

# Reader-focused business writing

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Busy business practitioners need to skim through, read and digest large amounts of information to make decisions, so the easier they can find and absorb the key points in the message the better. In this sense, business writing is always competitive: we have to compete for our reader's time and attention.

This input will focus on the design, content and style of business writing all of which play an important role in making the text reader-focused, appropriate and appealing.

## 1 Make your text easy to skim

The design of the text contributes to the amount of time your reader needs to spend on identifying and digesting the key messages. Making your text look appealing by creating what's called high skim value (HSV) helps the reader skim through the text quickly. It also increases readability: it makes the text easy to read and easy to navigate. In this way, it also helps enhance your credibility and creates a professional image of you as a writer.

The following five key techniques help in creating HSV:

1. Headings that highlight the key messages
2. Numbered and bulleted lists
3. Conceptually and grammatically parallel headings and lists
4. Enough white space
5. Easy-to-read typography

### 1.1 Headings that highlight the key messages

Headings are one of the main ways of creating high skim value for the reader. In essence, the headings should summarize the main points of your sections so that the reader can see at a glance how the message is organized and what the main points are (skim the document), or find a specific section (scan the document).

In making your text reader-focused, two points are particularly important: first, exploiting what are called 'message headings' that highlight your main points, and second, using action verbs when making recommendations.

### 'Message' headings focus reader attention on the main points

There are basically three types of headings (message, question, and topic), but for business purposes 'message headings' work most effectively.

- **Message headings** ensure that the headings have stand-alone sense (SAS). In other words, they clearly captures the main ideas and make the audience focus on the information you want to emphasize. Many persuasive messages are presenting an argument of some sort and message headings can highlight this argument, e.g. *Headings should highlight key takeaways.*
- **Question headings** stress the main focus of the paragraph that follows (or, if used in presentations, the main focus of the slide). e.g. *What makes an effective heading?* These headings focus the audience's attention on looking for an answer to the question posed, but do not help the audience to see what the answer actually is.
- **Topic headings** describe the subject of the paragraph but do not say what is important about it, how the reader should interpret it, or what conclusions our audience should draw from it, e.g. *Types of headings.*

#### Examples of the difference between topic, question and message headings:

<b>Message heading (conveys main idea)</b>	<b>Question heading (focuses reader on answer)</b>	<b>Topic heading (indicates subject)</b>
Top-level executives with strong background in finance	Who's the audience?	Audience
Readers prefer international trade news over sports	What are reader survey results?	Reader survey
Over-fifty age group growing rapidly	How are employees distributed by age?	Distribution of employees by age
Sales peaked at the end of Q3	How are sales this year?	Sales this year

As you can see, topic and question headings tell the reader the topic that will be covered in the paragraphs that follow, but they tell nothing about the main point of the content. This means the reader has to read the entire text to find out your main points or claims. Message headings, on the other hand, capture the main message of the paragraph that follows. Because they help the reader to skim through the text and see all the main points, message headings are a very important means to create high skim value.

### Action verbs in headings highlight recommendations

Most business writing involves making recommendations. In a report, for example, the recommendations section is often the most important part from the reader's perspective. Recommendations answer the question: 'What should the reader do?' or 'What should we have done?' To help the reader find, understand and respond to the recommendations, you should always clearly list them. To make the list as impactful as possible, you should use action verbs and highlight reader benefits.

Compare the two examples (A & B) of recommendation headings (which would then have more details in the following paragraphs). Which example sounds dynamic, enhances action and easier to read?

#### Example A: recommendations with no clear action verbs

We recommend that management take the following 5 steps:

1. A clear timeframe for the introduction of the new database important
2. Communication of the timeframe to all staff
3. Organising training sessions to ensure smooth implementation
4. Important to clarify job descriptions and explain to personnel how their input impacts the whole organisation
5. Ensuring supervisors and team leaders give feedback to employees on a regular basis

#### Example B: recommendations with clear action verbs

We recommend that management take the following 5 steps:

1. Establish a clear timeframe for the introduction of the new database
2. Communicate the timeframe to all staff
3. Organise training sessions to ensure smooth implementation
4. Clarify job descriptions and explain to personnel how their input impacts the whole organisation
5. Ensure supervisors and team leaders give feedback to employees on a regular basis

### 1.2 Numbered and bulleted lists

Putting information in a list rather than writing it out in a paragraph makes the text reader friendly and helps make it breathe. As a rule of thumb:

- Use numbering when the sequence or number of items is relevant.
- Use bullets when the number or the order of the items doesn't matter.

Compare the following three paragraph examples (A, B & C):

**Example A: information written out in a paragraph**

Before arriving in Finland, please take the following four actions. First, enroll at [www.abcevent.fi/registration](http://www.abcevent.fi/registration). In this address, you will be able to indicate any dietary restrictions. Second, pay the registration fee through your mobile bank. If you don't have access to a mobile bank, please contact us. Third, book your hotel room through [www.abcevent.fi/hotel](http://www.abcevent.fi/hotel) to be able to benefit from a discounted rate. Finally, if you have any questions, please contact us.

Even though the paragraph is only five lines long and it is well written with clear signposts (first, second, third and finally), it's still not easy to read.

**Example B: information written as a list**

Before arriving in Finland, please take the following four actions.

1. Enroll and indicate dietary restrictions at [www.abcevent.fi/registration](http://www.abcevent.fi/registration)
2. Pay the registration fee through your mobile bank or contact us for payment
3. Book your hotel room through [www.abcevent.fi/hotel](http://www.abcevent.fi/hotel) to benefit from a discounted rate
4. Contact us if you have any questions

Example B is easy to skim through; it's also clearly more inviting to read than A.

**Example C: information written as a list, with white space between items**

Before arriving in Finland, please take the following four actions.

1. Enroll and indicate dietary restrictions at [www.abcevent.fi/registration](http://www.abcevent.fi/registration)
2. Pay the registration fee through your mobile bank or contact us for payment
3. Book your hotel room through [www.abcevent.fi/hotel](http://www.abcevent.fi/hotel) to benefit from a discounted rate
4. Contact us if you have any questions

In example C, a small change has been introduced: a line between the items. It increases white space, which means the text breathes.

There is no definite right or wrong answer to which of the two previous examples (B or C) would be better. The latter one is a bit lighter and breathes more, but then again it takes up more space. Both alternatives have their advantages, and when you are writing, you often need to make choices between preferences like this. However, compared to the first example (A), the reader would be more likely to act if they were written as a list. In any case, it's easy to find out what action is required.

### 1.3 Conceptually and grammatically parallel headings and lists

To ensure that headings and lists help the reader as much as possible, it is crucial that they are both conceptually and grammatically parallel, i.e. equal.

#### Conceptual parallelism – making sure headings/listed items have the same relationship to the title of the document/list

Conceptual parallelism means that all of the headings or listed items have the same relationship to the title of the document or list, whether it be simply a heading or a longer introductory sentence. Having conceptual parallelism makes it as easy as possible for the reader to understand your points.

Compare the two lists (A & B).

#### List A: no conceptual parallelism

Here are the main findings:

- All the steps in the process were carefully monitored
- 15% of the raw material was defective
- The finished product was tested at 5 minute intervals
- 2% of the seals received insufficient adhesive

This list is not conceptually parallel. Points 1 and 3 describe how the research was carried out. Because the items are conceptually different, it is difficult to understand the key takeaways.

#### List B: conceptual parallelism

The pricing of the holiday apartments will depend on:

- location on the coast
- amenities in the neighbouring area
- number of bedrooms
- quality of furniture and fittings

This list is conceptually parallel. All the four items have the same relationship to the pricing of the apartments. It is easy to see and understand at a glance.

## Grammatical parallelism – making sure listed items start with similar grammatical structure

Grammatical parallelism simply means that each heading or listed point begins with a similar grammatical structure. Apart from strengthening the connection between the items in the list, this increases the readability of the text.

Here is one example how an email message to participants of a large event might look like:

Dear ABC event participants,

Here you will find instructions for what to do before our yearly event.

- 1. Enroll at [www.abcevent.fi/registration](http://www.abcevent.fi/registration)**  
Details ...
- 2. Pay the registration fee through your mobile bank**  
Details ...
- 3. Book your hotel room through [www.abcevent.fi/hotel](http://www.abcevent.fi/hotel)**  
Details ...

If you have any questions, just get in touch.

We look forward to seeing you all in Helsinki!

Best regards,

*Susanna Tammi*  
*Organizing team member*

Notice how all of the three headings here start with a verb to make them parallel with each other. Besides this, the action verbs make it clear to the reader what, exactly, they should do.

### 1.4 Enough white space

The last two points related to the design of the message may seem somewhat strange: white space and typography. However, in business writing they are vital because they make your text 'breathe' and can ensure an enjoyable reading experience.

To use enough – but not too much – white space, consider the following recommendations:

- Leave a couple of centimeters white space at either side of your text.
- Leave an empty line between paragraphs.
- Use single-space text.
- Write relatively short paragraphs, approximately 3-5 lines long. Make the first and last paragraph shorter than the rest to make sure your text begins and ends effectively.
- Ensure your headings stand out enough from the rest of the text, e.g. bolding.
- Consider leaving an empty line between items in a bulleted or numbered list. This also adds white space and helps the text breathe more, especially if the list is a bit longer.

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## 1.5 Easy to read typography

Finally, to make your document look good and consistent to the reader, consider the following two recommendations concerning typography:

### **Use emphatic fonts (bolding, italics, underlining) sparingly**

Typically, the main problem related to emphatic fonts is that we easily use them too much. That's how the text becomes restless and tires the eye. When you want to emphasize, your first option should be to put the information in a prominent position, such as a heading. If you still feel the need to highlight some words, then bolding, italics or underlining can direct the reader's eyes to important points.

### **Use lowercase text**

Because all caps reduces reading speed by up 13 to 20 percent, we should use lowercase as much as possible.<sup>1</sup>

Here are three examples to demonstrate why lowercase text is more reader-friendly.

1. THIS IS THE MOST DIFFICULT TO READ BECAUSE IT'S ALL CAPITALS.
2. Although You May See Headings Written Like This, It Isn't Much Easier Because Your Eye Has To Stop For A Fraction Of A Second Every Time You Come Across A Capital Letter.
3. This is by far the best and research clearly shows that you can read this a lot faster than the other two examples.

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<sup>1</sup> Scriver (1997)

## 2 Create a clear and logical structure

Whenever you are writing, you need to carefully consider what information you need to give to the readers to help them fully understand (informational objective) or accept (persuasive objective) your ideas. The same holds true for WhatsApp messages, emails, executive summaries, PowerPoint reports, and all other forms of writing.

To be able to decide what information to give, you need to define your objective and then put yourself in the audience's shoes to decide what content would best suit them and your objective. You want to neither *underestimate* nor *overestimate* their information needs by failing to provide enough background information or by giving too much information. Further, you should not give information that is too complex or unfamiliar.

Once you have decided what information to give, you will need to structure your text so that the reader can also understand your message the way you intend. The beginning and the end of the text are particularly important, which is why you'll find some recommendations for effective introductions and conclusions below.

### 2.1 Introduction – provide background, explain why you are writing, preview rest

The length of the introduction will depend on how familiar our reader is with the topic and the overall document length. If the content is something that they know about, then a clear subject line and a sentence or two may well be enough of an introduction. A longer document, particular one dealing with unfamiliar material, may well require a few paragraphs to put the content in context.

Introductions should accomplish three things: provide enough background information, explain why you are writing, and preview the rest of the document.

#### Provide enough background information

The amount of background information that you need to give will always depend on the context. Below are three examples to demonstrate different ways to do this.

#### Example A: referring to something the reader already knows

You can put your text in context by referring to something that the reader already knows or by referring to your earlier communications:

- As you know, the management team is in the process of reviewing...
- As we discussed last Friday, we have to agree on...

### Example B: referring to something you have been asked to do

You can refer to what someone asked you to do to put the text into context:

- You asked me to look into the question of ... Here are the latest figures for Seoul that you asked for.
- In your email of 21st June, you asked me to get back to you with suggestions for keeping our costs as low as possible. Here are my three suggestions that will help cut the costs within our branches...

### Example C: writing a 'first contact' email

If you are writing a 'first contact' email to someone who knows little or nothing about you or the subject you might begin as follows:

- Writer's introduction: *I am the HR Manager at ABC Apps... OR As the HR Manager of...*
- Brief background info: *As you may know, our organisation is planning to launch...*

### Explain why you are writing

Generally, you should go for BLUF (Bottom-Line-Up-Front) by stating both why you are writing and what you want the reader to do at the beginning of the message. Your reader is more likely to remember what needs to be done and act upon it if you place it at the beginning of the message. In fact, busy readers may never get to the end of the email and therefore they may not realize action is required if it is only stated at the end.

### Examples of how you can establish the reason for writing:

- Ms Walkowska asked me to arrange a working lunch for production supervisors in our Krakow plant sometime towards the end of this month.
- This email confirms the details of your visit to our Dublin production facility at the end of May. Could you please let me know whether you require...
- This report was commissioned by ABC Bank senior managers to
  1. gather comprehensive data about the present market situation in the Arkadia banking sector and
  2. provide recommendations of how to consolidate and further develop ABC's position as the first Internet-only bank in Arkadia.

### Preview the rest of the message

If you're writing a lengthier, more complex document, it is crucial to provide the reader with a brief overview of the content and an indication of how you've organized your ideas. This helps the reader understand your text.

#### Examples of previewing the rest of the message:

- This short report presents a description of our current financial situation, some alternative solutions, and our recommendations on how to effectively...
- This report presents observations, findings, and recommendations regarding effective website design. However, it does not provide any technical solutions for designing websites.

## 2.2 Closing section – reinforce key ideas, state action points, give deadlines, offer assistance, end on a positive note

No matter what type of message or document you are writing, it needs a closing section. Here are five alternatives:

### Reinforce the key ideas expressed in the body of the message

After the reader has read all of your information, you should close with a courteous ending that highlights the main document takeaways. For example,

- *I believe that by outsourcing these services we will be able to...*
- *We look forward to designing our new factory with your company.*

### State action points, i.e. what you wish to happen next

Unless the purpose of the message is simply to inform, you should finish with a clear call for action. What do you want your reader to do as a result of this message? You can use expressions such as

- *In order to take this process a stage further could you please let us have ...*
- *I'd appreciate it if you could let me have your comments by ...*

### Provide deadlines

People are busy and have tight schedules so it helps the reader prioritise if you provide fairly precise deadlines for information you want or when you'd like an action to occur. It might also be more effective if you give a reason for a particular deadline. E.g.

- *It would be great if you could get back to me by this Wednesday morning, as I need to get the proofs sent off to the publishers before the end of the week.*
- *Please send me your presentation slides by noon tomorrow so that I can put everyone's presentation in the same file before the meeting.*

### Offer further assistance if necessary

It is customary to end e.g. emails politely. In many cases you can do this by offering further assistance. For example, you might say:

- *I would be happy to carry out a survey of client responses to ...*
- *If we require more data on ... I would be happy to collate it for you.*
- *I would be glad to discuss these recommendations with you ...*

### End on a positive note

If you cannot use any of the above, you can (and often should) still end the message in a positive note. For example, you could say

- *Very much looking forward to working with you again.*
- *Looking forward to hearing from you.*
- *I'm looking forward to meeting you in the near future.*

## 2.3 Structure your paragraphs with the help of topic sentences and transitions

Although paragraphs in business writing are fairly short, it is still important to structure them clearly. A clear structure makes it more likely that you get your message across in the way you intended. It also makes the text more reader-friendly.

### Topic sentences introduce paragraphs

A topic sentence is the first sentence of a paragraph. It contains the central idea of the whole paragraph and also supports the controlling idea of your message. The rest of the paragraph develops this central idea.

Ideally, this *General-Specific structure* should be observed in all communication as it gives the reader/audience the big picture first and thus prepares the reader for what follows.

#### Effective use of topic sentence:

The sales report addresses three points in detail. First, xxx. Second, yyy. Finally, zzz.

#### No topic sentence, no General-Specific structure:

First, the sales report for Q3 shows a 20% increase in domestic sales. Second, sales to the EU area amounted to 123456 euros xxx. Finally, non-EU sales remained stable at 54321 euros zzz.

You should also consider how general to make your topic sentence. It should be general enough to cover all the information included in the paragraph but it should not be more general than necessary.

### Clear transitions make paragraphs easier to read

Clear transitions enable you to show how the ideas in the paragraph relate to one another. They thus ease the reader's job and ensure a smooth reading experience in much the same way as document design techniques.

Transitions accomplish two tasks: (1) they guide the reader through your text and (2) they give you an opportunity to interpret the text to the reader. For example, the reader may not know automatically that you mean something to be an example if it is not pointed out explicitly by the phrase "for example".

#### Here are examples of transitions.

1. Listing	-first, second, third -in the first place, following that, at a later stage -finally, in conclusion, lastly -equally, similarly, likewise, also, furthermore, moreover
2. Summarizing	to summarize, to sum up, in sum
3. Expressing consequence	as a consequence, consequently, accordingly, thus, therefore, as a result, for this reason
4. Focusing	in fact, in effect, indeed, in practice in particular, clearly
5. Contrasting	but, yet, however, nevertheless, on the contrary, in spite of this, despite, on the one hand – on the other hand, in contrast
6. Exemplifying	for example, for instance, e.g., that is, i.e., such as, to illustrate, a case in point

### A text without any transitions.

The ABC company should modify its language policy for several reasons. It should adopt one corporate language, English, which would be used for official communication in all subsidiaries. Performance appraisals should be available in this language. Corporate websites of our local units have been – and can be – in the local language. Our company needs to acknowledge the wide variety of languages used in everyday practice. Our employees speak more than 40 mother tongues. To require everybody to speak English at work would be unfeasible. We should target our language and communication training increasingly to our native English speakers, who represent a clear minority in our staff. Some native speakers' accents, speed and idiomatic expressions can be very challenging. Language training is costly when it is targeted at our large non-native English staff.

### A text with transitions showing how the writer wants the text to be interpreted.

The ABC company should modify its language policy for several reasons. **First**, it should adopt one corporate language, English, which would be used for official communication in all subsidiaries. **For example**, performance appraisals should be available in this language. **However**, corporate websites of our local units have been – and can be – in the local language. **Second**, our company needs to acknowledge the wide variety of languages used in everyday practice. **Indeed**, our employees speak more than 40 mother tongues. **Therefore**, to require everybody to speak English at work would be unfeasible. **Finally**, we should target our language and communication training increasingly to our native English speakers, who represent a clear minority in our staff. **To illustrate**, some native speakers' accents, speed and idiomatic expressions can be very challenging. **Moreover**, language training is costly when it is targeted at our large non-native English staff.

### 3 Choose an appropriate style

Style is about choice of words and expressions; they make your text formal or informal, professional or casual. There is no one writing style in business that is appropriate in all situations and for all readers. The style will always depend on who's writing to whom, and what we are trying to achieve, i.e. our communication objective.

In the business context, you have to write many different types of internal and external messages: sometimes you simply convey information, good news or routine requests, whereas other times you have to argue for a change, ask for favors, or deliver bad news messages. The type of message you're writing will itself define the style to choose. For instance, in a purely information-conveying type of message we can use a straightforward, matter-of-fact style as the situation is unlikely to be emotionally charged. In contrast, when conveying bad news, qualities such as diplomacy, tact and empathy may be crucial.

If the style is appropriate, your message is more likely to accomplish its task. If, however, you write in an inappropriate style there is the danger that you may make your reader feel uncomfortable or even annoyed. In addition, such a message does not only reflect negatively on you personally but also on the organization you work for.

The three examples below show how the choice of words and expressions create a different feel.

#### Examples of different styles:

- a) Do not hesitate to contact me if you have further questions or would like additional information. Our office hours are ...
- b) If you'd like more information, feel free to call me anytime between 8.00 and 16.30 Monday to Friday.
- c) Want to know more? Just give me a call. I'm in the office 8-16, Monday to Friday.

As communication is always context-bound, it's crucial that you analyze the situation carefully. Some situations require more sensitivity and politeness than others. Here are four general principles to bear in mind.

#### 3.1 Use a reader-centric 'you' attitude throughout

Write in terms of your reader's interests, preferences, and hopes. Put yourself in the reader's shoes: what's in it for them (WIIFT). Highlight reader benefits and outcomes, as in the following example:

*This event will give you (Ms Mäkinen in Mega-O) an excellent opportunity to meet high caliber graduates who would be excited to work for your organization.*

### 3.2 Express ideas in a kind and thoughtful manner

The amount of politeness that you choose to use is heavily context-bound and dependent on who's asking what of whom. Some questions that will define the level of politeness when you are making a request:

- Do you know the reader well or is this a first contact?
- Is it a routine request or are you asking for something special, a favor?
- How difficult is it for the reader to agree to what you're asking?

Here are a few common techniques that you can employ to soften your message and play down any possible conflict. Compare the two examples provided and think of how they would sound to you if you were the recipient.

- **Use of impersonal structures (the passive form, there is / are)**  
*You said you would send the components to us by the end of the week (sounds accusive). → We understood that the components would be sent by the end of the week.*
- **Use of modal verbs (would, could, may, might)**  
*This is a problem (harsh). → This might be a problem.*
- **Use of certain verbs (seem, appear, tend)**  
*You are unhappy with our proposal (abrupt, you+negative word) → It seems that you're not altogether happy with our proposal.*
- **Use of adverbs (slightly, somewhat, quite)**  
*We don't agree with you about (blunt). → We don't quite agree with you.*
- **Avoidance of negative adjectives**  
*That's a bad idea (blunt). → We feel that this might not be such a good approach.*

### 3.3 Emphasize the positive

Most information, even bad news, has some positive side that may make your message more acceptable. Compare, for example, the following two expressions:

1. *It is impossible to write the report today.*
2. *The report will be ready for you by 1 pm tomorrow.*

Which expression sounds more positive?

### 3.4 Use a salutation and complimentary close that reflects your relationship with the reader

How you begin (salutation) and end (complimentary close) your message matters because if you choose an inappropriate opening or closing you might easily annoy or even offend your reader. The opening and ending need to reflect your relationship with the reader.

So how should you begin, 'Dear Mr Lanzoni' or 'Hi Fabio!'? And how should you wrap it up: 'Sincerely', 'Best regards' or "Cheers"? The following table includes some basic rules:

<b>Formal messages</b>	<b>Salutation</b>	<b>Complimentary close</b>
1. Know the name, but have not written to them before	Dear Mr / Ms / Mrs / Miss + name, e.g.  Dear Mr Sypniewska Dear Ms Ang Bee Hong Dear Ms T H Schaefer  Note 1: Dear Ms + name is the most common way to address women, regardless of marital status. This is the best option unless the reader has a professional title such as 'Doctor' (Dr), which will then take precedence.  Note 2: If you do not know whether the recipient is a man or a woman, simply use the full name, e.g. Dear Eun-Young Park	Yours sincerely Sincerely yours Sincerely Cordially (Am.)
2. Write to a company or department	Dear Ladies and Gentlemen Dear Sirs (very formal)	Yours sincerely Sincerely yours Sincerely Cordially (Am.)
3. Do not have the recipient's name	Dear Sir / Madam Dear Sir or Madam Dear HR Manager	Yours sincerely Sincerely yours Sincerely Cordially (Am.)
4. Address groups of people	Dear All Dear Participants Members of the Board	
<b>Informal messages</b>		
1. Know the recipient	Dear + recipient's first name, e.g.  Dear Mehdi Hello Jaana Hi Marlotte	Best regards Kind regards Kindest regards
2. Write to a personal friend or close colleague	Hi Hi Peter Peter	BR Cheers By for now See you

## 4 Consider email DOs and DON'Ts

Because emails are one of the most common ways of communicating in the business world at the moment, here are some things to do and not do in emails to wrap up these business writing guidelines.

### 4.1 Email DOs

#### Use high-impact subject lines

Businesspeople receive dozens of emails every day and make quick decisions about which to read immediately, which to read later and which to delete. So, you should put the essence of your message in the subject line to ensure that your mail gets noticed and read promptly.

Avoid using vague, general subject lines which don't describe what the message contains. Make sure that the subject line clarifies what your message is about.

#### Examples of high-impact subject lines:

My comments on the TT3 project schedule
Need your comments on the agenda by Wednesday
Next steering group meeting - when?

#### Try to get everything on one screen

Try to get the main points on one screen. People often do not read long emails, so if the reader has to scroll the screen, they may miss important information.

#### Write reader-friendly text

Whenever you write an email, consider doing everything that you can to motivate the reader to read your message and to help them get your main point(s). Here are four ways to create reader-friendly text:

- Use short paragraphs: long, dense paragraphs are difficult to read especially on the screen.
- Use short sentences
- Use listing, numbering and headings to improve readability and emphasize key points

For example, if your questions are embedded in your text, chances are you will not get answers to all of them because the reader will fail to recognize them or simply overlook them especially when they are making a quick response. If you number your questions instead, you are more likely to get answers to all of them.

- Signpost the text to help reader see what is coming later on in the email. For example (the actual signposts are bolded in the examples):

*At this stage, I've got **three** questions. **1.** Xxxxx **2.** Xxx **3.** xxx*

*We've decided to divide the group into **4** distinct sub-groups ...*

### Go for BLUF (Bottom-Line-Up-Front)

Sometimes, you need to write a slightly longer email to convey all the important information. In these cases, remember that your reader is most likely going to read only the first few lines of the message thoroughly and then skim through the rest.

To ensure the recipient responds to you by a certain time with certain information, state both the summary of the main goal of the email and the required response in the first paragraph.

Here are examples of these:

- Summary the main goal of the email

*This email contains important information about our offsite session. Below you'll find the day's schedule in brief, names of the speakers and hotel arrangements.*

- Required response

*Please let us know by Tuesday at the latest whether you are attending the offsite.*

## 4.2 Email DON'Ts

### Don't send sensitive messages via email.

There are many subjects that are too sensitive to handle over email. Consider whether or not you want your message to be made public. Since it is so easy to forward email messages, think twice before you press the Send button. If you need to communicate sensitive information, consider another message channel.

### Don't be too informal

Whatever message channel you are using, you always have to consider the readership. An email is no different than any other communication. Your message should be written in a style and tone that is appropriate for the reader.

Informal language may not work well in emails. As there are no nonverbal clues to interpretation, there is always the danger that an email written in a casual, conversational style may well be misinterpreted. Flaming, misunderstandings leading to online confrontations, can occur because writers use an inappropriate style or tone. The writer's chatty style may be regarded as too direct, overfamiliar, or even rude. You should compensate for the lack of vocal tone and nonverbal cues by choosing words and phrases carefully.

### Don't overuse smileys

Consider your relationship with the reader before including virtual nonverbals. If your relationship is more casual, then using the symbols is fine. However, if your relationship is more formal, then it is best to refrain from using them.

### Don't overuse embedded text

Although it saves you time to write your response in the text you have received, it can be difficult for the reader to search for your reply. Even if you highlight embedded text, you can't

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always be sure that those points will be highlighted by the reader's system. Cutting and pasting sections that you wish to refer to can often be a more reader-friendly approach.

### Don't use ALL CAPS

Apart from the fact that the reader may think you are 'screaming' at them, all CAPS is exceedingly difficult to read.

## 5 References

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