

Writing in the Workplace: Common Genres

Correspondence

In this chapter, we're going to talk about routine correspondence genres: emails, memos, and letters. These are the genres you'll use on a day-to-day basis for any number of purposes when writing to any number of audiences.

Correspondence genres are very flexible and adaptable, so your most important concern is with [audience analysis](#). Figure out what your audience needs and adapt the content, organization, tone, and style of your message to suit that audience.

Because these genres are flexible, this chapter will focus on how to choose a correspondence medium that fits your purposes, and on ways to adjust your content to fit how audiences read each genre.

Rhetorical Context

Any day-to-day writing situation can call for any one of the correspondence genres, so it's important to understand how the features of each genre suit it for different purposes and audiences.

For routine messages, there are two main categories of readers: internal and external. Internal readers are those with whom you work on a consistent basis, whether that be within the same company, called in-house, or within the same field (i.e. a supplier for your hotel or restaurant). You can often communicate more informally with internal audiences.

In contrast, external readers are those readers whom you contact infrequently and/or with whom you are unfamiliar: clients, distant company management, etc. These readers are more likely to judge the formality of your document.

Another section of external readers includes the public audience for your business. Regardless the industry, there will always be a need to share information with a general readership, and we will talk more about those readers' specific needs in a separate chapter.

Choose your Format

Emails are used for quick, short electronic communications to both internal and external audiences, so they are typically the least formal correspondence genre. Emails are useful because they can be directed towards individuals or large groups, and email systems keep convenient copies for workplace records. Finally, emails allow for attachments and links, so they're a useful medium for sharing larger documents and connecting people to web content.

Memos are used for short internal communications. The memo format is often used for sharing short [reports](#) and [proposals](#) or for communicating changes in [policies](#). In the modern workplace, many memos are shared as email attachments, but memos are also designed to be distributed in print through office mailboxes or through posting in community workspaces where many employees can read them. They can be important in workplaces where employees don't have regular access to email.

Letters are typically used for more formal communications with external audiences. The formality of a letter is what differentiates it from emails and memos. If you are trying to build or maintain a professional and personable relationship with a client or partner company, letters are the genre for you.

The biggest disadvantage of a letter is that mail is significantly slower than in-house or electronic distribution.

You should select the medium best-suited for your distribution needs and the formality appropriate to the audience you are targeting.

Email Conventions

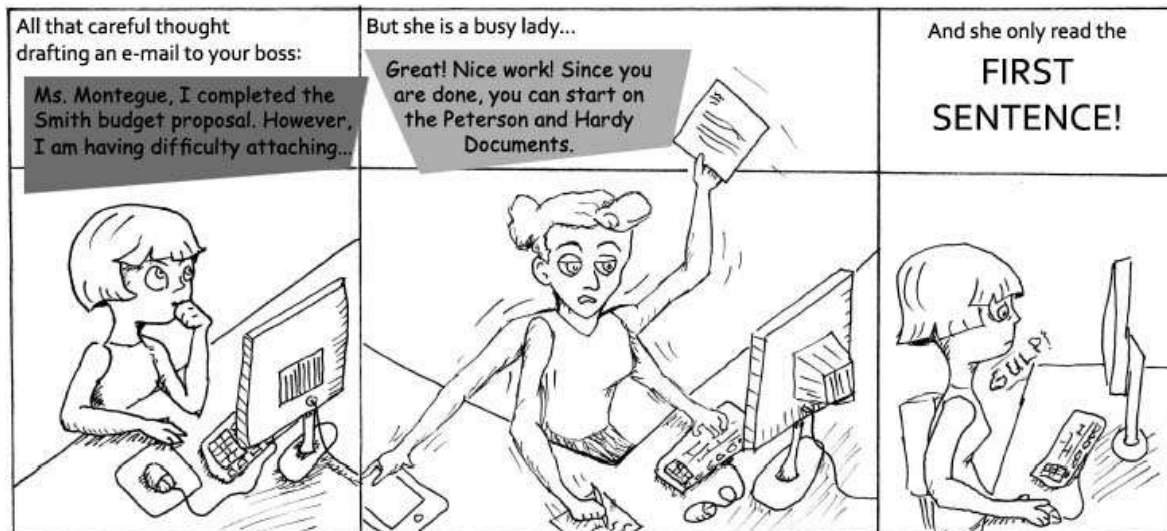
Email is the most commonly used workplace genre because the messages are quick, save paper costs, and maintain records of communications. Their features make them the most practical genre for typical low-stakes communication.

Features of an email

- electronic format—inexpensive and easy to distribute
- variable audiences—you can send to individuals or groups of any size
- subject line—readers can decide to read or delete without opening
- automatic record keeping—email systems record *all* emails (remember to be professional at *all* times)
- allows for attachments—you can distribute longer, more detailed documents
- allows for links—you can connect readers with more detailed information

Be careful to include full links rather than hyperlinks because emails set to plain-text formatting will strip away hyperlinks. A full link can be copied and pasted into a browser even if the link itself has been removed. Additionally, be sure to follow-up on emails that include links because links can increase the chances of your email being directed to the junk folder.

Emails are also the genre where the most miscommunications occur because readers read them very quickly. They often reply to emails as soon as they *think* they know what you're saying or asking in order to efficiently handle the volume of emails coming in. For this reason, make sure to carefully construct your emails, especially considering that readers may skim or stop before the end.



The comic illustrates this effect in action. Because the boss is so busy, she stops reading after the first sentence, “I completed the Smith budget proposal” because she thinks she knows what will follow. By trying to read efficiently, she misses the fact that there is a problem. Writers should keep in mind that many readers will make assumptions and take shortcuts to save time.

To support readers in effectively reading an email, you should:

- Write a clear, descriptive subject line that encourages the recipients to open and read it.
- Make the overall purpose and message of the email clear in the first couple of sentences.
- Break the email into extra-small, manageable chunks to support effective skimming.
- Keep the email short and concise so it can be read quickly.
- Limit your formatting because it doesn’t always transfer well, e.g. odd line breaks and list formatting disappearing.
- Make sure you remember to proofread.
- Verify you have included all attachments.

Memo Conventions

Memos follow emails as a convenient, quick genre for routine workplace messages, usually in-house. The format is frequently used for a variety of short [reports](#) and internal [proposals](#) because it relies on a professional yet personable tone and style, direct organization, and efficient document [design](#).

Features of a memo

- Organization name (optional)
- Memo label (optional)
- Header (To, From, Date, Subject)
- Introduction
- Body with headings
- Conclusion with courteous close (optional)

Header

Memo headers are intended to help workplace readers quickly understand the authority of the memo and its purpose. To do this, all memos should have the following standard elements in the heading:

- To:
- From:
- Date:
- Subject or Re:

This heading style supports readers in quickly determining the importance of the memo by:

- Making clear the reader is the target of the document.
- Indicating the authority of the document by designating the author and the currency (via the date).

- Clarifying the purpose of the memo through a brief but clear and descriptive subject line that alerts readers to the overall focus of the message.

Additionally, it is standard to write out the date in a memo heading. This assures that all audiences will read the date accurately. For example, if you write the date as 06/12/2015, some may read this as June 12, 2015, while others would read this as December 6, 2015. Writing out the name of the month eliminates the possibility of confusion.

Introduction

As with all other documents, the introduction should help readers get oriented to each document’s purpose and scope. Remember to establish the rhetorical context early in the introduction so that recipients understand why they’re receiving the memo and why they should continue reading.

Body

The body is, of course, where the bulk of your important information goes. To support readers in effectively reading your memos, you should utilize effective organizational strategies to guide readers efficiently through the memo:

- Descriptive subheadings
- Bulleted lists
- Topic sentences and transitional sentences
- Visuals to complement written text, especially complex information

Conclusion with Courteous Close

The conclusion of a memo is like any other—it summarizes the basic message of the document, and calls readers to any necessary action that should be taken as a result. Additionally, because a memo is a correspondence that seeks to maintain a positive workplace environment, it may also include a courteous closing that leaves readers with a very clear understanding of what they need to do with the information provided, e.g. “Please let me know by Wednesday if you have any questions about this new policy.”

Letter Conventions

Letters remain our most formal and polished genre option for workplace communication. For this reason, you will likely rely on this format for external, or out-of-house, messages as well as for official personnel records (job offers, contract and salary information, for example, as well as annual job evaluations/reviews). Signed letters still serve as legal records and are thus often subject to company review to assess potential liability concerns.

Features of a Letter

- Letterhead or Sender’s Address
- Date
- Inside Address of the Recipient (include full names and titles, i.e. President Bob Smith)
- Salutation

Example Salutations	Dear Mr. or Ms.:
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	Dear Dr.: Dear President Smith:
Notes	If you don't have a specific name, or if you are unsure of the recipient's gender, simply use the full name: Dear Pat Smith: Unless you have explicit knowledge that a married woman prefers "Mrs.," use the professionally inclusive "Ms." Business letters often use colons in salutations because they can create a more formal tone than a comma.

- Introduction
- Body Content
- Conclusion and Courteous Close
- Closing

Example Closings	Sincerely—always in style and appropriate Regards, Best regards, or Warm regards—adjectives vary upon readers and industry Best wishes—common in more casual fields
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- Enclosures, if any (can be abbreviated to Encl.)
- Typist's Initials, if other than sender

Formatting a Letter

There are two main options when formatting a letter: full block or modified block style. **Full block** is the simplest choice where all the text is flush with the left margin while **modified block** relies on indented body paragraphs and an address and closing left-aligned with the center of the page.

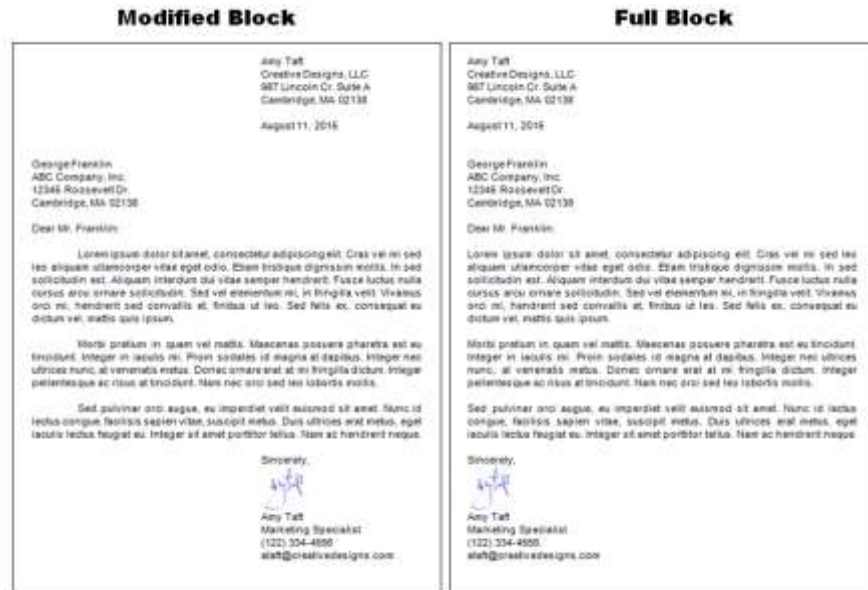


Figure 4: Modified Block and Full Block Letter Format

Modified block format (left) aligns the sender’s address, the date, and the closing with the center of the page; additionally, paragraphs are indented. Many writers use this format when printing on company letterhead. Full block format (right) aligns everything along the left margin, with no indentation and a full line of space between each paragraph.

Styling a Letter

To support readers in effectively reading a letter, you should:

- Choose the best organizational approach to reflect the content of the message.
 - A **direct approach** suits positive and routine messages that readers will easily accept and/or expect.
 - An **indirect approach** suits complex, negative and/or sensitive routine messages whose content readers might find unpleasant or unexpected.
- Establish a professional yet courteous tone. Treat your readers as individuals and respect their time: provide only pertinent information and clear cues on how to use it.
- Maintain confidentiality by acknowledging when there is more than one recipient to a letter and not sharing letters with readers who are not part of the intended audience.

Activities

1. Contact someone already working in your field and ask to them to share an example or two of the types of correspondence they are typically asked to write as part of their job. What tips can they offer about those routine messages?

Emails

2. Send a professional email to your instructor sharing your career goals.

3. With at least one other classmate, preferably one in the same field, draft an email to high ranking person in your industry requesting an informational interview. Workshop that draft with another group in order to test its effectiveness.

Memos

4. Write a memo to your instructor that explains your relationship with writing and your goals for the course.

Letters

5. Find an example of a professionally written letter and analyze its effectiveness based on the strategies discussed in this chapter.

Brief Proposals and Reports

In this section, we're going to talk about brief, or routine, proposals and reports. We've grouped them together because of the similarities the two genres have in form. However, in purpose, they are fairly distinct.

Proposals are persuasive documents that aim to convince others to take specific action(s). A proposal may convince a supervisor to approve a project or convince someone to implement an idea. They may even convince a reader to buy something.

Reports, on the other hand, are informative documents that simply aim to share information. The end result of a report may be that the audience takes an action, just as they would with a proposal, but a report won't advocate for that action throughout as a proposal would. It saves any recommendations for the end.

Rhetorical Context

A proposal or a report may be written for a number of reasons, and the motivating situation and audience needs determine what genre you write your proposal or report in. Here are some of the formats you may use to construct a proposal or a report:

- Templates
- Correspondence
- Unique Format
- Formal Format

Workplace templates, [correspondence](#), and unique document formats are typically used for short proposals and reports, which run no more than a few pages. A formal format, on the other hand, is a long, detailed document frequently compiled by multiple parties. It's considered formal because it includes formal elements, like a title page and table of contents, to reflect the complexity, length, and/or significance of a project.

The format you use for a report or proposal is flexible so that you can adapt to the situation and audience for which you're writing. Below are some of the considerations for when you might use each format.

Templates

If you're writing something that is regularly communicated, your workplace may have a form to increase the efficiency of those communications and to prevent miscommunication. Templates are especially common in larger companies or in industries that are heavily regulated.

For example, companies that conduct work with safety hazards (food processing, construction, aviation, etc.) often have *incident reports* that employees can fill out to notify supervisors of improper procedure, machine malfunctions, injuries, or damage to property.

Another common form you may encounter is a *purchase request*. A purchase request is a kind of proposal that seeks to convince your workplace to buy something. In order to persuade, these templates include spaces where you are expected to provide a justification for the purchase. If you convince your readers, they'll buy what you request.

If you work somewhere with a culture that may appreciate templates, you can show initiative by creating or modifying a form to improve communication.

Correspondence

Many workplace proposals and reports are communicated through correspondence: emails, memos, and letters. These templates of communication work for every day, small-scale reports and proposals. Please refer to the [section on correspondence](#) for more information on how to choose the appropriate form of correspondence for your purpose.

Sales letters are one common example of a proposal in correspondence form. Progress reports are another example; they often appear in either [email](#) or [memo](#) form.

Unique Format

This “format” is vague because it’s one that you design yourself. You can simply put a title at the top of a document that indicates it is a report or a proposal without using any specific genre requirements, or you can merge the report and proposal form with any number of other genres, adapting content conventions to fit your particular rhetorical context.

Technically, a form is a unique document format because the design is so flexible.

More and more often, people are also creating reports and proposals formatted as a web page or a site. There are many sites on the internet in which a single page is a report to the public, and there are whole sites which are basically a long, detailed report. You may also produce brochures that act as informal proposals or reports.

Proposal Conventions

Proposal conventions vary a bit by the purpose. Remember that the underlying purpose of a proposal is to communicate what a reader may gain by favorably responding to your proposed action, whether that action is to make a change in policy or to grant permission to pursue a project. You will adapt your proposals, i.e. in organization and tone/style, to the kind of action you are proposing be taken. Some of the most common types of proposals are:

Solution or Improvement—this type of proposal advocates for implementation of an idea, such as a plan for implementing a change to solve a problem or make an improvement.

Research—this type of proposal requests approval to conduct research or requests funding for research. It is often targeted toward supervisors who must approve your use of time and resources to conduct research. Or, such proposals target readers outside your department or organization that may grant money for projects that align with their interests.

Sales—this type of proposal persuades someone to buy a product or a service.

While the purposes and lengths of proposals can vary widely, the basic conventions are fairly consistent.

Introduction

The introduction to a proposal or report is like any document: it should define the purpose and scope of the document and provide any necessary background information that the reader may need to make sense of the upcoming sections.

In a long, complex proposal you may need to break the introduction up into multiple sections. For example, in a long, formal proposal the background section might be separate and distinct from the introduction. The Report Conventions section has further detail on how an introduction might be broken up into easily useable chunks.

Situation Description

One of the most important elements of any proposal is a description of the situation that motivated the proposal. This section can define a problem, opportunity, or need. This section plays a significant role in convincing readers that taking action can benefit them because it defines the current situation in contrast to the impact of the potential changes.

The situation description is often the most important and the most detailed section in a proposal. Why? Because in order to persuade someone that your idea to address a situation is the best idea, you must first convince them that there is a situation at all! You can't assume that your reader will either be aware of the situation or agree that it is a situation-that-needs-to-be-fixed, and so you must first lay the foundation with which to support your proposed solution.

Plan of Action

The plan of action is exactly what it sounds like. It's a section where you define the steps to complete the action for which you're advocating.

Solution or Improvement—explain the process for implementing the new idea.

Research—explain how you will complete the anticipated necessary research.

Sales—explain how they can buy the product or service.

The plan of action section often begins with general *objectives* of the plan. Then it follows with the *tasks or steps* that should be taken to accomplish those objectives. You can also include a *description of the end result* that would occur if the action were taken. Your audience will be persuaded to take action if the objectives are meaningful, the tasks feasible, and the end result valuable. Remember that the value of that end result must match the needs of the audience, not necessarily yours as the writer.

When you're advocating for implementing a solution or improvement, this is often the most detailed and heavily researched section.

Questions and Concerns: Know Your Audience

In order to be persuasive, you should anticipate concerns or skepticism your audience will have about the plan, especially regarding things that may make them resistant to implementing or approving the plan. Will they be most concerned with cost, timing, or something else?

You should create a section to address and respond to any of the likely questions or concerns that remain after the plan is shared. The most common sections that adhere to this convention are *cost*, *timing/schedule*, and *qualifications* (which refers to the writer's qualifications and credibility), but any number of other questions and concerns are possible depending upon the topic.

Conclusion

In the conclusion you should reaffirm the need for your plan and induce the audience to act. Make sure you explicitly ask for your audience to take the desired action instead of just rehashing the need for the

action. Encourage your audience to act using a confident and direct style that clearly says what needs to be done.

Report Conventions

As with proposals, report conventions vary by purpose. All reports aim to inform the audience on a topic, yet what typically distinguishes reports from each other is how the information is analyzed. Some of the most common types of analysis are:

Feasibility—this type of report seeks to evaluate how realistic an idea might be, and/or if it would be possible to implement. If you conduct a market analysis to see if a new business is viable, the resulting report is a feasibility report to share your findings.

Comparison—this type of report compares options to help a decision maker choose the best one. If the company you work for needs to replace an expensive piece of technology, you might research and compare new options and write a report so your boss can quickly choose the best one.

Cause—this type of report evaluates what's causing a particular effect in the workplace. If you're noticing a high employee turnover rate, you might evaluate causes and make a recommendation for a change.

Impact—this type of report evaluates the effects of something. If you recently implemented a change, you might research the effects it's having on your workplace to make sure there aren't unintended consequences and that it's providing the desired benefits.

You're not restricted to only one type of analysis in any one report, though shorter reports often focus on only one type. You will also find that most long reports are really a collection of many shorter reports, each with a different analytical focus.

Introduction

As with all other introductions, a report introduction should make clear the *purpose* and the *scope* of the report, providing any necessary *context* to help the reader understand what motivated the production of the report (so they know why they're reading it). The goal of the introduction is to orient readers to the situation that prompted the report.

For example, if the report is the product of a research project for which a proposal was written, the introduction might summarize the proposal content so that others who did not read the proposal know the background of the project.

Keep in mind that for longer, formal reports, the introduction may take several paragraphs and you may even find the introduction is broken into several distinct sections. Here are some sections that you might consider using in an introduction (you are unlikely to use all of these at once):

- **Purpose**—Describe the topic and define the function the report serves.
- **Overview or Scope**—Define what information the report covers in brief. This helps readers set realistic expectations—they won't expect content you had no intentions of providing.
- **Background**—Explain the context or situation that motivated the report, typically a problem or issue.

- **Methods or Criteria**—Explain the standards or methods of evaluation used to form conclusions and on which to issue recommendations.
- **Limitations**—Inform the reader of factors that weaken the authority of the report. For example, if you requested pricing information on a product and didn't hear back by the time your report was due, you might acknowledge that that your cost analysis is incomplete or only a rough estimate.
- **Definitions**—Define key terms for the reader. If there are more than five, use a glossary.

While you may need several sections, you should still aim to engage the audience and provide the necessary background as briefly as possible—give them what's necessary for clarity, rather than a history lesson. Reserve detail for later sections.

Analysis

In the analysis section(s) you will share your findings (relevant information you've found) and interpret those findings. An interpretation is an analysis where you piece your findings together to form new conclusions. In business writing, the interpretations are the most important element.

There is no fixed form for analysis—you need to come up with a form that meets the needs of your audience. Your goal is a document that is easily useable by the audience, so you should form your sections around the criteria your audience will use to make their decisions.

For example, let's say you are volunteering with a non-profit that needs to find a new desktop publishing software for publishing their quarterly newsletter. You know their budget is \$100 but they would prefer a free option. You also know they have high turnover in volunteers who compile the newsletter, so they need publishing software that is easy to learn and use and also that has readily available IT support.

Based on these audience needs, the criteria for analysis are cost, usability, and availability of support. As a result, you would make sure to include a section analyzing cost of options that fit within the budget, another analyzing usability of those same options, and a third analyzing the availability of support for each.

In the scenario above, your cost section would share the costs of the options reviewed (findings) and a statement making clear which option is the cheapest (interpretation). In a report, which is informative, keep your interpretations and conclusions focused on local content within the section—as the example above does. Save the final recommendations (like which software option should be purchased) for the recommendations section at the end of the report. You should not offer a final conclusion or recommendation until you have evaluated each criteria separately.

Conclusion

The conclusions section is a summary of the major findings and interpretations. Because many readers may skip to the conclusion to find out the results of your work, trying to save themselves time, this needs to be a concise and informative section that allows readers to avoid reading the full report if possible. Make sure you answer the questions that originally sparked the production of the report. There shouldn't be any new information in this section.

Recommendations

If your readers will want to use your report to make a decision or make a plan of action, you will include a recommendations section at the very end that details the next steps that should be taken as a result of the information you gathered and analyzed.

You may recommend that they buy a particular product or that they carry out a particular procedure. Audiences appreciate conciseness in recommendations so that they can implement quickly and easily. If your recommendations are brief (a few sentences), you may be able to combine them with the conclusions in a “Conclusions and Recommendations” section.

Activities

Brief Proposals

1. With a partner or small group, brainstorm a list of routine issues on campus—parking, Wifi access, etc.—that could be addressed in a brief proposal. Choose the strongest idea and, as a team, begin planning your document by determining:
 - Its rhetorical context,
 - The information needed to sufficiently meet the rhetorical context,
 - Your research goals.

With your plan in place, complete the necessary research and use it to draft the proposal. Use class time to workshop those drafts, testing for overall persuasiveness, strong audience awareness, and general document professionalism. Your instructor will guide your process through in-and-out of class work.

Brief Reports

2. Interview someone in your chosen career field about a typical week’s experiences. Write a brief report to your instructor that describes your findings, reaches an analytical conclusion, and offers any necessary recommendations.
3. Write a feasibility report as a follow-up to the brief proposal activity. What writing strategies do you now have to employ in order to fulfill a new purpose?
4. Kansas State University opened its parking garage in the spring of 2010. Either individually or in small groups, as directed by your instructor, write an impact report that seeks to follow-up on this action.