



What is effective writing at the World Bank?

Introduction

Welcome to the course!

As someone who frequently composes written correspondence as a representative of the World Bank, you have a great but often understated responsibility. To a large degree, the Bank's success depends on how well you communicate your ideas to others. Getting others to accept your message often leads to action that furthers the Bank's mission of eradicating poverty.

Writing effectively is a skill that you can develop, improve, and practice with success. In this course, you will explore techniques that can help you do this. You will learn some new strategies that will help you plan and draft well-written e-mails and letters.

Throughout the course, you will see quotes about good writing. The quotes were gathered during interviews with Bank managers — country directors, program managers, learning coordinators, and others. These quotes show how the principles taught in this course reflect what Bank managers say is important in Bank writing.

QUOTE



*"We should not underestimate the impact that writing has on us and our client — positive and negative. It is our first contact with the client."
—Country Director*

Learning Objectives

By the end of this module, you will be able to

- Distinguish key characteristics of e-mails and letters.
- Identify strengths and weaknesses in your writing and in samples from the Bank based on the core assumptions about effective writing introduced in this module.
- Identify your goals for this course.

Writing at the World Bank

This course will help you to become an effective writer, to recognize ineffective writing, and to avoid poor practices in your own writing. But what do these terms mean? Effective writing can mean just about anything to anyone. What does it mean to you, and what does it mean at the Bank?

At the World Bank, effective writing refers to how well you can deliver clear, well-written information that enables your readers to take action.

The remainder of Module 1 will explore characteristics of effective writing at the Bank and will help you formulate your goals for the course.

Describe Effective Writing at the World Bank

Throughout this course, you will find a series of activities. Some of these activities will ask you to write something or to analyze a written example. Others will ask you to analyze some aspects of your own work. Still others — like this first activity — will ask you to reflect on a question and consider your response before continuing.

Open the Reflections File for this activity by clicking on the link below. Answer the questions and save the file. You will refer to it later on in the module and have the opportunity to revise your work.

REFLECTION



[Reflection 1: Describe Effective Writing](#)

Characteristics of Effective Writing at the Bank

Here is another activity to get you thinking about the characteristics of effective writing.

Below you will see a list of characteristics. All of these words and phrases describe aspects of writing. Select from the list the **three characteristics** you believe are most important in writing effectively. When you have chosen your list, click on the **Compare** button to see how well your list matches ours.

Based on your own knowledge and experience as a writer at the Bank, choose the top three characteristics of effective writing.

- beautiful style
- descriptive
- formal
- interesting
- reader focused
- short
- amusing
- well organized
- courteous
- jargon-filled
- no adverbs or adjectives
- good mechanics
- no spelling mistakes
- suspenseful
- present tense
- unemotional
- friendly but distant
- no bullet points
- varied vocabulary

reader focused well organized good mechanics

The three identified above as aspects of effective writing form the content of this course. You will read about each in much greater detail as you work through the course.

Other aspects of writing are also important, but the three indicated here are the characteristics you will focus on in this course.

How closely did your responses match the suggested ones? You may have been surprised to see some unfamiliar words and phrases that describe effective writing. Don't worry if you didn't recognize these; you will consider their importance more carefully in this module.

Defining Effective Writing at the Bank

This course follows a few core assumptions that will help you to become an effective writer. You have already encountered these assumptions in the activity you just completed. Let's explore these ideas more thoroughly.

The following points represent the Bank's definition of effective writing:

- **Effective writing is well organized.** Effectively written documents have a clear purpose and main message. They provide information in manageable sections or groupings, and there is a logical hierarchy of ideas. A single idea is expressed in each paragraph.
- **Effective writing is reader focused.** Effective writing answers a reader's questions and satisfies a reader's expectations. For example, if you say you are going to recommend a printer to purchase, your reader will expect to find

your recommendation up front, not after a lengthy, step-by-step description of the research you did. An effectively written document meets the expectations that it sets up for the reader. The document must also satisfy these expectations in a logical way. Finally, the tone and style must be appropriate for the reader.




- **Effective writing demonstrates good mechanics.** It uses correct spelling, grammar, and punctuation. It uses formatting and visual techniques to emphasize or make obvious the logical structure of a document. These features allow readers to focus on the message that the document conveys.

Refer to these assumptions to help guide your thinking when you analyze texts in this course or when you are planning and composing documents at work. Later in this module, you will consider various techniques that you can use to support these assumptions.

Identify Effective Writing

Now let's apply these ideas about effective writing to some actual World Bank documents.

Below are links to three e-mail messages. Read each message, keeping in mind the core assumptions about effective writing.

Sample 1 Dow Jones 	Sample 2 OECD 	Sample 3 Written Communication Guidelines 
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In the drop-down menu below, choose which document you are working with first. After you choose a document, a table will appear where you can write down your observations about the effectiveness of the e-mail. After writing your comments and checking your answers, come back to this drop-down menu and choose one of the other e-mail messages to analyze.

Some characteristics of effective documents have been provided for you in the table below to help you focus your analysis. For each characteristic, describe how well the e-mail message demonstrates that characteristic. Write in the space provided, and click the **Check Answer** button.

Don't worry if some of the characteristics of effective writing are not immediately clear to you. You will be examining each of these characteristics in turn throughout the first four modules of the course.

Dow Jones E-mail ▼

Characteristic	Observations
<p>Good organization</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> The purpose is clearly stated.</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> The main message is stated up front, close to the beginning of the document.</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Similar information is grouped and labeled.</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> The text has an established and evident hierarchy of organization.</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> The text has one idea per paragraph.</p>	<div style="border: 1px solid gray; height: 40px; width: 100%;"></div> <p style="text-align: center;">Check Answer</p> <p>The e-mail is not well organized for its purpose. There are many ideas in the first paragraph. The ideas are neither grouped nor labeled: instead, they are presented chronologically but not in a logical sequence.</p>
<p>Reader focus</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> The document anticipates questions the reader might ask.</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> The reader's questions are answered in a logical sequence.</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> The document sets up and fulfills the reader's expectations.</p>	<div style="border: 1px solid gray; height: 40px; width: 100%;"></div> <p style="text-align: center;">Check Answer</p>

Tone and style are appropriate for the reader.




The message is not reader focused. Much of the e-mail reports on who the writer phoned, what happened next, and other details that are not relevant to the reader. The subject line is not clear. The main message is not well communicated: the e-mail answers the reader's main question only at the very end, and then not clearly.

<p>Good mechanics</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Spelling, grammar, and punctuation are consistent and appropriate.</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> The document uses visual techniques to support the logic of the text.</p>	<div style="border: 1px solid gray; height: 40px; width: 100%;"></div> <p style="text-align: center;"><input type="button" value="Check Answer"/></p> <p>Mechanics are not well done. Visual tools such as displayed lists could have made the information much easier to read.</p>
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OECD E-mail
▼

Characteristic	Observations
<p>Good organization</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> The purpose is clearly stated.</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> The main message is stated up front, close to the beginning of the document.</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Similar information is grouped and labeled.</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> The text has an established and evident hierarchy of organization.</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> The text has one idea per paragraph.</p>	<div style="border: 1px solid gray; height: 40px; width: 100%;"></div> <p style="text-align: center;"><input type="button" value="Check Answer"/></p> <p>The purpose is clear, and the main message of the e-mail is stated in the first line. Information is grouped and labeled. Some improvements could be made: for instance, the last paragraph could be headed "Next steps" or "Ongoing updates," to separate it from the paragraph concerning access.</p>
<p>Reader focus</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> The document anticipates questions the reader might ask.</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> The reader's questions are answered in a logical sequence.</p>	<div style="border: 1px solid gray; height: 40px; width: 100%;"></div> <p style="text-align: center;"><input type="button" value="Check Answer"/></p>

The document sets up and fulfills the reader's expectations.

Tone and style are appropriate for the reader.

Although this document makes an effort to answer questions logically, it does not accommodate the needs of its stated audience. Note that the "To" line reads "All staff." This e-mail might be appropriate in reader focus for a highly specialized technical group, but it is not appropriate for the whole staff of an entire department.

Good mechanics

Spelling, grammar, and punctuation are consistent and appropriate.

The document uses visual techniques to support the logic of the text.

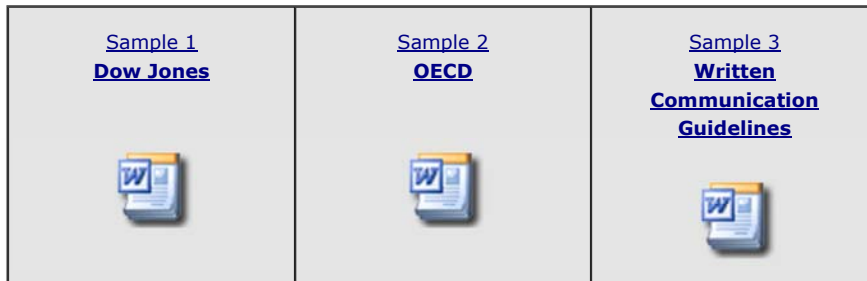
Check Answer

The e-mail uses correct mechanics.

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Some characteristics of effective documents have been provided for you in the table below to help you focus your analysis. For each characteristic, describe how well the e-mail message demonstrates that characteristic. Write in the space provided, and click the **Check Answer** button.

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Written Communication Guidelines E-mail ▼

Characteristic	Observations
<p>Good organization</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> The purpose is clearly stated.</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> The main message is stated up front, close to the beginning of the document.</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Similar information is grouped and labeled.</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> The text has an established and evident hierarchy of organization.</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> The text has one idea per paragraph.</p>	<div style="border: 1px solid gray; height: 40px; width: 100%;"></div> <p style="text-align: right;">Check Answer</p> <p>The main message is clear in the subject line and first paragraph. Ideas are presented in logical groupings, which are clearly labeled and which match the information in the main message.</p>
<p>Reader focus</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> The document anticipates questions the reader might ask.</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> The reader's questions are answered in a logical sequence.</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> The document sets up and fulfills the reader's expectations.</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Tone and style are appropriate for the reader.</p>	<div style="border: 1px solid gray; height: 40px; width: 100%;"></div> <p style="text-align: right;">Check Answer</p> <p>The document focuses on the reader's needs by anticipating and answering the questions "Why should we do this?" "What will it cost?" "How would we go about it?" and "What needs to happen next?" It concludes with a clear request for action.</p>
<p>Good mechanics</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Spelling, grammar, and punctuation are consistent and appropriate.</p>	<div style="border: 1px solid gray; height: 40px; width: 100%;"></div>

The document uses visual techniques to support the logic of the text.

Check Answer

**The writer uses bullet lists and subheads effectively.
Spelling and grammar are correct.**

Guiding Your Readers

Readers are more likely to have problems understanding the writer's purpose and responding appropriately when a document is poorly organized, lacks reader focus, or includes mechanical errors. If readers can't understand the purpose, the document is less likely to succeed in achieving that purpose.

The danger is that readers may make their own assumptions about which points are most important, and these assumptions may not be the same as the writer's. These differing assumptions may result in confusion or misunderstanding and make it harder for the writer to achieve the intended purpose.

Considering the Reader's Perspective

Take 30 seconds to read the words in the box below. Click on the **Start** button below when you are ready to begin. (After 30 seconds, the system will give you additional instructions. Do not advance to the next screen until you have followed these additional instructions.)

Take 30 seconds to read the words in the box below.

apple	ground beef	peas
green beans	onions	ice cream
peaches	grapes	strawberries
butter	milk	lamb chops
chicken	yogurt	eggs

Reading without Guidance

How many food items were you able to recall correctly? This is a tricky exercise for a number of reasons, and all of them relate to problems of ineffective writing.

- You were given no framework for understanding the list:
 - The instructions did not tell you to memorize the items, nor did they explain why you should read the list or how it was relevant to the course.
 - The items in the list were not grouped or ordered logically, so you had no way to organize the information.
- You were distracted by the two questions provided after the list, which were unrelated to the first part of the activity.

The Creative Reader

In trying to remember the food items on the list, you likely had difficulty with comprehension and recall because you were given no framework for understanding and you were distracted by unrelated information. As a result, you were left to wonder about the list and its purpose. In the absence of meaning, readers tend to construct their own meaning in order to facilitate their understanding. This is known as the condition of the [creative reader](#). Linda Flower, who coined the term, describes the creative reader this way:

What happens when readers go about decoding messages and creating meanings? The first thing to notice is that they just don't remember all the things we tell them. Instead of remembering all the details, readers do something much more creative — they draw inferences as they read and use the writer's ideas to form their own concepts. In other words, readers remember not what we tell them, but what they tell themselves.

Flower, Linda, 1993, *Problem-solving strategies for writing*, 4th edition (Fort Worth, Texas: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich).

Guidance for the Creative Reader

The table below shows how a properly organized list of food items might look.

Recommended Items for a New Diet		
Eat one item from each category every day, except for eggs, which you can eat once a week if available.		
Fruit and vegetables		
Fruit	Vegetables	
apples peaches grapes strawberries	green beans onions peas	
Animal products		
Meat	Dairy	Eggs
ground beef chicken lamb chops	butter milk yogurt ice cream	eggs

There are many possible ways to organize this list — or any information. The way you organize must reflect your purpose.

Techniques to Guide Your Reader

As you can see from our reorganized food item list, the information is set up and presented in a way that will help the reader remember it. The new list includes a variety of techniques to help guide the reader:

Provide a context. Readers need a framework for understanding. The new list provides this through a title and a short preamble that indicates why remembering the list of items is important. The context can also set expectations for the reader.

Group related ideas. Food items are organized into memorable and relevant categories. The groupings follow logically from the context provided in the title and preamble.

Organize ideas into a hierarchy. The table is organized in a hierarchy to show how ideas in the list are related to each other. For example, major food groups and sub-categories are given greater prominence, and individual food items are given less prominence.

Of course, this example is only for a simple list. However, you will be able to apply these same techniques to your own writing.

Identify Useful Techniques

The analysis below shows how the techniques listed on the previous screen are applied in one of the samples you have already reviewed.

Click on the numbered buttons to see how the assumptions and the techniques are related through an analysis of the text.

Sample: Written Communication Guidelines

From: Soledad Gomez, Program Assistant
 Subject: Recommendation to Design Written Communication Guidelines
 Date: February 2, 20xx 9:47 a.m.
 To: Angela Iqbal, Manager

Hello Angela,

- 1 Given the Bank's increasing emphasis on transparency and productivity, some members of our departmental staff seem to need help with their writing. To address this need, I am writing to recommend we design written communication guidelines for the department.
- 2 We would benefit in many ways, at minimal cost; I have outlined below a process we could follow.
- 3 **Benefits of Written Communication Guidelines**
 The benefits of producing these guidelines would be as follows:
 - Reduction of staff time in writing and, thus, higher productivity
 - Consistency of standards and style in letters and e-mails
 - Improved transparency and readability of correspondence
 - Better communication and less misunderstanding among staff
 - Appreciation throughout the organization for providing a workable model
- 4 **Production Costs**
 The cost of producing a set of guidelines would be about \$5,000. This would cover two phases: (1) hiring a consultant to develop reference guidelines based on current international standards for business correspondence and (2) putting the guidelines on our intranet website.
- 5 **Steps in Process**
 Here are the steps I believe we would need to take, in this order:
 1. Select a consultant.
 2. Provide reference materials and list of staff members who have agreed to provide information through interviews.
 3. Select team to review guidelines and give feedback.
 4. Train staff to use guidelines in daily correspondence.
- 6 **Next Steps**
 Please consider this recommendation and call me if you have any questions or need more information. If you agree, I hope you will authorize me to initiate and oversee the process.
- 7
- 8 Thanks,
 Soledad

Assumption	Technique
Organization: Provide clear purpose and context.	Provide context. Make purpose clear.
Organization: State main message specifically up front.	State main message.
Organization: Establish hierarchies.	Use headings to establish sections within the document.
Organization: Group related ideas.	Use lists for related points.
Organization: Group related ideas.	Use parallel structure
Organization: Group related ideas.	Use a list to set out a procedure. Numbered list shows sequence.
Reader focus: Return to expectations.	Close by fulfilling expectations set out in the beginning of the e-mail.
Good mechanics	Use correct spelling, grammar, and punctuation, and provide good visual structure.

Analyze Your Own Writing

For this activity, use the writing sample you submitted when you applied to take this course or another sample representative of your writing at the Bank.

The Reflections File below contains the criteria discussed earlier in Module 1 to evaluate writing. Write down some observations about your writing using the criteria as a guide. What you discover for yourself here will help you articulate what you need to focus on throughout the rest of this course.

REFLECTION



**Reflection 2:
 Analyze Your Own Writing**

Writing E-mails and Letters

The principles of good writing apply to all types of documents, including reports, handbooks, Web documents, and correspondence. In this course, you will focus on correspondence (e-mails and letters), as well as some other short documents.

You will find that principles of good writing are similar across many documents. That is, any e-mail, letter, or short document must do the following:

- Communicate a clear purpose.
- Answer the reader's questions.
- Group and order ideas logically.
- Have correct grammar and punctuation.

Comparing E-mails and Letters

Complete the table below to identify what you consider to be the similarities and differences of between e-mails and letters. When you are finished, click **Submit** to compare your answers.

	E-mails	Letters
Typical reader (Are readers internal or external to the organization?)	<input type="text"/> <input type="button" value="Submit"/> Could be internal or external	<input type="text"/> <input type="button" value="Submit"/> External
Format/appearance (What elements does the correspondence include, and how are they displayed?)	<input type="text"/> <input type="button" value="Submit"/> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Date automatic • To/From line required • Clear subject line essential • May use subheadings 	<input type="text"/> <input type="button" value="Submit"/> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Uses appropriate letterhead (consult "WBG Group Forms" icon in MS Word) • Date required • Recipient's address required • May use a subject line • May use subheadings
Beginning/end (Any patterns in how the correspondence usually begins or ends?)	<input type="text"/> <input type="button" value="Submit"/> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Usually has a greeting • Often (but not always) includes a complimentary close • Often includes a name and/or "signature" line at end 	<input type="text"/> <input type="button" value="Submit"/> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Must have greeting • Must have complimentary close • Must have signature at end
Formality (Typically, how formal is this type of correspondence? Are there exceptions?)	<input type="text"/> <input type="button" value="Submit"/> Can range from casual to formal depending on the purpose and the audience	<input type="text"/> <input type="button" value="Submit"/> Often more formal— depends on audience and purpose

Reconsider Your Goals

Earlier in this module, you recorded some of your own writing goals for this course ([Reflection 1: Describe Effective Writing](#)). Now that you have thought more about effective writing and analyzed a sample of your own writing, take another look at your goals. Have they changed? Based on your analysis of your writing, do you have any new course-related goals to add?

The goals you set will be most useful if they are as specific as possible. Base your goals on what you have read throughout this module and on what you have observed about your own writing. Be as specific as you can be about the skills you need to master; your tutor will then be better able to help you to achieve your goals.

Open your first Reflections File to review your course goals and revise them if you think they need to be changed.

Assignment 1: Share Your Goals

For Assignment 1, prepare a Word document that lists your own writing goals for the course. (For example, one sample goal could be "to improve my ability to structure documents more effectively.") Write a brief paragraph about each goal, explaining to your tutor why it is important to you.

If you and your tutor are both aware of your goals, it will be easier to stay focused on them throughout the course. You already started this task as part of your first Reflections File.

When you have completed Assignment 1, you will submit it to your tutor by uploading the completed Word file in the assignment section in [Moodle](#). Your tutor will then upload a copy of this file including his or her comments in the same place. You can retrieve the comments and see the status of the assignment there.

Your tutor may ask you to resubmit your goals document to clarify your goals or to provide more information about their importance.

Upload in Moodle the following for this assignment:

- One Word document describing your own goals for the course and the importance of each goal

Resources and Documents

Working Documents

- [Reflection 1: Describe Effective Writing](#)
- [Reflection 2: Analyze Your Own Writing](#)
- [Effective Writing Analysis Checklist](#)

Sample Texts

- [Dow Jones E-mail](#)
- [OECD E-mail](#)
- [Written Communication Guidelines E-mail](#)

Other Resources

- ["The Creative Reader" by Linda Flower](#)

Summary

Effective writing is a critical skill to have at the Bank; you are expected to communicate your ideas to others so that they can act on them. Writing well contributes to your success at the Bank. In turn, it contributes to the Bank's success in its overall mission of eradicating poverty.

This course focuses on e-mails, letters, and other short documents. Each format has its unique purpose and characteristics. However, whatever type of document you produce, your writing will be more effective if it demonstrates the following characteristics:

- **Good organization**
 - The purpose is clearly stated.
 - The main message is stated up front, close to the beginning of the document.
 - Similar information is grouped and labeled.
 - The text has an established and evident hierarchy of organization.
 - The text has one idea per paragraph.

- **Reader focus**
 - The document anticipates questions the reader might ask.
 - The reader's questions are answered in a logical sequence.
 - The document sets up and fulfills the reader's expectations.
 - Tone and style are appropriate for the reader.

- **Good mechanics**
 - Spelling, grammar, and punctuation are consistent and appropriate.
 - The document uses visual techniques to support the logic of the text.

Overall, effective writing successfully communicates the intended message to the intended audience.