offer and the more precise your language, the more the reader will be able to picture you doing the

job.

- Use your audience analysis research to help you connect with the company and to choose the appropriate tone, level of formality, and level of technicality.
- Aim for one page for your letter and avoid spilling over onto a second.
- Follow the Seven “C”s to make sure you’ve edited your letter professionally.
- Note that your cover letter always lands before your résumé; it “covers” the résumé.

Outline for cover letters

A clear structure helps you to connect with the reader and tell your story. There are many possible structures; consider reviewing the chapters in this OER textbook about persuasive writing and creating outlines. Having recommended that, however, here is a time-honoured structure for a cover letter:

1. Salutation
2. Subject line (noting the job you’re applying for)
3. Opening paragraph (indicating desire for position and tell the reader how your résumé shows you’re a good match for the job)
4. Body paragraph(s) (explaining the value of your past professional experience, skills, and education in whatever order works best for you)
5. Closing paragraph (expressing gratitude and indicate desire for an interview)

Make your cover letter relevant, conversational, and persuasive. Show the reader you *could* do the job, then get them interested in whether you *should* do the job. Remember, at this

stage, the goal is to secure an interview, not secure the job. That will come during the interview process.

Salutation

Make your best attempt to find a specific name (or at least the job title) of the person to whom you should address this letter. If the information is unavailable, use a generic salutation such as “Dear Hiring Manager.”

Subject Line

If the job posting had a specific title and/or job posting number, put those in the subject line so that people know exactly which job you’re applying for. Remember that many organizations are recruiting for multiple positions simultaneously, so you want to ensure you’re being considered for the position you’re interested in.

Opening paragraph

Express your interest in the position and briefly explain why you are an ideal candidate.

Body paragraph(s)

Your body paragraphs show how you are uniquely qualified for the position. There are many approaches here, such as the one listed above, that structures the body paragraphs by

professional experience, skills, and then education (linking to the employer and the job as much as possible).

Another approach is to build each paragraph around a single qualification or unique professional strength that relates to the job for which you are applying. Open the paragraph with a claim about this qualification/strength and then provide a developed illustration of a time in your work or academic history when you used/excelled at this skill or used it to benefit others.

For example, if the job requires excellent customer service skills, you might discuss a time in which you used your customer service skills to satisfy a customer or increase your company's profits. It can be effective to conclude your middle paragraphs with sentences that express how these past experiences will prepare you for the potential job.

Be sure to begin each paragraph with a clear topic sentence that unifies the information found in the paragraph.

Closing paragraph

Express gratitude for being considered and request an interview.

If there is any information the reader should know about getting in touch with you, include it. Adding your email address and phone number (even if they are listed elsewhere) is a good idea, too.

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24. Writing the Résumé

A **résumé** is a document that summarizes your education, skills, talents, employment history, and experiences in a clear and concise format for potential employers. All of us want our résumés to stand out from the stack. However, the best way to create an eye-catching one is not through gimmicks or flash, but rather through substance and customization.

The word *résumé* is a French word that means “a summary.” You may find it is more commonly spelled without the French accents, though this creates some confusion, as the word “resume” has a homophone with an unrelated meaning.

Résumés and **cover letters** work together to represent you in the most positive light to prospective employers. With a well-composed résumé and cover letter, you stand out to the employer—who may give you an interview and then an opportunity to win the job.

The résumé serves three distinct purposes that define its format, design, and presentation:

1. To represent your professional information in writing
2. To demonstrate the relationship between your professional information and the need the potential employer hopes to address
3. To get you an **interview** by clearly demonstrating you meet the minimum qualifications and have the professional background to help the organization meet its goals

An online profile page is similar to a résumé in that it represents you, your background, and qualifications. People network, link, and connect in new ways via online profiles or professional sites such as LinkedIn. In many ways, your online profile is an online version of your résumé, with connections and friends on public display. Your social media is often accessible to the public, so never post anything you wouldn't want your employer (current or future) to read, see, or hear.

This chapter covers a traditional résumé, as well as the more popular scannable features, but the elements and tips could equally apply to your online profile.

Types of résumés

Your **résumé** is an inventory of your education, work experience, job-related skills, accomplishments, volunteer history, internships, and more. It's a professional autobiography in outline form to give the person who reads it a quick, general idea of who you are and what skills, abilities, and experiences you have to offer. With a better idea of who you are, prospective employers can see how well you might contribute to their workplace.

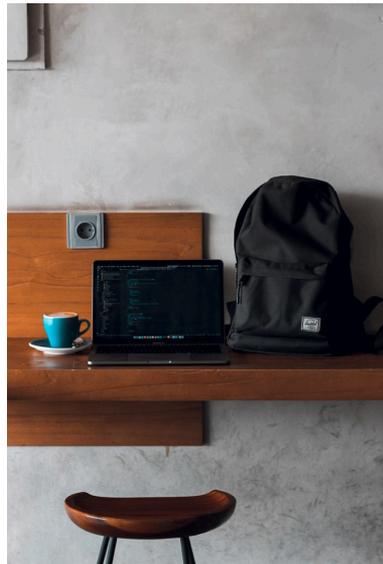


Photo #1: A workspace

As a college student or recent graduate, though, you may be unsure about what to put in

your résumé, especially if you don't have much employment history. Still, employers don't expect recent graduates to have significant work experience. Even with little work experience, you may still have a host of worthy accomplishments to include. How you present yourself is key.

Work histories come in a variety of forms, as do résumés. Although career experts enjoy debating which style of résumé is the best, ultimately you must consider which fits your current situation. Which style will allow you to best package your work history, and convey your unique qualifications?

There are three different formats that we will discuss in this chapter: **a chronological resume**, **a functional (skills) resume**, and **a targeted (hybrid) resume**.

The chronological résumé is a traditional format whose principal section is the "Employment Experience" section. In a chronological résumé, the "Employment Experience" section lists jobs in reverse chronological order (newest at the top, oldest at the end) and achievements/skills are detailed underneath each position.

In contrast, a functional (skills) résumé features a well-developed "Skills & Achievements" section, in which skills are organized into categories. The functional résumé still includes an "Employment Experience" section, but it is streamlined to include only the basic information about each position held.

A targeted (or hybrid) résumé includes a well-developed "Skills & Achievements" section that highlights the candidate's most important and relevant skills, but it also includes select bullets under each job in the "Employment Experience" section.

There are many reasons to choose one format over another. In brief, the chronological résumé serves candidates with a long/uninterrupted work history, in fields where the company

worked for is of paramount importance. On the other hand, the functional résumé serves candidates who are transitioning between fields, such as candidates shifting from a military to a civilian career or candidates who have gained skills in a variety of different settings (workplace, academic, volunteer). The targeted résumé offers the best of both worlds and is increasingly popular, as the contemporary labour market includes more variety in the pathways from education through to employment. Traditional approaches best represent the increasingly rare traditional candidate. A dynamic approach best represents a dynamic candidate.

Here are some examples of chronological, functional (skills), and hybrid résumé formats:

Chronological résumé

A chronological résumé lists your job experiences in reverse chronological order—that is, starting with the most recent job and working backward toward your first job. It includes starting and ending dates. Also included is a brief description of the work duties you performed for each job and highlights of your formal education.

The reverse chronological résumé may be the most common and perhaps the most conservative résumé format. It is most suitable for demonstrating a solid work history and growth and development in your skills. However, this format may not suit you if you are light on skills in the area you are pursuing, if you've changed employers frequently, or if you are looking for your first job.

Note that the chronological résumé does the following:

- Lists both work and education in reverse chronological

order (starting with the most recent positions/schools and working backward)

- Lists job achievements and skills under each position
- Presents experience under headings by job title, company, location, and dates of employment
- Allows employers to easily determine work performed at each company

Functional (skills) résumé

A functional résumé—also known as a **skills résumé**—is organized around your talents, skills, and abilities more so than work duties and job titles, as with the chronological résumé. It emphasizes specific professional capabilities, including what you have done or what you can do. Specific dates may be included, but are not as important.

This means that if you are a new graduate entering your field with little or no actual work experience, the functional résumé may be a good format for you. It can also be useful when you are seeking work in a field that differs from what you have done in the past. It's also well suited for people in unconventional careers.

Note that the functional résumé does the following:

- Focuses on skills and experience, rather than on chronological work history
- Groups functions or skills under categories
- Describes responsibilities, accomplishments, and quantifiable achievements under categories in the skills section
- Typically opens with a *brief* summary/profile detailing strengths (one-three sentences)

- Demonstrates how you match the requirements of your potential job by including *relevant* achievements and accomplishments

Targeted (hybrid) résumé format

The targeted résumé—also known as the **hybrid résumé**—is a format reflecting *both* the functional and chronological approaches. It's also called a combination résumé. It highlights relevant skills, but it still provides information about your work experience. With a targeted résumé, you may list your job skills as most prominent and then follow with a chronological (or reverse chronological) list of employers.

This résumé format is most effective when your specific skills and job experience need to be emphasized.

The main parts of a résumé

An important note about formatting is that, initially, employers may spend only a few seconds reviewing each résumé—especially if there is a big stack of them or they seem tedious to read. That's why choosing your format carefully is so important. Your choice will help you stand out and make the first cut (or not).

Exercise #1: What Do Employers Expect From A Résumé?

Take a moment to reflect on the following questions:

- What do you think employers want to see in your résumé?
- What elements are the most important to them?

When you have an answer to both questions, watch the video below. In the video, several employers are asked those questions. Do their answers surprise you at all? If so, why? Is there anything that you didn't expect?



One or more interactive elements has been excluded from this version of the text. You can view them online here:
<https://pressbooks.bccampus.ca/communicating/?p=64#oembed-1>

Format is definitely an important component of a résumé. However, employers also have expectations for the content in your résumé. They expect it to be clear, accurate, and up to date (Bennet, 2005). This document represents you in your absence and you want it to do the best job possible. You don't want to be represented by spelling or grammatical errors, as they may raise questions about your education and/or attention to detail. Someone reading a résumé with errors will only wonder what kind of work that candidate might produce that will poorly reflect on their company. There is going to be enough competition that you don't want to provide an easy excuse to

toss your résumé at the start of the process. Do your best work the first time.

Résumés have several basic elements that employers look for, including your contact information, objective or goal, education, work experience, and so on. Each résumé format may organize the information in distinct ways based on the overall design strategy, but all information should be clear, concise, and accurate (Simons & Curtis, 2004).

Contact information

Create a header that includes your address, telephone number, professional email address, and possibly a LinkedIn page. I recommend using your student email account (which you'll need to be checking daily so that you don't miss an email from an employer), as that shows your commitment to education and self-improvement. After you've finished school, consider getting your own web domain and creating an online portfolio of your work; this will help you stand out and will also allow you to use an email address with your own domain name, instead of a free corporate email address, which doesn't look as good.

Headline (also called summary, profile, or highlights of qualifications)

Many résumés include a brief summary of your professional self to grab your reader's attention. Think of this section as your "elevator pitch," offering a quick impression of your personal brand. Include a few key (relevant) achievements/strengths (in bullets or sentences). Headline sections are especially useful for

candidates with a long work history or who have experienced job transitions.

Have you been starting your résumé with an objective statement? These days, most experts recommend leaving the objective off your résumé entirely. Objectives too often emphasize what you want from a job, rather than what you can offer an employer, and are generally seen as a waste of space.

Education

Place your education section after the headline/summary section if it is recent and relevant or after the experience section if your stronger qualification is more recent employment experience.

List the most current degree/school attended first and proceed in **reverse chronological order**. Include the following information for each educational item:

- The name of the school
- The school's location
- Your graduation date or anticipated graduation date
- The credential earned or being pursued (and major if appropriate)

DO NOT include high school if you are in college unless your high school work was outstanding or unique (such as if you were valedictorian, won a special scholarship or award, or went to a trade/technology/arts high school). A good example would be to include high school athletics if you're applying for a job as a sports coach or trainer.

Include trainings and certifications (e.g. first aid certifications,

sales seminars, writing groups) at the end of the education section.

Further develop the education section by adding accomplishments:

- Relevant courses (if they prepared you for the job)
- Special accomplishments (conferences, special papers/projects, clubs, offices held, service to the school)
- Awards and scholarships (could also be separate section)

Employment experience

List positions in **reverse chronological order** (most recent first).

Include basic information for each job:

- Job title
- Employer
- Dates employed (may be only month and year or even only the year)
- City/state (and country if outside of Canada) of employment

Include internships and skilled volunteer positions (but, if you do, title the section “Experience” rather than “Employment”). You can also have a separate volunteer experience section, too.

Consider filtering work experience into “Related Experience” or “Relevant Experience” instead of one employment section to highlight most relevant jobs (and downplay less significant experience). This also allows you to include volunteer experience, though that’s really best pushed into a later section.

Skills/achievements/qualifications

Use sub-headers to group skills into skill set headings (management skills, customer service skills, laboratory skills, communication skills). Use targeted headings based on the qualifications your potential employer is seeking.

Include only the most relevant, targeted skills and achievements.

Emphasize quantifiable achievements and results: skills, equipment, money, documents, personnel, clients, and so on. Use the active voice (*supervised* 16 employees, *increased* profits, *built* websites) instead of the passive voice (*was responsible for supervising* or *duties included* the following).

Optional sections

Volunteer work

List skilled volunteer work (building websites, teaching classes) under skills, along with your other qualifications, but include general volunteer work (making meals for a soup kitchen, and so on) toward the end of your résumé in its own section or under activities.

Activities and interests

Include interests that may be relevant to the position, but aren't professional skills (sports for an opportunity at Nike, student groups for leadership, golfing for business jobs, game

design/play for game design jobs, blogging for PR jobs). Market yourself in the best light.

Include honours, awards, publications, conferences attended, languages known (including both written and oral fluency levels), and other features that could be valuable to an employer.

References

Do not write “references available upon request” on your résumé. Either include a section that lists your references, noting their name, title, employer, and best contact information, or don’t list references at all. Employers know they can ask for references if they’re considering hiring you. Generally, three references are sufficient, though you may find you want to include more as your career advances to higher levels. The most important references are your superiors, but you can also use co-workers, clients, or instructors. Contact each person to verify their willingness to act as a reference for you. Your reference sheet should match the look of your cover letter and your résumé.

Résumé guidelines

The following tips will help you write a résumé that adheres to the conventions employers expect while ditching fluff in favor of expertise.



Photo #2: A conference call

Using “me” and “I”

The convention in a résumé is to write in **sentence fragments** that begin with active verbs. Therefore, you can leave out the subjects of sentences. Example: “I eliminated the duplication of paperwork in my department by streamlining procedures” would become “Eliminated paperwork duplication in a struggling department by streamlining procedures.”

Quantifiable skills

The more you can present your skills and achievements in detail, especially quantifiable detail, the more authoritative you will sound. This means including references to technologies and equipment you have used, types of documents you have produced, procedures you have followed, languages you speak (noting both verbal and written fluency), numbers of employees you have supervised or trained, numbers of students you have taught, coding languages you know, types of clients you have worked with (cultural backgrounds, ages, disability status—demographic information that might be

relevant in your new workplace), graphic design, blogging or social media skills, and so on.

Filler words (fluff)

Avoid generic filler words that can be found on many résumés and don't suggest meaningful skills. These are examples of filler words:

- Passionate
- Strong work ethic
- Duties include
- Fast-paced
- Self-motivated

If you **MUST** use these phrases, find concrete examples to back them up. For example, instead of using “team player,” include a time you collaborated with peers to earn a good grade on a project, save your company money, or put on a successful work event.

Results

In at least one place in your résumé, preferably more, make mention of a positive impact (or result) of your skills/achievements. How did you create positive change for your employer, coworkers or customers? Did you resolve a customer complaint successfully? Did you make a change that saved your employer money? Did you build a website that increased traffic to your client? Did you follow procedures safely and reduce workplace injuries?

Building a better bullet (two skill bullet formulas)

Each skill bullet may need to go through a few revisions before it shines. Here are two formulas to help you strengthen your bullets:

Formula 1: Verb + Details = Results

Start your bullet with an action verb describing a skill or achievement. Follow it with the details of that skill or achievement, and then describe the positive impact of your achievement. For example:

- Developed (VERB) new paper flow procedure (DETAILS), resulting in improved staff accuracy and customer wait times (RESULT)
- Provided (VERB) friendly customer-focused service (DETAILS), leading to customer satisfaction and loyalty (RESULT)
- Organized (VERB) fundraising event (DETAILS) generating \$xxx dollars for nonprofit (RESULT)
- Provided (VERB) phone and in-person support for patients with various chronic and acute health issues (DETAILS & RESULT COMBINED)
- Supported (VERB) 8-10 staff with scheduling, filing, and reception (DETAILS), increasing efficiency in workflow (RESULT)

Formula 2: Accomplished [X] as measured by [Y] by doing [Z]

Develop your bullets by going into detail about how you accomplished what you have accomplished and why it matters

to your potential employer. Compare the following three versions of the same skill bullet:

- **First draft:** Participated in a leadership program
- **Second draft:** Selected as one of 125 for year-long professional development program for high-achieving business students
- **Final draft:** Selected as one of 125 participants nationwide for year-long professional development program for high-achieving business students based on leadership potential and academic success

Note how the third version is not only the most specific, but it is the one that most demonstrates the “so what” factor, conveying how the applicant’s skills will benefit the potential employer.

Keywords

Remember, use **keywords** you gathered in your pre-writing phase (from the job description, research into your field, and the “action verb” list presented earlier). If your potential employer is using résumé-scanning software, these keywords may make the difference between getting an interview or a rejection.

Length

Résumé length is a much-debated question and guidelines change as the genre changes with time. In general, the length of a résumé for entry-level or junior positions should be no longer than two pages (and each page should be full—do not

have one page full and another page only half full). Some fields, however, may have different length conventions (academic résumés, for example, which include publications and conference attendance, tend to be longer; executive-level résumés for senior candidates toward the end of their career can be quite long, as they have a lot more to showcase to future employers). If your résumé is on the longer side, your work history should justify the length. Some experts recommend one page per ten years of work history; while that may be too minimal, it is better to cut weaker material than to add filler. You can also experiment with your formatting and design so that you finish with either one full page or two full pages.

Design

Résumé design should enhance the content, helping the reader to quickly find the most significant and relevant information.

A few general guidelines:

- Templates are convenient, but bear in mind that, if you use a common template, your résumé will look identical to a number of others. Some of them are laughably overused.
- Use tables to align sections, then hide the borders to create a neat presentation.
- Use 10.5-12 point font for body text. Headings can be as large as 14-16pt. Your name can be even larger.
- Don't use too many design features; be strategic and consistent in your use of capitalization, bold, italics, underlining, and colour.
- To create visual groupings of information, always use more space between sections than within a section. This way your reader will be able to easily distinguish between the

key sections of your résumé and between the items in each section.

- Use the same design scheme in your résumé and your cover letter to maximize coherence and consistency.

Field-specific conventions

You may find that there are certain conventions in your field or industry that affect your choices in writing your résumé. Length, formality, design, delivery method, and key terms are just some of the factors that may vary across disciplines. As an example, people applying for acting jobs always include a headshot (photograph of their face). Ask faculty or professional contacts in your field about employers' expectations and visit the career center at your post-secondary institution or conduct web research to make informed field-specific choices.

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Photo #2 by Sigmund on Unsplash

25. Interview Strategies

Interviewing is the phase of the job search process where you go from being an applicant on paper to a real, three-dimensional person. Essentially, you will be evaluated on your verbal communication skills through this face-to-face (or video or phone) interaction. Employers want to see whether you match up to the qualifications described in your **résumé** and they want to see whether you have good interpersonal communication skills to get a sense of how you would function as part of their team.

Interviews also give employers a chance to see if you can think on the spot, answer questions that a person with your professional background and education should be able to answer, and demonstrate a professional level of preparation.

“One important key to success is self-confidence. An important key to self-confidence is preparation.” (Arthur Ashe)

Interviews are often intimidating for job seekers who feel the pressure of being evaluated and feel uncomfortable with the **interview** format. While the nervousness may never go away, effectively preparing for the interview can make

you feel more confident and, with practice, you will be better able to stay in the moment and treat the interview like a two-way conversation.

This chapter focuses on general interview preparation. Do bear in mind, though, that different disciplines and industries have different interviewing techniques. For instance, the technical interview or “code day” has become standard for many

computer science-related fields. You should always do research on standard practices in your industry, but also keep in mind that interviews can be surprising. In fact, some employers try to surprise interviewees to get a sense of how they think and react in unfamiliar situations. Part of your challenge is to stay open-minded and relaxed so you can project confidence, even in unexpected or unfamiliar situations.

Preparing for the interview

Good preparation before an interview is based on understanding who your **audience** is—understanding the employer and the industry. This is not the type of information that you can memorize the night before. Take as much time as you can to read and absorb information from a variety of sources to get a thorough sense of the company—not just the basic information you find on the “About” page of their website, but the tone and personality they broadcast in social media, their past and current projects, their achievements, their community involvement, and so on.

Job interview types and techniques

Every interview you participate in will be unique: the people you meet with, the interview setting, and the questions you’ll be asked will all be different from interview to interview.



The various factors that characterize any given interview can contribute to the sense of adventure and excitement you feel. Nevertheless, feeling a little nervous about the process is normal—even expected. With so many unknowns, how can you plan to “nail the interview” no matter what comes up?

A good strategy for planning is to *anticipate* the type of interview you may find yourself in. Common formats for job interviews are described in detail below. By knowing a bit more about each type and being aware of techniques that work for each, you can plan to be on your game no matter what form your interview takes.

Screening interviews

Screening interviews might best be characterized as “weeding-out” interviews. They ordinarily take place over the phone or in another low-stakes environment in which the interviewer has maximum control over the amount of time the interview takes. Screening interviews are generally short because they glean only basic information about you. If you are scheduled to participate in a screening interview, you might safely assume that you have some competition for the job and that the company is using this strategy to whittle down the applicant pool. With this kind of interview, your goal is to win a face-to-face interview.

For this first shot, though, prepare well and challenge yourself to shine. This type of interview should be treated like a real interview. This may mean dressing for the interview and having a résumé in front of you so that it can be referred to. Another suggestion is to make sure your cell phone is fully charged and that the screening interview takes place in a location that is

free of distractions. Try to stand out from the competition and consider following up with a thank-you note.

Phone or web conference interviews

If you are geographically separated from your prospective employer, you may be invited to participate in a phone interview or web conference interview, instead of a face-to-face meeting.

Technology, of course, is a good way to bridge distances. The fact that you're not there in person doesn't make it any less important to be fully prepared, though. In fact, you may wish to be all the more "on your toes" to compensate for the distance barrier.

Make sure your phone or computer is fully charged and your internet works (if possible, use an ethernet connection instead of wifi). If you're at home for the interview, make sure the environment is quiet and distraction-free. If the interview is via web conference, try to make your background neat and tidy. If using a simulated background, choose wisely, as they often look silly, unsuitable, or make the employer feel (even if subconsciously) that you are trying to hide something. Also, just because you're meeting via video phone, that doesn't mean you should dress casually. Aim to dress the way your interviewer's supervisor would dress at work. That's often a good benchmark: how does the interviewer's boss dress at work? That's probably the mark you need to hit.

One-on-one interviews

Many job interviews are conducted with just you and a single

interviewer—likely with the manager you would report to and work with. The one-on-one format gives you both a chance to see how well you connect and how well your talents, skills, and personalities mesh. You can expect to be asked such questions as, “Why would you be good for this job?” and “Tell me about yourself.” Many interviewees prefer the one-on-one format because it allows them to spend in-depth time with the interviewer. Rapport can be built. As always, be very courteous and professional. Be ready to add to your candidacy with a portfolio of your best work, list of references, or something else you can give them at the end of the interview to “top up” your application.

Panel interviews

An efficient format for meeting a candidate is a panel interview, in which perhaps two to five coworkers meet at the same time with a single interviewee. The coworkers comprise the “search committee” or “search panel,” which may consist of different company representatives, such as human resources, management, and staff. One advantage of this format for the committee is that meeting together gives them a common experience to reflect on afterward. In a panel interview, listen carefully to questions from each panelist, and try to connect fully with each questioner. Keep track of the names of the people in the room and use them at least once in the meeting when responding to their questions. At least once, make eye contact with each person on the panel.

Serial interviews

Serial interviews are a combination of one-on-one meetings

with a group of interviewers, typically conducted as a series of meetings staggered throughout the day. Ordinarily, this type of interview is for higher-level jobs when it's important to meet at length with several major stakeholders. If your interview process is designed this way, you will need to be ultra prepared, as you will be answering many in-depth questions.

Lunch interviews

In some higher-level positions, candidates are taken to lunch or dinner, especially if this is a second interview (a “call back” interview). If this is you, count yourself lucky and be on your best behaviour because, even if the lunch meeting is unstructured and informal, it's still an official interview. If all persons interviewing you are ordering an alcoholic drink, you can order one, but only one, along with a glass of water. Drink slower than the interviewer to show restraint and patience. Your best approach is to avoid alcohol, though. Even one drink slows your reaction time and impairs your judgment (albeit only slightly with one drink consumed slowly). You are not expected to pay or even to offer to pay, but use your best table manners.

During the interview

Once you have prepared mentally and gathered the information for your interview, it's time to prepare for the interaction **during** the interview.



Dress the part

Let's keep this simple—*dress your best*. In most business cultures, dressing professionally is a sign of respect, conveying that you care about the position, that you want to make a good impression.

Here are the basics:

1. Wear your best professional clothing. The total budget for your interview attire should be about 2% of the annual salary of the job you're going for. Applying for a job that pays \$50,000? That means your shoes are probably \$200+, your shirt is probably \$100, the clothing over your shirt and legs probably costs \$300-500, and accessories (tie, belt, earrings, make-up, and so on), are another \$100-300. This may sound expensive, but it's an investment in yourself and your employment. If it's too much for you, try to find something that *looks* like those higher-end products and

make the most of them. (Hints: Dark colours can hide lower quality on shoes and clothes. Simple white dress shirts and blouses can often be found for a lot less. One knock-out accessory can hide a lower price suit or jacket. At a distance, fake pearls and cubic zirconia look almost as good as real pearls and diamonds. However, once you land this job, invest in a quality wardrobe to help move forward.)

2. Try on the complete outfit (including shoes) to make sure you're comfortable. Does it fit? Does it stay in place? Can you sit down, shake hands, and move comfortably? You don't want your clothing to distract you or the interviewer.
3. Clean and press your clothes and shoes. Prepare your outfit the night before and hang it up (no wrinkles).
4. Manage your hygiene. Bathe the morning of the interview (or even later if you have an afternoon interview). Use unscented deodorant and avoid perfume and cologne. If you tend to sweat, wear an undershirt or use something else to catch sweat. Brush your teeth after the last meal before your interview.

Even if you know the work environment is casual, you should dress “up” for the interview—more professionally than you would if you worked there. The exception would be if you are explicitly told not to—for instance, if the recruiter specifies that you should dress “business casual” or if it's a job in the trades where you might be working with heavy equipment or outdoors during the interview.

Don't come empty-handed

Arriving at the interview with important documents and notes shows that you are prepared and thinking ahead. Organize all your materials in a nice folder or folio—presentation matters!

Print out at least one copy of your résumé and any other documents you might want to reference, such as the job or internship description or your references. You should also bring a few samples of your work, if possible—documents you've prepared or artifacts from projects.

Make the most out of all of that research and preparation by bringing notes. A nice notebook or paper and a pen are perfectly acceptable for you to have in the interview and they can help you feel more focused by getting some of the information out of your head and organized on paper.

Follow these guidelines:

1. **Be organized.** Re-write or type and print your notes so you can easily find the information you need. You don't want to be shuffling through scraps of paper.
2. **Keep it simple.** Write down keywords, brief phrases and ideas that will jog your memory, not a complete script.
3. **Prepare questions for the interviewer** (see examples below). You typically have the opportunity to ask these questions at the end of the interview, when it can be difficult to remember what you were going to ask.

Pro Tip: Take notes during the interview! The interviewer will likely reveal information to you during the conversation—write down anything that you want to remember for later or anything that you want to come back to later in the conversation.

Interview questions

For most job candidates, the burning question is “What will I be asked?” There’s no way to anticipate every single question that may arise during an interview. No matter how well prepared you are, you may get a question you just didn’t expect. Not to worry! Prepare as much as you can—doing so will build your confidence in your answers and help you to be ready for unexpected questions. Also think of questions you *wish you were asked*, as many interviewers will invite you to pose such questions (effectively to yourself) at the end of the interview.

To help you reach that point of sureness and confidence, take time to review common interview questions. Think about your answers. Make notes. Conduct a practice interview with a friend, a family member, or a colleague. Speak your answers aloud. Below is a list of resources that contain common interview questions and good explanations/answers you might want to adopt.

	WEBSITE:	DESCRIPTION:
1	100 top job interview questions—be prepared for the interview (from Monster.com)	This site provides a comprehensive set of interview questions you might expect to be asked, categorized as basic interview questions, behavioral questions, salary questions, career development questions, and other kinds. Some of the listed questions provide comprehensive answers, too.
2	Interview Questions and Answers (from BigInterview)	This site provides text and video answers to the following questions: Tell me about yourself, describe your current position, why are you looking for a new job, what are your strengths, what is your greatest weakness, why do you want to work here, where do you see yourself in five years, why should we hire you, and do you have any questions for me?
3	Ten Tough Interview Questions and Ten Great Answers (from CollegeGrad)	This site explores some of the most difficult questions you will face in job interviews. The more open-ended the question, the greater the variation among answers. Once you have become practiced in your interviewing skills, you will find that you can use almost any question as a launching pad for a particular topic or compelling story.

The video below asks different hiring managers what they want to hear from candidates in interviews.



One or more interactive elements has been excluded from this version of the text. You can view them online here: <https://pressbooks.bccampus.ca/communicating/?p=68#oembed-1>

Questions to ask the interviewer

At the end of nearly every interview, applicants are often asked if they have any questions they would like to pose to the employer. Do you have a question ready to ask?

In addition to revealing your knowledge of the company, these questions are also an opportunity for you to figure out if the employer and the company culture is a good fit for you. Think carefully about what matters to you, what would allow you to do your best work, and try to ask questions that will give you insight into those factors. Always have at least one ready. These are some useful examples:

- How would you describe the organizational culture here?
- What is the orientation or training process? (only for an entry-level job)
- What are the goals/priorities for a person in this position? How will success be measured?
- How does the company support professional development activities?
- How does this position fit within the team/department? What is the reporting structure?
- Does this position function alone or within a team setting?
- What are the company's overall goals and priorities and how do those affect someone in this department/position?

NOTE: The end of the interview is not typically the best time to ask about salary and benefits. This is your opportunity to learn about the workplace and the position—the environment, how it's structured, employee support programs.

From Donnie Perkins, Chief Diversity Officer, College of Engineering. Learn more here.

Following are some **questions students may ask prospective employers about their diversity,**

inclusion and equity. Company recruiters who can provide factual and reasonable responses to these questions are on a positive path to advancing diversity and inclusion in ways that truly benefit employees, the company, customers, and the community, while promoting innovations, strategic thinking and active engagement.

- How does [Company] define diversity, inclusion, and equity? Provide an example of how diversity, inclusion, and equity benefits [Company].
- What are the racial, ethnic, and gender demographics of [Company's] company-wide, leadership, and manager levels?
- As a national and/or multinational company, describe your cultural competency training program for employees who will take assignments in [specific countries or continents where the company does business].
- Describe the role and responsibilities of women and persons of color on [Company's] leadership team.
- Give me an example of how [Company] values people of colour, women, its LGBTQ employees, and employees with disabilities.

Body language & interaction

As a general rule, you need to be observant and take your cues from the interviewer. Reflect their tone and pay attention to the dynamic they set—are they very formal and professional or more conversational? Small talk is okay, especially at the beginning and end of the interview, but you want to follow the lead of the interviewer.

Be conscious of your posture. You will want to sit up straight (no leaning or lounging) and avoid crossing your arms in front of your chest (it can seem defensive or withdrawn). Don't point at anybody with your finger, but use an open hand to gesture to people in the room, as when connecting back to a previous question somebody asked earlier.

Make eye contact. Look at the interviewer(s) while they ask you questions and give them non-verbal cues—smiling, nodding—when appropriate. Make it clear that you are listening and understand what they're saying.



Speak clearly and thoughtfully. Adjust your volume for the environment and make sure the interviewer can hear and understand you easily. Don't rush yourself and take time

to deliver thoughtful responses. Ask for clarification if you don't understand a question.

Project calm. Fidgeting and extra movement can make you seem nervous, even if you aren't. Be aware of your tendencies and try to minimize them. If you know you fidget, try to keep your hands folded and avoid clicking or tapping the pen. Don't

wear jewelry that you will play with or that will make noise while you move. Wear your hair in a way that will not tempt you to touch or play with it constantly. If seated at a table, sit towards the front of the chair and plant your feet on the floor—it can help keep you steady. Think of something you can do to productively channel your nervous energy, such as taking notes.

Be yourself. With all of the previous tips in mind, you also need to feel comfortable. If you are enthusiastic, if you talk with your hands, if you are shy, that's fine; you just need to be the most engaged, professional version of yourself you can be in order to show the interviewer what you are capable of in the workplace.

After the interview

At the end of the interview, you will want to ask the interviewer what you can expect in terms of next steps or when they might make a decision about the position. This will help set your expectations and allow you to prepare for future interactions; they might have multiple rounds of interviews or they might have another week left of meeting with candidates, for instance.

There is a debate about whether to send thank-you notes after an interview. Some interviewers see this as a positive indication of interest in the job and communication skills. Others see it as a pathetic attempt to gain unearned points towards getting the job. I have literally heard recruiters say they never hire somebody who doesn't send a thank-you note and, with just as much certainty, recruiters who say that a thank-you note ends your candidacy. There is no way to be sure.

One half-measure that I've used (unsuccessfully, I should note) is to send a follow-up email with a point of information that came up during the interview. For example, if the interview included some conversation about something you'd previously written that wasn't in your portfolio (and presuming you felt good about what you'd written), you could send that to the interviewer—and simultaneously express thanks for the interview.

If you plan to send a thank-you note, email is a standard and expected vehicle for this message and you will likely have already been in contact with them via email or will have their business card from the interview.

The formula for this message is simple, but choose your words carefully and try to extend their good impression of your written communication here:

- Relevant subject line
- Gratitude for their time and the opportunity
- Your continued interest in the position
- Something specific from your conversation (this is where taking notes comes in handy)
- Positive and forward-looking conclusion

You will want to reflect the overall **tone** of your interaction—try to make it consistent with the person they met the day before.

Subject: Design Engineer Internship – Thank you
Ms. Tanner,
Thank you for the opportunity to meet with you

yesterday. I feel like I learned a lot about the Design Engineer Internship role at ABC Innovations and I remain very interested in the position.

After hearing about the project I would be assigned to, I did some further research on your prototyping process and I can see interesting connections with the work I did in my previous internship. It would be exciting to build on that knowledge with your team.

Please feel free to contact me via phone at xxx-xxx-xxxx or email if there is any additional information I can provide. I look forward to hearing from you.

Thank you,

J. Buckeye

Networking, elevator pitches, and unplanned interviews

Responding to a job posting can be an effective way of lining up a job interview and landing a job, but there are other powerful tools available to job seekers, notably networking.

Employers are constantly looking for new talent; they keep their eyes open for potential hires, even when they don't have any active job postings in their organization. If a candidate is appealing enough, there is an opening in the organization. Employers will create a position for the right person.

Knowing that, you want to maximize the amount of **face time** you have with potential employers. Opportunities to network

with potential employers are numerous, such as at job fairs or trade shows. As an example, the Vancouver Enterprise Forum is an amazing opportunity to speak to companies, many of whom are actively recruiting. The Vancouver Enterprise Forum is a mix of business-focused public lectures from industry leaders and purpose-built networking opportunities. Wherever you may live, you can find such opportunities at your local chamber of commerce, trade shows, job fairs, or sometimes charity or political events. You'll need to look for these opportunities, but doing so will set you apart from your competition.

Once you find yourself face-to-face with a potential employer, you need to be ready to pitch yourself in a quick, clear, concise, and impressive fashion. This is known as the **elevator pitch**.

Elevator pitches

The famed elevator pitch is named for the idea that a person may serendipitously find themselves in a short elevator ride with a person who could change their career path. How long is an elevator ride? Most are one or two minutes in length, so that's how long an elevator pitch should be.

An elevator pitch is an opportunity to introduce oneself and highlight one's own merit as a potential employee. If done well, it begins a conversation that could lead to a job (or perhaps an investment). You never know when these opportunities may arise, so being prepared is essential.

These are the building blocks of an elevator pitch:

- Polite greeting
- Introduction of self
- One clear, meaningful credential (such as where one

studies or works)

- One clear, meaningful connection to the other person (such as an interest in their organization or a mutual acquaintance)
- A request to extend the conversation, either immediately in person or at a later time (which invites an exchange of contact information)

This is what an elevator pitch might sound like for one of my students:

Hello Ms. Bains. I'm Roquan Abede, a business student at Douglas College. I was at your guest lecture about angel investors and was really impressed by the way you pursued investment opportunities for your company. I'm not sure if you have a minute now, but I'd love to get your business card so I could talk to you about this more or we could chat now if you have a few minutes.

This elevator pitch has two opportunities for success: an immediate conversation or receiving contact information to allow for follow-up with “Ms. Bains.” In all likelihood, the speaker will graciously invite “Roquan” to contact her or will invite him to **walk and talk** with her for a few minutes.

Not every elevator pitch is ultimately successful; some people will offer a business card, but never return a phone call or respond to an email. However, some people will appreciate the effort you're putting in and agree to meet for coffee. If you can impress in that meeting, you've basically passed the first round of a job interview. They might point out a job interview in the organization, an opportunity to volunteer or intern, or suggest that you apply for future jobs, as they become available.

Even if you don't secure a job immediately, this investment in

relationships and goodwill is invaluable and can get you ahead of your competition.

My advice is this: always be ready for an unplanned job interview. If somebody takes an interest in you, be ready to show that they're right to be interested by being ready to speak about yourself as a prospective employee.

Attributions

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Bennetch, Owen, and Keeseey also adapted their chapter from “Blueprint for Success in College and Career” by Lumen Learning and Linda (Bruce) Hill (on Rebus Community). It is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License.

PART VI

WRITING A REPORT

26. Professional Reports

Professional reports perform a number of important functions in organizations, whether that be large corporations, small non-profit groups, government agencies, or any other type of organization.

In some cases, organizations must produce reports as a matter of law, such as a publicly traded corporation that must present **audited financial statements** and an annual report for shareholders every year. Such reports are also used by government agencies to ensure the companies are complying with all laws and regulations.

Some reports are standard documents with known traits that are routinely used in the business world, such as a “**request for proposals**” that a government might use to invite construction companies to propose how to build a new bridge, with recommendations about how it should be done and how much it should cost.

Other reports are short, internal documents to fulfill specific, in-house purposes, such as a performance review for employees who are nearing the end of their probationary period.

There is a huge range of types of reports and the purposes they fulfill, but there are some basic parameters that always need to be considered, starting with rule number one: know your audience and put them first.

Internal or external?

If a report is for an audience that is internal to the organization (such as a budget report going between departments), that changes how it will be produced compared to an external report (such as the official community plan for a local government, which explains the intended direction for the community for years or even decades to come). Internal documents tend to be shorter and simpler; external documents tend to be longer and have a more polished look, including detailed formatting, photographs, and more charts/graphs.

This table indicates some of the *typical* differences between documents for internal and external audiences. Remember, these aren't rules; some organizations will have their own in-house styles that deviate from this table and there is some variability in how these traits are treated.

Traits	Internal audience	External audience
Lists names of authors	Yes, including their job title(s)	May list the individual author(s), may list their job title(s), may only list the organization as the author
Date	The full date is provided	May list entire date, only month and year, or only year
Indicates audience	Yes, including their job title(s)	May indicate audience or, for public documents, may omit mention of audience
Subject line	Yes	Placed on title page as the document title
Length	Usually shorter	Usually longer
Photographs	Only if essential	Yes, used to enhance visual appeal
Charts/ graphs	Only if essential	Yes, used to enhance visual appeal and information accessibility
Design features	Lean, minimal decoration	Aesthetic appeal is more important
Template use	May use simple memo templates or other in-house designs	May have a standard template for some documents, but more likely to have unique designs for each report
Executive summary	Rarely	Often
Table of contents	Rarely	Often
Reference list	Rarely, but if needed	Often, especially as needed
Print/digital	Usually designed to remain a digital document	Often designed for both print and digital use

Template or original design?

Some reports are developed from an in-house template. For example, a company with travelling salespeople may have a

standard trip report that needs to be completed when sales staff travel as part of their work. This report would likely indicate information about who the sales staff met with, how much they were able to sell, whether they developed any new promising leads, and how much of the company's money was spent on hotels, car rentals, plane tickets, and other expenses.

Other reports need to be produced as entirely original documents every time they are produced, such as a review of an unprecedented event (such as if a government agency wanted to review its response and operation through the pandemic).

Process

Although all of these types of reports vary in terms of content and format, the process for creating them is similar.

Step one: understand the task. In order to produce a report, you need to know the purpose of the report and that's usually included in the first paragraph of the introduction and/or executive summary. You need to understand what the report is, why it's being written, and why it's being sent to the intended audience. That understanding will focus the content of the rest of the document and explain its relevance. Also understand the **scope** of the document, that is, what is included in the work and, by implication, what is not.

Step two: gather information. This process is sometimes called "research" and the next few chapters deal with how to conduct research. In short, there are two types: primary and secondary. Most or all of the research you'll do as an undergraduate student will be secondary research. That means you're finding documents that other people have published and relying on that information to provide the evidence you need for your

report. In primary research, you actually go out and gather data firsthand, whether that is by interviewing people about their feelings, conducting surveys about what people do in their companies, counting the cars that pass through an intersection, or conducting a scientific experiment in a laboratory (among many other ways to gather data). Once the data has been gathered, it needs to be interpreted and made sense of; once done, the product is called “information.”

Step three: organize. Once you have the information you need to write your report, you need to organize it into a structure that will make sense to your reader. (See *Using Outlines to Strengthen Writing* for ideas about how to organize your work using an outline.) Organization is key to producing a quality document.

Step four: write and cite. Many people will tell you they write their documents and then add the citations and references after they’ve finished writing; this invites potential disaster, as you can too easily lose track of where citations are needed and which citations belong where. Include your citations as you write your report. With a strong outline, writing the report should come fairly naturally. The introduction will indicate the purpose of the document. There may be a background section that explains how the discussion arrived at the present moment. Content-driven sections will follow, each with a clear argument, supported by reasoning and evidence. There may be a separate section for recommendations or those may be worked into the content-driven sections or the conclusion, which is the next section that would be included. After that, the document has its references and, if necessary, appendices.

Step five: design and illustrate. For an internal document, this might be a very short step. There may be no design work to be done because an in-house template is being used. There may be no illustrations if no charts/graphs are needed. However, for

an external document, you'll need to carefully decide on a wide variety of design choices, such as fonts, font sizes, font colours, borders, shading, and other such matters. You'll also need to decide which information is best presented graphically, such as with a broken line graph, bar charts, or pie charts. (See Graphics, Tables, and Images for more on this topic.) The final document should be easy to skim, easy to search, and look good.

Step six: proofread, edit, and revise. *Professional Writing Today: A Functional Approach* provides a lot of guidance about punctuation, grammar, and editing skills. Make use of this knowledge! Your final report should be *perfect* in its spelling, capitalization, grammar, punctuation, use of numbers, and all other written respects. If the reader spots errors, they may begin to question the quality of the report in all ways, even if that's unfair. (See Proofreading and Editing Skills for more on this topic.) Also, feel no loyalty to your work; a good editor cuts the unnecessary and adds new content where necessary. Treat your work the same way. If, on inspection, you find content that doesn't help your reader, be merciless and cut it out.

Step seven: polish and publish. This step is really an extension of the previous. Set your document aside for a couple of days and then come back to it with a critical eye. Have you been consistent with how you capitalize headings? Are your fonts treated the same way everywhere (or is there a slight change in the font colour where you have copied text for a quote)? Are you sure about whether you want to spell that word "defence" or "defense"? Do all hyperlinks work? These are the sort of questions you should be asking yourself as you meticulously work through your document one final time. Once you have done that, do it again. Then, when you're sure, send it to the reader. Remember, you can't "un-send" the file. Once your file has been sent, that's what you'll be judged on (so don't do

your last proofread *after* you send the file, like so many of my students).

Examples

Internal municipal government report, based on a template:
<https://council.vancouver.ca/20110906/documents/spec1.pdf>.

Major government report for an external audience:
https://www2.gov.bc.ca/assets/gov/environment/climate-change/action/cleanbc/cleanbc_2018-bc-climate-strategy.pdf.

Corporate accountability report for an external audience:
https://cslships.com/wp-content/uploads/2024/07/CSL-Group-Sustainability-Report-2023_EN.pdf.

Non-profit annual report for an external audience:
<https://online.fliphtml5.com/gakf/zggw>.

Advocacy report for an external audience:
https://d3n8a8pro7vhmx.cloudfront.net/bcfs/pages/258/attachments/original/1607561694/Rsch-International_Students-2019-web.pdf?1607561694.

Internal program review, based on a template:
[https://www.douglascollege.ca/sites/default/files/docs/vpac/CYC%20Degree%20CPR%20Recommendations%20\(2020\)%20-%20for%20posting.pdf](https://www.douglascollege.ca/sites/default/files/docs/vpac/CYC%20Degree%20CPR%20Recommendations%20(2020)%20-%20for%20posting.pdf).

27. Finding and Evaluating Research Sources

Quality professional writing is driven by reasoning and evidence. Evidence is gathered through the research process and researchers need to ensure that they are relying on quality evidence sources. That means you'll need to evaluate the sources to determine whether they merit use in a professional document.

Popular versus scholarly sources

So much information is available at our fingertips on the Internet, but so much of it is unreliable. When there is no barrier to publishing, there is often no quality control. Students need to critically search through the reams of information in order to select credible sources that can provide reliable data to support ideas and convince an audience. In the era of “fake news,” deliberate misinformation, and “alternative facts,” developing the skill to evaluate the credibility of sources is essential.

Sources can be broken up into two categories: popular and scholarly. How would you define the difference between the two? Can you come up with some examples of both? Ideally, when you think of both categories, you should think of items such as those in the figure below.



Figure #2: Examples of popular versus scholarly sources.¹

Why are **scholarly sources** more desirable than **popular sources**? Let's look at this a little more deeply.

Take a look at this chart from the Douglas College Library. It recommends scrutinizing the sources you find for five key points: credibility, accuracy, reasonableness, support, and suitability.

When you look at a scholarly article, you will see the authorship and can check whether or not they are an expert in their field. You can see the sources the article is citing, so you can independently evaluate the quality of the evidence they're using. They disclose the methods they've used for collecting data, so you can decide if their process was a reliable way of producing new information. You'll also notice that scholarly

1. ²

2. [1]

research discusses its own weaknesses and limitations, which is reasonable and fair.

When you look at other online sources, do you see them passing these tests? Sometimes, the answer is “yes,” which is great. However, other times, you realize you can’t see who wrote the article or when. You don’t know what motivated them or whether they’re an expert. They may not cite their sources. These are all red flags.

Scholarly articles published in academic journals are usually required sources in professional communication; they are also an especially integral part of engineering projects and technical reports. Since you are researching in a professional field and preparing for the workplace, there are many credible kinds of sources you will draw on in a professional context, such as government statistics, trade publications, industry reports, and official records.

Critically evaluating sources

Clearly, there are a lot of places where you can pull sources from. However—and this is a *big* however—you must critically evaluate your sources for **authority, content, and purpose**.

Anyone can put anything on the internet and people with strong web and document design skills can make this information look very professional and credible, even if it isn’t. Since a majority of research is currently done online, and many sources are available electronically, developing your critical evaluation skills is crucial to finding valid, credible evidence to support and develop your ideas. In fact, this has become such a challenging issue that there are sites, such as Beall’s List of potential predatory journals and publishers, that regularly

update its online list of journals that subvert the peer review process and simply publish for profit.

When evaluating research sources and presenting your own research, be careful to critically evaluate the **authority**, **content**, and **purpose** of the material, using the questions found here: Evaluating the Authority, Content, and Purpose of the Information.

Going through all those questions may seem like a tedious, unnecessary process, but you need to consider these questions as you acquire sources for your reports. Not doing so can negatively impact your **credibility** as a professional.

Consider it this way: let's say you are presenting a **report** to a potential client. If they find out you used sources that lack authority, are not relevant or recent, or do not really serve their purpose, how will they view you? How will that affect their view of the company you work for?

Ultimately, critical thinking lies at the heart of evaluating sources. You want to be rigorous in your selection of evidence, because once you use it in your paper, it will either bolster your own credibility or undermine it.

References

Kurland, D. (2000). *What is critical thinking?* How the language really works: The fundamentals of critical reading and effective writing. https://www.criticalreading.com/critical_thinking.htm

Attributions

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28. Strategies for Conducting Research

Research begins with questions. You've already started this process as you considered the purpose of your report and came to understand your task. Odds are, as you did so, more questions came up that you were not sure how to answer and that's okay. Doing the actual research will help you answer those questions.

Primary versus secondary research

There are two basic kinds of research: **primary research** and **secondary research**.

Primary research is often first-person accounts and can be useful when you are researching a local issue that may not have been addressed previously and/or have little published research available. You may also use primary research to supplement, confirm, or challenge national or regional trends with local information.

Primary research can include any of these data collection methods:

- Interviews
- Surveys
- Questionnaires
- Observations and analysis
- Ethnography (the study and description of people, cultures, and customs)

Secondary research is what many students are most familiar with. This type of research generally requires searching libraries and other research institutions' holdings. Secondary research requires that you read other peoples' published studies and research in order to learn more about your topic, determine what others have written and said, and then develop a conclusion about your ideas on the topic in light of what others have done and said.

These are examples of sources that might be used in secondary research:

- Academic, scientific, and technical journal articles
- Governmental reports

- Raw data and statistics
- Trade and professional organization reports

Secondary research in action

First, the **secondary research** will help establish best or common practices, trends, statistics, and the state of current research about your topic.

Your brainstorming would likely lead to questions such as these:

- What are the major issues in this field? What are the controversies?
- Who is impacted by this issue and how?
- What is the current state of the issue locally and for your client?
- What has been done about this issue recently or significantly in the past? Did it work? Why or why not?

The above information would likely be available through secondary research sources.

Where do I look?

In the 21st century, we generally turn to the internet when we have a question. For technical, scientific, and academic research, we can still turn to the internet, but where we visit changes. We will discuss a few different places where you can perform research including Google, Google Scholar, and your college/university library website.

Google and Google Scholar

The default research site for most students tends to be Google. Google and other search engines can be a great starting place for a variety of research. You can use Google to find news articles and other popular sources, such as magazine articles and blog posts. You can use Google to discover keywords, alternative terms, and relevant professional, for-profit, and non-profit businesses and organizations.

The most important point to remember about using Google, though, is that search results are organized by popularity, *not* by accuracy. Further, because Google customizes search results based on a user's search history, searches performed by different people or on different browsers may provide slightly different results.

For many technical, scientific, and scholarly topics, Google will not provide access to the appropriate and necessary types of sources and information. Google Scholar, however, searches only academic and scientific journals, books, patents, and governmental and legal documents. This means the results will be more technical and scholarly and, therefore, more appropriate for much of the research you will be expected to perform as a student.

However, while Google Scholar will show academic and technical results, that does not mean that you will have access to the full-text documents. Many of the sources that appear on Google Scholar are from databases, publishers, or libraries, which means that they are often behind paywalls or password-protected. **Do not pay for these documents!** There is a good chance you will be able to access them through your college, university, or even local library.

College and university libraries

College and university libraries have access to databases, peer-reviewed journals, and books that are generally the best choice for accurate and more technical information. A Google search might yield millions and millions of results and a Google Scholar search may yield tens or hundreds of thousands of results, but a library search will generally turn up far fewer, perhaps a handful to a few thousand, which is actually a benefit.

You may think, “Isn’t fewer results a bad thing? Doesn’t that mean limiting the possibilities for the project?” The quick answer is yes, fewer results means fewer options for your project, but no, this does not mean using the library limits the possibilities for a project. Apart from having more peer-reviewed and academic resources, generating fewer results through a library’s academic database search saves time because there are fewer results to sift through. Besides, you weren’t going to check all 11,800,000 hits from a Google search, were you?

Overall, library resources are more tightly controlled and vetted. Anyone can create a blog or website and post information, regardless of the accuracy or usefulness of the information.

Library resources, in contrast, have generally gone through rigorous processes and revisions before publication. For example, academic and scientific journals have a review system in place—whether a peer-review process or an editorial board. Both feature panels of people with expertise in the areas under consideration. Publishers for books also feature editorial boards who determine the usefulness and accuracy of information.

Of course, this does not mean that every peer-reviewed journal article or book is 100% accurate and useful all of the time. Biases still exist and many commonly accepted facts change over time with more research and analysis. Overall, the process for these types of publications require that multiple people read and comment on the work, providing some checks and balances that are not present for general internet sources.

Common types of library sources

- **Databases:** databases are specialized search services that provide access to sources such as academic and scientific journals, newspapers, and magazines. An example of a database would be Academic Search Complete.
- **Journals:** journals are specialized publications focused on an often narrow topic or field. For example, *Computers & Composition* is a peer-reviewed journal focused on the intersection of computers, technology, and composition (i.e., writing) classes. Another example is the *Journal of Bioengineering & Biomedical Science*.
- **Books:** also called monographs, books generally cover topics in more depth than can be done in a journal article. Sometimes books will contain contributions from multiple authors, with each chapter authored separately.
- **Various media:** depending on the library, you may have

access to a range of media, including documentaries, videos, audio recordings, and more. Some libraries offer streaming media that you can watch directly on the library website without having to download any files.

How do I perform a search?

Research is not a linear process. It requires a back and forth between sources, your ideas and analysis, and the key words you're using for your research.

The research process is a bit like an eye exam. The doctor makes a best guess for the most appropriate lens strength and then adjusts the lenses from there. Sometimes the first option is the best and most appropriate; sometimes it takes a few tries with several different options before finding the best one for you and your situation.

Have a wide range of keywords because not all terms will result in the same information. Developing a list of keywords can be aided by a quick Google search. A Google search may reveal more official language or terms, broader or narrower terms and concepts, or related terms and concepts. For technical and scientific topics, though, Google may not be a lot of help for finding other terms.

You can use a couple different tricks to narrow your search. See this video about Boolean operators for guidance about how to achieve better database search results



One or more interactive elements has been excluded from this version of the text. You can

view them online here: <https://pressbooks.bccampus.ca/communicating/?p=105#oembed-1>

If you still are not sure where to start, or if you hit a wall, **talk to a librarian**. They are available to help and they can save you a lot of time and improve your research experience. I love librarians so much, I married one! (For real!) You can go to any post-secondary library for help. If are a post-secondary student in British Columbia, you can chat with a librarian online at AskAway. If you're lucky, they might marry you.

Determining a topic and finding relevant resources are only the beginning steps in the research process. Once you locate sources, you actually have to read them and determine how useful and relevant they are for your particular research context.

References

Clark, S. (n.d.). *Online research: Tips for effective search strategies* [Video]. Youtube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LTJygQwYV84>

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29. Quoting, Paraphrasing, and Summarizing Sources

When writing a report, you want your own analytical voice to shine through the work so that the reader hears your consistent voice throughout the document.

However, you also want to draw in evidence from sources and give credit to the reasoning developed by others, too. When you find a great quote, you want to use it. How do you balance this?

When quoting, paraphrasing, and summarizing sources, academic integrity plays a huge role. You obviously don't want to copy a source's research word for word and claim it as your own. That would be **plagiarism**. However, you also can't simply copy huge chunks of text, put quotation marks around it, add a citation, and call it a job well done. That's not writing a report; that's copying and pasting and putting quotation marks and a citation around somebody else's writing. There's no post-secondary credential to be earned through copying and pasting. Instead, you want to include a combination of original writing, paraphrasing, and quotes. This chapter will walk you through how to do this.

Integrating materials into your report

Simply presenting information from your sources in your

reports is not the end of the process. You must also build clear, persuasive arguments and draw your own conclusions. Otherwise you are simply restating someone else's work and you are not furthering your argument. Many students forget this crucial step in writing reports. Thankfully, it's a relatively easy fix once you know what to do. We will first walk you through the structure you need to follow, and then show you how to use it to incorporate **direct quotes, paraphrasing, and summaries** in your report.

The source integration structure

Read the example paragraph below. What is wrong with it?

People often have an inaccurate definition of communication. MacLennan (2009) explains that people tend to define communication incorrectly. "Most people, when asked to define communication, would produce something like the following definition: 'the transmission of information by speaking, writing, and other means'" (p. 5). She goes on to say that this definition is not comprehensive enough. "While it may be easy to visualize and understand, this model of communication is ultimately inadequate, since it implies that communication is little more than an exchange of information" (MacLennan, 2009, p. 5). Instead, she defines communication as "less like a process of information exchange than it is like a process of negotiation, which almost always involves the interplay of assumptions, values, ethics, public or

professional status, self-definition, personal feelings, and social needs” (MacLennan, 2009, p. 5). As we can see, the concept of communication is much more deep and involved than most people think.

A couple of issues should stand out. The most obvious is that the paragraph is almost exclusively **direct quotes**. We have a little bit of the student’s input at the start and end of the paragraph, but there isn’t really anything substantial between the quotes.

Ultimately, the student didn’t incorporate all three elements for integrating sources that are recommended.

Presenting Ideas from an Outside Source: 3 Things to Include

Lead-in: May include source info, background info, and/or transition phrases.

Ideas from one or more sources: Can be a direct quote, paraphrase, or a summary.

Analysis of the ideas you’ve presented: Includes your response, interpretations, or arguments.

Let’s look at the same paragraph again, but highlight the three elements we have discussed. This will show you visually how the paragraph is arranged. We will use the following colors:

Lead-in

Idea from a Source

Analysis

People often have an inaccurate definition of communication. MacLennan (2009) explains that people tend to define communication incorrectly. “Most people, when asked to define communication, would produce something like the following definition: ‘the transmission of information by speaking, writing, and other means’” (p. 5). She goes on to say that this definition is not comprehensive enough. “While it may be easy to visualize and understand, this model of communication is ultimately inadequate, since it implies that communication is little more than an exchange of information” (MacLennan, 2009, p. 5). Instead, she defines communication as “less like a process of information exchange than it is like a process of negotiation, which almost always involves the interplay of assumptions, values, ethics, public or professional status, self-definition, personal feelings, and social needs” (MacLennan, 2009, p. 5). As we can see, the concept of communication is much more deep and involved than most people think.

We do have some lead-in for the quotes, but almost no analysis is given. Yes, the quoted information may be relevant, but it is not immediately clear how it’s relevant to the writer’s main point because there is not enough analysis.

Students often mistakenly assume that their readers will figure out the relevance on their own, but that is *not the case*. The reader shouldn’t need to interpret your writing for you. Your

writing should be as explicit as possible by connecting your sources to your argument.

Let's look at a revised version of the above paragraph that does a better job incorporating a **lead-in**, a **source**, and **analysis**. We have colour coded the three elements again so you can better see where they are in the paragraph:

Communication is a much more complex concept than people realize. Typically, the idea will be defined as “the transmission of information by speaking, writing, and other means” (MacLennan, 2009, p. 5). While this interpretation works at a basic level, it does not account for the larger complexities at play in communication. This is because communication is more than an exchange of information: it is a negotiation (MacLennan, 2009, p. 5). A negotiation is always far more complex than an exchange, because, as MacLennan (2009) explains, “[it] always involves interplay of assumptions, values, ethics, public or professional status, self-definition, personal feelings, and social needs” (MacLennan, 2009, p. 5). As a result, when people communicate with each other, they must consider all the different elements that can both negatively and positively affect their message; otherwise, they risk being misunderstood and having their message corrupted.

See the difference? Applying this structure when you use **direct quotes**, **paraphrase**, or **summary** will greatly improve the quality of your writing. Now let's look at each method for incorporating sources in detail.

Direct quotes, paraphrasing, and summary

When writing in academic and professional contexts, you are required to engage with the words and ideas of other authors. Therefore, being able to correctly and fluently incorporate other writers' words and ideas in your own writing is a critical writing skill. As you now know, there are three main ways to integrate evidence from sources into your writing:

1. **Direct quotes**
2. **Paraphrasing**
3. **Summaries**

One important note that we haven't mentioned is that you are required to include a citation anytime you are using another person's words and/or ideas. This means that, even if you do not quote directly, but paraphrase or summarize source content and express it in your own words, you still must give credit to the original authors for their ideas. Your instructors will be checking that you do this when they read your work.

You have already seen the use of citations in action throughout this textbook. Anytime we have integrated content from another source, you will have seen a citation that looks something like this:

(Smith, 2020)

These citations are done using the American Psychology Association (APA) style. You will be expected to use this citation style in your many college and university assignments (some disciplines use other citation styles). However, if you are not sure how to do APA citations correctly, don't worry. We will go into the specific mechanics of how to cite sources in the next chapter.

We will now walk you through each source integration method, giving you opportunities to practice each one. If at any point you're confused, or unclear, don't hesitate to ask your instructor for help. Your college or university learning center is also a great resource.

Direct quotes

A **direct quote** is the word-for-word copy of someone else's writing or spoken words. This is noted by quotation marks (" ") around those words. Using quotations to support your argument has several benefits over **paraphrasing** and **summarizing**:

- Integrating quotations provides direct evidence from reliable sources to support your argument.
- Using the words of credible sources conveys your **credibility** by showing you have done research into the area you are writing about and consulted relevant and authoritative sources.
- Selecting effective quotations illustrates that you can extract the important aspects of the information and use them effectively in your own argument.

However, *be careful not to over-quote*. As we saw in the above example, if you over-quote, you risk relying too much on the words of others and your own analytical voice will be subsumed.

Quotations should be used sparingly because too many quotations can interfere with the flow of ideas and make it seem like you don't have ideas of your own.

When should you use quotations?

- If the language of the original source uses the best possible phrasing or imagery and no paraphrase or summary could be as effective; or
- If the use of language in the quotation is itself the focus of your analysis (e.g., if you are analyzing the author’s use of a particular phrasing, metaphor, or other rhetorical strategy).

Of course, if you need to quote, then do so. But again, if you quote too much, you risk having your own voice subsumed by the voices of those you’re quoting. Especially in professional writing, you want your own analytical voice to shine through the writing, so paraphrase and cite, rather than relying too much on the words of others.

How to integrate quotations correctly

Integrating quotations into your writing happens on two levels: the argumentative level and the grammatical level.

The argumentative level

At the argumentative level, the quotation is being used to illustrate or support a point that you have made and you will follow it with some analysis, explanation, comment, or interpretation that ties that quote to your argument.

As mentioned earlier, this is where many students run into trouble. This is known as a “quote and run.” *Never* quote and run. This leaves your reader to determine the relevance of the quotation and they might interpret it differently than you intended. A quotation, statistic or bit of data cannot speak for itself; you must provide context and an explanation for the

quotations you use. As long as you use the three steps we listed above for integrating sources, you will be on the right track.

The grammatical level

The second level of integration is grammatical. This involves integrating the quotation into your own sentences so that it flows smoothly and fits logically and syntactically. There are three main methods to integrate quotations grammatically:

1. **Seamless Integration Method:** embed the quoted words as if they were an organic part of your sentence. This means that if you read the sentence aloud, your listeners would not know there was a quotation.
2. **Signal Phrase Method:** use a signal phrase (Author + Verb) to introduce the quotation, clearly indicating that the quotation comes from a specific source.
3. **Colon Method:** introduce the quotation with a complete sentence ending in a colon.

Let's see this in action. Consider the following opening sentence (and famous comma splice) from *A Tale of Two Cities* by Charles Dickens, as an example:

“It was the best of times, it was the worst of times.”

Dickens, C. (2017). *A tale of two cities*. Alma Books Ltd. p. 5

Below are examples of the quote being integrated using the three methods.

1. **Seamless Integration:** embed the quotation, or excerpts from the quotation, as a seamless part of your sentence

Charles Dickens (2017) begins his novel with the paradoxical observation that the eighteenth century was both “the best of times” and “the worst of times” (p. 5).

2. **Signal Phrase:** introduce the author and then the quote using a signal verb (scroll down to see a list of common verbs that signal you are about to quote someone)

Describing the eighteenth century, Charles Dickens (2017) observes, “It was the best of times, it was the worst of times” (p. 5).

3. **Colon:** if your own introductory words form a complete sentence, you can use a colon to introduce and set off the quotation. This can give the quotation added emphasis.

Dickens (2017) defines the eighteenth century as a time of paradox: “It was the best of times, it was the worst of times” (p. 5).

The eighteenth century was a time of paradox: “It was the best of times, it was the worst of times” (Dickens, 2017, p. 5).

Don't rely too much on any one grammatical method in your own writing. Instead, try to use a balance of methods to make your writing seem more dynamic and varied. Sentence variety is the spice of writing.

Block quotations

In the event that you want to add a very long quote, you'll need to use a format known as a "block quotation." This is for quotes that are 35 words or longer (some say 40 words or longer). In a block quotation, the quote is pulled into its own, fully indented paragraph, such as shown below this line:

According to most studies, people's number one fear is public speaking. Number two is death. Death is number two. Does that sound right? This means to the average person, if you go to a funeral, you're better off in the casket than doing the eulogy. (Jerry Seinfeld)

Editing quotations

When you use quotation marks around material, this indicates that you have used the *exact* words of the original author. However, sometimes the text you want to quote will not fit grammatically or clearly into your sentence without making some changes. Perhaps you need to replace a pronoun in the quote with the actual noun to make the context clear, or perhaps the verb tense does not fit. There are two main ways to edit a quotation to make it fit grammatically with your own sentence:

- **Use square brackets:** to reflect changes or additions to a quote, place square brackets around any words that have been changed or added.
- **Use ellipses:** ellipses show that some text has been removed. They can have either three dots (...) or four dots (....). Three dots indicate that some words have been removed from the sentence; four dots indicate that a substantial amount of text has been deleted, including the

period at the end of a sentence.

Let's look at this in action using the quote below.

“Engineers are always striving for success, but failure is seldom far from their minds. In the case of Canadian engineers, this focus on potentially catastrophic flaws in a design is rooted in a failure that occurred over a century ago. In 1907 a bridge of enormous proportions collapsed while still under construction in Quebec. Planners expected that when completed, the 1,800-foot main span of the cantilever bridge would set a world record for long-span bridges of all types, many of which had come to be realized at a great price. According to one superstition, a bridge would claim one life for every million dollars spent on it. In fact, by the time the Quebec Bridge would finally be completed, in 1917, almost ninety construction workers would have been killed in the course of building the \$25 million structure”

Petroski, H. (2012). The obligation of an engineer. In *To forgive design: Understanding failure* (pp. 175-198). Harvard University Press.
<https://doi.org/10.4159/harvard.9780674065437>

You are allowed to change the original words, to shorten the quoted material or integrate material grammatically, but only if you signal those changes appropriately with square brackets or ellipses:

Example 1: Petroski (2012) observed that “[e]ngineers are

always striving for success, but failure is seldom far from their minds” (p. 175).

Example 2: Petroski (2012) recounts the story of a large bridge that was constructed at the beginning of the twentieth century in Quebec, saying that “by the time [it was done], in 1917, almost ninety construction workers [were] killed in the course of building the \$25 million structure” (p. 175).

Example 3: “Planners expected that when completed the ... bridge would set a world record for long-span bridges of all types” (Petroski, 2012, p. 175).

In summary, there are a lot of ways you can approach integrating quotes. You can even change certain elements of your quote as long you indicate this with proper punctuation.

Paraphrase and summary

Unlike **direct quotes**, which use a source’s exact wording, **paraphrase** and **summary** allow you to use your own words to present information. While the approach to using both methods is similar, the reason you will choose one over the other is different.

A **paraphrase** is typically more detailed and specific than a **summary**. It also retains the length of the original source.

A summary, on the other hand, is used when describing an entire source. For example, if you want to emphasize the main ideas of a source, but not go into great detail, then a summary is usually best.

Paraphrase

Paraphrasing is when you put source text in your own words and alter the sentence structure to avoid using direct quotes. Paraphrasing is the preferred way of using a source when the original wording isn't important. This way, you can incorporate the source's ideas so they're stylistically consistent with the rest of your document and better tailored to the needs of your audience. Also, paraphrasing a source into your own words proves your advanced understanding of the source text. Here are five steps for paraphrasing a source:

1. Read the source material until you fully understand the author's meaning. This may take 3-4 readings to accomplish.
2. Take notes and list key terms that you can use in your paraphrase.
3. Write your own paraphrase without looking at the source material. You should include the key terms that you wrote down.
4. Check that your version captures the intent of the original and all important information.
5. Provide an in-text (parenthetical) citation.

We will go through this in a bit more detail below. However, if you feel like you understand, feel free to skip down to the next part.

An in-depth look at paraphrasing

A **paraphrase** must faithfully represent the source text by containing the same ideas as the original, usually in fewer words. Let's walk through the five steps mentioned above to create a paraphrase for the following text:

Students frequently overuse direct quotation [when] taking notes, and as a result they overuse quotations in the final [research] paper. Probably only about 10% of your final manuscript should appear as directly quoted matter. Therefore, you should strive to limit the amount of exact transcribing of source materials while taking notes.

Lester, J. D. (1976). *Writing research papers: A complete guide*. Pearson Scott Foresman.

Step 1: Read the source material until you fully understand it

What are these three sentences about? What information do they give us?

They discuss how students rely too much on direct quotations in their writing. It also explains just how much of a final paper should include direct quotes. That seems clear enough, so let's move on to the next step.

Step 2: Take notes and list key terms for your paraphrase

The key terms you come up with for your paraphrase will depend on what information you want to convey to the reader. For our purposes, let's say you want to use Lester (1976) to highlight how much students over-quote in their papers. You may focus on the following key terms:

- 10%
- students
- research

Notice that these are only three words from the original text, which has over 50 words. This may not seem like much, but it's definitely enough for our paraphrase.

Step 3: Using key terms, write your own paraphrase without looking at the original

Let's try to put together a paraphrase. As a matter of good writing, you should try to streamline your paraphrase so that it tallies fewer words than the source passage, while still preserving the original meaning. An accurate paraphrase of the original passage above, for instance, can reduce the three-line passage to two lines without losing or distorting any of the original points. Here's our attempt with the key terms highlighted in yellow:

Lester (1976) advises against exceeding 10% quotations in your written work. Since students writing research reports often quote excessively because of copy-cut-and-paste note-taking, they should try to minimize using sources word for word (Lester, 1976).

This isn't necessarily a perfect example of a paraphrase, but it is certainly a good start. Time to move on to the next step.

Step 4: Compare your paraphrase to the original

Here is the original text with our paraphrase:

Original: Students frequently overuse direct quotation [when] taking notes, and as a result they overuse quotations in the final [research] paper. Probably only about 10% of your final manuscript should appear as directly quoted matter. Therefore, you should strive to limit the amount of exact transcribing of source materials while taking notes.

Paraphrase: Lester (1976) advises against exceeding 10% quotation in your written work. Since students writing research reports often quote excessively because of copy-cut-and-paste note-taking, they should try to minimize using sources word for word (Lester, 1976).

Notice that, even though we only have three key terms, we didn't have to repeat any two-word sequences from the original. This is because we have changed the sentence structure *in addition to* most of the words. This can definitely take a couple of tries, so if you don't get it right away, that's okay.

Step 5: Provide an in-text citation

We've already done this step twice in our paper: once at the start of our paper with "Lester (1976) advises..." and once at the end with "(Lester, 1976)." We'll talk about how to do this more in-depth in the next chapter.

See this excellent video from Humber College about how to insert in-text citations in APA format:



One or more interactive elements has been excluded from this version of the text. You can view them online here: <https://pressbooks.bccampus.ca/communicating/?p=107#oembed-1>

Common plagiarism issues with paraphrasing

As we mentioned in the previous section, when paraphrasing, you change both the words *and* sentence structure of the original text. However, many students struggle with the first part. They will typically only substitute major words (nouns, verbs, and adjectives) here and there, while leaving the source passage's basic sentence structure intact. This inevitably leaves strings of words from the original untouched in the “paraphrased” version, which can be dangerous because including such **direct quotation** without quotation marks will be spotted as **plagiarism**.

Consider, for instance, the following poor attempt at a paraphrase of the Lester (1976) passage that substitutes words selectively. Like last time, we have included the original text with the incorrect paraphrase. We have also highlighted the unchanged words in **yellow**.

Original Quote: Students frequently overuse direct quotation [when] taking notes, and as a result they

overuse quotations in the final [research] paper. Probably only about 10% of your final manuscript should appear as directly quoted matter. Therefore, you should strive to limit the amount of exact transcribing of source materials while taking notes (Lester, 1976).

Poor Paraphrase: Students often overuse quotations when taking notes, and thus overuse them in research reports (Lester, 1976). About 10% of your final paper should be direct quotation. You should thus attempt to reduce the exact copying of source materials while note taking (Lester, 1976).

As you can see, several strings of words from the original are left untouched because the writer didn't change the sentence structure of the original. Plagiarism-catching software, such as Turnitin, specifically look for this kind of writing and produce Originality Reports to indicate how much of a paper is plagiarized. In this case, the Originality Report would indicate that the passage is 64% plagiarized because it retains 25 of the original words (out of 39 in this "paraphrase"), but without quotation marks around them.

Correcting this by simply adding quotation marks around passages such as "when taking notes, and" would be unacceptable because those words aren't important enough on their own to warrant direct quotation. The fix would just be to paraphrase more thoroughly by altering the words *and* the sentence structure, as shown in the paraphrase a few paragraphs above. (And, of course, cite the source.)

Summary

Summarizing is one of the most important skills in professional communication. Professionals of every field must explain to non-expert customers, managers, and even co-workers the complex concepts on which they are experts, but in a way that those non-experts can understand. Adapting the message to such audiences requires brevity, but also translating jargon-heavy technical details into plain, accessible language.

Fortunately, the process for summarizing is very similar to paraphrasing. Like paraphrasing, a **summary** is putting the original source in your own words. The main difference is that a summary is a fraction of the source length—anywhere from less than 1% to a quarter, depending on the source length and length of the summary.

A summary can reduce a whole novel or film to a single-sentence blurb, for instance, or it could reduce a 50-word paragraph to a 15-word sentence. It can be as casual as a spoken overview of a meeting your colleague was absent from or an elevator pitch selling a project idea to a manager. It can also be as formal as a memo report to your colleagues on a conference you attended on behalf of your organization.

When summarizing, you will follow the same process as a paraphrase, but with a few additional steps:

1. Determine how big your summary should be (according to your audience's needs) so that you have a sense of how much material you should collect from the source.
2. Pull out the main points, which can usually be found in places like the summary portion of a report, the introduction, the abstract at the beginning of an article, or a topic sentence at the beginning of a paragraph.

- Disregard detail such as supporting evidence and examples. These elements belong in a paraphrase, not a summary.
 - How many points you collect depends on how big your summary should be (according to audience needs).
3. Don't forget to cite your source(s).

References

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30. How to Use APA Style

We need to talk about citing sources. You've seen citations in action throughout this text and we mentioned it briefly in the previous chapter, including showing you a video of how to complete in-text citations.

This chapter will add more detail and explain the difference between in-text citations and a reference list. Specifically, we will look at how you can use **in-text citations** and create **reference entries** using the American Psychological Association Style Guide, better known as **APA Style**.

Why did we pick APA specifically?

APA style is one of several citation styles that exist for students and professionals engaging in academic conversations. You may have already encountered these styles if you have taken classes in different departments. For example, some departments use the Modern Language Association (MLA) style, whereas others may use the Chicago Manual of Style. Combined with **APA style**, these are the three most well-known citation styles used in North America.

Do you need to learn all the different styles in the world to be a successful student and professional? Of course not; after all, there are hundreds of citation styles out there. However, you'll need to be able to figure out how to use these different citation and reference styles on an as-needed basis. In truth, they are not that far different from each other. Also, once you settle into your upper-level courses in post-secondary, you will most likely only be using one style guide throughout.

One important note about all style guides is that they receive updates every couple of years. This means that the rules and expectations will change somewhat with each new edition. For our purposes, we are using the 7th of edition of the **APA style** guide, which came out in 2020.

Why do style guide publishers do this? It may seem like a hassle to have to relearn the rules every ten years or so, but there are two main reasons. The first is keep up with the evolution of research. For example, the first edition of the **APA style** guide came out back in 1953. Back then, researchers didn't need to worry about citing sources such as YouTube videos or websites or even tweets. Now, in the latest edition, there are rules for how to do that.

The second reason is to keep up with the evolution of the

English language. In previous editions, there was no guidance around gender and pronoun usage. Now, there is specific guidance on both of those topics in addition to how to avoid implying gender binaries in your writing.

Why use a style guide at all?

Using **APA Style**, or any style guide for that matter, is important for establishing your credibility as a professional communicator. Every **in-text citation** you use will correspond to an entry on the **references page** at the end of your **report**. This allows readers to quickly check the back of your report to see where your sources are from. In doing so, you are able to show that you have taken the report seriously by engaging with legitimate, professional sources in the field.

Additionally, style guides ensure that your report is consistent. You may think that having slight differences in how you use in-text citations may seem like a non-issue, but people notice these discrepancies. If they see you are not paying attention to specific details, they may wonder where else you are not paying attention and you will lose credibility.

As a professional communicator, you must ensure you understand these guidelines and can apply them in your own writing. However, we want to be clear about something. APA Style—and all style guides for that matter—have rules about more than just how to cite sources. Specifically, they have rules around formatting papers, such as where page numbers should go, how to create a title page, how to design headers, and other fine details. When producing professional documents, the only parts of APA formatting you'll use will be in-text citations and reference entries. Only academic documents follow *all* APA style conventions.

How to use APA

For the remainder of this chapter, we will discuss the mechanics of **APA style**. There will be two parts:

1. How to create a **references page**
2. How to add **in-text citations** in your report

Before we go into each part, please note that the rules we show you will be the basic requirements. Depending on the source, you may need to add more information to your **reference entry** or adjust how you write the **in-text citation**. To learn more about all these differences, check out these videos from Humber Libraries and see these examples from the APA. Their website provides a good overview, with examples, of the different ways to write your references and in-text citations.

If you would like some in-person feedback or have questions, please visit your college or university library. If you are a post-secondary student in British Columbia, you can chat online with a librarian through AskAway.

References page

Perhaps surprisingly, we are going to start with the end of your paper, the **references page**. This is because all **in-text citations** are based on this section of your report.

The references page allows your reader to easily find any work you cite in your paper. This is because all of your sources will be written up as **reference entries** on the page. These works should *only* be ones that you used in your paper. This means

you must include entries for all the sources that support the ideas, claims, and concepts you are presenting.

Please note a reference page is different from a bibliography (which you may have had to create in high school). While both will include the sources you used to write your paper, a bibliography will *also* include works you used for background reading, even if they're not cited in your paper. Put another way, if you use a source for background research, but don't use the source's content to write your paper, then it doesn't go in your references page.

For every reference entry, there is one or more in-text citation in your report. Every in-text citation is linked to a single reference entry.

What's in a reference entry?

In APA style, a reference entry needs, at minimum, four elements. These elements tell the reader specific information about where you found your source:

1. The author (who wrote the work?)
2. The date (how recent is the information you are using?)
3. The title (what is the name of the original source?)
4. The retrieval information (where can the reader retrieve this work if they want to use it for their own research?)

Every reference entry you write should have these four elements. However, each type of reference entry (a book, a journal article, an online video, etc.) can have some slight variation on what those four elements look like.

Exercise #1: Identify the Four Elements of a Reference Entry

Take a look at the three **reference entry** examples below from sources we've used in this textbook. Can you find all four elements? How are all three **references** similar? How are they different?

(1) Book

MacLennan, J. (2009). *Effective communication for the technical professions* (2nd ed.). Oxford University Press.

(2) Journal Article

Booth, W. C. (1963). The rhetorical stance. *College Composition and Communication*, 14(3), 139-145. <https://doi.org/10.2307/355048>

(3) YouTube Video

Wordvice Editing Services. (2018, April 1). *How to paraphrase in research papers (APA, AMA)* [Video]. YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1VACN6X2eFO>

You should notice that each source type is a little different from the others. For example, (1) and (2) use an author name, but

(3) uses an organization name. The title for sources (1) and (3) are italicized, but not for (2). Instead, the name of the journal is italicized. There are other differences as well, but the point is that you realize that how you format a specific reference entry will depend on the source type.

This is because there are dozens of different source types and one might be formatted slightly differently than another. To be clear, we don't expect you to know how to format every type of source. What we want you to know is what information to include when you make your own references page and where to go when you have questions.

To make this easier on you, there are automatic reference entry generators you can use, but one point of caution: though these services make writing reference entries easier, they make a lot of mistakes. You need to check to make sure the reference entry is written and formatted correctly.

Fortunately, the two rules for formatting a references page are pretty simple:

1. Put references in alphabetical order by the author's last name or organization's name.
2. If the reference runs over to multiple lines, make sure to indent each successive line in the reference (called a "hanging indent," which is basically the reverse of a standard indentation).

In-text citations

An **in-text citation** is a way that a writer acknowledges the work of others. That means you should "cite the work of those

individuals whose ideas, theories, or research have directly influenced your work” (American Psychological Association, 2019, p. 253). The information that follows the quote in the previous sentence is an example of an in-text citation.

APA style uses what is known as the **author-date citation system** for citing **references** in texts. This means that, at minimum, your citations will have the last name of the author (or authors) and the year the source was published.

If you include a **direct quote**, such as the sentence above, you will also need to include the page number.

A Very Important Note

Typically, APA Style only *requires* you to include page numbers if you are using a direct quote in your writing. However, you should include page numbers where possible, even when paraphrasing. Your instructors likely want you to include page numbers every time you cite a source in your work. That means, whether you use a direct quote, paraphrase, or summary, include the page number. This will allow you more opportunities to practice your in-text citation skills and allows the reader to find the exact location where the original information can be found in the source.

An **in-text citation** is commonly found in the body of reports. However, they can also be found in tables, appendixes, and figures. They are important because they show the reader where your research information is coming from. If the reader

is interested in the source, they can then flip to your references page at the end of your report and learn more about the source.

Here are two versions of what an in-text citation can look like using the same information. The first one is known as a **parenthetical citation** and the second is a **narrative citation**:

1. A concept that will directly impact your relationship with someone is your footing, which is the “foundation upon which your credibility rests in a given interaction” (MacLennan, 2009, p. 10).
2. MacLennan (2009) explains that one concept that will directly impact your relationship with someone is your footing, which is the “foundation which your credibility rests in a given interaction” (p. 10).

The first example, a parenthetical citation, is the one that most people are familiar with. The second one, a narrative citation, is probably unfamiliar, but it is not difficult to apply once you know how. Ideally, you should use a combination of both methods in your writing.

Parenthetical citation

First, let’s start with **parenthetical citations** because they are the ones most students already know. At its core, a parenthetical citation needs the surname of the author (or authors) that wrote the original source material you are using and the year the information is published. It will look like this:

(MacLennan, 2009, p. 10)

If the information you are citing goes onto more than one page, the citation will look like this:

(MacLennan, 2009, pp. 10-11)

And that's it.

Parenthetical citations are almost always placed at the end of the sentence, but they can sometimes occur before a comma, colon, or semicolon, as well, especially when a different source is being cited later in the same sentence. One point that students often mistake is where to position the period in a parenthetical citation. Notice in example (1) in the previous section that the period goes *after* the citation. It does not go before the closing quotation mark, which is where most students want to put it. Some students will also try to put a period before the quotation mark *and* after the citation, but this is wrong. You only need one period and it goes after the citation.

One important note is that the content of your citation will change depending on the number of authors and if there is a group author like an organization. The year will also change slightly if you are citing the same author who published multiple papers in the same year. In the event that no date information is provided, an abbreviation of "no date" (n.d.) is listed. This page from Purdue OWL provides guidelines on how to format these situations.

Narrative citation

A **narrative citation** uses the same **author-date citation system** as a **parenthetical citation**. The difference is that instead of the citation occurring at the end of the text, it occurs in the text itself. The author's name will be in the text and this is immediately followed by the publication year in parenthesis. The page number will come at the end of the sentence:

Bashar (2009) explains...communication (p. 10).
Jones (1994) advocates...theory (p. 41).
Tanaka (2020) agrees... study (pp. 245-246)

Using signal verbs

You probably noticed that a verb followed the three narrative citation examples above. These are known as **signal verbs**. They are special verbs that help you tell the reader how someone is expressing their ideas. Signal verbs are typically more active and descriptive than other verbs like “says” or “writes” or “discusses.”

Read the three examples below. What do the different verbs indicate about the author?

- (1) Smith (2020) challenges...
- (2) Smith (2020) illustrates...
- (3) Smith (2020) verifies...

Each verb provides different information about the rhetorical purpose of the author. Your job as a writer is to make sure you capture that purpose accurately.

When choosing a **signal verb**, ask yourself: what is the author *doing* in the passage I'm citing? Is the author *describing* something? *Explaining* something? *Arguing*? *Giving examples*? *Estimating*? *Recommending*? *Warning*? *Urging*?

Be sure the verb you choose accurately represents the intention of the source text. For example, don't use "concedes" if the writer isn't actually conceding a point. Look up any words you don't know and add ones that you like to use.

Table #3 below shows different signal verbs you can use in your own writing

Table #3: Commonly used signal verbs

Making a claim	Recommending	Disagreeing or Questioning	Showing	Expressing Agreement	Additional Signal Verbs
argue	advocate	challenge	illustrate	agree	respond
assert	call for	complicate	convey	admire	assume
believe	demand	criticize	reveal	endorse	speculate
claim	encourage	qualify	demonstrate	support	debate
emphasize	warn	counter	propose	affirm	estimate
insist	implore	contradict	point out	corroborate	explain
remind	plead	refute	exemplify	verify	imply
suggest	recommend	reject	indicate	reaffirm	use
hypothesize	urge	deny		assert	
maintains		question		posit	

How do I choose which citation to use?

One point to keep in mind is that you will never mix **parenthetical citations** and **narrative citations** in the same sentence. You will only use **one**.

But how do you know which one to use? There are several reasons why you would use one of the other, but here are the main two:

1. If you want to highlight the author, use a **narrative citation**. You might do this because the author is well-known in your field and you want to add some authority to your own argument. Alternatively, if you are arguing against something the author is saying, you may want to mention them directly.
2. If you want to highlight the information, use a **parenthetical citation**. You might do this if you are trying

make a point about the topic or provide some general information. Also, if you want to focus in on the argument a source is making, and not who made the argument, you would use this form.

References

American Psychological Association. (2019). *Publication manual of the American Psychological Association* (7th ed.).

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31. Formatting the Report

We've spent a lot of time on how to generate the content of your formal written **report**. However, we need to take a step back and look at how you will format the report.

Like any kind of project, reports have specifications. These specifications can be for a number of different features, such as the report's layout, organization, and content. How should you format the headings and lists? How should you label graphics and tables?

Good formatting helps the reader. If someone hands you a report and you want to read the introduction first, you will know exactly where to look. Reports are usually read in a hurry because readers want to quickly get the information they need and a predictable report format helps them achieve that.

Think of a formal written report as having three distinct parts: the **front matter**, the **report body** and the **back matter**. Within those three parts are elements you may choose to include in your report. Some may not be necessary, depending on how you produce your work.

In order, these are the typical elements of reports:

1. The **Front Matter**:
 - Title page
 - Transmittal document (may not be needed, depending on length and audience)
 - Executive summary (may not be needed, depending on length)

- Table of contents (may not be needed, depending on length)
- List of tables and figures (may not be needed)

2. The **Report Body**:

- Introduction (sometimes a “background” section is added or used instead)
- Discussion (possibly including recommendations)
- Recommendations (could be omitted if included elsewhere)
- Conclusion (possibly including recommendations)

3. The **Back Matter**:

- References
- Appendix (may not be needed)

Ensure you have the necessary elements in your report—and that you write and format them correctly. Make the format work for your content and your audience; don't feel that somebody else's document design is “the right way” to do it. There are functional designs and dysfunctional designs; construct a design that is functional for your unique content and your specific audience.

We will now go into each element in detail. At the very bottom of this page, you will be able to see an example of a formal research report that includes most of these elements.



Front matter

The first part of your report is the **front matter**. This

combination of elements, such as the title page and table of contents, will be the first section your reader sees. These elements are relatively easy to make, but if they are completed sloppily, these elements can negatively impact the reader's view of the **credibility** of your work before they even read it.

Transmittal document

A transmittal document can either be a **letter** or **memo**, depending if you have an external (letter) or internal (memo) audience. The format you choose will depend on the **audience** who is receiving the report, but ultimately the goal of this element is to maintain goodwill by adding a personal component to the report. It is not strictly necessary, but it is often a feature of longer documents.

If including one, your letter/memo should do the following:

- Describe the topic.
- Make a brief statement of the report's major findings, while also acknowledging who helped form the report.
- Express appreciation to the client/audience and offer to provide follow-up with the report.

Note that the transmittal letter/memo can sometimes be included after the title page, especially in digital documents. Historically, it was paperclipped to the front page of the report, but those days are mostly gone.

Title page

Your title page should have four points of protocol information:

1. The title of the report
2. The name and title of the author(s)
3. The date of submission
4. The identity of the audience

In certain circumstances, a title page can also include the name and title of the person who commissioned the report.

Executive summary

The executive summary gives the reader an overview of the report. It allows them to quickly see what the content of your document is without having to read the entire report.

In a professional context, you might have to search through dozens, if not hundreds of reports to find information for your own research. You obviously wouldn't have time to read all of them, so looking at just the report's executive summary section would help you quickly sort through your potential research materials.

In a long report, the executive summary should be about 10% of the length of the entire report, but would almost never exceed three or four pages, even if the report is 40+ pages. It should condense the information that is already in the main document. This includes information such as the report's recommendations, justifications, limitations, and conclusions.

Table of contents

A table of contents (TOC) lists out the sections of a report. This means that the primary headings for each section are included,

along with the page numbers where they appear. If your report has secondary or lower headings, those could be included, too.

Make sure your organization is consistent. A TOC must properly reflect the organization of your report. For example, you wouldn't put the executive summary (which comes at the top of your report) as the last entry of your TOC. Additionally, you must proofread to ensure that the headings are worded and capitalized the same in the body of the report and the TOC.

List of tables and figures

The list of tables and figures operates similarly to the TOC. It presents an organized list of all the graphics that you created for your report with the page numbers where they are found. This list will be a separate page that comes after your TOC, which means that it needs to be in the TOC.

Report body

The second part of your formal research report is the **report body**. This is the main portion of the report that you have already been working on with your research.

You are probably familiar with the traditional five-paragraph essay, which has an introduction, body, and conclusion. For those kinds of essays, the introduction and conclusion are only one paragraph long. That is not the case for written reports, where both of those elements can have multiple paragraphs or even multiple pages. Similarly, the discussion can be broken up into multiple sub-sections, each with their own specific focus

and multiple paragraphs. The number of paragraphs for all three parts will ultimately depend on the information you are trying to convey.

Introduction

Your introduction sets the **tone** and expectations for your report.

First and foremost, your introduction sets the stage for the content to follow.

To accomplish this, you must provide your reader with an understanding of the purpose and scope of your report. Additionally, you must illustrate why your topic is important by describing the size and impact of the problem that you are analyzing. You may want to include background information of how the issue(s) you're exploring came to the present day and the current situation. You may also discuss your research methods here or you could break that into a separate section.

By the end of the introduction, the reader should clearly understand the purpose, audience, and context for your report.

Executive summary versus introduction

Many students confuse the purpose of a report's executive summary and introduction. The main difference is that a summary provides an overview of the report as a whole. This means that it include the results and conclusions of the report. The introduction does not do this. Instead, its purpose is to prepare the reader by providing background information to help ease the reader into the topic.

Below is a representation of the differences in a table format:

Executive Summary	Introduction
<ul style="list-style-type: none">condenses information that is already present in the main document	<ul style="list-style-type: none">introduces the report and explains its purpose
<ul style="list-style-type: none">can exist separately from the main document	<ul style="list-style-type: none">prepares reader for report that follows
<ul style="list-style-type: none">written for a general audience	<ul style="list-style-type: none">written for the specific audience who would be most interested in the detailed contents of the report
<ul style="list-style-type: none">usually includes report's recommendations, justification, limitations, and conclusions	<ul style="list-style-type: none">clearly shows the writer's aims and objectives, but does not mention or foreshadow conclusions or recommendations
<ul style="list-style-type: none">sources not needed (but cited if used)	<ul style="list-style-type: none">sources more likely to be needed (and cited)

Discussion

The discussion is the main part of your report. This is where you are defining the problem that you want to resolve. You do this by laying out your argument(s) and presenting the information needed to support your conclusion(s). As a result, the discussion section will have the most detailed information. It

it typically divided into multiple sections, each labeled with a heading that establishes the structure of the argument(s).

Your discussion area may not be labelled “discussion.” Instead, you may find that you want to break your content areas up topically, such as by recommendations, arguments, or issues. How you arrange this is up to you, but it should make the document more accessible to the reader and organize your content in a logical way.

Recommendations

This is where you will tell the reader how they should act based on the conclusion(s) you have come to in your report.

Pay close attention to your **tone** here. Don’t make the text sound like you are commanding or ordering the reader to do something. Instead, try to recognize that the choice is up to the reader to decide whether to take the recommended action.

This section might stand alone in the report or it might not. The content could work better with the recommendations integrated into the discussion or it might work better if it’s integrated into the conclusion. The choice is yours, but, once again, make it work for your content and your audience.

Conclusion

By the end of the discussion section, your reader should have a clear understanding of the problem you are addressing. The conclusion explains why it’s significant to the reader. It answers the “**so what?**” question that a reader will ultimately have by this stage of your report. Put another way, after reading your

report, the reader will have all this new information you provided them; “so what” are they supposed to do with it? What should the next steps be? What is their role moving forward? What is your role, if any, moving forward? What comes next?

Back matter

Congratulations! You are now done with the **report body**! Just one more part to go.

The third and final part of the report is made up of the **back matter**. This is where the reader can find information that helps them learn more about your topic. Specifically, this is where you will put your references page and appendices (if any).

References page

We’ve already talked a bit about the **references page** in the chapter on APA Style, so we will just review here. A references page includes a full **reference entry** for each work you cite in your report. These entries allow your reader to find the original sources for the information you are using if they want them.

Keep in mind that every source in your reference list must be represented in the body of your report by at least one **in-text citation**.

Appendix

The appendix section is for anything that needs to be attached to a report.

In general, a piece of content goes into the appendix if it is too long or complex to include in the discussion. However, don't just put anything in the appendix. The information should help the reader more fully understand your topic by supplementing the material in the body of the report.

Each appendix item should contain only **one** type of material. For example, all images should be under one heading, all tables should be under a different heading, and so on. If using an appendix, include the appendix in the table of contents.

Sample report

A Passage to UFV India: A Primer for Canadian Faculty Interested in Teaching at UFV's Chandigarh Campus

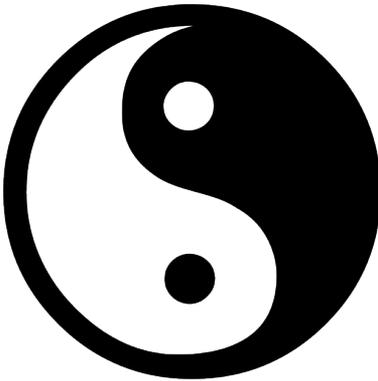
Take note that this sample report misses some of the above elements. For example, it has no executive summary and does not use APA format for the few sources being cited, instead using hyperlinks; there is no references page. There is no list of tables or figures and the recommendations are spread throughout the document, rather than confined to a single section. The reasons for these differences is that this was the functional format that worked for this unique content and this specific audience. That's the way professional reports go.

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32. Graphics, Tables, and Images

Incorporating graphics into reports is an important skill in developing quality professional documents. The more formal the report you are writing, the more likely the need for non-text material, such as tables, graphs, charts, maps, drawings, and photographs.



These visual elements can take many different forms, but they all have the same basic purpose: to help clarify information presented in the report. They also help break up a text-heavy report, making it more visually appealing.

The key concept to remember here is that visuals *clarify*, *illustrate*, and *augment* your written text. They are *not* a replacement for written text. Similar to when you present facts from an outside source to the reader in your writing, you are responsible for interpreting your graphics for your reader. Any time you include a chart, graph, or table, you should tell your reader what key point(s) they should understand from it.

The old adage, “a picture is worth a thousand words” does not hold true in professional writing, but adding visuals may save you a hundred words of additional explanation and clarification. If you have visual elements in your document, they must be based on and supplement your written content.

Throwing in “gratuitous graphics” just to decorate or take up space can confuse your reader (and the reader *knows what you’re doing*).

Choose the right kind of visual to convey the story you want your reader to understand. If visuals are poorly chosen or poorly designed for the task, they can actually confuse the reader and have negative consequences. For example, the first point you noticed when you opened this page was the image above. Did you wonder why it is there? Has it distracted you? Our eyes are naturally drawn to visuals that stand out, so make sure the ones you pick for your reports are essential to your purpose.

Deciding which graphics to include

As you review your research and consider possible visuals to include in your **report**, the first step is to think about which graphics are most appropriate given the data you wish to convey.

Table #4 below provides some general guidelines on the kinds of graphics most suitable for different types of information:

Table #4: General guidelines for graphics

Information to Convey	Visual Type
Numbers, percentages, categories	Tables, charts
Processes	Flow charts
Geographic data	Maps
Chronological or prioritized lists	Numbered lists
Non-ordered lists	Bulleted lists

For more specific reasoning for using individual types of graphics, see table #5 below:

Table #5: Common types of illustrative graphics

Type of Visual		Description and Purpose
Tables		Places detailed data/information in categories formatted into rows and columns for comparison; use when exact figures are important. Label column headings and/or rows.
Graphs	Bar graph	Compares and contrast two or more subjects at the same point in time or compare change over time.
	Column graph	Reveals change in a subject at different points in time.
	Line graph	Shows the degree and direction of change relative to two variables, compare items over time, show frequency or distribution, or show correlations.
Charts	Pie chart	Displays the number and relative size of the divisions of a subject; show relation of parts to a whole (parts must add up to 100% to make sense).
	Org. chart	Maps the divisions and levels of responsibility or hierarchy within an organization.
	Flow chart	Shows the sequence, steps, and/or options in a process or procedure.
	Gantt chart	Indicates timelines for multi-stepped projects, especially used in proposals and progress reports.
Illustrations	Diagram	Identifies the parts of a subject and their spatial flow or functional relationship; emphasizes detail or shows dimensions.
	Photo	Shows what a subject looks like in realistic detail or shows it being used.

	Animation	Simulates a process, operation, or incident.
	Film clip	Depicts a process, operation, or incident in realistic detail.

Formatting graphics

Once you have selected the correct graphic for your report, you will need to create it. Unfortunately, there is no universal way to format graphics. However, your employer may have an in-house style guide that you are expected to use.

Use the rules outlined in APA Style (7th Edition) for citing your tables and figures.

The key takeaway here is to always aim for **consistency**—especially if you are ever in a situation where you do not have a style guide. This means that elements such as titles, numbers, and headings should be formatted the same across the entire document. Small inconsistencies may not seem like a big deal, but they can suggest to a supervisor or client that you are not thorough or paying attention to details.

Placement and context

As you develop visuals for your report, you will want to also consider two points:

1. Where the visuals should be placed
2. What information you need to provide in your report to adequately prepare your readers for the message within that graphic

While there are different requirements depending on the visual you choose, there are five main rules you should follow to integrate your graphics.

Five Rules For Integrating Graphics into your Document

1. Give each visual a numbered caption that includes a clear descriptive title.
2. Refer to the caption number within the body text and discuss its content.
3. Label all units (x and y axes, legends, column box heads, parts of diagrams).
4. Provide the source of the data and/or visual image if you did not create it yourself.
5. Avoid distorting the data or image.

In addition, visual elements should also be surrounded with sufficient passive space to emphasize the image and enhance its readability. If copying and pasting an image, make sure all elements are clear and the print size is readable. A visual that has been shrunk down to an unreadable size does not help the reader understand your ideas.

Exercise #1: Examine and Compare the Figures

Examine Figure #1.1 below. Do you understand what the information conveys? What is missing? Use the five rules above to determine where this figure goes wrong.

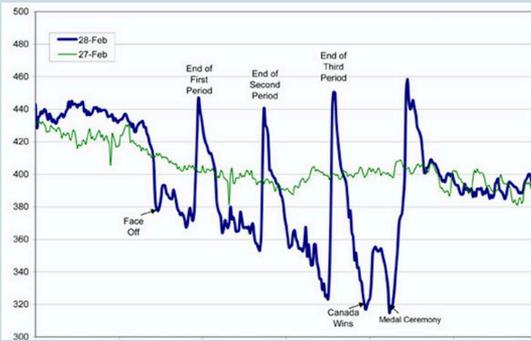


Figure #1.1

If you look carefully, you might be able to guess what story the graph above is telling. However, the lack of a descriptive caption and labeling of axes makes it impossible to know for sure.

Compare that figure to Figure #1.2 below using the same five rules.

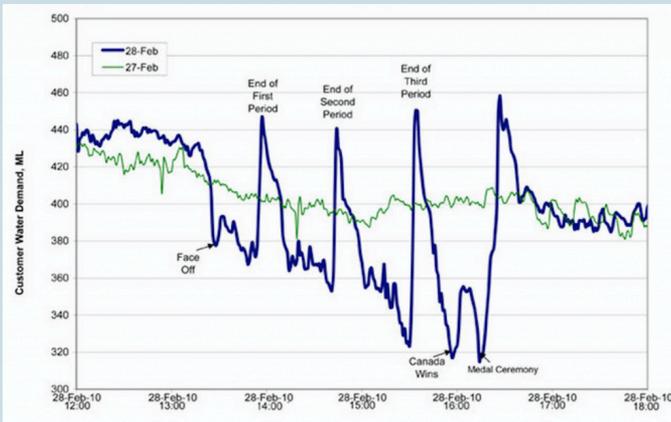


Figure #1.2 Water Consumption in Edmonton during the 2010 Gold Medal Hockey Game (Flowingdata).

Figure #1.2 has a numbered caption, a descriptive title, and it has properly labelled x and y axes and legends. It also cites the source the graph was retrieved from in the caption using an in-text citation. The original image has not been distorted in any way. Thus, it follows the five key rules listed above.

Using graphics ethically

As with everything discussed, the graphics you use can have an impact on your overall presentation. If the graphics are misleading in any way, and your audience realizes this, it can negatively impact how **credible** or trustworthy they consider you.

Exercise #2: The Ethics of Graphics

Watch the video below on misleading graphics. After watching, answer the following questions:

- Why might a person trying to persuade you toward their point of view use a graph to present information?
- How can graphs present an opinion?
- List three methods of “cherry picking data” and the advantages each provides.

Link to Original Video: tinyurl.com/spotbadgraphs

The next time that you feel persuaded by a graphic representation of data, check the labels, numbers, scales and context and ask yourself what story the picture is trying to tell. As you edit your own report, check to make sure your own use of graphics is ethical and complete.

Creating graphs in MS Excel

Creating charts in MS Excel is one of the easiest ways of incorporating graphic data into a document, especially an MS Word document.

If you're not familiar with how to create charts in Excel, I recommend, for your viewing pleasure, starting with this video tutorial.

That video does a great job of showing the features of creating one type of chart in Excel. You should also know that you can make a pie chart or a line graph just as easily and using the exact same process. The type of chart you choose will depend on the type of data you want to present. (Hint: percentages are usually best shown in a pie chart; events over time are usually best shown in a line graph; raw counts are usually best shown in a bar graph.)

Another point that video doesn't show is that you can simply copy a chart you've created in Excel and paste it right into an MS Word document. It's that simple to do.

My advice if you're new to this: create a simple table in Excel and play around until you can get it to work. When you've figured out how to get the results you want, put some time into formatting it to match the rest of your document. If you're using somebody else's data for your information, cite the data (even though you made the chart).

Chart examples

Finally, I'm posting this list of examples of charts. These are mostly for comic relief, but they all do aptly demonstrate which formats of charts work best for which purposes. (I couldn't find a really good pictograph, but perhaps that's because there really aren't many good pictographs out there for professional reports.)

Line graph: <https://i.chzbgr.com/full/4652666368/h640C8678/more-sunshine-more-problems>

Bar graph: <https://www.deviantart.com/trustinlies/art/Fun-Bar-Graph-305503243>

Venn diagram: <https://images.template.net/wp-content/uploads/2015/12/09193556/Funny-Clever-Venn-Diagrams-Template-Download.jpg>

Pie chart1: <https://images2.memedroid.com/images/UPLOADED53/528aad71e0df9.jpeg>

Pie chart2: <http://flowingdata.com/wp-content/uploads/2011/09/yoda-625x468.jpg>

(If you don't get that one, watch this 25 second clip:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BQ4yd2W50No>)

Infographic map: <https://d3ui957tjb5bqd.cloudfront.net/uploads/2014/01/Screen-Shot-2014-01-27-at-9.10.55-AM-560x488.png>

Flow chart: <https://cacoo.com/wp-app/uploads/2018/12/engineering-flow-chart.png>

As a final thought in this chapter, remember to put the needs of your audience first when preparing graphics. The charts above are silly and marginally funny; they wouldn't be appropriate for a professional audience.

Think about what information your audience needs in the image to gain an understanding of the information you want to convey. Step back from your first draft of your graphics and think about whether they would make sense out of context or if they could be misunderstood and revise as needed.

Also, good professional documents provide some text interpreting the graphics they provide; tell the reader what they should notice about the charts. If the chart is too simple to need such an interpretation, why not simply explain the information in one sentence? Graphic aids simplify complex information, not simple information. The audience doesn't

need a chart to visualize, for example, the difference between two numbers.

References

Flowingdata. (2010, March 9). *Canada: The country that pees together stays together*. <https://flowingdata.com/2010/03/09/canada-the-country-that-pees-together-stays-together/>

TED-Ed. (n.d.). How to spot a misleading graph – Lea Gaslowitz [Video]. Youtube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=E91bGT9BJYk>

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Figures #2 – 4 are in the Public Domain from openclipart.org.

PART VII
APPENDICES

Appendix A: Capitalization

While creating an entirely new chapter on capitalization would be fun, there are myriad resources online that are freely available.

Grammarbook.com, which also houses free quizzes to help students study, is an excellent source on capitalization rules: <https://www.grammarbook.com/punctuation/capital.asp>. I recommend using this page to answer most capitalization questions you may have.

There are some “rules” on capitalization that are disputed or followed irregularly, such as whether to capitalize a job title following a person’s name.

Example: “Please consult Montgomery Scott, **D**irector of **E**ngineering, for information about propulsion systems.” Most organizations capitalize in that case, but many official rule books suggest otherwise.

In matters of such discrepancy, consult your organization’s style guide if they have one. Many organizations have in-house rules for such points and will expect you to follow them. If your organization has no such style guide, consider using the *Canadian Press Style Guide* or a similar document to fill in. Or, at the very least, be consistent in your capitalization choices.

Oh, and one point to finish with, **the word “I” is always capitalized. We all know that, right? Right?**

Appendix B: Writing Numbers

Professional communicators have a few points of debate in how to write numbers, but most of the advice is pretty consistent.

Here are the numbers that are virtually always written as words: zero, one, two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight, and nine.

There is some disagreement about ten/10, so go with the style used in your industry or by your employer. For myself, I use “10” unless there’s some reason to do otherwise. (In academia, APA recommends “10,” but MLA recommends “ten,” so there’s no one right answer there, either.)

Numbers greater than 10 are written as digits until you reach the millions. Then, for ease of reading, you may write large numbers in the following style: 3.2 million, half a billion, 453 billion, 1.22 trillion, and so on.

When writing a number less than one and greater than -1 in a decimal format, include a leading zero before the decimal point. That is, write “0.5” and not “.5” or “-0.25” and not “-.25”; this will provide greater visual clarity.

Negative numbers are always written as digits, showing the negative symbol before the number.

If your number has units attached or is expressed as a fraction or in some mathematical equation, always express it as digits. Here are some examples: \$1.00, 2%, $\frac{3}{4}$, 5°, and so on.

With percentages, you should usually use the percent symbol,

but writing “percent” is also acceptable. Whatever choice you make, be consistent.

Avoid using apostrophes with numbers in professional writing. If you must use them, remember that the rules of apostrophes apply equally to numbers and words. They show possession or missing numbers. They do not indicate plurals (but plurals can have possession). Here are examples with explanations.

Right:	When you're abbreviating a decade:	I loved the music of the '60s so much!	What that means is that I loved the music produced from 1960 through 1969.
Wrong:		I loved the music of the 60's so much!	This is wrong because "so much" doesn't belong to the decade of 1960-69. The word isn't possessive. The apostrophe shows letters being omitted there.
Right:	When you're showing possession:	For me, 1960s' music is the best!	This is probably what the person means; they like the music produced from 1960 through 1969, not only one particular year. With plural possessives, the apostrophe lands after the "s" showing a plural.
Probably not:		For me, 1960's music is the best!	This means that the person likes the music from only the year 1960, not the whole decade. They probably don't mean to say this.
Awkward:		For me, '60s' music is the best!	This is technically acceptable, but ugly and confusing. Avoid this treatment.
Right:	When showing a plural only:	The 1960s was a decade of exceptional music.	The writer is simply discussing the decade as a whole. There is no possession and there is no abbreviation. No apostrophe is needed.
Wrong:		The 1960's was a decade of exceptional music.	There is no possession. Delete the apostrophe.

Numbers with more than three digits have a comma every

third digit, counting from right to left. Here are some examples: 1,234; 56,789; 123,456. There are a few exceptions, such as calendar years. If writing that “1999 was the best year in the history of cinema,” don’t add a comma in the year. If you’re writing about ancient history or the distant future, you should include the comma for years of 10,000 or larger, such as “25,000 BCE.” When writing the a full date in words, as in “Canada confederated on July 1, 1867, with the national unification of New Brunswick, Nova Scotia, Ontario, and Quebec,” the year is offset with parenthetical commas on both sides.

Do not add unnecessary spaces where commas would be clearer.

International note #1: in much of the world, the usage of commas to separate large numbers and the use of periods to separate whole numbers from decimals is reversed. For example, in Switzerland, what is written as “\$12,345.68” in North America would be written as “\$12.345,68” instead. Keep your eyes open for this difference in style.

International note #2: if you were educated in India, you may be used to including a comma between the third and fourth digits (counting from right to left), and then a comma every other digit after that (continuing from right to left). This is unique to India. This comma pattern aligns with a “lakh” (100,000) and a “crore” (10,000,000), which are numerical groupings popular in India, but not elsewhere. In India, a lakh is written as “1,00,000” and a crore is written as “1,00,00,000.” India is an outlier in this regard. Most people do not recognize or understand this comma placement. Use standard comma placement outside of India.

Of course, there are some exceptions.

If you're beginning a sentence with a number, you'll write out the whole number to avoid confusion. Here's an example: "Fifty-five years ago, music reached its zenith."

If you're keeping score at a sporting event or putting a number on the back of a player's jersey, the numbers are always expressed as digits. Addresses are virtually always expressed as digits, even when only a single digit is part of the address, and commas are not added in street numbers of four digits or longer.

These are the standard practices in professional documents. If your employer or industry deviate from the above advice, then you should deviate in keeping with that pattern, but be consistent in your treatment of numbers within each document you produce.

Appendix C:

Homonyms and Other Problem Words

English is full of homonyms and different types of homonyms at that. The two types addressed here are **homophones** and **homographs**.

A homophone is a word that has the same pronunciation as another word, but is spelled differently.

A homograph is a word that has the same spelling as another word, but is pronounced differently.

These are particularly tricky. This appendix provides a list of the most common and the most frustrating, along with a few other trouble words.

Each line in the list links to a Merriam-Webster definition for each word, which includes an audio clip that you can listen to to hear the pronunciation of the word. The definitions include examples for how to use each word, so you can see the differences.

accept vs. except: These two words actually have an almost opposite meaning. To *accept* means to include something, either in meaning or participation or as a statement of fact. On the other hand, if I say that I like all punctuation marks *except* the exclamation mark, that means the exclamation mark is excluded from the list (not accepted by me at all).

ad vs. add: The word “ad” is short for “advertisement.” The word “add” is used to put two numbers (or anything else) together.

advice vs. advise: These two words are closely related. “Advise” is a verb. When you perform the action of *advising*, you have provided somebody with *advice*, the noun form.

affect vs. effect: This one is infamously difficult; see *Grammar Girl's* explanation here.

a lot vs. allot vs. **alot**: Let’s start with the problem here: “alot” isn’t a word. There is no correct use of “alot.” The word “lot” is complex, with a large number of sometimes disparate meanings. It can refer to a portion of land or a portion of anything, really. When people write that they have “a lot” of something, they mean a large quantity. The verb, “to allot” means to give people something in portions (and often in equal portions).

allusion vs. illusion: An “allusion” is a reference, sometimes subtle or indirect, to something else. An “illusion” is the creation of an appearance that isn’t real, as in a magic trick.

altar vs. alter: An “altar” is a special table or raised structure used for religious ceremonies. The verb “to alter” means to change something.

appraise vs. apprise: The verb, “to appraise” means to determine the value of something. The verb “to apprise” means to inform somebody of something.

assure vs. ensure vs. insure: *The Grammar Guru* at the University of Nebraska explains this one for us; see the explanation here.

band vs. banned: A “band” is an object that holds a group of items together, such as an elastic band around pencils. It can

also refer to a ring, such as a wedding band. “Banned” is the past tense of “to ban,” which means to prohibit.

bare vs. bear: The word “bare” means uncovered, empty, or naked. “Bear” has many meanings, such as a large forest-dwelling mammal with big claws, or it can mean merit or ownership, such as a statement that “bears repeating” or a person who “bears responsibility for an action.”

bases vs. basis: A “basis” is the reason given for an action, policy, or decision. The word “bases” is plural for the noun “base,” which can refer to a station, as in a military base. It can also refer to something that is simple, as in “basic” in a “base-level automobile.”

beat vs. beet: The word “beat” has a number of meanings, but “beet” is very simple; it’s a round, purple/red root vegetable that is popular in eastern European cuisine.

blew vs. blue: “Blue” is the colour of the daytime sky or the ocean, as seen from outer space. The word “blew” is the past tense of the verb “to blow,” which indicates the pushing of air, usually from the mouth or by wind.

buy vs. by vs. bye: See this explanation from *Grammarist*.

capital vs. capitol: The word “capital” is almost always the word you want here. The word “capitol” has one specific meaning: the physical building where lawmakers meet in the capital city of a state, province, country, or other major jurisdiction. (These tend to be large, old, pretty buildings, often made of stone.)

cell vs. sell: The verb “to sell” means the action of exchanging a possession, either for oneself or on behalf of another, for money. A “cell” is a single unit, often of a larger whole, such as a single human skin cell. “Cell” can also be short for “cellular,” as in a cellular phone or a mobile phone.

cent vs. scent vs. sent: See the explanation from *Grammarist* [here](#).

cereal vs. serial: The word “serial” refers to something that happens in a *series*; the word “cereal” refers to food from grains, as in breakfast cereal or cereal oats.

cite vs. sight vs. site: Let’s go to the Grammar Monster for an explanation of this one.

coarse vs. course: The word “coarse” refers to an abrasive texture. The word “course” has many meanings, such as taking a college course for learning or playing in an obstacle course for aerobic fun.

complement vs. compliment: The verb “to compliment” means to say something kind or favourable about another person (or sometimes an object, such as a beautiful house). “Complement” has a number of meanings. The most confusing is when somebody says that one item or person “complements” another, which means they work together well or provide a favourable synergy together. In audio, the pronunciation is the same, so be careful to listen for context.

council vs. counsel and councillor vs. counselor: A “council” is a group of people who gather to form policy of one type or another. A member of such a council is a “councillor.” A person who provides advice, often a therapist or a lawyer, is a counselor. The verb “to counsel” is the action they take when providing advice. That advice is often called “counsel,” as in “if charged with a crime, seek legal counsel.”

crews vs. cruise vs. crus: The verb “to cruise” means to travel, usually leisurely, and is often used to mean a luxurious voyage on a large ship, known as a “cruise ship.” A “crew” is a group of people who work together, often in the trades or performing outdoor labour. The word “crus” has to do with legs as an

anatomical part and isn't commonly used, but the words "Grand Cru" or "Grand Crus" in plural refer to a high quality of French wine.

currant vs. current: The noun "currant" is a type of berry, usually red or black. The word "current" can refer to the flow of a river or of electricity or to events taking place in the present.

defer vs. differ: To "defer" is to delay. To "differ" is to disagree.

desert vs. dessert: A "dessert" is a dish served after the main meal; it is usually sweet and the last course served in a meal. As a noun, "desert" is a biome that receives little or no precipitation. As a verb, "to desert" means to abandon.

dew vs. do vs. due: See this explanation from *Grammarist*.

dissent vs. descent: To "dissent" is to publicly disagree, often with government or another authority. The word "descent" refers to a drop, usually in elevation, as when a airplane begins its landing. "Descent" can also refer to ancestry, as a person is of "French descent" if their grandparents are from France.

dual vs. duel: A "duel" is a fight between two combatants, historically on a point of honour and often to the death. In contemporary speech, it often simply refers to a contest between two people. The word "dual" refers to the number two, as in a "dual engine aircraft," which would have two engines.

eminent vs. imminent: The word "eminent" describes somebody prestigious or famous, as in an eminent scholar who is foremost in their field. The word "imminent" refers to an event that is about to happen.

enquiry vs. inquiry: These two words are really variants of each other. They can be used interchangeably, but be consistent in your use of one or the other. If quoting somebody else, use the spelling they use.

fair vs. fare: See this explanation from Grammar.com.

farther vs. further: “Farther” is a greater physical distance. The verb “to further” means to advance something, as in “he aims to further his cause by recruiting more supporters.” In spoken English, there is not always clarity about which is being used; in some contexts, either word could be acceptable to achieve similar meaning.

faze vs. phase: A “phase” is a stage or step in a larger process, such as in construction or human development, that is connected to other sequential stages or steps. The verb “to faze” means to affect somebody, often in a negative sense, as in to discourage or concern a person. This is frequently used as a person who is “unfazed,” as in “she was unfazed by the dangers ahead.”

for vs. fore vs. four: See this explanation from *Grammarist*.

forward vs. foreword: “Forward” is a direction that means to move in the direction ahead. A “foreword” is a portion of writing that lands before the main text. For example, when somebody writes a book, another author will sometimes write a “foreword” that is included before the main author’s writing to provide context or interpretation. A foreword could be seen as the *words before*.

halve vs. have: To “halve” means to cut something in half. The word “have” is a possessive verb.

hear vs. here: To “hear” is a verb that indicates audio reception through the ears. The word “here” indicates the present location.

it’s vs. its: This is a common challenge for many students. See *The Oatmeal’s* explanation here (scroll down).

knight vs. night: A “knight” is a medieval warrior clad in armour,

riding on horseback. The word “night” refers to the period of time after the sun has set, but before it has risen again the next day.

later vs. latter: “Later” refers to something that occurs in time after the current moment or point of discussion. The word “latter” refers to the last item on a list (and that list often has only two items).

lay vs. lie: Oh, boy. This is a big one. See Merriam-Webster’s own explanation of these words, which they note have caused confusion for centuries.

lead vs. led: The word “led” is the past tense of the verb “to lead,” which means to go before another (as in “leadership”). The words “lead” and “lead” are different and have different pronunciations. Oh, how do we explain this better? Click on the link to “lead” and scroll down to the definition of “lead” where the word means a particular metal (Pb #82 on the periodic table of elements) and listen to the pronunciation there. You’ll hear that the metal “lead” is pronounced the exact same way as “led,” the past tense of the verb “lead.” Consult your instructor for help if needed.

leased vs. least: The verb “to lease” is a form of rental agreement with specific timelines. The word “least” means the lowest amount that can be considered in the conversation, as in “\$500 was the least he could accept when selling his bicycle, as it was worth double and he needed the money badly.”

liable vs. libel: The word “libel” is a legal term that refers to written defamation, as when somebody publishes malicious lies about another person or organization. The word “liable” can also have legal significance, but refers to responsibility for an action. It can also refer to a future likelihood, as in “the instructor is liable to know the difference between these two words.”

loan vs. lone: A “loan” is a financial arrangement where one person or organization temporarily gives money to another with an expectation that that money will be returned, usually in a larger sum than originally given. The word “lone” means “one” and is connected to “alone,” as in “the lone samurai now needed to defend the shogun from four intruders, but skill and cunning were on his side; the intruders would be no match in the end.”

loose vs. lose: “Loose” is the opposite of “tight” or sometimes the opposite of “well defined,” as in “because the records are missing, we only have a *loose* understanding of what happened.” “Lose” is the opposite of “win” or “keep,” as in “don’t *lose* that parcel; the contents are very valuable.”

may be vs. maybe: The two words “may be” provide a qualified indication that something is possibly true, as in “that may be the situation, but we need confirmation” (from the verb “to be”). The word “maybe” is used to note a similar uncertainty, but it is in an adverb form.

morning vs. mourning: “Morning” is the period of time after the sun rises, but before it reaches its zenith in the sky at high noon. The word “mourning” refers to the experience of grief upon the death of a loved one or some other significant personal loss.

oar vs. or vs. ore: Grammar Monster explains the differences here (and adds “awe” to the mix, too).

overdo vs. overdue: The word “overdue” means that something should have happened previously, but still has not happened, as in “all assignments were due to be submitted by Friday, but mine is now overdue.” The verb “to overdo” means to complete a task beyond the necessary level and to excess. “He wanted to impress on the first date, but was bringing a horse-drawn carriage, a mariachi band, and 144 red roses going to overdo it?”

passed vs. past: The word “passed” is the past tense of the verb “to pass.” If one moves by another person, they have “passed” that person, as in a race: “the fastest horse passed the rest on the home stretch.” The word “past” refers to events that occurred in history before the present.

patience vs. patients: The word “patients” refers to the people treated by doctors and other medical professionals. The word “patience” is the state of waiting without exhibiting frustration. (The word “patients” was derived from the need to wait to see a doctor, which is not a recent phenomenon.)

peace vs. piece: A “piece” is a portion or component of a larger whole. The word “peace” is the opposite of war or disturbance.

plain vs. plane: See this thorough explanation from English Grammar Lessons online.

pole vs. poll: A “pole” is a long object that is straight on its axis and round, as in a pipe or the straw in a drink. A “poll” is a form of survey that is used to estimate how people feel about a topic or what they think about an issue. These words can also be used as verbs, wherein a person “poles” to push their way somewhere, as with a boat across shallow water, or “polls,” which is to ask people questions (used to produce a poll).

precede vs. proceed: The word “precede” denotes events that transpired before the present matter. The word “proceed” means to make progress or advance in a forward direction.

principal vs. principle: A “principal” is a person in a primary or authoritative position, as in the principal of a school or business; it can also mean the main actor(s) in a film or play. “Principal” can also mean an initial investment upon which an investor hopes to gain a return. The word “principle” refers to a belief or value based on some moral or ethical idea(s).

rational vs. rationale: The word “rational” is an adjective that

means an action or idea has a clear logical basis. The word “rationale” is a noun that is a reasoning or explanation (as derived through rational thinking).

read vs. red: “Red” is a colour, as of the colour of a ripe raspberry or strawberry. The word “read” has multiple meanings and, in the past tense of “to read,” has the same pronunciation of “red.”

respectfully vs. respectively: The word “respectfully” means that something is in the spirit of fairness, honesty, honour, and sometimes deference. The word “respectively” indicates that something applies to one or more objects, people, or phenomena in the order as stated or sometimes equally.

right vs. write: The word “right” has multiple meanings, such as being a synonym for virtue or being of the side of the body that is the same as the liver and opposite the heart or of the side of a clock with the numbers one, two, three, four, and five. The word “write” means to create markings that can be read by another person, usually with a pen or pencil on paper, but also on wood, stone, glass, or other surfaces and with other instruments.

road vs. rode: A “road” is a cleared trail from one place to another, usually paved, but at least flattened for use by wheeled vehicles. The word “rode” is the past tense of “to ride,” which means to travel by vehicle or by horse (or sometimes other animals, such as a camel or elephant).

role vs. roll: A “roll” is something that can be stored by circling the object around itself, as in a rug that is put in a roll for storage. It can also refer to pastries or buns that are sometimes made by circling the dough around itself before baking. A “roll” can also be a list, especially of people. The term “roll call” refers to checking for attendance of people on a list. This can also be a verb for achieving the same outcome, as in “she rolled the rug up and stood it against the wall.” The word “role” refers to a

duty or task, as in “as a lawyer, her role was to provide the best defense possible.”

than vs. then: See Merriam-Webster’s explanation here.

there vs. their vs. they’re: See Merriam-Webster’s explanation here.

to vs. too vs. two: See the BBC’s explanation here.

who’s vs. whose: This is a common error, but it’s actually easily avoided. The words “who is” or “who has” are shown as a contraction in “who’s.” The word “whose” is possessive, showing that somebody else owns something. When in doubt, ask yourself if “who is” or “who has” would work as a substitute. If yes, use “who is” or “who has.” If no, stick with “whose.” Avoid “who’s” in professional writing (as with all contractions).

your vs. you’re: This issue follows the same pattern as with “who’s” and “whose” above. The words “you are” are shown as a contraction in “you’re.” The word “your” is possessive, showing that somebody else owns something. When in doubt, ask yourself if “you are” would work as a substitute. If yes, use “you are.” If no, stick with “your.”

Be warned: this list is not exhaustive! There are literally hundreds (thousands?) of homonyms in English. You’ll find additional lists of homonyms online, such as this one: <https://7esl.com/homonyms>.

Other problem words

among vs. **between**: Objects that can be compared separately and in parallel are usually discussed using “between.” For

example, “I was choosing between travelling to Italy, Japan, and Egypt.” Only one of those will be chosen. If something is not so easily distinguished, the word “among” may be better. Here’s an example: “I was choosing from among a large number of travel destinations.” In that sentence the destinations aren’t clearly separated for comparison.

amount vs. number: The word “number” is used for a noun that can be counted. The word “amount” is used when a noun must be measured. For example, “we have a number of options, but only a set amount of time to choose.” The options can be counted, but time must be measured.

few vs. little: The word “few” means small in number, while “little” means small in size.

good vs. well: “Good” is usually an adjective, as in I’m reading a “good book.” The word “well” is usually an adverb. If one wants to say that they are in a positive mood, they might say they are “doing well.” If a person says that they are “doing good,” that would mean they were performing acts of goodness, such as donating to charity or helping the needy. It wouldn’t speak to their mood, but rather their actions connected to good deeds.

I vs. me: These pronouns both refer to the self. “I” is used when the pronoun is the subject of the sentence, as in “I love grammar and punctuation.” The word “me” is used when the pronoun is the object in the sentence, as in “That ice cream was for William and me.” The most common error is to write “That ice cream was for William and I.” If you remove “William and” from the sentence, you should now hear that “That ice cream was for I” sounds wrong (because it is). That’s the easiest test for which to use when.

less vs. fewer: The word “fewer” is used when the object can be counted, such as “we have fewer customers this time of year” because we can count the customers. The word “less” is used

when the object cannot be counted, as in “there is less water in the lake this year” because the water cannot be counted; it would need to be *measured*.

like vs. such as: The word “like” is a comparison between two objects that are not the same, as in “oranges are like lemons” because they are similar (but not the same). The words “such as” provide examples, as in “we have several citrus fruits to choose from, such as lemons, oranges, and limes.” If “such as” is swapped for “like” in that last sentence, that means they do not have any lemons, oranges, or limes, but other citrus fruits that are similar.

many vs. much: The word “many” is used for countable nouns; the word “much” is used for nouns that must be measured to determine their quantity. For example, “we have many musicians, but not much noise.”

which vs. that: See *Grammar Girl's* explanation [here](#).

who vs. whom: See *Grammar Girl's* explanation [here](#).

Words to avoid

“According to me”: Everything you write is according to you unless you specify otherwise. That’s what citations and attributions are for. If you’re drawing on someone else’s ideas, data, images, text, or other original content, you tell the reader that and cite your source. If you don’t do that, everything you’ve written in the sentence is according to you and only according to you. In short, never write that phrase again.

Besides: While this is actually a fine word, it is misused 99% of the time that I see it in writing. Trust me: there’s a 99% chance

you're in the 99% of students misusing it. If you want to take the time to see if you're using it correctly, go ahead, but you'll quickly realize that it isn't a word you need very often if you are, in fact, using it correctly. The correct usage is when you've indicated something true and then want to indicate a special type of exception.

However, here's an example of how to correctly use the word:

"Jimmy called me to come patch his flat tire, but I was in a rush and he had already called a tow truck; besides, he had a spare tire in the back that he knew how to put on his car. He was being lazy; that's all there was to the matter."

So, you've been warned: use this word at your own risk because you're probably misusing it.

Etcetera (etc.): This word tells the reader that you've decided not to tell them information. If there is something important, include the information. If not, don't include it. Using "etc." asks the reader to guess what you've left out.

Got: This word is almost never needed. Usually people write, "I've got a problem." However, in that instance, you can remove "got" and simply write, "I have a problem." The word "got" is superfluous.

Just: This word is almost never needed in a sentence (unless you're using it to mean "justice"). If you omit the word from almost any sentence, the meaning will be exactly the same. It's sometimes called a "softening" word, which means it's used to reduce the impact of the following word or phrase or the whole sentence. But, why would you want to do that?

Like: This is another word that is actually fine to use, provided you use it correctly. Most of the time, students use "like" when they mean "such as." Students almost never actually mean the true meaning of the word "like." You can more or less stop using

it because not using it will more likely improve your writing than hurt it in any way.

exception: (verb) show appreciation, but even then

irregardless: This isn't a real word. It is improper usage. Use "regardless" or "irrespective," which are likely the intended words in any event.

Nowadays: Everything you write is understood to be in the context of the present unless you specify otherwise, so you don't need to use it. Moreover, the word is also cliché and invites more clichés. People who begin a sentence or paragraph (or, gasp, a document) with "nowadays" almost immediately jump into a cliché or a stereotype. For example, if you're tempted to write, "nowadays, technology is advancing business and communications development at an unprecedented rate," you might quickly realize that the statement would have been true every single day for the past 100+ years. People used to talk that way about "global communication" when the telegraph was invented. The word "nowadays" actually creates an error because it creates a false pretext.

Stuff: This word lacks specificity. It means an unspecified physically real noun. Given that, why not provide a specific noun? Instead of writing that you "picked up 'stuff' at the grocery store," why not write that you "picked up food, batteries, and cleaning supplies"? Now the reader will clearly and specifically understand what you mean.

Exception: (verb) to stuff a turkey

Thing(s): Grab a pad of paper and a pen and write down a definition for this word. I challenge you. The rest of this paragraph will wait while you try. While you think about the word and realize that you can't create a clear working

definition, ask yourself, if that's the case, "What does this word mean if I can't define it?" Ah ha! This word has almost no meaning. It is a placeholder for meaning. We use it to show that we intend meaning, but haven't been clear or specific about what that meaning is. You can always use a word that offers greater clarity, accuracy, or specificity. Take the time to choose a better word.

Glossary

A.I.D.A.

attention, interest, decision, and action

a persuasive sales technique for structuring a pitch to a customer:

- gain **a**ttention.
- stimulate **i**nterest.
- push for a **d**ecision.
- motivate **a**ction.

action verbs

verbs found in job application materials that quickly identify a candidate's skills, achievements, and accomplishments

active voice

a sentence structure where the subject carries out the action

APA Style

The American Psychological Association (APA) Style is a style guide that provides guidance on how to format papers. For this course, we are using it only for rules on citing sources and creating reference entries.

audience

the receiver or receivers of a message

audited financial statements

Audited financial statements are documents that review the financial position and operation of an organization. The documents record the value of the organization's assets, liabilities, and equity. They also show annual revenues and expenses. For most organizations, these documents must be produced annually.

author-date citation system

a system for creating in-text citations that requires the inclusion of the author's (or authors') last name(s) and the year the source was published, as well as the page number where possible

axiom

a universal principle or foundational truth that operates across cases or situations

back matter

the final part of your report, this is where your reader can find information that will help them learn more information about the topic. The elements are the recommendations, the appendix and the references page.

buy-in

organizational acceptance of a process, decision, or outcome

chronological résumé

a traditional résumé format whose main section is the "employment experience" section. Jobs are listed in reverse chronological order, with skills/achievements under each position

clause

when a subject and verb are combined in a sentence. There are two types: independent clause and dependent clause.

comma splice

when two independent clauses are incorrectly joined by a comma

communication

the process of one person stimulating meaning in the mind of another by means of a message

conciseness

using the fewest words possible to achieve the goal of communication

connective statements

several types of statements or phrases that are designed to connect part of your speech to make it easier for audience members to follow

coordinating conjunctions

a word that joins two clauses, such as "and," "but," "for," "yet," "nor," "or," and "so"

cover letter

also known as an "application letter," this document is your opportunity to establish a connection with the company you are applying to. You will pick a few significant qualifications that make you a good fit for the position and go into depth about each one.

credibility

a quality that allows others to trust and believe you

dependent clause

a clause that relies on another part of the sentence for meaning because it cannot stand on its own

direct quote

a word-for-word copy of someone else's words and/or ideas.

elevator pitch

a short opportunity to introduce oneself and highlight one's marketability as an employment prospect for a potential employer (or sometimes investor)

ethnocentrism

the belief that one's own culture is superior or acting in such a way as to treat one's own culture as superior or normative, judging other cultures on the preconceived notion that one's own culture is normative or superior

face time

time spent face-to-face in conversation, usually with a key contact, such as a supervisor or person in a position to hire or invest

feedback

information that a receiver sends back to the sender

footing

the foundation upon which your credibility rests in a given interaction

free riders

a person who attempts to avoid contributions or effort in a team setting, while still gaining the rewards and recognition of the team's achievements

front matter

the first group of elements that a reader will see of your report. These elements are the cover page, the transmittal document, the title page, the table of contents, the list of tables and figures, and the summary.

full block format

a standard letter format that has seven elements: (1) letterhead/logo, (2) heading, (3) salutation, (4) introduction, (5) body, (6) conclusion, (7) signature line

functional (skills) résumé

a résumé format whose main section is the "Skills and Achievements" section. Skills are organized into categories. There is still an "Employment Experience" section, but it only includes basic information about each position.

fused sentence

when two independent clauses are combined without any punctuation

gerund

a word ending in "ing" that serves as a noun or adjective in a sentence, not is a verb

gerund fragment

a type of sentence fragment where the issue is a gerund (an -ing word serving as a noun or adjective) being used incorrectly in a sentence

gifs

an image file that is usually animated in some way

groupthink

a tendency of groups to avoid conflict and, thus, avoid discussing contrary ideas to those previously adopted by the group

halo effect

treating a particular person's ideas as superior or unquestionable based on their seniority, status, rank, or past performance

header block

the section of a memo that contains detailed information on its recipient, sender, and purpose

homographs

a word that has the same spelling as another word, but is pronounced differently

homophones

a word that has the same pronunciation as another word, but is spelled differently

horn effect

treating a particular person's ideas as inferior or questionable based on their lack of seniority, status, rank, or past performance

in-text citation

also called a "citation," in-text citations are a mechanical way that a writer acknowledges the work of others. An in-text citation can take two forms: a parenthetical citation or a narrative citation.

independent clause

a clause that can stand on its own because it conveys a complete idea.

informative report

a report where you establish your credibility so the audience will accept the facts you present

interview

the phase of the job search process where you go from being an applicant on paper to a real, three dimensional person.

interviewing

the phase of the job search process where you are evaluated on your verbal communication skills through face-to-face (or phone) interaction

jargon

certain words that are used by a profession or group that are difficult for others to understand

job package

a collection of documents that are used to apply for a position, such as a cover letter and résumé

keywords

words in a job posting that highlight skills, qualities, and values that are important to a company

lead-ins

long strings of words that don't add much to the overall meaning of the message

letter

a brief message to recipients that are often outside the organization

memos

full name "memoranda," these are documents sent within an organization to pass along or request information, outline policies, present short reports, or propose ideas

narrative citation

a type of citation where the source information is embedded into the text. The author's name is in the text and is then followed by the year in parenthesis. The year is then followed by a signal verb. Include the page number at the end of the sentence in parenthesis. For example: MacLennan (2009) argues...(p. 10).

netiquette

etiquette for using the internet, or more specifically, communicating in online spaces. This includes (1) knowing your context, (2) remembering the human, (3) recognizing that text is permanent, (4) avoiding flaming, and (5) respecting privacy and original ideas

noise

information that is unintentionally added to a message or that confuses or disrupts a message during transmission, also known as "interference"

nominalizations

an issue where the main action (a verb) is turned into a noun which overcomplicates the writing

non-verbal communication

the transfer of information through the use of body language, including eye contact, facial expressions, gestures and more

non-verbal feedback

a type of feedback where you use your whole body to provide information to a speaker. Some examples include leaning your body in, using eye contact, and nodding affirmatively

outline

a visual structure where you can compile information into a well-organized document

paraphrase

a way to use your own words to present information. This method is more detailed and specific than a summary and retains the length of the original source.

parenthetical citation

a type of citation that comes at the end of a sentence where an outside source is used. The author, date, and page number go inside the parenthesis. For example: (MacLennan, 2009, p. 10)

passive voice

a sentence structure where the subject of a sentence receives an action instead of doing it

persuasive report

a report where you want the audience to accept the facts *and* you want them to change their thinking and actions

phrase

a group of words that are missing a subject, a verb, or both

plagiarism

when a person represents the ideas of another as their own original work

plain words

words that are more common and easier for readers to understand

popular sources

sources that are good for background information and ideas, but not for including in actual research

pre-writing

the first phase of the writing process where you gather information and content from sources to help generate materials in the drafting phase

predicate

the verb that conveys the action or state of being in a clause or sentence

preposition

words that show relationships between other words. Some examples include *in*, *on*, *at*, *of*, and *under*

preposition fragment

a type of sentence fragment where an issue with a preposition makes the sentence an incomplete idea

primary research

research that is often made up of first-person accounts and can be useful for issues where there is little research available

pronouns

Generally, a shorter word that stands in for a longer word or noun phrase, often replacing a proper noun.

Examples: Jennifer walked to the store, but then she was disappointed that it was closed.

In that sentence, "she" is a pronoun referring to "Jennifer" and "it" is a pronoun referring to "the store."

Culturally, a self-made declaration of the pronouns that should be used in reference to oneself.

Example: *Professional Writing Today: A Functional Approach* was written by Sam Schechter (he, him, his).

In that sentence, the author is declaring that he should be referred to with male pronouns.

protocol information

content that is provided as a matter of standard formatting or practice, such as the date a report was written, the name of the author(s), the subject or title of the document, and the intended audience

receiver

a person who receives a message from a sender

reference entry

detailed information about your source that a reader can use to find the information on their own. A reference entry should include, at minimum, the author(s) who generated the source, the date the source was published, the title of the source, and information on where the source can be found.

references

external sources that have been used to supply data, words, numbers, images, ideas, or other content to a document or presentation

references page

also "references list"

a section of your report that will have reference entries for all of the sources you cite in your paper. All reference entries should be organized in alphabetical order by author last name or organization name, and, if the reference runs on to multiple lines, each successive line should be indented.

report

an account of your investigation into a subject, presented in a written document or oral presentation that has conventional formatting

report body

the main portion of the report that has all the content of your findings. The elements are the introduction, the discussion, and the conclusion.

request for proposals

A request for proposal, or RFP, is a document that invites other organizations to create a proposal to achieve a particular aim. For example, if a municipal government wants to build a bridge, it will publish an RFP so that construction companies can produce proposals about how to build the bridge and how much it should cost.

research question

a question that a research project sets out to answer

résumé

a document that summarizes your education, skills, talents,

employment history, and experiences in a clear and concise format for potential employers

reverse chronological order

a way of organizing your job experiences so that you are starting with the most recent job and working backwards toward your first job

run-on sentence

a writing error where two or more independent clauses are connected without proper punctuation

scholarly sources

sources that are typically peer-reviewed by experts, more technical in nature, and cite references

scope

elements you must consider that can impact the message you create and how it will be received. For example, the audience, the purpose of your message, and constraints you must work within

secondary research

research that requires searching libraries and other locations for other people's published studies and research

self-inventory

the process of brainstorming your past accomplishments, skills, and achievements

sender

a person who sends a message

sentence fragment

a writing error where a sentence is missing a subject or verb

Shannon-Weaver Model

also known as the transmission model, this communication model shows communication as a linear process where a sender encodes information and sends it to a receiver who decodes it

signal verb

a special verb that shows the reader how an author is expressing their ideas

simple future

a verb tense that is used to talk about things that haven't happened yet

simple past

a verb tense that is used to talk about things that happened or existed before now

simple present

a verb tense that is used to show an action is happening right now or that it happens regularly

speaker

a person sending a message through their voice

subject

the topic being discussed in a clause or sentence

subordinate conjunction

a word that connects a dependent clause to an independent clause. It shows a cause-and-effect relationship or a shift in time and place between the two clauses

subordinate conjunction fragment

a type of sentence fragment that is caused by an issue with a subordinate conjunction

summary

a way to use your own words to present your own information. This method is used for describing an entire source. This means that you will focus only on main ideas and not go into details.

targeted (hybrid) résumé

a résumé format that includes both a well-developed "Skills and Achievements" section that highlights a candidate's most relevant skills and bullet points under each job in the "Employment Experience" section

team chat applications

a program, such as Slack or Microsoft Teams, that companies use to promote efficient communication across their workforce

technical communication

any communication on a specialized, technical topic

territorial acknowledgment

The practice of declaring, either verbally or in writing, that

one is living, working, or otherwise occupying the territory of a specific Indigenous nation whose lands are not currently under their own full control.

Example: "The lands occupied by Douglas College campuses are on the territories of the Coast Salish Peoples of the QayQayt and Kwikwetlem First Nations."

thank you note

a brief note that thanks the interviewers for meeting with you. It should also express your continued interest in the position, reference something specific from the conversation, and remind them of your qualifications

tone

the attitude of a communicator toward the message being delivered and/or the audience receiving the message

transactional

types of communication that are highly designed to create a purposeful exchange between the sender and receiver of a message

transition words

words that are used to connect words, phrases, or sentences. Examples include: *as a matter of fact*, *moreover*, *in other words*, and *as a result*

verb

a word that conveys the action or state of being in a sentence

verb tenses

grammatical ways of altering verbs to show when a person does something, or when something existed or happened

walk and talk

a practice of inviting a person to carry out a conversation for so long as both people are on their way to a destination, frequently done out of expediency or lack of meaningful availability

written report

a type of report where a person uses writing to relay information

About the Author

Practical Writing Today: A Functional Approach was written by Sam Schechter, a faculty member in the Communications Department at Douglas College. The book was inspired by Rebekah Bennetch at the University of Saskatchewan. Credit for much of this book is owed to her and her co-authors, Corey Owen and Zachary Keeseey.

Sam also wrote *Public Speaking for Today's Audiences*, an OER textbook designed for first-year post-secondary students learning the craft of public speaking and *Public Relations: From Strategy to Action*, an OER textbook for upper-level undergraduate students learning about public relations. He is also the editor of an OER collection of case studies in *Public Relations Case Studies: Strategies & Actions*. His fifth and most recent OER is *Social Media & Reputation Management*.

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