Pamplin School of Business: "Expectations for Student Writing"

One important skill that you may contribute to an employer, or to a community or religious organization, is writing clearly. While there are some aspects of good writing that are dependent on your audience or a matter of taste, there is broad agreement about what constitutes good business writing. This document sets out, in an abbreviated form, the expectations that the Pamplin School of Business Administration faculty members have for student writing. The first half identifies elements of a good business document; the second half explains how you should use and acknowledge your sources when you write a document for a class in the Pamplin School.

In addition to using this document as a resource, we expect that all business students will have the writing handbook used in all Eng. 107 ("College Writing") classes at the University: *The Pocket Wadsworth Handbook* by Kirszner and Mandell. It provides detailed, careful explanations of most important points of grammar, word use, style, and documentation.

1. Elements of Good Business Writing

You will be doing several types of writing in the Pamplin School, as do people in the working world. Some of that writing will be informal: for example, writing that aims to stimulate your own thinking on an issue. The standards we set out here will most likely not apply to that sort of assignment. Other writing will be formal; you will be expected to produce a finished product for someone else to read. Research papers, memos, and business plans are examples of formal writing.

When you produce a finished written product, we expect you to follow the ten guidelines below. As you write the first draft, focus on the first four. Who will read your document? What is your main point? What evidence can you offer to support it? How can you organize your document to make your point effectively?

Once you complete a first draft, have someone you trust review it. For example, make an appointment at the Writing Center to have a Writing Assistant read your draft. (For information on how to make an appointment, go to the Integrated Writing Program appointments web page.) Ask whoever helps you how to clarify your message, how to provide more effective support for it, and how to organize your message and its support better.

Once you think your draft meets the first four guidelines, it is time to revise your document to meet the other six. *In particular*, a final draft should be completely free of errors in spelling, grammar, and punctuation. These sorts of errors are especially obvious to readers; in many contexts, the presence of such errors will reduce your credibility. Faculty may refuse to read written work that contains more than two such errors per page. In addition, all finished products should be neatly typed.

Creating a final draft free of spelling, grammar, and punctuation errors is not a simple matter. Using a computer's spell checker and grammar checker, while helpful, is not sufficient. Edit your final draft with care. First, use a spell checker and grammar checker. Second, read your document out loud to catch errors of grammar and word choice. Finally, get someone you trust to review the draft to catch errors you missed.

We chose these ten guidelines because of their importance to good business writing. However, no short list characterizes good writing in an exhaustive way. For example, our guidelines do not mention that good writers avoid clichés—yet this is also a characteristic of good writing. Make it your goal to master these ten points and then to go beyond them.

These guidelines are based on recommendations from Troyka, Strunk and White, Ober, and Weiss.

1.1 Write for your specific audience.

Effective writers think carefully about who will be reading what they write and then take that audience into account as they compose. Depending on the document, this will involve different issues. For example, you should:

- Consider the background of your readers. (Will they understand the vocabulary you use without explanation? Should you assume they understand the concepts you want to convey?)
- Consider how interested your readers are apt to be in your message. (How important is it to convince them they should be interested in your document? Do you need to craft an extensive "hook"?)
- Consider what your readers need to know. (For example, if you are writing to convince them to take an action, what is the crucial background you need to convey?)
- Consider the expectations your readers are apt to have. (Are they expecting a one page memo or a multi-page report? Are they expecting a chatty or a formal tone?)

1.2 Make your main point early and clearly.

Assume your readers are busy. Make it easy for someone to scan your writing and make sense of what is crucial. Normally, this will mean placing the central argument of a memo or paper in the first paragraph and stating it bluntly.

1.3 Provide plenty of good evidence for claims you make.

When you can, use primary sources, ones that provide direct information relevant to your claim (for example, data showing a company's profits over a period, presenting the income of people in various cities, or reporting the attitudes of consumers toward various products).

- If you rely on secondary sources, select ones that will be effective.
- Use sources written by experts, people your reader might recognize as authorities.
- Use materials that appear in respected publications.
- Use current sources, ones that will likely incorporate the most recent data and research.

1.4 Organize your writing logically and make the organization obvious to a reader.

Order your paragraphs carefully and include transitional sentences to indicate how they are related to one another. Divide long documents into sections and include an opening paragraph that provides an overview of the document's organization. When you divide a document into sections:

- give each section a heading or subheading that effectively conveys the section's content,
- be sure each section hangs together,
- and make it clear to your reader how the sections relate to one another.

1.5 Keep paragraphs unified.

- Develop one idea in each paragraph.
- Express that idea in the first sentence or two.
- Arrange sentences so your reader sees how they connect.

1.6 Use standard spelling, grammar, and punctuation.

There are many sorts of English in use in the world. However, for formal written assignments, and for most business writing in the United States, there are standardized expectations. Kirszner and Mandell spell out those expectations in Parts 4, 6, and 7 of their handbook.

1.7 Write in the active voice.

Make active sentence structure a habit. In most sentences, the subject of the sentence should perform the action (for example: "Apple created the iPhone" rather than "The iPhone was created by Apple"). The active voice contributes energy and clarity to your writing. Use the passive voice *only* when you have a particular reason to need it.

Passive voice:
Informal English is too-often used by students.

Active voice:
Students use informal English too often.

1.8 Be concise.

Writing styles differ between disciplines. Business writing places a premium on being understood quickly. You will be understood more quickly if you avoid padding sentences with extra words.

Padded:
As a matter of fact, it seems students often make use of the word "raise" when they should make use of "rise."

Concise:
Students often use "raise" when they should use "rise."

1.9 Use the right words.

Each word you select should convey the tone and meaning you intend. For example, slang and contractions will be too informal for most business assignments and sexist language risks offending your reader. Use a dictionary or the Kirszner and Mandell section on usage review when you are not sure what word is correct.

Figure 1 below contains words that are frequently misused by students in Pamplin School classes. The first column illustrates the correct use of a word and the second explains that use. In each case, the word in question is underlined.

Figure 1. Word Choice Examples

Correct Usage	***Explanation***
<u>Its</u> employees have generous benefits	"<u>Its</u>" is a possessive pronoun. In this sentence, it refers to the company.
It's a generous company	"<u>It 's</u> " is a contraction for "it is."

She thought the action was moral.	"Moral" means conforming to a standard of what is right or good.
The new benefits improved morale.	"Morale" means the attitude of an individual or a group.
They found his tone too personal.	Personal means private or intended for a particular person.
He worked for personnel.	Personnel is the division of a company concerned with employees (also called human resources).
Their benefits are generous.	"Their" is a possessive
There is where you should work.	"There" means "in that place."
They're happy at Ben & Jerry's.	"They're" is a contraction for "they are."

1.10 Use tables, graphs, and other visual aids.

These aids are especially valued in business writing. Visual aids frequently make points more effectively than written explanations: they can be grasped more quickly and allow a reader to see data for himself or herself, rather than having to trust an author's summary.

The promise of visual aids will be fulfilled only if each aid is carefully thought out. We offer some pointers below for increasing the effectiveness of aids. Some of them are taken from Power *et al.* (99).

Whatever sort of visual aid you use:

- Give the aid a title that communicates quickly what it contains.
- Create a connection to the aid in the text of your paper. Tell your reader the point you mean the aid to make.
- Keep your visual aid simple. Omit information that is not relevant to the point you wish to make. For example, round off numbers, when possible, to avoid confusing your reader with extra digits.

If your visual aid is a chart or graph:

- Choose the form of chart or graph that makes your point best. For example,
  - -a pie chart best shows the relative sizes of the parts of a whole
  - -a bar chart best shows the relative sizes of several different categories at one point in time
  - -a line graph best shows the trend in a category, or in several categories, over time
  - -Label both the units of measurement (dollars, pounds, etc.) and their dimensions (thousands, millions, etc.) clearly.

2. Careful Use of Sources

There are three issues here. One is how to make appropriate use of facts or ideas from another writer. Section 2.1 summarizes our expectations on this score. Another issue is why careful documentation is important. Section 2.2 tackles that subject. Finally, there is the issue of *how* to document the sources you utilize in a piece of written work. Section 2.3 presents the format we expect students to use when documenting sources. It is the same one taught in Eng. 107, "College Writing;" it is called the Modern Language Association system of documentation.

2.1 Quoting or restating

You can use a source by quoting it or by restating its point. Quoting a source means actually using the same words it uses. ***Any time*** you do this you should clearly indicate your quotation.

There are two ways to do that:

- for a short quotation, surround the words you borrow with double quotation marks;
- for a long quotation (more than four lines), put the words you borrow in their own paragraph, indented an additional one inch on the left.

Use a quotation *only* when it makes precisely the point you wish to make and only when it makes it in a way you cannot improve upon.

Normally, you should use a source by restating its point. That restatement can communicate all the elements of the passage you rely upon or it can condense the passage to its essence. An acceptable restatement results from understanding your source and communicating its message in your own words. It ***does not*** involve merely rearranging the words from your source. To clarify this point, we include below a long quotation from Levitt discussing the shortsightedness frequently demonstrated by managers of firms with dominant products. Following the quotation, we include two restatements of an important idea from the passage. Each restatement is followed by a commentary on its weaknesses and strengths.

> It is impossible to mention a single major industry that did not at one time qualify for the magic appellation of "growth industry." In each case its assumed strength lay in the apparently unchallenged superiority of its product. There appeared to be no effective substitute for it. It was itself a runaway substitute for the product it so triumphantly replaced. Yet one after another of these celebrated industries has come under a shadow. (2)

Unacceptable use of restatement:
We give the magic appellation of growth industry to an industry whose product has apparently unchallenged superiority and seems to have no effective substitute (Levitt 2).

> *Commentary:* This restatement is unacceptable (even though it characterizes an idea of Levitt's fairly and cites its source) because it contains no quotation marks, but repeats three phrases from the article word-for-word: "the magic appellation of growth industry," "apparently unchallenged superiority," and "no effective substitute." This use of another author's words, without specific acknowledgement, is a *form of theft*.

Good use of restatement:
Levitt tells us that managers must beware: replacements eventually emerge for every product, even ones that seem irreplaceable (2).

> *Commentary:* This is a good restatement because it captures an important idea from the passage, using different words and a different sentence structure. Restating ideas in this way will help you reach a deep understanding of what an author has to say. That deep understanding will help you make interesting connections between that author and your other sources.

2.2 Documentation matters

When you make use of another writer's ideas, it is important to document that use carefully, so that:

- your readers can easily find that source and read it for themselves,
- you acknowledge the writer's ideas and avoid claiming them as your own,
- And you let your readers know you have consulted the relevant literature.

If you fail to document your use of another person's ideas, you are stealing just as if you grabbed their wallet. This sort of robbery is called *plagiarism*. It is also plagiarism to use an author's words without indicating you have done so (see 2.1 above). Both forms of plagiarism are taken very seriously in universities. Take care to avoid plagiarism and *ask your professor* if you have any questions about how to use another author's ideas correctly in your writing.

Both the University and the business school consider plagiarism cheating. Possible penalties for plagiarism include awarding an F on the assignment, awarding an F for the course, and being placed on academic probation. The University's expectations, along with consequences for violating them, are discussed in more detail in the Guidelines for Implementation section of the Code of Academic Integrity page of the University Bulletin.

2.3 How to document

The Modern Language Association (MLA) citation system places references in the text of a document. Each reference provides the information your reader needs to identify a source in a list of references (called "Works Cited") you place at the end of the document.

This section presents, in brief form, the MLA format for in-text citations (in 2.3.1) and lists of references (in 2.3.2). To handle cases not presented here, you should refer to Kirszner and Mandell. Some examples given (as well as the headings introducing them) are taken from Troyka. This document uses the MLA system, both for its in-text citations and for its list of references.

2.3.1 Format for in-text citations

Section a. below shows how to cite the source of a quotation. However, most citations will be for sources you have paraphrased or summarized (see 2.1 above). As a result, Section b. and the ones that follow it show how to cite paraphrased or summarized sources.

The MLA format expects page numbers to be included for *all* types of citations. Those page numbers should be taken from the original version of the article published, to make it easy for someone to find the passage you cite. This means taking special care when you use an article from a library database (for example, ABI/Inform). Be *sure* to download a "page image" of the article (if available), rather than the text version. A page image (for example, a PDF) will have the same pagination as the original article. The page image will *also* include all the tables and graphs from the original article; these are sometimes omitted from the text version.

a. Citing the source of a short quotation

A citation may include the author's last name or may include only the page number, if the author's name is included in the sentence. In the first case, the name and page number, separated by a space, are surrounded by parentheses. In the second case, only the page number is placed in parentheses. In either case, the parenthesized citation comes after the closing quotation marks, but before the period.

- **Author's name in citation**

Managers of railroads characterized their industry too narrowly "because they were railroad-oriented instead of transportation-oriented; they were product-oriented instead of customer-oriented" (Levitt 45).

- **Author's name in text**

Levitt argues that railroad managers "defined their industry wrong because they were railroad-oriented instead of transportation oriented; they were product-oriented instead of customer-oriented" (45).

b. Citing a source with one author

As above, the author's name can appear in either location. Note that page numbers are provided for citations that restate the author's point, just as they are for citations that quote an author.

- **Author's name in citation**

Railroad managers should have thought more about their customers and about the products that could substitute for railroad transportation (Levitt 48).

- **Author's name in text**

Levitt argues that railroad managers should have thought more about their customers and about the products that could substitute for railroad transportation (45).

c. Citing a source with two authors

- **Authors' name in citation**

One report describes 2,123 occurrences (Krait and Cooper 700).

- **Authors' names in text**

The results Krait and Cooper report would not support the conclusions drawn by others (700).

d. Citing a source with more than three authors

When a source has three or more authors, only the first one shown in the source is normally given. It is followed by et al.

- **Author's name in citation**

In one anthology, 35 percent of the selections had not been anthologized before (Elliott *et al.* 153).

- **Author's name in text**

Elliott *et al.* include 17 authors whose work has never been anthologized (153).

e. Citing a source with no listed author

- **Source noted within citation**

An industry is a group of firms that produce products that can be used in place of one another and that sell to the same purchasers ("Economic Theory" 753).

> *note:* Since this citation is to an unsigned article, the in-text reference is to the article's title. In a parenthetical citation, the title should be shortened as much as possible, without making the citation ambiguous. The works cited entry for this

source would begin with its full title. For the entry, look below at end of section 2.3.2.d.

- **Source noted in text**

"Economic Theory: Market structure: competition, oligopoly, monopoly" defines an industry as a group of firms that produce products that can be used in place of one another and that sell to the same purchasers (753).

- **Citing an internet source**

The URL (without http:// or https://) is now normally given for a Web source. Angle brackets are not used around it. In-text references to internet sources will usually contain no page numbers, since internet documents usually are not paged. If your internet source *does* contain page numbers, use them.

- **Author's name in text**

Landsburg thinks it is difficult to think about our obligations to people yet unconceived in a rigorous way.

- **Author's name in citation**

At least one author thinks it is difficult to think rigorously about our obligations to people yet unconceived (Landsburg).

2.3.2 Format for entries in the works cited list

The citations described in the previous section direct your reader to a list of references at the end of your document. That list should be labeled "Works Cited." All entries should be double spaced. It should include *all* the sources used, alphabetized by author's last name. Use the author's name as given in the source. Each source listed appears in its own "paragraph;" the first line of each paragraph is left justified and subsequent lines are indented 5 spaces. For an example of a Works Cited list, see the final page of this document.

a. Books

Reference entries for books include three parts: author's name, book title (italicized), and publication information (publisher, date). Shorten the publisher's name if you can do so and still be clear; use "U" as an abbreviation for "University" and "P" as an abbreviation for "Press." When an organization is both author and publisher of a work, the organization's name is given only once, usually as the publisher (no author is stated in this case). A forward slash (/) now separates the names of co-publishers. The medium of publication is not stated, except when it is needed for clarity.

- **Book with one author**

Jacoby, Sanford M. *Modern Manors: Welfare Capitalism Since the New Deal*. Princeton U P, 1997.

- **Book with two or three authors**

Smith, Richard J., and Mark Gibbs. *Navigating the Internet*. Sams, 1994.

- **Book with more than three authors**

Cameron, Deborah, et al. *Researching Language: Issues of Power and Method*. Routledge, 1992.

b. Journals or magazines

- **Article in a journal with continuous pagination**

LaFollette, Mark C. "The Politics of Research Misconduct, Congressional Oversight, Universities, and Science." *Journal of Higher Education,* vol. 65 (1994): *pp.* 261-85.

- **Article in a journal that pages each issue separately**

Levitt, Theodore. "Marketing Myopia." *Harvard Business Review*, vol. 38, no. 4 (1960): *pp.* 45-56.

c. Internet resources

Kirszner and Mandell include some good examples of citing resources from the internet. We present three examples below to characterize our expectations. If the document contains the date it was created or last modified, include use that date in your entry. *Whether or not* the document is dated, citing the date when an online work was consulted is optional. The URL (without http:// or https://) is normally given for a WWW source. Angle brackets are not used around it.

- **Article in a journal included in a library database**

Agrawal, Ajay and Rebecca Henderson. "Putting patents in context: Exploring knowledge transfer from MIT." *Management Science,* vol. 48, no. 1 (2002): *pp*. 44-60. ABI/INFORM Global. 15 June 2012.

- **Article in a magazine with no print version**

Landsburg, Steven E., "Who Shall Inherit the Earth?" *Slate*. May 1997, www.TheSlateGroup.com. 1 October 2011.

note: In this entry, the first date is the day the article was published, while the second is the day the WWW source was accessed.

- **Unsigned article in a reference work**

"Monopoly and competition." *Encyclopædia Britannica Online Academic Edition,* 2012,www. www.EncyclopædiaBritannicaInc. 17 June 2012.

- **Documents within a website**

Nix, Elizabeth. "6 Viking Leaders You Should Know." *A&E Television Networks*, 6 Feb. 2014, www.History.com, 13 June 2014.

- **Citing an entire website**

Nelson, Cary, and Bartholomew Brinkman, eds. *Modern American Poetry*. Dept. of English, U of Illinois, 2014, www.uofm.edu,26 May 2015.

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