



Revision in Business Writing

Brought to you by the [Purdue University Online Writing Lab](#)

Few writers are so talented that they can express themselves clearly and effectively in a rough draft. For short, routine business communications, you may be able to write quite easily with little or no revision. However, for most business writing--especially longer, more complex letters and reports--you should expect to revise, sometimes substantially, to insure that you've said exactly what you meant to say in a manner that the reader will understand.

Remember: An ineffective message is a waste of everyone's time.

Revision Provides a Service for Your Reader

If you are always satisfied to send out the first draft of your letter or report, you are not serving your reader well. Not only are you asking a high payment in terms of your reader's time and attention and running the risk that the reader may misinterpret or be confused by what you have to say, but you are also risking your reader's low opinion: careless, hasty, unrevised writing is always apparent.

Revision Requires a Shift in Your Perspective

To revise effectively, you must first distance yourself from your writing so that you can respond objectively. In other words, you need to shift your perspective by assuming the role of the reader. To accomplish this, you should get away from the paper for a while, usually leaving it until the following morning. You may not be able to budget your time this ideally; but you can put the paper aside while you visit a friend, grab a bite to eat, or work on something else. Unless you divorce yourself from the paper, you will probably remain under its spell: that is, you will see only what you think is on the page instead of what is actually there. And you will be unable to transport yourself from your role of writer to that of reader.

Such objective distance may at first seem difficult to achieve; however, the following questions should help you to systematize the revision stage of your letter and report writing and enable you to keep your reader in mind as you determine appropriate detail, language, tone, organization, and mechanical correctness.

Detail: Deciding What to Include

1. What does my reader want or need to know to enable him or her to understand my message?
2. Does my letter/report answer all the questions my reader has asked or questions he or she may have in mind?
3. What is my purpose in writing this letter/report?
4. Does my letter/report give all the information needed to accomplish this purpose?
5. What purpose does this communication serve for my reader?
6. Have I included **ONLY** the material essential to my reader's purpose and understanding? Or am I boring or distracting my reader with unessential and/or obvious information?
7. What do I want my reader to do when he or she finishes reading my letter or report?
8. Have I included all the information he or she will need to enable my reader to easily take this action or make this decision?

Language: Aiming for Conciseness and Clarity

1. Have I used **ONLY** the essential words to get my message across to my reader?

WORDY	CONCISE
Sale of surplus tappers is one of our primary needs. (10)	We must sell our surplus tappers. (6)
This manual of instructions was prepared to aid our dealers in being helpful to their customers. (16)	We prepared this instruction manual to help our dealers serve their customers. (12)
It is the responsibility of our Production Department to see that it meets the requirements of our Sales Division. (19)	Our Production Department must meet our Sales Division's requirements. (9)

2. Have I used too many words to express simple, unimportant, or obvious ideas?

WORDY	CONCISE
The collision had the effect of a destructive force on the duplicator. (12)	The collision destroyed the duplicator. (5)
We have enclosed a pamphlet which shows further details of construction on page four. (14)	Page four of the enclosed pamphlet shows further construction details. (10)
Three days ago you asked us to investigate the problem of discomfort among your office workers. . . We have made our study. Too low humidity is apparently the main cause of your problem. Your building is steam-heated; therefore, your solution is to. . . (41)	Too low humidity is apparently the cause of your workers' discomfort. Since your building is steam-heated, your solution is to . . . (21)

3. Have I poured out ideas and facts too rapidly for the reader's comprehension?

Negative Example

Our deluxe models have chromium, rubber-insulated fixtures for durability, economy, and easy maintenance, and convenient controls to cut down on installation costs and necessary adjustments. They operate on AC or DC current and incorporate the latest principles of electronic controls which means flexibility in their use, better adjustment of the thermal units, less chance of error, and reduced labor costs per unit of production.

4. Have I used vague words instead of more vivid and convincing specific words?

VAGUE	SPECIFIC
contact	call, write, visit
slowly	about as fast as you normally walk
soon	by March 15
This television set is high quality.	All components in this television set meet or exceed government specifications for use in manned satellites

5. Have I keyed the language to my reader's understanding?

EXCESSIVE, OVERWRITTEN	ACCESSIBLE, DIRECT
The defendant is renowned as a person of intemperate habits. He is known to partake heavily of intoxicating beverages. Further, he cultivates the company of others of the distaff side, and wholly, regularly, and consistently refuses and abstains from earnest endeavors to gain remuneration.	The defendant drinks, chases other women, and refuses to work.
The choice of exogenous variables in relation to multi-collinearity is contingent upon the derivations of certain multiple correlation coefficients.	Supply determines demand.

Tone: Tailoring Language to Your Audience

1. Have I expressed my ideas so that the reader will feel that I am helpful, courteous, and human?

TACTLESS	TACTFUL
You neglected to take care of the requirements of form 123.	To enjoy the full benefits. of your new ABC, simply follow the procedures outlined on form 123.
We want our check.	To keep your account in the preferred customer class, send our check for \$142.33 today.

2. Have I tailored my message to my reader's desires, problems, circumstances, and probable reactions to the purpose of my message?

FLAT DETAIL	DETAIL ADAPTED TO READER NEED
This cookware is guaranteed to withstand temperature changes.	Because Creston cookware can withstand extreme changes in heat and cold, you can safely move any piece from your freezer to your microwave.

3. Have I emphasized "you", the reader, instead of "I" or "we"?

"WE" ATTITUDE	"YOU" ATTITUDE
We are happy to have your order. We shipped it this morning.	You will receive your solid walnut desk by Tuesday, October 23.
We regret that you've had so much trouble with our product, and we apologize for not solving your problem sooner.	You were right to ask me about the troubles you've been having with your new car. Thank you for this opportunity to answer your questions.

4. Have I expressed my ideas so they reflect good public relations for the company (letters) or good human relations with my colleagues (reports)?

POOR ATTITUDE	GOOD ATTITUDE
You must remember that we've more responsibility here at CEC than worrying about some one's fingers getting caught in some machine.	I've asked Mr. Sanders, a safety consultant from Health Enterprises, to investigate and suggest possible procedure and machine modifications.
It's hardly possible that our trigger could have misfired without some contributing cause; nevertheless, to help out those who lack technical know-how, a company as responsible as Creative Guns can gladly replace the trigger you have.	To prevent your gun from misfiring again, we will gladly replace the trigger you have.

5. Have I tactfully avoided words and phrases which imply that my reader is dishonest, careless, or mentally deficient?

TACTLESS	TACTFUL
Obviously, if you'd read your policy carefully, you'd be able to answer these questions yourself.	I'm glad to clear up these questions for you.
In order to complete the claim you made, simply. . .	To complete your transaction, . . .

6. Have I stressed the positive and avoided emphasizing ideas my reader may view unfavorably?

NEGATIVE	POSITIVE
I regret to inform you that your admission to candidate status has been delayed until you complete the following requirements.	Before you are admitted to candidate status, you will need to complete the following requirements.
On March 3, we sent you the accidental injury forms and requested that you return them to the Health Center. It is now March 27, and we have not yet received your reply.	To receive your check from Student Insurance, please file the accidental injury form we sent you on March 3.

Organization: Fitting the Form to Message and Audience

1. Have I structured my letter or report according to what my reader's reaction to my message is likely to be?

- Have I used the direct approach (which begins with good news or the main idea and fills in necessary explanation later) when my reader is likely to consider my message favorable or neutral?
- Have I used the indirect approach (which begins with a buffer and requires necessary explanation and detail before the decision is stated) when my reader is likely to consider my message unfavorably or when he or she will need to be persuaded?

2. Have I included transitions which will show my reader the relationships between my sentences and paragraphs?

3. Does one paragraph logically follow the preceding paragraph and lead into the one which follows?

Correctness: Using Conventional Grammar, Spelling, and Punctuation

Since most writers have problems with only particular types of spelling, grammar, and/or punctuation errors, you should read through your final drafts carefully--looking for those errors which you frequently commit. Slowly reading through your letter or report once for EACH of these errors will, in most cases, insure that your reader's attention will be focused on your message, not on your mechanical errors.

The following information must remain intact on every handout printed for distribution.

This page is located at http://owl.english.purdue.edu/handouts/print/pw/p_revisebus.html

Copyright ©1995-2001 by OWL at Purdue University and Purdue University. All rights reserved.

Use of this site, including printing and distributing our handouts, constitutes acceptance of our terms and conditions of fair use, available at

<http://owl.english.purdue.edu/lab/fairuse.html>.

To contact OWL, please visit our contact information page at

<http://owl.english.purdue.edu/lab/contact.html> to find the right person to call or email.