Chapter 5

Writing Preparation

Before you write, think.

  - William Arthur Ward

Getting Started

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INTRODUCTORY EXERCISES

1. Identify a career you are interested in pursuing and do an online search for information about it, taking note of the number of results returned and a couple of the top ten sources. Compare your results with those of your classmates.
2. Visit your college or university library. Familiarize yourself with the resources available to business writers and choose one resource that you find especially valuable. Write a short summary of the resource to share with your classmates, explaining why you chose this resource.
3. In a business setting, describe some circumstances where it would it be appropriate to send a message by instant messaging, or by e-mail, or in a printed memo. Ask some colleagues or coworker what they consider the best option and why, and share the results with the class.

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No matter who you are, you were not born speaking English (or any other language), and were certainly not born writing. You learned to speak and to write and, like all humans, your skill in speaking and writing can continue to improve and adapt across your lifetime. The awareness of this simple fact should encourage you. If your writing has been well received in the past, congratulations. It may be that your skill in producing college-level essays has served you well. Still, the need for learning to produce clear, concise business writing may be a new skill for you. Even seasoned professional business communicators find it a challenge to present complex and dynamic relationships in a way that the audience can grasp at a glance, on a first read, or with minimal effort. If your writing has not been as well received in the past as you would like, this chapter will help you see the process from a perspective where attention to specific steps can lead to overall success.

In addition to your previous experiences, you will necessarily draw on the writing of others as you prepare for your writing effort. If you have ever fallen asleep on your textbook, you know that trying to absorb many pages of reading in a single session is not the best strategy for studying. In the same way, as you prepare to write a business document, you know that using the first search result listed on Google or Yahoo! is not the best strategy for success. You may be tempted to gather only the information that is most readily available, or that which confirms your viewpoint, but you will sell yourself short and may produce an inferior piece of writing.

Instead, you need to determine the purpose of your writing project; search for information, facts, and statistics to support your purpose; and remain aware of information that contradicts the message you are aiming to convey. Think of it as an exercise program. If you only do the easy exercises, and nothing else, you may develop a single muscle group, but will never gain real strength. What kinds of skills, or strengths, will you need in order to write well enough to succeed in your career? Solid research skills combined with effective preparation for writing involve a range of skill sets that require time and practice. The degree to which you make the extra effort will pay dividends throughout your career.

5.1 Think, Then Write: Writing Preparation

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LEARNING OBJECTIVES

1. Explain why preparation is important in business writing.
2. Think critically and employ strategies to overcome common fears of writing.

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"How do I prepare myself for writing?" is a common question and one that has no single correct answer. When do you do your best work? Whatever your work or task may be, it doesn't have to be writing. Some people work best in the morning, others only after their daily dose of coffee. Still others burn the midnight oil and work well late into the night while their colleagues lose their productive edge as the sun sets. "To thine own self be true," is a great idea when you have the freedom to choose when you work, but increasingly our lives are governed by schedules and deadlines that we do not control. You may have a deadline that requires you to work late at night when you recognize that you are far more productive early in the morning. If you can, consider one important step to writing success: know when you are most productive. If you cannot choose your timing, then dedication and perseverance are required. The job must be completed and the show must go on. Your effort demonstrates self-control and forbearance (as opposed to impatience and procrastination) and implies professionalism.

To be productive, you have to be alert, ready to work, and can accomplish tasks with relative ease. You will no doubt recognize that sometimes tasks take a lot longer, the solution is much harder to find, and you may find work more frustrating at other times. If you have the option, try to adjust your schedule so the writing tasks before you can be tackled at times when you are most productive, where you ability to concentrate is best, and when you are your most productive. If you don't have the option, focus clearly on the task before you.

Every individual is different, and what works for one person may be ineffective for someone else. One thing that professional writers agree on, however, is that you don't need to be in the "right mood" to write—and that, in fact, if you wait for the right mood to strike, you will probably never get started at all. Ernest Hemingway, who wrote some of the most famous novels of the twentieth century as well as hundreds of essays, articles, and short stories, advised writers to "work every day. No matter what has happened the day or night before, get up and bite on the

nail."Hemingway, E. (1999). *Ernest Hemingway on writing* (L. W. Phillips, Ed.). New York, NY: Simon & Schuster Adult Publishing Group.

In order for your work to be productive, you will need to focus your attention on your writing. The stereotype of the writer tucked away in an attic room or a cabin in the woods, lost in the imaginary world created by the words as they flow onto the page, is only a stereotype. Our busy lives involve constant interruption. In a distraction-prone business environment, much of your writing will be done while colleagues are talking on the phone, having face-to-face conversations as they walk by, and possibly stopping at your desk to say hello or ask a question. Your phone may ring or you may have incoming instant messages (IMs) that need to be answered quickly. These unavoidable interruptions make it even more important to develop a habit of concentrating when you write.

The mind has been likened to a brace of wild horses; if you have ever worked with horses, you know they each have a mind of their own. Taken individually they can be somewhat manageable, but together they can prove to be quite a challenge. Our minds can multitask and perform several tasks simultaneously, but we can also get easily distracted. We can get sidetracked and lose valuable time away from our designated task. Our ability to concentrate is central to our ability to write effectively, whether we work alone or as part of a team.

In many business situations, you may not be writing solo but instead collaborating on a document with various coworkers, vendors, or customers. The ability to concentrate is perhaps even more important in these group writing situations.Nickerson, R. S., Perkins, D. N., & Smith, E. E. (1985). *The teaching of thinking.* Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erbaum Associates. In this discussion, we'll consider the writing process from a singular perspective, where you are personally responsible for planning, researching, and producing a product of writing. In other areas of this text we also consider the collaborative process, its strengths and weaknesses, and how to negotiate and navigate the group writing process.

Thinking Critically

As you approach your writing project, it is important to practice the habit of thinking critically. **Critical thinking**[1] can be defined as "self-directed, self-disciplined, self-monitored, and self-corrective thinking."Paul, R., & Elder, L. (2007). *The miniature guide to critical thinking: Concepts and tools.* Dillon Beach, CA: The Foundation for Critical Thinking Press. It is the difference between watching television in a daze versus analyzing a movie with attention to its use of lighting, camera angles, and music to influence the audience. One activity requires very little

1. "Self-directed, self-disciplined, self-monitored, and self-corrective thinking."

mental effort, while the other requires attention to detail, the ability to compare and contrast, and sharp senses to receive all the stimuli.

As a habit of mind, critical thinking requires established standards and attention to their use, effective communication, problem solving, and a willingness to acknowledge and address our own tendency for confirmation bias, egocentrism, and sociocentrism. We'll use the phrase "habit of mind" because clear, critical thinking is a habit that requires effort and persistence. People do not start an exercise program, a food and nutrition program, or a stop-smoking program with 100 percent success the first time. In the same way, it is easy to fall back into lazy mental short cuts, such as "If it costs a lot, it must be good," when in fact the statement may very well be false. You won't know until you gather information that supports (or contradicts) the assertion.

As we discuss getting into the right frame of mind for writing, keep in mind that the same recommendations apply to reading and research. If you only pay attention to information that reinforces your existing beliefs and ignore or discredit information that contradicts your beliefs, you are guilty of **confirmation bias**[2].Gilovich, T. (1993). *How we know what isn't so: The fallibility of human reason in everyday life.* New York, NY: The Free Press. As you read, research, and prepare for writing, make an effort to gather information from a range of reliable sources, whether or not this information leads to conclusions you didn't expect. Remember that those who read your writing will be aware of, or have access to, this universe of data as well and will have their own confirmation bias. Reading and writing from an audience-centered view means acknowledging your confirmation bias and moving beyond it to consider multiple frames of references, points of view, and perspectives as you read, research, and write.

Egocentrism and sociocentrism are related concepts to confirmation bias. **Egocentrism**[3] can be defined as the use of self-centered standards to determine what to believe and what to reject. Similarly, **sociocentrism**[4] involves the use of society-centered standards.Paul, R., & Elder, L. (2007). *The miniature guide to critical thinking: Concepts and tools.* Dillon Beach, CA: The Foundation for Critical Thinking Press. Both ways of thinking create an "us versus them" relationship that can undermine your credibility and alienate readers who don't share your viewpoint.

This leads to confirmation bias and groupthink, resulting in false conclusions with little or no factual support for a belief. If a person believes the earth is flat and never questions that belief, it serves as an example of egocentric thinking. The person believes it is true even though he has never questioned why he believes it. If the person decides to look for information but only finds information that supports his pre-existing belief, ignoring or discrediting information that contradicts that

2. When you only pay attention to information that reinforces your existing beliefs, and ignore or discredit information that contradicts your beliefs.

3. The use of self-centered standards to determine what to believe and what to reject.

4. Involves the use of society-centered standards.

belief, he is guilty of confirmation bias. If he believes the earth is flat because everyone in his group or community believes it, even though he himself has never questioned or confirmed the belief, he is guilty of sociocentrism.

In each case, the false thinking strategy leads to poor conclusions. Watch out for your tendency to read, write, and believe that which reflects only what you think you know without solid research and clear, critical thinking.

Overcoming Fear of Writing

For many people, one of the most frightening things in life is public speaking. For similar reasons, whether rational or irrational, writing often generates similar fears. There is something about exposing one's words to possible criticism that can be truly terrifying. In this chapter, we are going to break down the writing process into small, manageable steps that, in turn, will provide you with a platform for success. To take advantage of these steps, you need to acknowledge any reluctance or fear that may be holding you back, and bring your interests and enthusiasm to this discussion on writing.

Having a positive attitude about writing in general, and your effort, is also a key ingredient to your success. If you approach a writing assignment with trepidation and fear, you will spend your valuable time and attention in ways that do not contribute positively to your writing. People often fear the writing process because of three main reasons:

1. Negative orientation
2. Risk of failure
3. Fear of the unknown

Let's take each reason in turn. Negative orientation means the writer has a pre-existing negative association or view of the task or activity. We tend to like people who like us,Gudykunst, W. B., & Kim, Y. Y. (1997). *Communicating with strangers: An approach to intercultural communication* (3rd ed.). New York, NY: McGraw-Hill. tend to pursue activities where we perceive rewards and appreciation for our efforts, and are more likely to engage in activities where we perceive we are successful. Conversely, we tend to not like people who we perceive as not like us, tend to ignore or avoid activities where we perceive we are not appreciated or are not rewarded, and are less likely to engage in activities where we perceive we are not successful. For some writers, previous experiences have led to a pre-existing association with writing. That association may be positive if they have been encouraged, affirmed, or rewarded as they demonstrated measurable gain. That

association may also be negative if efforts have been met with discouraging feedback, a lack of affirmation, or negative reinforcement.

Effective business writing is a highly valued skill, and regardless of the degree to which writing will be a significant aspect of your designated job duties, your ability to do it well will be a boost to your career. If you have a negative orientation toward writing, admitting this fact is an important first step. Next, we need to actively seek ways to develop your skills in ways that will demonstrate measurable gain and lead to positive affirmation. Not everyone develops in the same way on the same schedule, and measurable gain means that from one writing assignment to the next you can demonstrate positive progress. In an academic setting, measurable gain is one of your clear goals as a writer. In a business or industry setting, you may lack the time to revise and improve, meaning that you will need to get it right the first time. Take advantage of the academic setting to set positive, realistic goals to improve your writing. Surround yourself with resources, including people who will help you reach your goal. If your college or university has a writing center, take advantage of it. If it does not, seek out assistance from those whose writing has been effective and well received.

It is a given that you do not want to fail. Risk of failure is a common fear across public speaking and writing situations, producing predictable behavioral patterns we can recognize, address, and resolve. In public speaking, our minds may go blank at the start of a presentation as we confront our fear of failure. In writing, we may experience a form of blankness often referred to as "writer's block"—the overwhelming feeling of not knowing what to write or where to start—and sit helplessly waiting for our situation to change.

But we have the power to change our circumstances and to overcome our risk of failure. You may be familiar with the concept of a rough draft, but it may compete in your mind with a desire for perfection. Writing is a dynamic process, a reflection of the communication process itself. It won't be perfect the first time you attempt it. Awareness that your rough draft serves a purpose, but doesn't represent your final product, should serve in the same way a rehearsal for a speech serves a speaker. You get a second (or third) chance to get it right. Use this process to reduce your fear of failure and let go of your perfectionist tendencies, if only for a moment. Your desire for perfection will serve you well when it comes to polishing your finished document, but everything has its time and place. Learning where and when to place your effort is part of writing preparation.

Finally, we often fear the unknown. It is part of being human, and is reflected across all contexts, including public speaking and writing. If you have never given a speech before, your first time on stage can be quite an ordeal. If you have never written a

formal business report, your fear of the unknown is understandable. How can you address this fear? Make the unknown known. If we take the mystery out of the process and product, we can see it for its essential components, its organizational pattern, and start to see how our product may look before we even start to produce it. In many organizations, you can ask your supervisor or coworkers for copies of similar documents to the one you have been assigned, even if the content is quite different. If this is not an option, simply consider the way most documents in your company are written—even something as basic as an interoffice e-mail will provide some clues. Your goal is to become familiar with the type of document and to examine several successful examples. Once you see a couple of reports, you will have a better feel for what you have to produce and the unknown will be far less mysterious.

KEY TAKEAWAY

There are several reasons why people fear writing, but there are also several strategies to reduce or eliminate those fears.

EXERCISES

1. How would you describe your orientation to writing? Where does this orientation come from? Discuss your thoughts with a classmate.
2. If you could identify one aspect of your writing you would like to improve, what would it be and why? Write a one- two-page essay on this subject.
3. What kinds of writing do you like? Dislike? Explain why and provide an example of each. Share and compare with the class.
4. Who is your favorite author? What do you like about her or his writing? Discuss your opinion with a classmate.

5.2 A Planning Checklist for Business Messages

> ### LEARNING OBJECTIVES
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> 1. Understand who, what, where, when, why, and how as features of writing purpose.
> 2. Describe the planning process and essential elements of a business document.

John Thill and Courtland Bovee,Thill, J. V., & Bovee, C. L. (2004). *Business communication today* (8th ed.). Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall. two leading authors in the field of business communication, have created a checklist for planning business messages. The following twelve-item checklist, adapted here, serves as a useful reminder of the importance of preparation in the writing process:

1. Determine your general purpose: are you trying to inform, persuade, entertain, facilitate interaction, or motivate a reader?
2. Determine your specific purpose (the desired outcome).
3. Make sure your purpose is realistic.
4. Make sure your timing is appropriate.
5. Make sure your sources are credible.
6. Make sure the message reflects positively on your business.
7. Determine audience size.
8. Determine audience composition.
9. Determine audience knowledge and awareness of topic.
10. Anticipate probable responses.
11. Select the correct channel.
12. Make sure the information provided is accurate, ethical, and pertinent.

Throughout this chapter we will examine these various steps in greater detail.

Determining Your Purpose

Preparation for the writing process involves purpose, research and investigation, reading and analyzing, and adaptation. In the first section we consider how to determine the purpose of a document, and how that awareness guides the writer to effective product.

While you may be free to create documents that represent yourself or your organization, your employer will often have direct input into their purpose. All acts of communication have general and specific purposes, and the degree to which you can identify these purposes will influence how effective your writing is. **General purposes**[5] involve the overall goal of the communication interaction: to inform, persuade, entertain, facilitate interaction, or motivate a reader. The general purpose influences the presentation and expectation for feedback. In an informative message—the most common type of writing in business—you will need to cover several predictable elements:

- Who
- What
- When
- Where
- How
- Why (optional)

Some elements may receive more attention than others, and they do not necessarily have to be addressed in the order you see here. Depending on the nature of your project, as a writer you will have a degree of input over how you organize them.

Note that the last item, *Why*, is designated as optional. This is because business writing sometimes needs to report facts and data objectively, without making any interpretation or pointing to any cause-effect relationship. In other business situations, of course, identifying why something happened or why a certain decision is advantageous will be the essence of the communication.

In addition to its general purpose (e.g., to inform, persuade, entertain, or motivate), every piece of writing also has at least one specific purpose, which is the intended outcome; the result that will happen once your written communication has been read.

For example, imagine that you are an employee in a small city's housing authority and have been asked to draft a letter to city residents about radon. Radon is a naturally occurring radioactive gas that has been classified by the United States Environmental Protection Agency as a health hazard. In the course of a routine test, radon was detected in minimal levels in an apartment building operated by the housing authority. It presents a relatively low level of risk, but because the incident was reported in the local newspaper, the mayor has asked the housing authority director to be proactive in informing all the city residents of the situation.

5. The overall goal of the communication interaction: to inform, persuade, entertain, facilitate interaction, or motivate a reader.

The general purpose of your letter is to inform, and the specific purpose is to have a written record of informing all city residents about how much radon was found, when, and where; where they can get more information on radon; and the date, time, and place of the meeting. Residents may read the information and attend or they may not even read the letter. But once the letter has been written, signed, and distributed, your general and specific purposes have been accomplished.

Now imagine that you begin to plan your letter by applying the above list of elements. Recall that the letter informs residents on three counts: (1) the radon finding, (2) where to get information about radon, and (3) the upcoming meeting. For each of these pieces of information, the elements may look like the following:

1. Radon Finding

   ◦ Who: The manager of the apartment building (give name)
   ◦ What: Discovered a radon concentration of 4.1 picocuries per liter (pCi/L) and reported it to the housing authority director, who informed the city health inspector, environmental compliance office, and mayor
   ◦ When: During the week of December 15
   ◦ Where: In the basement of the apartment building located at (give address)
   ◦ How: In the course of performing a routine annual test with a commercially available do-it-yourself radon test kit

2. Information about radon

   ◦ Who: According to the city health inspector and environmental compliance officer
   ◦ What: Radon is a naturally occurring radioactive gas that results from the breakdown of uranium in soil; a radon test level above 4.0 pCi/L may be cause for concern
   ◦ When: Radon levels fluctuate from time to time, so further testing will be done; in past years, test results were below 4.0 pCi/L
   ◦ Where: More information is available from the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency or the state radon office
   ◦ How: By phone, mail, or on the Internet (provide full contact information for both sources)
   ◦ Why: To become better informed and avoid misunderstandings about radon, its health risks, and the meaning of radon test results

3. City meeting about radon

   ◦ Who: All city residents are welcome

- ◦ What: Attend an informational meeting where the mayor, director of the housing authority, city health inspector, and city environmental compliance officer will speak and answer questions
- ◦ When: Monday, January 7, at 7 p.m.
- ◦ Where: City hall community room
- ◦ Why: To become better informed and avoid misunderstandings about radon, its health risks, and the meaning of radon test results

Once you have laid out these elements of your informative letter, you have an outline from which it will be easy to write the actual letter.

Your effort serves as a written record of correspondence informing them that radon was detected, which may be one of the specific or primary purposes. A secondary purpose may be to increase attendance at the town hall meeting, but you will need feedback from that event to determine the effectiveness of your effort.

Figure 5.1

Communication about health care concerns requires careful planning and preparation.

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Now imagine that instead of being a housing authority employee, you are a city resident who receives that informative letter, and you happen to operate a business as a certified radon mitigation contractor. You may decide to build on this information and develop a persuasive message. You may draft a letter to the homeowners and landlords in the neighborhood near the building in question. To make your message persuasive, you may focus on the perception that radiation is inherently dangerous and that no amount of radon has been declared safe. You may cite external authorities that indicate radon is a contributing factor to several health ailments, and even appeal to emotions with phrases like "protect your children" and "peace of mind." Your letter will probably encourage readers to check with the state radon office to verify that you are a certified contractor, describe the services you provide, and indicate that friendly payment terms can be arranged.

Credibility, Timing, and Audience

6. Qualities, capabilities, or power to elicit from the audience belief in one's character.

At this point in the discussion, we need to visit the concept of credibility. **Credibility**[6], or the perception of integrity of the message based on an association with the source, is central to any communication act. If the audience perceives the

letter as having presented the information in an impartial and objective way, perceives the health inspector's and environmental compliance officer's expertise in the field as relevant to the topic, and generally regards the housing authority in a positive light, they will be likely to accept your information as accurate. If, however, the audience does not associate trust and reliability with your message in particular and the city government in general, you may anticipate a lively discussion at the city hall meeting.

In the same way, if the reading audience perceives the radon mitigation contractor's letter as a poor sales pitch without their best interest or safety in mind, they may not respond positively to its message and be unlikely to contact him about any possible radon problems in their homes. If, however, the sales letter squarely addresses the needs of the audience and effectively persuades them, the contractor may look forward to a busy season.

Returning to the original housing authority scenario, did you consider how your letter might be received, or the fear it may have generated in the audience? In real life you don't get a second chance, but in our academic setting, we can go back and take more time on our assignment, using the twelve-item checklist we presented earlier. Imagine that you are the mayor or the housing authority director. Before you assign an employee to send a letter to inform residents about the radon finding, take a moment to consider how realistic your purpose is. As a city official, you may want the letter to serve as a record that residents were informed of the radon finding, but will that be the only outcome? Will people be even more concerned in response to the letter than they were when the item was published in the newspaper? Would a persuasive letter serve the city's purposes better than an informative one?

Another consideration is the timing. On the one hand, it may be important to get the letter sent as quickly as possible, as the newspaper report may have already aroused concerns that the letter will help calm. On the other hand, given that the radon was discovered in mid-December, many people are probably caught up in holiday celebrations. If the letter is mailed during the week of Christmas, it may not get the attention it deserves. After January 1, everyone will be paying more attention to their mail as they anticipate the arrival of tax-related documents or even the dreaded credit card statement. If the mayor has scheduled the city hall meeting for January 7, people may be unhappy if they only learn about the meeting at the last minute. Also consider your staff; if many of them will be gone over the holidays, there may not be enough staff in place to respond to phone calls that will likely come in response to the letter, even though the letter advises residents to contact the state radon office and the Environmental Protection Agency.

Next, how credible are the sources cited in the letter? If you as a housing authority employee have been asked to draft it, to whom should it go once you have it written? The city health inspector and environmental compliance officer are mentioned as sources; will they each read and approve the letter before it is sent? Is there someone at the county, state, or even the federal level who can, or should, check the information before it is sent?

The next item on the checklist is to make sure the message reflects positively on your business. In our hypothetical case, the "business" is city government. The letter should acknowledge that city officials and employees are servants of the taxpayers. "We are here to serve you" should be expressed, if not in so many words, in the tone of the letter.

The next three items on the checklist are associated with the audience profile: audience size, composition, knowledge, and awareness of the topic. Since your letter is being sent to all city residents, you likely have a database from which you can easily tell how many readers constitute your audience. What about audience composition? What else do you know about the city's residents? What percentage of households includes children? What is the education level of most of the residents? Are there many residents whose first language is not English; if so, should your letter be translated into any other languages? What is the range of income levels in the city? How well informed are city residents about radon? Has radon been an issue in any other buildings in the city in recent years? The answers to these questions will help determine how detailed the information in your letter should be.

Finally, anticipate probable responses. Although the letter is intended to inform, could it be misinterpreted as an attempt to "cover up" an unacceptable condition in city housing? If the local newspaper were to reprint the letter, would the mayor be upset? Is there someone in public relations who will be doing media interviews at the same time the letter goes out? Will the release of information be coordinated, and if so by whom?

One additional point that deserves mention is the notion of decision makers. Even if your overall goal is to inform or persuade, the basic mission is to simply communicate. Establishing a connection is a fundamental aspect of the communication audience, and if you can correctly target key decision makers you increase your odds for making the connection with those you intend to inform or persuade. Who will open the mail, or e-mail? Who will act upon it? The better you can answer those questions, the more precise you can be in your writing efforts.

In some ways this is similar to asking your professor to write a letter of recommendation for you, but to address it to "to whom it may concern." If you can provide a primary contact name for the letter of recommendation it will increase its probable impact on the evaluation process. If your goal is to get a scholarship or a job offer, you want to take the necessary steps to increase your positive impact on the audience.

Communication Channels

Purpose is closely associated with channel. We need to consider the purpose when choosing a channel. From source to receiver, message to channel, feedback to context, environment, and interference, all eight components play a role in the dynamic process. While writing often focuses on an understanding of the receiver (as we've discussed) and defining the purpose of the message, the channel—or the "how" in the communication process—deserves special mention.

So far, we have discussed a simple and traditional channel of written communication: the hardcopy letter mailed in a standard business envelope and sent by postal mail. But in today's business environment, this channel is becoming increasingly rare as electronic channels become more widely available and accepted.

When is it appropriate to send an instant message (IM) or text message versus a conventional e-mail or fax? What is the difference between a letter and a memo? Between a report and a proposal? Writing itself is the communication medium, but each of these specific channels has its own strengths, weaknesses, and understood expectations that are summarized in Table 5.1 "Written Communication Channels".

Table 5.1 Written Communication Channels

Channel	Strengths	Weaknesses	Expectations	W
IM or Text Message	• Very fast • Good for rapid exchanges of small amounts of information • Inexpensive	• Informal • Not suitable for large amounts of information • Abbreviations lead to misunderstandings	Quick response	

Channel	Strengths	Weaknesses	Expectations	W

Channel	Strengths	Weaknesses	Expectations
E-mail	• Fast • Good for relatively fast exchanges of information • "Subject" line allows compilation of many messages on one subject or project • Easy to distribute to multiple recipients • Inexpensive	• May hit "send" prematurely • May be overlooked or deleted without being read • "Reply to all" error • "Forward" error • Large attachments may cause the e-mail to be caught in recipient's spam filter	Normally a response is expected within 24 hours, although norms vary by situation and organizational culture
Fax	• Fast	• Receiving issues (e.g.,	Normally, a long (multiple page) fax is not expected

Channel	Strengths	Weaknesses	Expectations	
	• Provides documentation	the receiving machine may be out of paper or toner) • Long distance telephone charges apply • Transitional telephone-based technology losing popularity to online information exchange		
Memo	• Official but less formal than a letter • Clearly shows who sent it, when, and to whom	• Memos sent through e-mails can get deleted without review • Attachments can get removed by spam filters	Normally used internally in an organization to communicate directives from management on policy and procedure, or documentation	Yo gei org
Letter	• Formal • Letterhead represents your company	• May get filed or thrown away unread	Specific formats associated with specific purposes	Yo pei or do cor

Channel	Strengths	Weaknesses	Expectations	
	and adds credibility	• Cost and time involved in printing, stuffing, sealing, affixing postage, and travel through the postal system		
Report	Significant time for preparation and production	Requires extensive research and documentation	Specific formats for specific purposes; generally reports are to inform	Yo rel am int
Proposal	Significant time for preparation and production	Requires extensive research and documentation	Specific formats for specific purposes; generally proposals are to persuade	Yo au arg

By choosing the correct channel for a message, you can save yourself many headaches and increase the likelihood that your writing will be read, understood, and acted upon in the manner you intended.

Our discussion of communication channels would not be complete without mentioning the issues of privacy and security in electronic communications. The American Management AssociationAmerican Management Association. (2007). *Electronic monitoring & surveillance survey: Over half of all employers combined fire workers for e-mail & Internet abuse.* Retrieved from http://press.amanet.org/press-releases/177/2007-electronic-monitoring-surveillance-survey estimates that about two thirds of employers monitor their employees' electronic communications or Internet use. When you call and leave a voice message for a friend or colleague at work, do you know where your message is stored? There was a time when the

message may have been stored on an analog cassette in an answering machine, or even on a small pink handwritten note which a secretary deposited in your friend's in-box. Today the "where" is irrelevant, as the in-box is digital and can be accessed from almost anywhere on the planet. That also means the message you left, with the representation of your voice, can be forwarded via e-mail as an attachment to anyone. Any time you send an IM, text, or e-mail or leave a voice message, your message is stored on more than one server, and it can be intercepted or forwarded to persons other than the intended receiver. Are you ready for your message to be broadcast to the world? Do your words represent you and your business in a positive light?

Newsweek columnist Jennifer Ordoñez raises this question when she writes, "For desk jockeys everywhere, it has become as routine as a tour of the office-supply closet: the consent form attesting that you understand and accept that any e-mails you write, Internet sites you visit or business you conduct on your employer's computer network are subject to inspection."Ordoñez, J. (2008, July 14). *The technologist: They can't hide their pryin' eyes*. Retrieved from http://www.newsweek.com/id/143737 As you use MySpace, update your Facebook page, get LinkedIn, Twitter, text, and IM, you leave an electronic trail of "bread crumbs" that merge personal and professional spheres, opening up significant issues of privacy. In our discussion we address research for specific business document production, and all the electronic research conducted is subject to review. While the case law is evolving as the technology we use to interface expands, it is wise to consider that anything you write or record can and will be stored for later retrieval by people for whom your message was not initially intended.

In terms of writing preparation, you should review any electronic communication before you send it. Spelling and grammatical errors will negatively impact your credibility. With written documents we often take time and care to get it right the first time, but the speed of IM, text, or e-mail often deletes this important review cycle of written works. Just because the document you prepare in IM is only one sentence long doesn't mean it can't be misunderstood or expose you to liability. Take time when preparing your written messages, regardless of their intended presentation, and review your work before you click "send."

KEY TAKEAWAY

Choose the most effective channel for your document and consider the possible ramifications of what you have written before you send it.

EXERCISES

1. Write a one-page letter to a new customer introducing a new product or service. Compare your result to the letters your classmates wrote. What do the letters have in common? How do they differ from one another?
2. Write a memo that addresses a new norm or protocol, such as the need to register with a new company that will be handling all the organization's business-related travel, with specific expectations including what information is needed, when, and to whom.
3. Make a list of the written communication that you read, skim, or produce in a one day. Please share your results with the class.

5.3 Research and Investigation: Getting Started

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

1. Compare and contrast ways of knowing your reading audience.
2. Conduct research and investigation to gather information.

Clearly, not every piece of business writing requires research or investigation. If you receive an e-mail asking for the correct spelling of your boss's name and her official title, you will probably be able to answer without having to look anything up. But what if the sender of the e-mail wants to know who in your company is the decision maker for purchasing a certain supply item? Unless you work for a very small company, you will likely have to look through the organizational chart, and possibly make a phone call or two, before you are able to write an e-mail answering this question. There—you have just done the research for a piece of business writing.

Even if you need to write something much more complex than an e-mail, such as a report or proposal, research does not have to be all about long hours at a library. Instead, start by consulting with business colleagues who have written similar documents and ask what worked, what didn't work, what was well received by management and the target audience. Your efforts will need to meet similar needs. Your document will not stand alone but will exist within a larger agenda. How does your proposed document fit within this agenda at your place of work, within the larger community, or with the target audience? It's worth noting that the word "investigation" contains the word "invest." You will need to invest your time and effort to understand the purpose and goal of your proposed document.

Before you go to the library, look over the information sources you already have in hand. Do you regularly read a magazine that relates to the topic? Was there an article in the newspaper you read that might work? Is there a book, CD-ROM or mp3 that has information you can use? Think of what you want the audience to know and how you could show it to them. Perhaps a famous quote or a line from a poem may make an important contribution to your document. You might even know someone that has experience in the area you want to research, someone who has been involved with skydiving locally for his or her whole life. Consider how you are going to tell and show your audience what your document is all about.

Once you have an assignment or topic, know your general and specific purposes, and have good idea of your reader's expectations, it's time to gather information. Your best sources may be all around you, within your business or organization. Information may come from reports from the marketing department or even from a trusted and well-versed colleague, but you will still need to do your homework. After you have written several similar documents for your organization, you may have your collection of sample documents, but don't be tempted to take shortcuts and "repurpose" existing documents to meet a tight deadline. Creating an original work specifically tailored to the issue and audience at hand is the best approach to establish credibility, produce a more effective document, and make sure no important aspect of your topic is left out.

Narrowing Your Topic

By now you have developed an idea of your topic, but even with a general and specific purpose, you may still have a broad subject that will be a challenge to cover within the allotted time before the deadline. You might want to revisit your purpose and ask yourself, how specific is my topic?

Imagine that you work for a local skydiving training facility. Your boss has assembled a list of people who might be candidates for skydiving and asks you to write a letter to them. Your general purpose is to persuade, and your specific purpose is to increase the number of students enrolled in classes. You've decided that skydiving is your topic area and you are going to tell your audience how exhilarating the experience is, discuss the history and basic equipment, cover the basic requirements necessary to go on a first jump, and provide reference information on where your audience could go to learn more (links and Web sites, for example).

But at this point you might find that a one-page letter simply is not enough space for the required content. Rather than expand the letter to two pages and risk losing the reader, consider your audience and what they might want to learn. How can you narrow your topic to better consider their needs? As you edit your topic, considering what the essential information is and what can be cut, you'll come to focus on the key points naturally and reduce the pressure on yourself to cover too much information in a limited space environment.

Perhaps starting with a testimony about a client's first jump, followed by basic equipment and training needed, and finally a reference to your organization may help you define your document. While the history may be fascinating, and may serve as a topic in itself for another day, it may add too much information in this persuasive letter. Your specific purpose may be to increase enrollment, but your

general goal will be to communicate goodwill and establish communication. If you can get your audience to view skydiving in a positive light and consider the experience for themselves, or people they know, you have accomplished your general purpose.

Focus on Key Points

As a different example, let's imagine that you are the office manager for a pet boarding facility that cares for dogs and cats while their owners are away. The general manager has asked you to draft a memo to remind employees about safety practices. Your general purpose is twofold: to inform employees about safety concerns and to motivate them to engage in safe work practices. Your specific purpose is also twofold: to prevent employees from being injured or infected with diseases on the job, and to reduce the risk of the animal patients being injured or becoming sick while in your care.

You are an office manager, not a veterinary or medical professional, and clearly there are volumes written about animal injuries and illnesses, not to mention entire schools devoted to teaching medicine to doctors who care for human patients. In a short memo you cannot hope to cover all possible examples of injury or illness. Instead, focus on the following behaviors and situations you observe:

- Do employees wash their hands thoroughly before and after contact with each animal?
- Are hand-washing facilities kept clean and supplied with soap and paper towels?
- When cleaning the animals' cages, do employees wear appropriate protection such as gloves?
- What is the procedure for disposing of animal waste, and do all employees know and follow the procedure?
- When an animal is being transferred from one cage to another, are there enough staff members present to provide backup assistance in case the animal becomes unruly?
- What should an employee do if he or she is bitten or scratched?
- What if an animal exhibits signs of being ill?
- Have there been any recent incidents that raised concerns about safety?

Once you have posed and answered questions like these, it should be easier to narrow down the information so that the result is a reasonably brief, easy to read memo that will get employees' attention and persuade them to adopt safe work practices.

Planning Your Investigation for Information

Now let's imagine that you work for a small accounting firm whose president would like to start sending a monthly newsletter to clients and prospective clients. He is aware of newsletter production service vendors that provide newsletters to represent a particular accounting firm. He has asked you to compile a list of such services, their prices and practices, so that the firm can choose one to employ.

If you are alert, you will begin your planning immediately, while your conversation with the president is still going on, as you will need more information before you can gauge the scope of the assignment. Approximately how many newsletter vendors does your president want to know about—is three or four enough? Would twenty be too many? Is there a set budget figure that the newsletter cost must not exceed? How soon does your report need to be done?

Once you have these details, you will be able to plan when and where to gather the needed information. The smartest place to begin is right in your office. If the president has any examples of newsletters he has seen from other businesses, you can examine them and note the contact information of the companies that produced them. You may also have an opportunity to ask coworkers if they know or even have copies of any such newsletters.

Assuming that your president wants to consider more than just a couple of vendors, you will need to expand your search. The next logical place to look is the Internet. In some companies, employees have full Internet access from their office computers; other companies provide only a few terminals with Internet access. Some workplaces allow no Internet access; if this is the case, you can visit your nearest public library.

As anyone who has spent an entire evening aimlessly Web surfing can attest, the Internet is a great place to find loads and loads of interesting but irrelevant information. Knowing what questions you are seeking to answer will help you stay focused on your report's topic, and knowing the scope of the report will help you to decide how much research time to plan in your schedule.

Staying Organized

Once you open up a Web browser such as Google and type in a search parameter like "newsletter production," you will have a wealth of information to look at. Much of it may be irrelevant, but even the information that fits with your project will be so much that you will be challenged to keep track of it.

Perhaps the most vital strategy for staying organized while doing online research is to open a blank page in your word processor and title it "Sources." Each time you find a Web page that contains what you believe may be useful and relevant information, copy the URL and paste it on this Sources page. Under the URL, copy and paste a paragraph or two as an example of the information you found on this Web page. Err on the side of listing too many sources; if in doubt about a source, list it for the time being—you can always discard it later. Having these source URLs and snippets of information all in one place will save you a great deal of time and many headaches later on.

As you explore various Web sites of companies that provide newsletter production services, you will no doubt encounter new questions that your president did not answer in the original conversation:

- Does the newsletter need to be printed on paper and mailed? Or would an e-mail newsletter be acceptable, or even preferable?
- Does your firm want the newsletter vendor to write all of the content customized to your firm, provide a menu of pre-existing articles for your firm to choose from, or let your firm provide some—or even all—of the content?
- What are the advantages and disadvantages of these various options?

You also realize that in order to get any cost estimates, even when the above questions are settled, you will need to know the desired length of the newsletter (in pages or in words), and how many recipients are on your firm's mailing list. At this point in your research and investigation, it may make sense to give your president an informal interim report, summarizing what you have found out and what additional questions need to be answered.

Having a well-organized list of the information you have assembled, the new questions that have arisen, and the sources where you found your information will allow you to continue researching effectively as soon as you have gotten answers and more specific direction from your president.

KEY TAKEAWAY

To make a writing project manageable, narrow your topic, focus on key points, plan your investigation for information, and stay organized as you go along.

EXERCISES

1. Think of a time when someone asked you to gather information to make a decision, whether for work, school, or in your personal life. How specific was the request? What did you need to know before you could determine how much and what kind of information to gather? Discuss your answer with those of your classmates.
2. Make a list of all the ways you procrastinate, noting how much time is associated with each activity or distraction. Share and compare your results with a classmate.
3. You are the manager. Write an e-mail requesting an employee to gather specific information on a topic. Give clear directions and due date(s). Please share your results with the class.
4. How do you prepare yourself for a writing project? How do others? What strategies work best for you? Survey ten colleagues or coworkers and compare your results with your classmates.

5.4 Ethics, Plagiarism, and Reliable Sources

LEARNING OBJECTIVE
1. Understand how to be ethical, avoid plagiarism, and use reputable sources in your writing.

Unlike writing for personal or academic purposes, your business writing will help determine how well your performance is evaluated in your job. Whether you are writing for colleagues within your workplace or outside vendors or customers, you will want to build a solid, well-earned favorable reputation for yourself with your writing. Your goal is to maintain and enhance your credibility, and that of your organization, at all times.

Make sure as you start your investigation that you always question the credibility of the information. Sources may have no reviews by peers or editor, and the information may be misleading, biased, or even false. Be a wise information consumer.

Business Ethics

Many employers have a corporate code of ethics; even if your employer does not, it goes without saying that there are laws governing how the company can and cannot conduct business. Some of these laws apply to business writing. As an example, it would be not only unethical but also illegal to send out a promotional letter announcing a special sale on an item that ordinarily costs $500, offering it for $100, if in fact you have only one of this item in inventory. When a retailer does this, the unannounced purpose of the letter is to draw customers into the store, apologize for running out of the sale item, and urge them to buy a similar item for $400. Known as "bait and switch," this is a form of fraud and is punishable by law.

Let's return to our previous newsletter scenario to examine some less clear-cut issues of business ethics. Suppose that, as you confer with your president and continue your research on newsletter vendors, you remember that you have a cousin who recently graduated from college with a journalism degree. You decide to talk to her about your project. In the course of the conversation, you learn that she now has a job working for a newsletter vendor. She is very excited to hear about your firm's plans and asks you to make her company "look good" in your report.

You are now in a situation that involves at least two ethical questions:

1. Did you breach your firm's confidentiality by telling your cousin about the plan to start sending a monthly newsletter?
2. Is there any ethical way you can comply with your cousin's request to show her company in an especially favorable light?

On the question of confidentiality, the answer may depend on whether you signed a confidentiality agreement as a condition of your employment at the accounting firm, or whether your president specifically told you to keep the newsletter plan confidential. If neither of these safeguards existed, then your conversation with your cousin would be an innocent, unintentional and coincidental sharing of information in which she turned out to have a vested interest.

As for representing her company in an especially favorable light—you are ethically obligated to describe all the candidate vendors according to whatever criteria your president asked to see. The fact that your cousin works for a certain vendor may be an asset or a liability in your firm's view, but it would probably be best to inform them of it and let them make that judgment.

As another example of ethics in presenting material, let's return to the skydiving scenario we mentioned earlier. Because you are writing a promotional letter whose goal is to increase enrollment in your skydiving instruction, you may be tempted to avoid mentioning information that could be perceived as negative. If issues of personal health condition or accident rates in skydiving appear to discourage rather than encourage your audience to consider skydiving, you may be tempted to omit them. But in so doing, you are not presenting an accurate picture and may mislead your audience.

Even if your purpose is to persuade, deleting the opposing points presents a one-sided presentation. The audience will naturally consider not only what you tell them but also what you are not telling them, and will raise questions. Instead, consider your responsibility as a writer to present information you understand to be complete, honest, and ethical. Lying by omission can also expose your organization to liability. Instead of making a claim that skydiving is completely safe, you may want to state that your school complies with the safety guidelines of the United States Parachute Association. You might also state how many jumps your school has completed in the past year without an accident.

Giving Credit to Your Sources

You have photos of yourself jumping but they aren't very exciting. Since you are wearing goggles to protect your eyes and the image is at a distance, who can really tell if the person in the picture is you or not? Why not find a more exciting photo on the Internet and use it as an illustration for your letter? You can download it from a free site and the "fine print" at the bottom of the Web page states that the photos can be copied for personal use.

Not so fast—do you realize that a company's promotional letter does not qualify as personal use? The fact is that using the photo for a commercial purpose without permission from the photographer constitutes an infringement of copyright law; your employer could be sued because you decided to liven up your letter by taking a shortcut. Furthermore, falsely representing the more exciting photo as being your parachute jump will undermine your company's credibility if your readers happen to find the photo on the Internet and realize it is not yours.

Just as you wouldn't want to include an image more exciting than yours and falsely state that it is your jump, you wouldn't want to take information from sources and fail to give them credit. Whether the material is a photograph, text, a chart or graph, or any other form of media, taking someone else's work and representing it as your own is **plagiarism**[7]. Plagiarism is committed whether you copy material verbatim, paraphrase its wording, or even merely take its ideas—if you do any of these things—without giving credit to the source.

This does not mean you are forbidden to quote from your sources. It's entirely likely that in the course of research you may find a perfect turn of phrase or a way of communicating ideas that fits your needs perfectly. Using it in your writing is fine, provided that you credit the source fully enough that your readers can find it on their own. If you fail to take careful notes, or the sentence is present in your writing but later fails to get accurate attribution, it can have a negative impact on you and your organization. That is why it is important that when you find an element you would like to incorporate in your document, in the same moment as you copy and paste or make a note of it in your research file, you need to note the source in a complete enough form to find it again.

Giving credit where credit is due will build your credibility and enhance your document. Moreover, when your writing is authentically yours, your audience will catch your enthusiasm, and you will feel more confident in the material you produce. Just as you have a responsibility in business to be honest in selling your product of service and avoid cheating your customers, so you have a responsibility

7. Representing another's work as your own.

in business writing to be honest in presenting your idea, and the ideas of others, and to avoid cheating your readers with plagiarized material.

Challenges of Online Research

Earlier in the chapter we have touched on the fact that the Internet is an amazing source of information, but for that very reason, it is a difficult place to get information you actually need. In the early years of the Internet, there was a sharp distinction between a search engine and a Web site. There were many search engines competing with one another, and their home pages were generally fairly blank except for a search field where the user would enter the desired search keywords or parameters. There are still many search sites, but today, a few search engines have come to dominate the field, including Google and Yahoo! Moreover, most search engines' home pages offer a wide range of options beyond an overall Web search; buttons for options such as news, maps, images, and videos are typical. Another type of search engine performs a **metasearch**[8], returning search results from several search engines at once.

When you are looking for a specific kind of information, these relatively general searches can still lead you far away from your desired results. In that case, you may be better served by an online dictionary, encyclopedia, business directory, or phone directory. There are also specialized online databases for almost every industry, profession, and area of scholarship; some are available to anyone, others are free but require opening an account, and some require paying a subscription fee. For example, http://www.zillow.com allows for in-depth search and collation of information concerning real estate and evaluation, including the integration of public databases that feature tax assessments and ownership transfers. Table 5.2 "Some Examples of Internet Search Sites" provides a few examples of different kinds of search sites.

Table 5.2 Some Examples of Internet Search Sites

Description	URL
General Web searches that can also be customized according to categories like news, maps, images, video	• http://altavista.com • http://www.google.com • http://go.com • http://www.itools.com/research-it • http://www.live.com

8. Returning search results from several search engines at once.

Description	URL
	• http://www.yahoo.com
Metasearch engines	• http://www.dogpile.com • http://www.info.com • http://www.metacrawler.com • http://www.search.com • http://www.webcrawler.com
Dictionaries and encyclopedias	• http://www.britannica.com • http://dictionary.reference.com • http://encarta.msn.com • http://www.encyclopedia.com • http://www.merriam-webster.com • http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Main_Page
Very basic information on a wide range of topics	• http://www.about.com • http://www.answers.com • http://wiki.answers.com
To find people or businesses in white pages or yellow pages listings	• http://www.anywho.com • http://www.peoplelookup.com • http://www.switchboard.com • http://www.whitepages.com • http://www.yellowpages.com
Specialized databases—may be free, require registration, or require a paid subscription	• http://www.apa.org/psycinfo • http://clinicaltrials.gov/ct/screen/AdvancedSearch • http://medline.cos.com

Description	URL
	• http://www.northernlight.com • http://www.zillow.com

At the end of this chapter, under "Additional Resources," you will find a list of many Web sites that may be useful for business research.

Evaluating Your Sources

One aspect of Internet research that cannot be emphasized enough is the abundance of online information that is incomplete, outdated, misleading, or downright false. Anyone can put up a Web site; once it is up, the owner may or may not enter updates or corrections on a regular basis. Anyone can write a blog on any subject, whether or not that person actually has any expertise on that subject. Anyone who wishes to contribute to a Wikipedia article can do so—although the postings are moderated by editors who have to register and submit their qualifications. In the United States, the First Amendment of the Constitution guarantees freedom of expression. This freedom is restricted by laws prohibiting libel (false accusations against a person) and indecency, especially child pornography, but those laws are limited in scope and sometimes difficult to enforce. Therefore, it is always important to look beyond the surface of a site to assess who sponsors it, where the information displayed came from, and whether the site owner has a certain agenda.

When you write for business and industry you will want to draw on reputable, reliable sources—printed as well as electronic ones—because they reflect on the credibility of the message and the messenger. Analyzing and assessing information is an important skill in the preparation of writing, and here are six main points to consider when evaluating a document, presentation, or similar source of information.Adapted from Paul, R., & Elder, L. (2007). *The miniature guide to critical thinking: Concepts and tools.* Dillon Beach, CA: The Foundation for Critical Thinking Press. In general, documents that represent quality reasoning have the following traits:

- A clearly articulated purpose and goal
- A question, problem, or issue to address
- Information, data, and evidence that is clearly relevant to the stated purpose and goals

- Inferences or interpretations that lead to conclusions based on the presented information, data, and evidence
- A frame of reference or point of view that is clearly articulated
- Assumptions, concepts, and ideas that are clearly articulated

An additional question that is central to your assessment of your sources is how credible the source is. This question is difficult to address even with years of training and expertise. You may have heard of academic fields called "disciplines," but may not have heard of each field's professors called "disciples." Believers, keepers of wisdom, and teachers of tomorrow's teachers have long played a valuable role establishing, maintaining, and perpetuating credibility. Academics have long cultivated an understood acceptance of the role of objective, impartial use of the scientific method to determine validity and reliability. But as research is increasingly dependent on funding, and funding often brings specific points of view and agendas with it, pure research can be—and has been—compromised. You can no longer simply assume that "studies show" something without awareness of who conducted the study, how was it conducted, and who funded the effort. This may sound like a lot of investigation and present quite a challenge, but again it is worth the effort.

Information literacy is an essential skill set in the process of writing. As you learn to spot key signs of information that will not serve to enhance your credibility and contribute to your document, you can increase your effectiveness as you research and analyze your resources. For example, if you were researching electronic monitoring in the workplace, you might come upon a site owned by a company that sells workplace electronic monitoring systems. The site might give many statistics illustrating what percentage of employers use electronic monitoring, what percentage of employees use the Internet for nonwork purposes during work hours, what percentage of employees use company e-mail for personal messages, and so on. But the sources of these percentage figures may not be credited. As an intelligent researcher, you need to ask yourself, did the company that owns the site perform its own research to get these numbers? Most likely it did not—so why are the sources not cited? Moreover, such a site would be unlikely to mention any court rulings about electronic monitoring being unnecessarily invasive of employees' privacy. Less biased sources of information would be the American Management Association, the U.S. Department of Labor, and other not-for-profit organizations that study workplace issues.

The Internet also encompasses thousands of interactive sites where readers can ask and answer questions. Some sites, like Askville by Amazon.com, WikiAnswers, and Yahoo! Answers, are open to almost any topic. Others, like ParentingQuestions and WebMD, deal with specific topics. Chat rooms on bridal Web sites allow couples who are planning a wedding to share advice and compare prices for gowns, florists, caterers, and so on. Reader comment sites like Newsvine facilitate discussions about current events. Customer reviews are available for just about everything imaginable, from hotels and restaurants to personal care products, home improvement products, and sports equipment. The writers of these customer reviews, the chat room participants, and the people who ask and answer questions on many of these interactive sites are not experts, nor do they pretend to be. Some may have extreme opinions that are not based in reality. Then, too, it is always possible for a vendor to "plant" favorable customer reviews on the Internet to make its product look good. Although the "terms of use" which everyone registering for interactive sites must agree to usually forbid the posting of advertisements, profanity, or personal attacks, some sites do a better job than others in monitoring and deleting such material. Nevertheless, if your business writing project involves finding out how the "average person" feels about an issue in the news, or whether a new type of home exercise device really works as advertised, these comment and customer review sites can be very useful indeed.

Figure 5.2

Discover something new as you research, but always evaluate the source.

© 2010 Jupiterimages Corporation

It may seem like it's hard work to assess your sources, to make sure your information is accurate and truthful, but the effort is worth it. Business and industry rely on reputation and trust (just as we individuals do) in order to maintain healthy relationships. Your document, regardless of how small it may appear in the larger picture, is an important part of that reputation and interaction.

KEY TAKEAWAY

Evaluating your sources is a key element of the preparation process in business writing. To avoid plagiarism, always record your sources so that you can credit them in your writing.

EXERCISES

1. Before the Internet improved information access, how did people find information? Are the strategies they used still valid and how might they serve you as a business writer? Interview several people who are old enough to have done research in the "old days" and report your findings.

2. Visit the Web site of the United States Copyright Office at http://www.copyright.gov. Find something on the Web site that you did not know before reviewing it and share it with your classmates.

3. On the United States Copyright Office Web site at http://www.copyright.gov view the multimedia presentation for students and teachers, "Taking the Mystery out of Copyright." Download the "Copyright Basics" document and discuss it with your class.

4. Look over the syllabus for your business communication course and assess the writing assignments you will be completing. Is all the information you are going to need for these assignments available in electronic form? Why or why not?

5. Does the fact that Internet search results are often associated with advertising influence your research and investigation? Why or why not? Discuss with a classmate.

6. Find an example of a bogus or less than credible Web site. Indicate why you perceive it to be untrustworthy, and share it with your classmates.

7. Visit the parody Web site The Onion at http://www.theonion.com and find one story that you think has plausible or believable elements. Share your findings with the class.

5.5 Completing Your Research and Investigation

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LEARNING OBJECTIVE

1. Demonstrate your ability to manage your time and successfully conduct research and investigation for a writing assignment.

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Once you become immersed in your sources, it can be easy to get carried away in the pursuit of information and lose sight of why you are doing all this research and investigation. As a responsible writer, you will need to plan not only how you will begin your information gathering, but also how you will bring it to a conclusion.

Managing Your Time

Given the limited time for research involved in most business writing, how can you make the most of your information-gathering efforts? Part of learning to write effectively involves learning to read quickly and efficiently while conducting research. You are not required to read each word, and if you did, you would slow yourself down greatly. At the same time, if you routinely skip large sections of print and only focus on the bullet lists, you may miss valuable examples that could inspire you in your writing.

How can you tell when to skim and when to pay attention to detail? One strategy is to look for abstracts (or brief summaries of information) before you commit time to reading an article all the way through. Look for indexes to identify key terms you might want to cover before eliminating them as you narrow your topic.

As we mentioned earlier in this chapter, it is smart to make a list of your sources as you search; you may also want to bookmark pages with you Web browser. Sometimes a source that does not look very promising may turn out to offer key information that will drive home an important point in your document. If you have done a good job of recording your sources, it will be easy to go back to a site or source that at first you passed over, but now think may make a relevant contribution.

Compiling Your Information

Patricia Andrews, James Andrews, and Glen WilliamsAndrews, P. H., Andrews, J., & Williams, G. (1999). *Public speaking: Connecting you and your audience.* Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin Company. provide a useful outline of a process to consider when compiling your information. **Compiling**[9] involves composing your document out of materials from other documents or sources. This process has seven major steps, adapted from the Andrews, Andrews, and WilliamsAndrews, P. H., Andrews, J., & Williams, G. (1999). *Public speaking: Connecting you and your audience.* Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin Company. model, which we will consider: sensitivity, exposure, assimilation and accommodation, incubation, incorporation, production and revision.

Let's say your letter introducing skydiving to a new audience was relatively successful and the regional association asks you to write a report on the status of skydiving services in your region, with the hope that the comprehensive guide may serve to direct and enhance class enrollment across the region. Your task has considerably expanded and involves more research, but given the opportunity this assignment presents, you are excited at the challenge. As you begin to research, plan, and design the document, you will touch on the process of compiling information. If you are aware of each step, your task can be accomplished effectively and efficiently.

Sensitivity[10] refers to your capacity to respond to stimulation, being excited, responsive or susceptible to new information. This starts with a self-inventory of your current or past interests and activities. If you are intrigued by a topic or area of interest, your enthusiasm will carry through to your document and make it more stimulating for your reading audience. You may not have considered, or even noticed elements or ideas associated with your topic, but now that you have begun the process of investigation, you see them everywhere. For example, have you ever heard someone say a word or phrase that you never heard before, but now that you are familiar with it, you hear it everywhere? This same principle applies to your sensitivity to ideas related to your topic. You'll notice information and it will help you as you develop your awareness of your topic and the many directions you could take the speech. Cognitive psychologist use the term **priming**[11] to refer to this excited state of awareness.Yaniv, I., & Meyer, D. (1987). Activation and metacognition of inaccessible stored information: potential bases for incubation effects in problem loving. *Journal of Experimental Psychology: Learning, Memory, and Cognition, 13*, 187–205.

Exposure[12] involves your condition of being presented views, ideas, or experiences made known to you through direct experience. If you are going to select a topic on flying but have never flown before, your level of exposure may be low. Your level of

9. Involves composing your speech out of materials from the documents and other sources you have collected.

10. Your capacity to respond to stimulation, be excited, be responsive, or be susceptible to new information.

11. An excited state of awareness.

12. Involves your condition of being presented with views, ideas, experiences, or made known to you through direct experience.

awareness may be high, however, in terms of the importance of security on airplanes after reading about, watching on television, or hearing on the radio stories after the events of September 11, 2001. You may decide to expose yourself to more information through a range of sources as you investigate the topic of airline security. And the more you become exposed to the issues, processes, and goals of your topic, the more likely you are to see areas of interest, new ideas that might fit in your speech, and form patterns of awareness you did not perceive earlier. We have previously discussed at length the importance of selection as a stage in the perceptual process, and selective exposure is one way you gain awareness. You may want to revisit this chapter as you develop your topic or choose where to look for information or decide what kinds of information to expose yourself to as you research your topic.

Assimilation[13] and **accommodation**[14] refer to the processes by which you assimilate (or integrate) new ideas into your thinking patterns and accommodate (or adopt, adapt, or filter out) new sources of information as they relate to your goal. You may have had preconceived notions or ideas about airline security before you began your investigation, but new information has changed the way you view your topic. You might also find issues (e.g., right to privacy) that may be points of conflict with your beliefs as you review information. This stage is important to the overall process of developing your topic, and it takes time. You need time to be able to contemplate, review, and reflect on how the new information fits or fails to connect clearly to your chosen topic.

Incubation[15] is the process by which you cause an idea or ideas to develop in your mind. This might not happen all at once, and you might spend time thinking about the new information, directions, or ways you might develop or focus your topic. Consider the meaning of the word as it relates to chickens and eggs. An egg may be produced, but it needs time and a warm environment to develop. You might have an idea, but you need to create an environment for it to develop. This might involve further investigation and exploration, or it may involve removing yourself from active research to "digest" or "incubate" what you have already learned. You may feel stuck on an idea or perceive an inability to move on in the development of your ideas or topic, and giving it a rest may be the best course of action. You may also find that just when you least expect it, an idea, fully formed, flashes in your mind and you think, "Why didn't I see that before?" Before the idea escapes you, write it down and make sure you can refer to it later.

Incorporation[16] refers to the process by which you bring the information into a whole or complete topic. By now you have investigated, chosen some information over others, and have started to see how the pieces will come together. Your perceptions of how the elements come together will form the basis for your development of the organization of your document. It will contribute to the *logos*, or

13. The process by which you integrate new ideas into your thinking patterns.

14. The process by which you adapt or filter out new sources of information as they relate to your goal.

15. The process by which you cause an idea or ideas to develop in your mind.

16. The process by which you bring the information into a whole or complete topic.

logic, of your thought and its representation in your document, and help you produce a coherent, organized message that your audience can follow clearly.

Production[17] involves the act of creating your document from the elements you have gathered. You may start to consider what comes first, what goes last, and how you will link your ideas and examples together. You may find that you need additional information and need to go back to your notes that you have taken to find the source quickly and easily. You may also start to communicate with friends, sharing some of the elements or even practicing the first drafts of your document, learning where the connections are clear and where they need work.

Revision[18] is the process by which you look over again in order to correct or improve your message. You will notice elements that need further investigation, development, or additional examples and visual aids as you produce your document. This is an important step to the overall production of your message, much like revising an essay for an English course. The first time you said, thought, or wrote something it may have made sense to you, but upon reflection and after trying an idea out, you need it to be revised in order to work effectively as part of your document. You may revisit the place in which you started (and start all speeches) by reconsidering the rhetorical situation and see if what you have produces is in line with the expectations of the audience. Your awareness of the content, audience, and purpose of the rhetorical situation will guide you through the revision process and contribute to the production of a more effective document.

Once you have gathered what you think is enough material—or, perhaps, once your eyes begin to glaze over—take a step back and return to the general and specific purpose of the document you set out to write. Look again at the basic elements (i.e., who, what, when, etc.) and fill in the "answers" based on what you have found. It is not unusual at this stage to have some "holes" in the information that require more research to fill. You may also realize that your research findings have disproved part or even all of your original agenda, making it necessary to change your message significantly.

Leave enough time before your deadline so that you can sketch out a detailed outline and rough draft of your document and leave it alone for at least a day. When you look at it again, it will probably be clear which additional details need more support, and you can perform targeted research to fill in those gaps.

17. Involves the act of creating your speech from the elements you have gathered; you may start to consider what comes first, what goes last, and how you will link your ideas and examples together.

18. The process by which you look over your speech again in order to correct or improve it.

KEY TAKEAWAY

Be mindful of your result and your time frame as you conduct your research and investigation. Allow enough time to let the writing rest before you return to it and make revisions.

EXERCISES

1. Choose a topic related to a career that interests you and think about how you would research that topic on the Internet. Set a timer for fifteen minutes. Ready, set, go! At the end of fifteen minutes, review the sources you have recorded in your list and think about the information you have found. How well did you use your limited time? Could you do better next time? Try it again.
2. Complete an Internet search of your name and report your findings to the class.
3. Complete an Internet search of your favorite product or service and report your findings to the class.
4. You've been assigned to a marketing team tasked to engage an audience just like you. Make a list of what services or products your target audience would find attractive. Pick one and develop a slogan that is sure to get attention. Share your results with the class.

5.6 Reading and Analyzing

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LEARNING OBJECTIVES

1. Understand different types of reading and analyzing that business documents encounter.
2. Demonstrate how to write for skimming and for analytical reading in at least one written document of each kind.

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When you read, do you read each and every word? Do you skim over the document and try to identify key terms and themes? Do you focus on numbers and statistics, or ignore the text and go straight to the pictures or embedded video? Because people read in many diverse ways, you as a writer will want to consider how your audience may read and analyze your document.

Ever since Benjamin Franklin said that "time is money,"Franklin, B. (1748). *Advice to a young tradesman, written by an old one*. Philadelphia, PA: B. Franklin and D. Hall. business managers have placed a high value on getting work done quickly. Many times, as a result, a document will be skimmed rather than read in detail. This is true whether the communication is a one-paragraph e-mail or a twenty-page proposal. If you anticipate that your document will be skimmed, it behooves you to make your main points stand out for the reader.

In an e-mail, use a "subject" line that tells the reader the gist of your message before he or she opens it. For example, the subject line "3 p.m. meeting postponed to 4 p.m." conveys the most important piece of information; in the body of the e-mail you may explain that Wednesday's status meeting for the XYZ project needs to be postponed to 4 p.m. because of a conflict with an offsite luncheon meeting involving several XYZ project team members. If you used the subject line "Wednesday meeting" instead, recipients might glance at their in-box, think, "Oh, I already know I'm supposed to attend that meeting," and not read the body of the message. As a result, they will not find out that the meeting is postponed.

For a longer piece of writing such as a report or proposal, here are some techniques you can use to help the reader grasp key points.

- Present a quick overview, or "executive summary," at the beginning of the document.

- Use boldface headings as signposts for the main sections and their subsections.
- Where possible, make your headings informative; for example, a heading like "Problem Began in 1992" is more informative than one that says "Background."
- Within each section, begin each paragraph with a topic sentence that indicates what the paragraph discusses.
- When you have a list of points, questions, or considerations, format them with bullets rather than listing them in sentences.
- The "bottom line," generally understood to mean the total cost of a given expenditure or project, can also refer to the conclusions that the information in the report leads to. As the expression indicates, these conclusions should be clearly presented at the end of the document, which is the place where the time-pressed reader will often turn immediately after reading the first page.

Imagine how unhappy you would be if you submitted a report and your audience came away with a message completely different from what you had intended. For example, suppose your manager is considering adopting a specific new billing system in your office and has asked you to report on the pros and cons of this system. You worked hard, gathered plenty of information, and wrote a detailed report which, in your opinion, gave strong support for adopting the new system.

However, the first few pages of your report described systems other than the one under consideration. Next, you presented the reasons not to implement the new system. Throughout the report, embedded in the body of several different paragraphs, you mentioned the advantages offered by the new system; but they were not grouped together so that you could emphasize them with a heading or other signpost for the reader. At the end of the report, you reviewed the current billing system and stated that few problems were encountered with it.

When you delivered your report, the manager and colleagues who received it missed your most important information and decided not to consider the new system any further. Worse, your manager later criticized you for spending too much time on the report, saying it was not very informative. Situations like this can be avoided if you provide a clear organizational framework to draw your reader's attention to your main points.

Analyzing is distinct from reading. When you read, you attempt to grasp the author's meaning via words and symbols, and you may come away with a general emotional feeling about what the writer has written instead of an arsenal of facts. When you analyze a document, you pay more attention to how the author

assembled the information to present a coherent message. Business writing often involves communication via words and symbols in ways that meet audience expectations; in many cases, the audience needs to be able to analyze the content, and reading is secondary. For this reason, a solid organizational pattern will greatly enhance your document's effectiveness.

KEY TAKEAWAY

Logical organization is important to promote reader understanding and analysis.

EXERCISES

1. Take a news article and mark it up to reveal its organizational structure. Does it have an informative opening paragraph? Does each additional paragraph begin with a topic sentence? Does it use subheadings? Is there a conclusion that follows logically from the information presented?
2. Find an article that you do not like and review it. State specific reasons why you dislike it and share your opinion with your classmates.
3. Find an article that you do like and review it. State specific reasons why you like it and share your opinion with your classmates.
4. You've been assigned to a sales team that has not been performing at optimal levels. Develop an incentive program to improve the team's performance. Present your idea to the class.

5.7 Additional Resources

The Library of Congress is the nation's oldest federal cultural institution and serves as the research arm of the U.S. Congress. It is also the largest library in the world, with millions of books, recordings, photographs, maps, and manuscripts in its collections. http://www.loc.gov/index.html

The Copyright Office of the Library of Congress offers a wide variety of resources for understanding copyright law and how to avoid plagiarism. http://www.copyright.gov

The Learning Center is designed to help educators and students develop a better sense of what plagiarism means in the information age, and to teach the planning, organizational, and citation skills essential for producing quality writing and research. http://www.plagiarism.org/learning_center/home.html

The New York Public Library's Science, Industry, and Business Library (SIBL) is the nation's largest public information center devoted solely to science and business. http://www.nypl.org/research/sibl

The Lippincott Library serves the Wharton School of the University of Pennsylvania, one of the world's top business schools. http://www.library.upenn.edu/lippincott

Thunderbird School of Global Management operates Thunderbird Knowledge Network, an interactive forum on contemporary business issues delivered in stories, columns, videos, podcasts, and blogs. http://knowledgenetwork.thunderbird.edu/research

The *Wall Street Journal* is one of the most widely read sources of business news. http://online.wsj.com/home-page

Personalize your business news and analysis with *Business Week*'s member service, Business Exchange. http://bx.businessweek.com

INSEAD: The Business School for the World, one of the largest and most highly regarded schools for MBA, Executive MBA, and PhD degrees in business, makes its library resources available online. http://www.insead.edu/library/index.cfm

As an example of an industry trade association, the Association of Construction Project Managers (ACPM) is a voluntary association of specialist project management professionals working in the built environment. http://www.acpm.co.za

The United States Government's Small Business Administration has a mandate to aid, counsel, assist and protect the interests of small business concerns, to preserve free competitive enterprise, and to maintain and strengthen the overall economy of our nation. http://www.sba.gov

The U.S. Department of Labor's Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) sets the standards and conducts inspections to ensure safety and prevent accidents in the workplace. http://www.osha.gov

The Society for Human Resource Management is a key source of news and information on HR topics. http://www.shrm.org/Pages/default.aspx

The Chicago Board of Trade, the world's oldest futures and options exchange, trades treasury bonds, corn, soybean, wheat, gold, silver, and other commodities. http://www.cbot.com

Yahoo! Finance is a useful site for tracking the Dow, S&P 500, and other major stock indices in the United States and abroad; it also has areas for financial news, investing, and personal finance. http://finance.yahoo.com

The *Occupational Outlook Handbook*, published every two years by the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, describes hundreds of different types of jobs, the training and education each job requires, the typical earnings in that job, and more. http://www.bls.gov/OCO

CareerBuilder.com, which describes itself as the largest online job search site, offers a vast online and print network to help job seekers connect with employers. http://www.careerbuilder.com

According to its Web site, *Fast Company* "sets the agenda, charting the evolution of business through a unique focus on the most creative individuals sparking change in the marketplace." http://www.fastcompany.com

LinkedIn, which has been described as the professional counterpart to social networking sites such as Facebook and MySpace, is an interconnected network of

experienced professionals from around the world, representing 170 industries and 200 countries. http://www.linkedin.com

Intuit, maker of QuickBooks, Quicken, TurboTax, and other accounting software, provides a small business information center on its Web site. What would you expect to find here that is different from the resources a noncommercial source would offer? http://smallbusiness.intuit.com