

Writing for Results

Business communication insights
for procurement pros

Mastering Business Writing for Procurement

As a procurement professional, you practice business writing every day — from emails and instant messages to Request for Proposals (RFPs) and contracts. You're constantly using your writing skills to grab attention, share information, and inspire action. But are you communicating as effectively as you could be?

Clear, concise, purpose-driven communication prevents misunderstandings by ensuring all parties are aligned on requirements, specifications, timelines, and action items. Those who master written communication can negotiate with suppliers, manage contracts, and coordinate with internal departments more effectively and efficiently.

Benefits of strengthening your writing skills include:

- Increasing mutual understanding
- Supporting collaboration
- Improving action and follow-up
- Building trust
- Enhancing personal and brand reputation

Whether you are a seasoned professional or just starting your career, this guide offers practical insights for more powerful communication.



What is business writing?



Any written communication within the workplace is considered business writing. You use it to share information, make requests, or persuade your reader to complete tasks.

Most of these communications fall within four types:



Informational

Relays essential business information without requiring action. Examples include annual reports, meeting minutes, and organizational updates.



Transactional

Facilitates day-to-day operational communication and often requires a response as part of the workflow. Examples include confirmation emails and meeting invitations.



Instructional

Provides direction or guidance on performing tasks. Examples include user manuals and standard operating procedures.



Persuasive

Influences decisions and often includes a call to action. Examples include sales emails and proposals.

By understanding the types of business writing, you can tailor your communication to get the results you want. For instance, you should use an instructional approach when explaining how to submit proposals, while an informational style is better for communicating contract terms.

Fundamentals for effectiveness



Consider your reader

Writing with a clear reader in mind helps you to convey your intended message while avoiding unnecessary content. Ask yourself, who are you writing to — and why should they care? Understanding the recipient's concerns, challenges, and requirements is key to crafting an impactful message. Choosing the right language, tone, and level of detail helps maintain clarity and relevance.

Terry McKee, Procurement Director at Knoxville's Community Development Corporation, emphasizes the importance of selecting the right words for your audience when writing bid specifications, general instructions, terms and conditions, and inter-office communication: "We use different words, and words may have slightly different meanings in North Dakota than in Tennessee, and certainly if you happen to be doing something with Canadian folks. They say, 'invitation for tenders,' most Americans say, 'invitation for bids,' so understanding what we really mean is critical."

Guidelines for writing to your reader

- **Assess what they already know:** Consider the recipient's knowledge on the subject and decide on the type of information to include. Use familiar words and phrases that resonate with them.
- **Decide what they need to know:** Include essential information — and leave out unnecessary details.
- **Explain why they should care:** Make sure your communication is relevant and valuable. Does it solve a problem? Answer a question? Initiate a task? Provide compelling reasons.

Setting the right tone

Tone conveys your attitude and affects how your readers interpret your writing. Writers establish tone through word choice and sentence structure. Effective business writers balance warmth with professionalism to create a positive and respectful tone. However, your tone will vary based on what you're writing and who is reading it. Victor Leamer, Senior Buyer for Spokane County in Washington, explains, "The solicitation document itself is formal and to the point, but your letters, emails, should always be active and warm."

Guidelines for setting the right tone

- **Begin formal:** Adopt a more formal tone in first interactions or formal documents, such as RFPs. In email, choose formal greetings and closings to show respect and professionalism.
- **Follow your recipient's lead:** Adapt to match your reader's preferred tone. If you notice a more casual tone being used, mirror that tone in your response to build a comfortable, trusting rapport.
- **Maintain consistency:** Use the same tone throughout your communication. A steady tone reinforces your message.
- **Be personal, yet professional:** Showing warmth, empathy, and understanding makes a significant difference in how the reader receives your message. Simple phrases like "We understand your challenge" or "Thank you for your patience" is all it takes.

Leamer stressed the importance of using an appropriate tone in building relationships with suppliers: "They may not get the contract, but — depending on your relationship with them and your communication — they're going to get that feeling of 'I could work with this department. I'm going to submit the bid next time and do even better.'" He continued, "If you're so cold, professional, rude, they're going to feel intimidated about asking for clarification on the contract."



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Clarity and conciseness

When drafting content — including procurement documents — prioritize clarity and conciseness to avoid misunderstandings. McKee advises, “We owe it to our clients, vendors, ourselves, our departments, and the citizens, to write it as clear as possible. Ultimately if you don’t, you end up with ‘well, I thought,’ or ‘we meant’ and a vendor doesn’t have to do what you thought, a vendor doesn’t have to do what you meant — they have to do what you put in writing.”

Clear, concise writing improves readability, engagement, and retention. Many times people will add extra words to appear more intelligent or informed, but doing so can convolute your message. “Government in general uses antiquated words and legalese, including me,” McKee shared. “We throw in ‘therefore’ and ‘whereas’ in every other paragraph and that’s not how real people talk.”

Using complex words or jargon can make your sentences difficult to understand. Instead, opt for a simple, straightforward message that can be read and interpreted quickly. Your writing should be as short and succinct as possible without sacrificing meaning.

Guidelines for clarity and conciseness

Be direct: Get straight to the point. Avoid ambiguity and wordiness in everything you write, even email subject lines.

✗ **Avoid:** Subject: Professional development

✓ **Use:** Subject: Sign up for professional development

Choose simple words: Put the thesaurus away. Readers comprehend simple words more quickly.

✗ **Avoid:** We utilized data from the previous year’s sales.

✓ **Use:** We used last year’s sales.

Write short sentences: Break long, complex ideas into shorter sentences.

✗ **Avoid:** In order to enhance satisfaction, we need to implement measures to improve customer service.

✓ **Use:** We must make changes to improve customer service.

Use active voice: Write action-focused sentences for more visual storytelling.

✗ **Avoid:** The contract was signed by city leaders.

✓ **Use:** City leaders signed the contract.

Avoid redundancy: Repetition bores readers and increases the chance of confusion.

✗ **Avoid:** Join us on Monday at 9 a.m. in the morning.

✓ **Use:** Join us on Monday at 9 a.m.

Besides helping your reader quickly understand, these guidelines also have the benefit of helping you avoid opportunities for error. “If you put on your cover page ‘Bids are due by 2:00 on February 1’, don’t put it three other times in the bid document,” McKee shares. “Because you are setting yourself up to [make] errors. You might type it 11:00 on February 3 the second time.”

Formatting and structure

People skim and scan content more than ever before. When readers can't find information quickly, they move on. Structure your ideas and sections for logical flow and format your document for easier navigation and comprehension.

Guidelines for structuring and formatting your content

- **Start with the why:** Write a headline or title that conveys a benefit, then use your introduction to explain why your information is valuable. Catchy headlines might grab attention, but relatable benefits-focused introductions draw readers in.
- **Prioritize your main point:** Open with your primary message, then include supporting details. Your reader might miss your main point if you leave it for the last sentence.
- **Focus your paragraphs:** Use each paragraph to expand on a single idea.
- **Format for readability:** Add headings, bullet points, and proper spacing for quick skimming.
- **Add visuals:** Include relevant visuals to make ideas easier to grasp. Consider tables or charts to highlight key points or infographics to simplify complex information.
- **Seek inspiration:** Look for examples of well-structured content. "I still read other people's bid specs, not to mention technical details, just [to see] how they lay things out," McKee admits. "We have to make our bids attractive."



Proofreading and final insights

Every writer makes spelling and grammatical mistakes. But in business writing, factual errors or unclear sentences can be costly. Proofreading and editing allows you to correct mistakes and improve readability.

Guidelines for proofreading and editing your work

- **Write first, revise second:** Focus on getting your ideas down without worrying about perfection. Once you have your draft, focus on rearranging your paragraphs and removing extra information.
- **Proof it more than once:** Read your writing at least twice, focusing on a specific element to review each time such as grammar, punctuation, clarity, or style.
- **Request feedback:** Ask a trusted colleague to review your document for clarity, tone, and overall message.
- **Break it up:** Take breaks to gain fresh perspective. For longer documents, McKee recommends reviewing sections one at a time or in reverse order to catch inconsistencies and errors. “Don’t always proof pages 1-50. Break it into segments because your brain goes into auto-mode at some point. Whether it’s two pages, five pages, or 15 pages, most people go into auto-mode.”
- **Read it aloud:** Hearing your writing helps catch issues with flow, awkward phrasing, and punctuation errors.
- **Check for consistency:** Are all terms, names, and formatting consistent throughout your document? Also check for consistency in style, tone, and structure.
- **Verify data:** Double-check that all numbers, quotes, references, and titles are correct and up to date.
- **Use editing tools:** Leverage artificial intelligence and grammar and spell-check features in your word processor, but don’t rely on them. McKee recommends using technology to proof your work but warns that those applications have limitations, as he experienced early in his career: “I led Knox County Procurement in the infancy of spellcheck. I prepared a bid for a boiler and meant to type ‘a shut-out valve’. I ran spellcheck, and it didn’t find anything. The bid spec went out with a different four-letter word, which was spelled correctly, but it was that four-letter word that was published.”

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