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WRITING LETTERS REVISITED: INTERPERSONAL, RHETORICAL, AND STRUCTURAL TRAITS

У статті розглянуто новітні тенденції ділового листування англійською мовою. Особливу увагу приділено інтерперсональним, риторичним та структурним аспектам англійського ділового листа. Докладно висвітлено способи ведення ефективного діалогу з адресатом залежно від субординації комунікантів, підкреслено важливість залучення елементів розмовного мовлення, початкової та фінальної частин листа; адекватного добору слів, залучення засобів вираження емоції задля доконечної мети – ефективного переконання адресата.

Ключові слова: ділове листування; інтерперсональні, риторичні, структурні риси; залучення елементів розмовного мовлення; емоція.

В статье рассмотрены новейшие тенденции деловой корреспонденции на английском языке. Особое внимание уделяется интерперсональным, риторическим и структурным аспектам англоязычного делового письма. Детально освещены способы ведения эффективного диалога с адресатом в зависимости от субординации коммуникантов, подчеркнута значимость инкорпорирования элементов разговорной речи, роли начальной и финальной частей письма; адекватного подбора слов, использования средств выражения эмоции с целью эффективного убеждения адресата.

Ключевые слова: деловая корреспонденция; интерперсональные, риторические, структурные особенности; использование элементов разговорной речи, эмоция.

Business writing has changed. This paper brings together the field's best knowledge and shows exactly how to put it to work. It addresses constructing well-crafted business letters from the perspective of interpersonal, rhetorical, and structural points. It also takes into consideration the specificity of upward, downward, and lateral communication. Emphasized here are: creating goodwill and developing relationship, applying conversational style to business letters, writing effective openings and closings, avoiding jargon, choosing words that capture the reader's interest, with the ultimate purpose of writing clearly and persuasively.

Key words: business writing; interpersonal, rhetorical, structural traits; applying conversational tone; emphasis.

Today, business people spend an average of 30 % of their work time writing. And businesses spend about \$ 3 billion a year helping their employees become more effective writers [4]. The **importance** of getting back to writing business letters is obvious: business writing has changed. Despite research efforts in the area of business writing [1; 2; 7], and a bunch of practical manuals, including online resources [3; 5; 7; 8; 9], several key issues on the three levels – interpersonal, rhetorical, and structural – have escaped detailed scrutiny. The **purpose** of this article is to provide an overview of current trends in business writing, namely, in basic types of letters. We will deal with several points, namely, structural, interpersonal, and rhetorical issues.

Letters and memos are the sharpest, fastest way to make points in business. Compared to other business documents, they seem simple to write. But they're not! The average US memo or business letter seldom runs more than one or two pages. This brief format gives you time to hone your message. It also means there's no place to hide: poor writing shows up at once. Why? Because everything jumps out at the reader: a hostile or inauthentic phrase, coldness, impersonalness, impatience, an exaggerated claim, and feelings of superiority. A bit of poor writing can be lost in the pages of a longer report. It stands out immediately in a letter. In short, with letters and memos – everything counts.

Every business letter has three functions: **(1)** creating goodwill, **(2)** communicating the information, and **(3)** achieving its main goal (settling a claim, collecting a bill, selling a product). There are basically four kinds of business letters – those that contain: information, good news, bad news, and a persuasive message. All have their tricks and secrets. Of the four, bad news- and persuasive letters are the most challenging. A key question to ask yourself – before starting a business letter – is: what do I want to accomplish? The answer will guide you in producing the message. Once the objective is decided, many professional letter-writers do the key paragraph first and build the rest around it. Structurally, if you're writing to a company on two different matters, it's usually better to separate major messages – discussing each in a separate letter. Especially if each issue requires action by a different department. A single letter may be filed away by one department and the other one may never receive your inquiry.

In the interpersonal sense, no matter what your objective is, the need for goodwill is paramount. Every business letter can reflect company goodwill, even if it refuses a claim or represents “the last recourse” in a sequence of collection letters. How often a salesman works hard to acquire a new customer for the company, only to lose her with a tactless letter from a correspondent in another department. Without goodwill, you have no clients, no customers, and no business. Goodwill actually belongs in a larger framework of *a relationship*. Interaction between any two people involves a relationship, and relationships don't come from facts and figures, or from words that haven't been spoken for a hundred years (“*Pursuant to your letter of June 17th...*”). They come from breaking through the cold formality or false intimacy you find in so many letters. How do you do that? Basically, it involves using a more conversation language in writings. This is crucial in a letter, which is, after all, a form of conversation. But first, the reader.

There are two kinds of corporate communication – internal and external. Internally we write letters to superiors, equals, and subordinates. Successful communication demands adapting your tone to the position of the reader.

Upward Communication. Senior executives in major corporations tend to be cosmopolitan, well-educated, and intelligent; their language, relatively sophisticated. That doesn't mean you should be stuffy or archaic. Letters to superiors should still reflect the spoken language. Acknowledge the reader's authority but don't dwell on it. Avoid flattery – it's much too obvious in a letter to a superior. Instead, get right to the heart of the matter. Offer suggestions, present your information; make your request, within the context of the relationship.

Lateral Communication. Communication between equals is characterized by the free interchange of ideas, opinions expressed, positions argued. Equality should set the tone for all external communications – whether you're dealing with good or bad news, information or persuasion. Avoid imperatives (“*you will do this; you must do that*”) or granting favors or permission. They all place the writer in a superior light and can only affect the reader negatively.

Downward Communication. Letters and memos to subordinates – are a bit more delicate. Someone once said: “It is sweet to have the power of a tyrant. But unforgivable to use it.” Those who work under you – directly or indirectly – are aware of your authority. It is far more challenging for you, to motivate with the carrot than the stick. In the long run, you will build a more devoted and better-motivated group of subordinates if your letters encourage and appreciate than if they order and command.

Every business letter comes through at two levels: the **information** and the **relationship**. We have no choice: they're inseparable, like mind and body. You might think: “I'm just interested in presenting the facts.” But in a letter, there *is* no such thing as “just facts.” Facts are presented for a purpose, and the ultimate purpose of all communication is persuasion: persuading someone to buy a product, to accept your negative reply or point-of-view, or to love you. In the last analysis, we're persuaded more by emotions than by logic. Many of us like to justify our decision with facts, but the decision itself is ultimately based on emotional appeal. That emotional appeal involves many things – which all fit within the framework of the relationship. It involves a certain degree of personalness. Above all, the relationship involves understanding the reader's point-of-view, her needs and background, her

attitudes and expectations. And meeting those needs! When drafting a letter, reduce your ego as much as possible – your status, your needs, your virtues, and your individuality. To the reader, the most important thing in the world is not *you* – but *herself* or *himself*. Focus on the reader: make him or her subject or the object of the sentence. Refer to the addressee more often than to yourself. In other words, use *you* and *your* more than *I* or *me*. This focus on the reader is called by business-letter writers the *You-attitude*. To realize such-attitude, *I*'s should be kept down to a minimum; in general, no more than five in a letter. As a rule, avoiding making *I* the first word in a message is a good idea. At the same time, *I* and *we* do have their place in a correspondence. There are different degrees of formality: *personal*, *semi-formal*, *formal*, and *frozen*. The personal voice is always preferable. Some writers come up with the strangest sentences, to avoid using the word *I*, when the first person singular may be just fine – even the best word for the job. For example, they may shift a sentence into the passive:

It is recommended that you submit a new budget.

when the natural expression would be:

I recommend you submit a new budget.

Even this is pretty formal (Better: “*I would suggest you submit a new budget*”), but at least it is authentic language; you can imagine someone saying it. One business-letter expert suggests visualizing your reader: Picture him sitting across the desk from you and you just talking to him. In some cases, *we* is more appropriate than *I*, specifically when speaking for the company or several people in it – for example, the chairman of the board reporting to the stockholders: “At the last board-of-directors meeting, *we* decided to increase dividends on common stock by \$1.25 share.” Otherwise, the editorial *we* should be used sparingly; especially if you think of a letter as a conversation – expressing a relationship between two people. Imagine saying to an acquaintance: “*What did you think of the Time editorial by Lance Morrow?*” And him saying (speaking just for himself): “*We thought it was a bit naive.*” While we often use it in writing as an expression of modesty, the first person plural may come across as inauthentic, impersonal – even arrogant.

The last thing the reader's interested in is what goes on in your office. Reference to an office routine or clerical procedures – can shred the façade, hopefully it is not just a façade – that he is respected as an individual; not simply a number on an invoice. One way to kill the reader's enthusiasm is by starting a letter with a cold impersonal phrase like: “*According to our*

records ...” or other references to invoices, files, and the like. What about the other part of the reader-writer contract: you, the writer – your style, your language, the translation of your personality into print? All of these are crucial to a successful communication. Let’s turn to them now.

Many people know you only through your writing. To many, *your writing is you!* And the letters you write can give a very false impression. They can make you seem petty instead of gracious, hostile instead of friendly, negative instead of affirming. Internally, people notice your style of writing as carefully as they note your style of dress or the way you speak. In a successful letter, one person is talking to another. You need to make them forget they’re reading a letter. One dictionary definition of personality is: “the quality of being personal.” Many people feel that company correspondence should be formal and dignified, that it should be couched in “the language of business.” In reality, there *is* no language of business. The language of business is in fact a façade that hides the same angers and passions, the same humiliations and ambitions that face us anywhere in life. And by denying letters a certain amount of emotion, we *denature* them; making them a burden to read and to write – instead of a living breathing medium of communication.

The secret of a natural style is not in transferring your exact speech pattern to the printed page, but capturing some of the warmth and spontaneity of conversation. For example, here are three versions of the same sentence:

- A. *With reference to the above captioned property, it is imperative to secure the signature of Mr. Belbo, the new mortgagor.*
- B. *Hi, this is Max Black. Yes. Yes. Farmingdale branch. We gotta’ mortgage app without a signature and closing’s in two days. The guy’s name? Belbo.
No. B-e-l-b-o. No, not elbow. Belbo.*
- C. *We have a mortgage application here without a signature and closing is coming up in two days. We have to contact the person right away. The client’s name is Belbo.*

The first version is stiff and impersonal, using archaic, “inflated” terms and legalese. The second is actual conversation, which doesn’t make good reading either. The third maintains the natural tone of conversation, but eliminates those things that detract from the written message. One of the things missing from the printed page is the intonation of speech. It’s not *what* you say. It’s *how* you say it. That how is in the intonation: the emphasis and subtleties, the doubts and uncertainties; in short, the emotions. All of these

are brought out by intonation. Writing tries to express some of these features with punctuation, which does a reasonably good job – if used properly. Another feature of intonation is pause – which we do our best to indicate with punctuation. And we do a decent job at the end of a sentence, with a period or question mark. The problem is: dividing units of thought within the sentence. For this we use colons, semi-colons, commas, and double dashes – singly or in pairs. But we use them too conservatively; more according to the grammar book than to improve the clarity, emphasis, or “flow” of a sentence – especially with double dashes, which are one of the best ways to achieve these three goals and recreate the seamless flow of speaking. Try to use the same style or tone in speaking and writing. Otherwise, you’re working against yourself. How would you feel, for example, about someone who is warm, friendly, and encouraging – in person or on the phone? Then you receive a letter from him that uses cold, archaic, impersonal phrases. Which is the real him? What are his true intentions? Perhaps he just has trouble writing letters. Or maybe that is the real him coming out. Either way, it makes letters ambiguous, confusing, and ultimately – less effective. The advantage of a conversational style in letters is that it reflects the image of the modern corporation – an image of sharp, clear, dynamic communication. We’re talking about style in letters. And one of the most important marks of style in a letter is using a conversational tone – making the reader feel that you’re talking to him. To him alone. But in a letter, we have only words. No pictures, no diagrams; words alone. In a letter, words have to do it all. In contrast, face-to-face conversation takes place somewhere – in a physical setting; there are things happening – colors, sounds, people, movement. In a letter, all of these must be created with words. Conversation by itself may be fascinating. But in general, people are captured by action, by the image of things happening. That’s why they prefer TV to radio.

Let’s think of it as narrative style. If your letter is discussing a choice, a hard decision, a problem, a difficult point – present it as someone in the situation – making that decision. It makes your letters more vivid and interesting. It’s much more convincing if the reader can picture himself in the situation. Sometimes the best way to do this is putting yourself in that situation. Picture you, the writer, making the decision, lodging the complaint, trying to figure out why something you bought didn’t work. Describe how you felt when you were faced with a similar problem. Mention how you worked it out.

Pictures. If you’re describing a product, make your description vivid. If

you want him to buy something, he must first be able to *see* it. Even in technical descriptions, people don't see numbers. They see colors, shapes, sizes, textures. All the explanations in the world won't work unless the reader can see the product or picture the service.

Verbs. The reader is interested in action: things happening, people, places, events. To give a feeling of things happening in the sentence, use action verbs instead of be verbs – verbs that appeal to the senses; especially the sense of sight, movement, energy. Cut out weak or flabby verbs: two-word phrases containing an empty verb like *make* or *do*, plus a noun, where one word would suffice. For example:

We made arrangements for a conference to be held in March.

A better option:

We arranged for a conference to be held in March. .

Another way to tighten up writings is employing the simple tenses – the past, present, or future. They're much clearer than the compound tenses – the past progressive, present progressive, or present perfect; things like: "I had been studying," "I had wanted to talk to you," or "We will have completed it by May." Sometimes you'll need a compound tense to capture an exact meaning. But don't use them unless you have to.

One of the secrets of a successful personality – is enthusiasm. In a letter, it can raise the interest of a skeptical or indifferent reader. Apart from promotion letters – which sometimes go to the other extreme – most business letters lack enthusiasm. Enthusiasm means a keen interest in the reader, the product, the problem. It can infuse even negative letters, in the writer's effort to help, to understand. Even a reply to a complaint letter can be made with enthusiasm. It's best to express enthusiasm with words, and to avoid too many typographic marks, like exclamation points, underlining, or caps. They can give a letter a shrill tone, and have the effect of a salesman shouting at you.

Just as there is an implied reader, so there is an implied writer – the image the reader has of you: your knowledge, your concern, your purpose, your believability. This applies doubly if reader and writer have never met. Each one asks himself questions about the other. What's his background? What's he interested in? What makes him tick? Can I believe what he says? Can I really trust his word? This is probably the most important question of all. For if the answer is: "No," then nothing else matters. Life is a matter of make-believe. It's what people make you believe and what you make *them* believe. How do you as a writer make yourself believable? For one thing,

don't take liberties in the relationship: If you haven't met the reader, don't treat him like an old friend. Don't praise him unless you have good reason to. The best way to achieve credibility is to avoid the "incredible" words, claims, and phrases like these: *stupendous, breathtaking, extraordinary, revolutionary, amazing, exciting, the biggest, the best*. Once you exaggerate – even a little, here and there – the reader will start to suspect everything you write. Instead of using these worn-out superlatives, present facts and details, and let them speak for you. You don't convince people you're great by telling them how great you are. On the printed page, that's the mark of the amateur. It's called overwriting. People are so used to the hype, the melodrama – that it's lost its impact. If you want people to believe you, use a low-keyed approach. There's an old Taoist proverb: "*Those who know – don't talk about it. And those who talk about it – don't know.*" If you know you're good, you don't have to shout about it. All of those galactic adjectives are simply a sign of insecurity. Quiet self-assurance makes you believable – in a letter, a proposal, or any other written message.

After all is said, it is words that engender love or hatred, or indifference – toward another. You can lose someone, with just a careless word or phrase, something unthinking, or unintended. In a sense, words on paper are more crucial than words in conversation. For letters lack the other communication channels that help clarify the message: the body movements, the facial gestures, and the intonation. The proper choice of words can make or break the communication. Letters seem to have their own peculiar vocabulary problems: with words and phrases you'd never use elsewhere – never in reports or proposals, in newsletters or manuals. And never ever in speaking: inflated words, legalisms, archaic words. Along with others common in letters: offensive words, certain clichés and jargon, slang and technical words. Let's look at each of these briefly.

Inflated Words. One of the things that put people off is phrases like: "*This is to inform you*", or "*In response to*". It's a good idea to avoid words and phrases like these:

- subsequent to
- prior to
- in receipt of
- deem advisable
- awaiting your favorable reply
- in response to
- attached please find

- this is to inform you
- with reference to

Legalisms have the same effect. In an effort to make a message sound important, you dehumanize it. Anything that's said in legalese can be said in clear easy-to-understand language. Instead of writing:

The undersigned enters into an agreement with the aforementioned party

you can simply say:

Mr. Dwight Williams has signed a contract with the XYZ corporation.

Legalisms to avoid include:

- attached hereto
- attached herewith
- hereby advise
- pursuant to
- the above captioned

The result of inflated language is what we might call *Medievalisms*: words and phrases that haven't been spoken in hundreds of years, and that belong more in the Court of King Arthur than in a modern business letter. They simply compound the image of the writer as haughty, cold, uncaring. In some cases, you may want to create that impression. If so, this is the way to do it – by using phrases like: *as per or beg to advise*. But if your aim is persuading, creating goodwill, or developing a relationship –this is not the way to do it. If you're not sure it's Middle English, think how you'd feel if someone used it in conversation. If it fits right in with swords and capes, it doesn't belong in the letter.

A reader may get into the letter and then be put off by little words that usually cause a negative reaction – something quite unintended by the writer. If that's the kind of reaction you want – fine. Otherwise, avoid words like: *apparently, must, mistaken, overlooked, obviously, forgot, neglected, should know*.

Clichés are those expressions that were once fresh and original – but have been used so often they're now dull and lifeless. Call them stereotyped expressions, like: *belly-up, covering a multitude of sins, standing the test of time, or It worked like a charm*. There comes a point in the life of a phrase when it becomes a cliché. The trick is to use a phrase when it's alive and vibrant and drop it when it becomes a cliché. Notice the clichés in this paragraph. Of course, we've exaggerated here for effect:

I think we should touch bases with all our suppliers before going out on a

limb for this contract. The competition's going to be hard as nails and unless we've got all our ducks lined up, we could go right down the tubes.

Here are the clichés:

- touch bases
- going out on a limb
- hard as nails
- got all our ducks lined up
- go right down the tubes

Here's a rewrite, with the clichés removed:

I think we should check with all our suppliers before going all out for this contract. The competition's going to be fierce, and unless we have all our facts and figures straight, we could go bankrupt on this one

The problem is slightly different with **jargon**. Jargon is used to show that you're an insider – a member of the club, that you have a good grasp of business events. I'm not suggesting you avoid jargon completely. But like Tabasco, a little goes a long way. Some readers are offended by jargon. Others may not understand the term as you intended it, and so there is greater chance for confusion. This discussion of inflated words, archaic phrases, and clichés – leads to the following principle: avoid using formal or stereotyped words and phrases – *especially* when dealing with sensitive or delicate matters. The reader won't believe you. Notice this example:

It is with deep regret that I must inform the loyal employees of Aerospace

that the TA-111 corporate jet is being phased out of production.

Reading this, you don't feel that the writer has a deep regret or even any regret. When writing, we should keep in mind one big question: *How can I make it easier for the reader?* One way is to divide your major points into short paragraphs. Another, if, for example, there are several things to be done, is: separating the various items *for* the reader, rather than forcing them to do it themselves.

The **opening** and **closing** – the first and last paragraphs are the most important part of a letter. They are the reader's first and last impressions: what she first sees and what she comes away with. If a reader doesn't like the opening, she may not read any further. For that reason, you want to make the opening as attractive as possible – something that catches the reader's eye, holds her, leads her down into the letter. That something can be an intriguing question; not just anything of course, but a question that ties into the main subject. It can be a shocking statement, a surprising statistic, or humor. Humor lends a light

touch; it represents you as a human being. A humorous opening can carry right through the letter to the very end. But be careful: humor must be appropriate. It must never offend. And it should relate to the message in some way: as an example, or a moral – a lesson to be learned from the anecdote. At the same time, humor can be dangerous; especially if you've had no personal contact with the reader. He may not appreciate humor in a business letter. If it's a serious problem on the part of either party, he may not think it's funny. The kind of opening depends a great deal on the kind of message. If it's good news, put it up front, immediately. That's what the reader wants to hear. Once he's gotten a favorable reply, he'll be more receptive to the details and anything else you want to tell him. If it's bad news, you'll want to locate it further in the text, and start the letter with a buffer – some point of common agreement. We'll look at this a little later, later, in the section on Customer Service. Think audience. A person may write a dozen letters a day and not remember exactly what he wrote to you about. The opener might contain a short *reminder* to him. But no matter what your subject, if you want people to read your letter – start with something that catches them that draws them in. The first paragraph says one of two things to the reader: “This looks interesting,” or “This looks dull.” Apart from an occasional supercharged promotional piece, most business letters start off very slow and try to pick up speed if they can. But by that time it may be too late to capture the reader's interest. Upon checking through dozens of copies of business letters, we've spotted the openers to avoid:

- Openings with participial phrases like: “*Having received your order or May 25th ...*” They're too slow and formal.
- Phrases like: “*I would like to take a few minutes of your time ...*” “*I would like to take the opportunity to ...*”
- Clichés in the opening or in a closing.

If it's someone you know, refer to something you've done together, a shared moment, something that happened that you can both relate to. And above all: watch out for formality! Your opener must be real, authentic, and natural. A trite or hackneyed phrase can kill some examples, good and bad:

Good Openers

- *You've got to be one of the most difficult people to reach.*
- *It was a pleasure talking to you and Ed last week.*
- *Thank you for the opportunity to have been beaten up again by you and John.*

Seriously though ...

- *Nobody's perfect, not even us. Claims do come up. And we want to*

take care of

them as fast as possible – to your satisfaction.

Poor Openers

- *I am writing in response to your letter of June 23rd.*
- *This is a follow-up report on the above-referenced DuPont order.*
- *I am writing with respect to concerns voiced by Kinsey Electronics*

regarding a recent

delivery made by Beverly Movers to Acme Computers in Garden City, New York.

- *I would like to take a few minutes of your time to introduce myself.*
- *I would like to thank you for your professionalism and courtesy*

extended during our brief phone conversation today.

Closings. You may have created an excellent letter, with a very persuasive argument and a warm personal touch. Don't kill it with a stilted phrase in the closing. Again, one should avoid -ing phrases like: "Hoping to hear from you soon," or "Looking forward to your reply." Weak endings like: "We hope you will let us send you a copy" or "We trust you will return the enclosed card" should also be avoided. Such phrases suggest a lack of confidence, at a time when the reader needs the final push. Or things like: "Thank you for your interest." No one believes them. The last sentence or two of a letter is also a good place to summarize, especially if you're dealing with complex information. Remember to pay special attention to the first and last sentence of a letter. They are the best remembered. Here are some good and bad closings:

Good Closings

- *Please contact me if I can help in any way.*
- *If you have any questions, please call me. I'd like to be of help.*
- *I'm depending on you, John. This represents a great step for*

Hawley International.

- *Thanks, Bonnie.*

Poor Closings

- *Thank you for the confidence you have placed in me.*
- *Thank you for your interest in Robinson's.*
- *In the interim, Please feel free to call Bill, Joan, or myself with any*

questions you may have.

- *Please do not hesitate to contact me.*
- *If I have overlooked any pertinent points in our discussion, please*

contact me.

Otherwise, I look forward to speaking with you again in the near future.

• *If I can be of any further assistance regarding this matter, please let me know.*

The **salutation** is often a problem, especially when you're addressing someone you don't already know. Dear Sir or Dear Madam – are cold and impersonal. Even if you're writing to a group of people, try to make it a little more personal. One way is to address the reader in the singular instead of plural. Or to use a pronoun instead of a noun:

Poor:

Dear Stockholder:

This is to inform you of the dividend declared for the second quarter.

Better:

Because you own stock in Wilson Sporting Equipment:

I'm writing to tell you about the latest quarterly dividend.

How to handle first and last names in a salutation? Use a first name in the salutation only if you know the person, and you're already on a first-name basis. Depending on the nature of the relationship, it's usually safe to let the other person use yours first in his opening – and then replying in the same way. In general, a letter's not the place to suddenly become someone's friend. An alternative to either first or last name – is using both together. For example: it's less formal than “Dear Mr. Baker,” but not as personal as “Dear Ed.”

The Complimentary Close. Like the salutation, this is another uneasy area. The complimentary close equates with the “good-by” of a conversation. But most complimentary closes are formal, stiff, and stereotyped, and lacking in personal warmth. There's nothing sincere about “*Sincerely yours,*” or even “*Very sincerely yours.*” Instead, try for something that has at least a semblance of humanness about it, such as:

- *With best wishes,*
- *With warmest wishes,*
- *Wishing you all the best,*
- *All the best*
- *Best regards,*
- *My very best,*
- *My thanks*
- *Thanks very much*
- *It really helps*
- *It's made all the difference,*

At the same time, beware of false intimacy when writing to strangers, brief

acquaintances, or superiors. You may want to use a formal phrase. But if the letter has a conversational tone, why not carry it through to the closing. [4:172–199].

Other important points are about openings and closings: *addressing* people and *signatures*. One problem that comes up when you're writing to someone from another culture is: how to address them. The degree of formality differs, even in countries where English is the first language. British tend to be more formal than Americans. It's always safe to start off being formal (Dear Mr / Mrs / Ms), and shifting to a more informal tone (Dear Frank / Helen) if the other person addresses *you* that way. One thing you *don't* want to do is: shortening someone's name (Dear Steve instead of Steven) unless they use that short form themselves. The signature is more important than it seems. For one thing, it fixes responsibility for the message. For another, it affects the general appearance of the letter.

Summing it all up, the current trends in writing business letters include (but are not limited to) the following. On an interpersonal level: applying conversational tone, avoiding cold impersonal phrases, inflated words and Middle English, legalisms, words with negative overtones, keeping clichés and jargon to a minimum. On the rhetorical level: referring to the reader (you / your) more than yourself (I / me), avoiding false intimacy, showing enthusiasm, avoiding exaggerated words and claims, as well as imperatives. And, last but not least, in terms of structure: using transitions between paragraphs, employing simple tenses – whenever possible, emphasizing key points, and paying attention to openings and closings.

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