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Tips for Better Business Writing

Business writing is any writing you do to get work done: an email asking for a decision, a short report explaining what happened, instructions that help someone do a task without asking twice, a message to a customer, or a note to a manager about a problem. It is not school writing, and it is not advertising. The reader is busy, often reading on a phone between other jobs, and they care about one thing first: what does this mean for me, and what do I need to do? Good business writing answers that question early, in plain words, and then gives just enough detail to make the answer trustworthy.

This set helps anyone who writes at work — people in offices, shops, warehouses, clinics, schools, call centers, and small businesses, and people who run a business alone and write everything themselves. It helps if you write a lot and want to be faster and clearer. It helps if you write rarely and feel nervous every time you press send. It helps if English is your second language, because the habits here — short sentences, common words, clear order — make writing easier to produce and easier to read for everyone. You do not need a talent for writing. You need a method you can repeat.

Why does it matter? Because unclear writing costs real time and real money. A vague instruction is followed the wrong way and the work is done twice. A long email with the request buried at the bottom sits unanswered while a deadline passes. A sharp, annoyed tone in a short message starts an argument that takes a week to cool down. Clear writing does the opposite. It gets a faster answer, it prevents mistakes, and it builds a quiet reputation: this is a person whose messages can be trusted, whose instructions work, and who respects other people's time. Employers notice that reputation quickly, even when they never say so out loud.

A note on limits, stated honestly at the start. These lessons teach general business writing — everyday emails, notes, instructions, summaries, and short reports. They do not teach legal documents, contracts, formal bids, or technical manuals, which have their own rules and often need a specialist reviewer. They also do not replace your employer's style guide or templates where one exists. Where your workplace has a required format, use it. These habits will make your writing inside that format clearer.

What You Will Learn

- How to decide the one main point of a message before you write a single sentence.
- How to write plain sentences with common words that say exactly what you mean.
- How to structure emails, notes, and short reports so a busy reader can scan them in seconds.
- How to choose subject lines and headings that tell the reader what is inside.
- How to keep a calm, courteous tone even when the news is bad or the message is difficult.
- How to cut filler, jargon, and blame language without losing important detail.
- How to edit and proof your own work in a short, repeatable check before you send.

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- How to write instructions and next steps so the reader knows who does what, by when.

Lesson 1 — Start With the Reader and the One Thing You Need

Every failed message fails in the same place: the writer started with what they wanted to say, instead of what the reader needed to know. A warehouse supervisor writes three paragraphs about a difficult morning before mentioning, in the last line, that he needs two extra staff on Friday. A customer service agent explains the history of a product before telling the customer whether a refund is coming. The reader works hard, arrives tired at the actual point, and sometimes gives up before reaching it. Strong business writing reverses that order. It starts by naming the reader, the situation, and the one thing the message must achieve — and only then does it start drafting.

The one thing is a single sentence you could say out loud. It usually takes one of four forms. You need a decision: "I need Maya to approve the revised delivery date." You need action: "I need the team to send their hours by Thursday at noon." You need to inform: "I need everyone on shift to know the entrance changes on Monday." Or you need to record: "I need a short written note that we agreed to extend the trial by two weeks." If you cannot state the one thing in a single sentence, you are not ready to write the message yet. That is not a failure. It is useful information. It means the thinking is unfinished, and writing now would pass the confusion on to the reader.

Next, think about the reader as a real person, not an audience. What do they already know? A manager who approved the budget last week does not need the budget explained again. A new colleague needs the background your manager does not. What do they care about most? A finance reader cares about cost and risk. A customer cares about what happens to them and when. A busy team lead cares about time and who is affected. What might they misunderstand? If a date could be read two ways, write it in full. If a word has a special meaning in your trade, explain it once in plain words. Two minutes spent picturing the reader saves twenty minutes of follow-up questions later.

Finally, decide what belongs in this message and what does not. A common habit is to load one email with three separate topics because it feels efficient. It is not. The reader answers the first topic, forgets the second, and never sees the third. One message, one main point, is the rule for everyday writing. Background belongs only where it helps the reader decide or act. If a detail does not change the decision, the action, or the understanding, it is probably a detail for a different message — or for no message at all. Cutting is not losing information. Cutting is respecting the reader enough to give them the information in the order they can use it.

The Steps

1. Before you open your email or document, write one sentence on paper or in a note: "After reading this, [name or role] will [decide / do / know] [what]." Keep it where you can see it while you draft.

2. List what the reader already knows about this topic in two or three short points. Do not re-explain those points in the message.

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3. List what the reader does not know but needs in order to decide or act. Those points become the body of your message, in order of importance.

4. Check whether you are trying to cover more than one main point. If you are, split the writing into separate messages or separate headed sections.

5. Write the opening line of your message so it carries the one thing: the decision needed, the action needed, or the news itself. Do not open with background or apology.

6. Draft the rest of the message, then compare every paragraph against your one-sentence purpose. If a paragraph does not serve it, cut it or move it.

7. End with the next step stated plainly: who does what, and by when. If no action is needed, say so — "No action needed — this is for your records" is a kind and useful closing line.

A Worked Example

Priya works in purchasing for a small food distributor. A supplier has told her a key delivery will arrive two days late, which affects a promotion her company has advertised. Her first draft to her manager, Daniel, runs to nine sentences about the supplier's factory problems, the weather at the port, and her own frustrating phone calls that morning. The request — permission to pay extra for a faster delivery from a second supplier — appears in the final line, almost as an afterthought. Daniel, reading between meetings, replies "Okay, thanks for the update," because he read it as news, not as a decision he needed to make. The faster delivery is never approved, and the promotion launches short of stock.

Priya rewrites using the method. Her purpose sentence is: "After reading this, Daniel will decide whether to approve $420 for a backup delivery." Her new message opens: "I need your decision today on a $420 backup delivery so the weekend promotion is fully stocked." The next two short paragraphs give only what Daniel needs: the main delivery arrives Monday instead of Friday, the backup supplier can deliver Friday morning, and doing nothing means roughly 60 promotion orders cannot be filled. She closes: "If you approve, I will place the order by 3 p.m. today. Please reply yes or no — either answer works, I just need it today." Daniel replies "Yes, go ahead" within the hour. Same facts, same writer, same manager. The difference was order and purpose, not effort or talent.

Common Mistakes

- **Burying the point at the end.** Readers scan from the top. A request in the last line is a request many readers will never reach.
- **Writing to everyone the same way.** The background a new starter needs will bore and confuse a manager who already knows it, and the short version a manager needs will strand a new starter.
- **Covering three topics in one message.** Each extra topic lowers the chance that any single topic gets a clear answer.
- **Starting with an apology or a long warm-up.** "Sorry to bother you, I know you are busy, I just wanted to quickly ask about something small" spends the reader's attention before the message begins.

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• **Confusing detail with thoroughness.** Ten facts the reader cannot use hide the two facts they can. Thorough means complete for the decision, not complete about everything you know.

Lesson 2 — Plain Sentences That Do the Work

Plain language is not simple-minded language. It is language that has been worked on until it is easy. The test is strict: a competent reader should understand the sentence the first time, without going back. That takes more skill than writing long, impressive sentences, because long sentences can hide fuzzy thinking. When a sentence runs to forty words with three commas and a bracketed aside, often the writer has not yet decided what they actually mean. Shortening the sentence forces the decision — and the reader benefits twice, once from the clarity and once from the speed.

Start with words. Prefer the common word over the formal twin wherever the meaning is the same. Use "use," not "utilize." Use "help," not "facilitate." Use "before," not "prior to," and "because," not "due to the fact that." Use "about," not "in relation to." These swaps are not dumbing down. "Utilize" and "use" mean the same thing; one of them simply makes every reader, including readers working in a second language and readers who are tired, do extra work for no gain. The same rule applies to your trade's jargon. Every workplace has shorthand that insiders understand instantly. Inside the team, that shorthand is efficient and fine. The moment a message travels outside the team — to a customer, another department, or a new starter — spell the term out once in plain words, then use the short form. "The monthly stock check (what we call the cycle count) happens on Friday" costs six extra words and saves a confused reply.

Next, build sentences around strong, ordinary verbs and keep them short enough to hold in the mind. One main idea per sentence is a good working rule. "The meeting was moved to Tuesday because the room was double-booked, and the agenda will be sent by Ana before noon" carries three ideas and asks the reader to sort them. Split it: "The meeting has moved to Tuesday. The room was double-booked. Ana will send the agenda before noon." Notice what else changed: the second version names who acts. "The agenda will be sent" leaves the doer hidden. "Ana will send the agenda" answers the reader's quiet question — who is handling this? — before they have to ask. Writing in this active style, where the person or team doing the action appears in the sentence, is the single most reliable way to make business writing clearer. The passive style still has a place when the doer truly does not matter or is unknown — "Your order was shipped on Tuesday" is fine — but as a default habit, name the actor.

Numbers, dates, and names deserve special care because they are where plain writing most often quietly fails. Write dates in a form that cannot be misread across countries: "5 March 2027" is clear everywhere, while "03/05/27" means different days in different places. Give times with their zone or context when readers are in different places: "3 p.m. your time (New York)." Round money honestly and state what is included: "$420, including delivery" prevents a second round of questions. And when you give a number that matters — a count, a deadline, a price — put it where the eye lands, in the sentence itself, not buried inside a dense paragraph where it can be

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skimmed past.

The Steps

1. Draft your message without worrying about word choice. Get the meaning down first.
2. Read the draft and circle any formal twin words — utilize, facilitate, prior to, in order to, due to the fact that — and replace each with the common word.
3. Find every abbreviation or piece of trade shorthand. For any reader outside your immediate team, spell it out in plain words the first time it appears.
4. Break any sentence longer than about twenty-five words into two shorter sentences, one idea each.
5. In each sentence, ask "who does this?" If the sentence hides the doer and the doer matters, rewrite it to name the person or team.
6. Check every date, time, and amount. Write dates in day-month-year words, add time zones where needed, and state what money figures include.
7. Read the final draft aloud, slowly. Wherever you stumble, run out of breath, or have to restart a sentence, the reader would have stumbled too. Rewrite that spot.

A Worked Example

Marcus supervises a cleaning team at a medical center. He needs to tell the clinic manager about a change to night cleaning. His first version reads: "Due to the fact that utilization of the north entrance has been discontinued during nighttime hours, cleaning operations in relation to that area will be facilitated by the south entrance team going forward, and it is requested that access arrangements be communicated at your earliest convenience." The clinic manager reads it twice and still has to ask what is actually changing and what she needs to do.

Marcus rewrites it plainly. "From Monday, the north entrance is closed at night. The south entrance team will clean that area instead. Please tell your night staff to use the south entrance from Monday so the team can let them in." Three short sentences. Every word is common. The doer is named in each sentence. The one action needed — tell your night staff — is unmistakable. The manager replies the same day confirming it is done. Marcus keeps a small list of his own most-used formal phrases taped near his screen, with the plain version beside each, until the plain version becomes his habit. That list, built from your own drafts, is worth more than any general vocabulary lesson, because it fixes the exact phrases you personally overuse.

Common Mistakes

- **Using formal words to sound professional.** Readers judge professionalism by clarity and accuracy, not by long words. A plain sentence that is right beats a grand sentence that is vague.
- **Letting one sentence carry a whole paragraph of ideas.** If a sentence needs two commas and a bracket to survive, it needs to become two or three sentences.

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- **Hiding the doer.** "It has been decided" and "mistakes were made" leave the reader asking who decided and who will fix it. Name the actor whenever the actor matters.
- **Assuming shorthand travels.** What your team calls "the audit," "the run," or "closing" may mean nothing — or something different — one department over.
- **Writing dates and times in a private shorthand.** Ambiguous dates cause real missed deadlines. Spend the extra words to make them unmistakable.

Lesson 3 — Structure That Lets Busy People Read Fast

Most business readers do not read. They scan. They look at the subject line, the first line, the headings, and the last line, and they decide in a few seconds whether this message needs them now, later, or never. Good structure works with that habit instead of fighting it. It puts the most important information where scanners look first, groups related points together, and uses white space and headings as signposts. A well-structured page is not decoration. It is a kindness that also protects you: when your structure is clear, your key point cannot be missed, your deadline cannot be overlooked, and your careful work gets the attention it deserves.

Start before the first paragraph, with the subject line or title. A good subject line is a tiny summary, not a label. "Update" tells the reader nothing. "Delivery delayed to Monday — decision needed today" tells them the news, the topic, and the urgency in one glance, and it makes the message findable later when someone searches their inbox. Apply the same rule inside longer documents. Headings should state content, not just name a section. "Background," "Details," and "Conclusion" are empty boxes. "What changed," "What it costs," and "What I need from you" guide the reader even if they read nothing else. If someone could understand your whole message by reading only the subject line and headings, your structure is doing its job.

Inside the body, use the journalist's order: most important first. Business writing is not a story that builds to a reveal. Give the decision, news, or request in the opening lines, then the reasons and evidence, then background, then minor detail. Within that order, keep paragraphs short — one point per paragraph, often just two to four sentences — and leave a blank line between them. Dense walls of text push readers away, especially on phones where a modest paragraph fills the whole screen. Where you have three or more parallel items — options, steps, problems, dates — turn them into a list. Lists let the reader count, compare, and refer back precisely: "your second point" is a conversation that only works when points are visibly separated. Number the list when order or count matters, as with steps or ranked options. Use bullets when the items are parallel and order does not matter.

Endings deserve the same discipline as openings. Close with the next step, not with a fade-out. State who acts, what they do, and by when, in its own short paragraph or line so it cannot hide. If you need a reply, say what form the reply should take: "Reply yes or no is enough" gets faster answers than an open invitation to comment, because you have lowered the effort of answering. If there is a deadline, give the day, date, and time, and briefly say why that deadline exists when the reason is not obvious — people meet deadlines they understand. Then stop. A clear message that ends cleanly looks confident, and confidence, quietly, is persuasive.

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The Steps

1. Write the subject line last but design it first in your mind: topic plus news or action needed. Aim for a line someone could act on without opening the message.
2. Put your main point in the first one or two lines of the body. Test it by hiding the rest of the message — does the opening alone make sense?
3. Group the supporting points. Give each group its own short paragraph, or its own heading in a longer document.
4. Turn any run of three or more items into a numbered list (order matters) or a bulleted list (parallel items).
5. Replace empty headings like "Details" with content headings like "What it costs" or "Dates that change."
6. Write the closing as its own paragraph: who does what, by when, and what form a reply should take.
7. Look at the page as a scanner would: subject, first line, headings, lists, last line. If those five things tell the story, send it. If not, restructure before you polish words.

A Worked Example

Sofia coordinates volunteers for a community health fair. She emails forty volunteers a message titled "Health Fair Info" with six long paragraphs covering the new venue, parking, shift times, what to wear, a changed lunch plan, and a request to confirm attendance. She gets nine replies. Most volunteers later say they stopped reading halfway, and several arrive at the old venue because the venue change sat in paragraph four.

For the next event, Sofia restructures the same information. Subject: "New venue + please confirm your shift by Wednesday." First line: "The fair has moved to the Riverside Community Hall, and I need your confirmation by Wednesday." Then short headed sections: "Where" (address and parking in two lines), "Your shift" (times in a short list), "What to wear and bring" (three bullets), "Food" (one line). The message closes with its own line: "Please reply with just 'Confirmed' or tell me if you need a different shift." She gets thirty-four replies by Wednesday, and nobody goes to the old venue. Sofia changed almost none of the facts and none of the words mattered as much as the order, the headings, and the closing line standing alone where tired eyes could not miss it.

Common Mistakes

- **Saving the news for a dramatic finish.** Business readers reward the writer who leads with the point; they punish suspense by skimming past it.
- **Subject lines that say nothing.** "Hello," "Update," and "Question" waste the most-read line in the entire message and make the email impossible to find later.
- **One giant paragraph.** On a phone screen it looks endless, so readers postpone it — often forever.

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- **Burying the deadline inside a sentence.** Deadlines belong in the closing line, stated in full, where they can be seen and copied into a calendar.
- **Asking for "thoughts" when you need a decision.** Vague requests get vague, slow replies. Ask for the exact answer you need.

Lesson 4 — Tone, Courtesy, and Difficult Messages

Tone is the feeling your writing leaves behind after the facts are absorbed. In speech, tone rides on voice and face. In writing, the reader invents your tone from word choice, sentence length, and what you chose to include or leave out — and tired, stressed readers tend to invent a harsher tone than you intended. A short message written for speed ("Send me the figures.") can land as an order barked at a junior colleague. A message meant to be firm can land as hostile. Managing tone is therefore not softness or decoration. It is accuracy: making sure the feeling the reader receives matches the feeling you meant to send.

Everyday courtesy in writing is mostly small, concrete habits. Greet the person by name where the relationship allows it; a name signals that this message is for them, not broadcast at them. Thank people for specific things — "Thanks for turning the figures around so quickly" — rather than with a generic line that could be pasted anywhere. Keep requests as requests, with "please" placed naturally, even when you have the authority to order; authority travels fine in polite sentences. Watch the blame words. "You failed to send the report" accuses. "I have not received the report yet" states the fact and leaves room for explanation — perhaps it was sent to the wrong address, perhaps there was an emergency. State facts about work and deadlines. Let the reader keep their dignity, and you will get cooperation instead of defense.

Difficult messages — refusals, corrections, complaints, bad news — need the same courtesy plus a clear structure. A reliable pattern has four parts in order. First, state the decision or news plainly and early; do not make the reader wade through warmth to discover bad news, which feels like a trick when it arrives. Second, give the honest reason in one or two sentences, about circumstances and standards, not about the person's worth. Third, offer what you can: an alternative, a next step, a future opening, or at minimum a clear explanation of what happens now. Fourth, close with respect and a door left open where one genuinely exists. Never invent a hopeful alternative you cannot deliver — false softness is its own kind of unkindness, and readers remember it. Also handle anger with time. If you are writing while angry, draft the message, then wait. An hour is good; overnight is better for anything serious. Send the cooled version. You will almost always find sentences in the hot draft that would have cost you more than the original problem did.

One more tone trap deserves naming: humor and familiarity. A joke that works with a close colleague can misfire badly in writing to someone who does not know you, because the reader cannot see your smile and may be reading on a bad day. Sarcasm almost never survives writing at all — it depends entirely on tone of voice, which text does not carry. Keep everyday business writing warm, plain, and literal. Save humor for relationships where it is already established in person, and even then, keep it out of messages about problems, money, discipline, or bad news.

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The Steps

1. Before sending, re-read your draft and ask: "If I received this on my worst day this month, how would it feel?" Adjust any sentence that could land harsher than you intend.
2. Address the reader by name where appropriate, and make any thanks specific — name the thing they did.
3. Turn accusations into facts: replace "you failed to / you never / you always" with a plain statement of what has or has not happened and what is needed now.
4. For a difficult message, use the four-part order: decision or news first, honest reason, what you can offer or what happens next, respectful close.
5. If you drafted while angry or upset, save the draft and wait at least an hour — overnight for serious matters — then edit and send the cooled version.
6. Remove sarcasm, jokes about the problem, and exclamation marks beyond one. Keep the message warm, plain, and literal.
7. Check that any promise or alternative you offered is one you can truly deliver. Cut hopeful lines you cannot stand behind.

A Worked Example

James runs a small repair shop and must tell a regular customer, Mr. Alvarez, that a promised repair cannot be finished this week because a part is unavailable. His hot first draft, written after a stressful call with the supplier, reads: "As I already explained, parts are out of my control. You will have to wait until next week. There is nothing I can do." Every sentence is technically true, and every sentence pushes the customer away. James waits, walks around the shop, and rewrites. "Mr. Alvarez, I am sorry — your repair will not be finished this week. The part I ordered has been delayed by the supplier and will reach me on Tuesday. I can do one of two things: fit it the same day it arrives, on Tuesday, at no extra charge for the delay, or lend you a courtesy machine from Monday until yours is ready. Please tell me which suits you better, or call me and we will work it out." The news is identical. The reason is honest and brief. Two real alternatives are offered. The customer chooses the courtesy machine, thanks James for calling it straight, and remains a regular. Tone did not change the facts. It changed whether the facts cost James a customer.

Common Mistakes

- **Writing the hot draft and sending it.** The message you write in the first five angry minutes will be quoted back to you for months. Draft, wait, edit, then send.
- **Hiding bad news under a long warm opening.** Readers feel managed and mistrust the rest of the message when the blow finally lands.
- **Using blame words about people instead of facts about work.** "You never listen" starts a fight. "The last two briefs were missing the delivery date" starts a fix.
- **Over-apologizing for ordinary requests.** Apologize sincerely for real harm or real delay. Apologizing for existing — for asking a normal work question — weakens every message you send.

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- **Trying to soften a no with a maybe.** "We will see" when you mean no creates false hope and a second, harder conversation later. A clear, kind no respects the reader more.

Lesson 5 — Edit, Proof, and Send With Care

Writing and editing are two different jobs, and mixing them is why so many messages go out with errors. While you draft, your mind is on meaning — what happened, what you need, what order things go in. Editing asks colder questions: is every sentence clear, is every fact right, is anything here that should not be? If you try to edit sentence by sentence while drafting, you will polish the first paragraph five times and rush the ending where the deadline lives. The professional habit is simple: draft for meaning first, then run a short, fixed editing check, in the same order every time, so the check becomes fast and automatic even on busy days.

The check has three passes, each looking for different things. The first pass is for sense. Read the whole message once and ask only: does it say the one thing I set out to say, in an order a scanner can follow? Cut any sentence that repeats an earlier point in different words — repetition is the most common length problem in business writing, and it sneaks in because writers circle back to a point they care about. Cut hedges that drain meaning: "I just think that maybe we should possibly consider" says nothing that "I recommend we" does not say better. The second pass is for facts. Check every name, date, time, figure, and attachment reference against its source. Names matter doubly: a misspelled name tells the reader you did not care enough to check the one word that is theirs. Confirm that every attachment you mention is actually attached, and every link actually opens. The third pass is for surface errors — spelling, punctuation, and the dangerous small words. Spellcheckers help but they cannot catch a correctly spelled wrong word: "form" for "from," "manger" for "manager," or a missing "not" that reverses your meaning entirely. Read the final version slowly, ideally aloud or in a changed format — a different screen, a printed page, a larger font — because fresh eyes in a fresh format catch what familiar eyes glide over.

Sending deserves the same care as writing, because the most expensive writing errors are sending errors. Check the recipient line before anything else, especially where autocomplete offers several similar names; the wrong recipient can turn an ordinary internal note into a serious confidentiality problem, a topic covered in depth in the companion set on confidentiality. Check whether you meant Reply or Reply All — Reply All to a large list with a private comment is a classic workplace embarrassment, and the reverse, replying only to one person when the group needed your answer, quietly stalls work. For sensitive messages, pause on one final question: would I be comfortable if this were forwarded? Business messages are forwarded constantly, often with good intentions. Write every message so that a forward does not shame you or harm anyone named in it. That single habit — writing for the possible forward — quietly improves clarity, tone, and judgment all at once.

Keep a personal error list. Every writer has repeat faults: yours might be missing the attachment, writing "Thurs" without a date, or overusing one filler phrase. Each time you catch an error — yours or one a colleague catches for you — add it to the list and check for it specifically in the second pass. Within a few months your fixed check plus your personal list will catch nearly

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everything, and the whole edit will take three to five minutes for an ordinary message. That is the real secret of polished business writing. It is not talent and it is not a long process. It is a short process, repeated without exception.

The Steps

1. Finish the draft completely before editing anything. Let meaning come first.
2. Pass one — sense: read through once, cut repeated points, cut empty hedges, and confirm the opening line and closing line carry the purpose and the next step.
3. Pass two — facts: verify every name (spelled exactly), date, time, figure, and promised attachment against its source. Open every link.
4. Pass three — surface: run the spellchecker, then read slowly for correctly spelled wrong words and missing small words like "not." Read aloud if you can.
5. Check your personal error list: the two or three mistakes you personally repeat. Look for each one on purpose.
6. Before sending, verify the recipient names in the To line one by one, choose Reply versus Reply All deliberately, and confirm attachments are attached.
7. For anything sensitive, ask the forward question: "Would this be fine if it were forwarded to anyone named in it?" If not, rewrite or pick up the phone instead.

A Worked Example

Aisha coordinates training for a retail chain. She sends a message to twelve store managers: "Training moves to Thurs at 10, Room B. Please bring the form." Three managers reply asking which Thursday, two arrive without the form because "the form" could be any of three forms, and one manager misses the session because her store uses a different Room B in a different building — the message never named the site. No one made a careless mistake. The message simply never passed through a facts check.

Aisha builds the three-pass habit. Her next message reads: "Store manager training moves to Thursday 12 June, 10:00–11:30 a.m., at the Northgate store, Training Room B (upstairs). Please bring the completed Stock Loss Form (attached) — one per store." She verified the date against the calendar, spelled out the site, attached the form, and read the draft aloud, catching that her first version said "bring the from" — a correctly spelled error her spellchecker had passed. Attendance is complete, nobody travels to the wrong building, and no follow-up messages are needed. The edit took her four minutes. The previous unclear message had cost twelve people a thread of replies and one wasted journey. Editing is not extra work. It is the work, done once, in the right place.

Common Mistakes

- **Editing while drafting.** You polish the opening, run out of time, and send an unchecked ending — which is where the action and deadline live.
- **Trusting the spellchecker completely.** It cannot see meaning. "Public" for "pubic," "form" for "from," and a dropped "not" all pass it cleanly.

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- **Mentioning an attachment that is not attached.** The most common sending error in business. Attach first, then write "attached," then check in the facts pass.
- **Sending to the autocompleted name without looking.** Similar names are everywhere. One glance at the full recipient line prevents the worst errors in business writing.
- **Treating proofreading as a luxury for important messages only.** Short everyday messages are read by more people, more often, than your rare long report. The habit must cover them all.

Try It

Do these exercises in order, using real writing from your own work wherever you can. Keep each exercise short — the goal is reps, not a single giant effort.

First, the purpose drill. Take three messages you sent in the last week. For each one, write its purpose sentence now: "After reading this, [reader] will [decide / do / know] [what]." Then re-read the sent message and mark where the reader would have discovered that purpose. If the answer is "in the last line" or "they would have to guess," rewrite just the opening two lines and the closing line as you would send them today. Save the before-and-after pairs. They are your personal textbook.

Second, the plain rewrite. Find the longest email you have sent this month. Copy it into a fresh document. Replace every formal twin word with the common word, split every sentence over twenty-five words, and name the hidden doer in every passive sentence. Count the words before and after. Most people cut fifteen to thirty percent without losing a single fact. Read both versions aloud and note which one you would rather receive at 4:45 p.m. on a Friday.

Third, the structure rebuild. Take a message that got a slow or confused response. Rebuild it without changing the facts: new subject line carrying the news, main point in the first line, supporting points in short headed paragraphs or a list, and a closing line that stands alone with who, what, and by when. Send this rebuilt style on your next three real messages and watch the reply speed.

Fourth, the tone check. Recall a difficult message you handled recently — a refusal, a correction, a complaint. Rewrite it using the four-part order: news first, honest reason, what you can offer, respectful close. Compare the feeling of the two versions as if you were the receiver on a bad day. Keep the four-part order written where you draft difficult messages until it becomes automatic.

Fifth, build your editing card. On a small card or note you will see every day, write the three passes (Sense, Facts, Surface), the forward question, and your two most repeated personal errors. Use the card on every message for two weeks. At the end of two weeks, time yourself: most writers find the full check takes under five minutes and their follow-up questions have visibly dropped. Keep the card. Clear writing is not a course you finish. It is a short check you run, every time, until it runs itself.

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