

7 Cs of Professional Communication

Professional communication occurs in all workplace settings. In emails, reports, presentations, proposals, memos, and more, writers must learn to effectively communicate with their audience. Effective communication requires writers to consider the information they are sharing, as well as the needs and expectations of their audience.

Professional writing differs from other forms of writing in that it is primarily shaped by a specific purpose and audience. Academic writing often focuses on analyzing ideas, presenting evidence, and demonstrating understanding of a topic or discipline-specific knowledge. Creative writing, meanwhile, may focus on storytelling, personal expression, and emotional impact. In contrast, professional writing typically focuses on communicating information in a clear, efficient manner so that readers can understand a message and the immediate actions that need to be taken afterward.

The 7 Cs of Professional Communication provide a framework for creating strong, effective professional writing. Each “C”—clarity, conciseness, correctness, courtesy, coherence, concreteness, and completeness—helps writers communicate ideas in a way that is easy to understand. By applying the 7 Cs, professional writers can strengthen their writing and communicate effectively across a variety of contexts.

Clarity

Clarity refers to the extent to which a message is easy for its intended recipient to understand. Clear professional writing communicates ideas clearly and avoids creating confusion about the meaning or purpose of a message. Writers should consider what their audience already knows and provide enough context to understand the information being presented.

Some tips for improving clarity in professional writing include

- avoid unnecessary jargon, vague language, and overly technical terminology;
- use straightforward language; and
- ensure that any calls to action are explicitly stated.

For example, this sentence can be revised for clarity:

Please complete the necessary updates and send them over as soon as possible.

This sentence does not specify which updates are needed, who is responsible for completing them, or when they should be submitted. Instead, try writing something like this:

Please update the client spreadsheet and send the revised version to me by Tuesday at 4pm.

This revised sentence provides the reader with specific, topical information about the required task, the expected action, and the deadline for completion.

Conciseness

Conciseness refers to the ability to communicate information effectively without including unnecessary words or details. Concise professional writing respects the recipient's time by presenting information efficiently while still including the details necessary for understanding. Writers should consider which information is essential to their message and remove unnecessary filler, repetition, and irrelevant details.

To improve conciseness in professional writing, it is recommended that you

- remove unnecessary words and phrases; and
- avoid including details that do not directly relate to the purpose of the message.

For example, this is a sentence that should be revised for conciseness:

Due to the fact that our team is currently in the process of reviewing the important materials that were submitted by the other department, we will be unfortunately unable to provide you with an update or response at this point in time. However, we will reach out to you very soon as soon as we have completed our review process.

This sentence contains unnecessary phrases and repetition that make the message longer than necessary. The writer can communicate the same information much more directly without losing the important context. Instead, try writing something like this:

We are reviewing the materials submitted by the department and will provide a response as soon as the review is complete.

This revised sentence communicates the necessary information more efficiently while still providing the reader with needed context about the current status of the review and expectations about what is coming next.

Correctness

In professional writing, correctness refers to the accuracy and reliability of a message. Writers should follow grammar, punctuation, spelling, and formatting conventions while also ensuring that the information being communicated is factually accurate.

Some tips for improving correctness in professional writing include

- review grammar, spelling, punctuation, and formatting before sending a message;
- verify facts, dates, names, numbers, and other important information; and
- ensure that information is accurate and appropriate for the intended audience and purpose.

For example, this is a sentence that should be revised for correctness:

The meeting agenda were sent to all staff members on Monday, September 8th. The meeting will take place on Tuesday, September 10th at 3:00 PM.

This example contains both a grammatical error and a factual error. The phrase “agenda were sent” is grammatically incorrect because “agenda” is a singular noun and should be paired with “was” instead. Additionally, the meeting date is incorrect because September 10th falls on a Wednesday, two days after September 8th.

Instead, try writing something like this:

The meeting agenda was sent to all staff members on Monday, September 8th. The meeting will take place on Wednesday, September 10th at 3:00 PM.

This revised sentence corrects the grammatical error and provides accurate scheduling information, allowing recipients to make appropriate plans and complete the required task.

Courtesy

Courtesy goes beyond simply being nice to your recipient. Courtesy refers to communicating with professionalism, respect, and consideration for the recipient. Courteous professional writing recognizes that messages may be read by people with different experiences, responsibilities, and perspectives. Writers should use a respectful tone and thoughtful word choice to maintain positive workplace relationships in the future.

For example, this is a sentence that should be revised for courtesy:

You failed to submit the required form, so I need you to send it immediately.

This sentence may cause the recipient to feel blamed or criticized. Although the writer is communicating an important request, the tone is unnecessarily harsh and does not encourage a positive interaction. Instead, try taking a more courteous approach:

I have not yet received the required form. Could you please submit it by Friday afternoon? Let me know if you have any questions or need any assistance completing it.

This revised sentence communicates the same information while using a more respectful tone. The message remains clear about the needed action while maintaining a professional relationship with the recipient.

Coherence

Coherence refers to the logical organization and flow of ideas within a professional message. Coherent professional writing presents information in a way that allows readers to easily understand how ideas connect. Writers can improve coherence by organizing related information together and using transitions to create a clear progression of ideas.

For example, this paragraph should be revised for coherence:

The library's summer reading program begins next month. The staff meeting will take place on Tuesday. The program will include reading challenges, workshops, and community events. Staff members should review their assigned responsibilities before the program begins.

Although each sentence contains relevant information, the ideas are not presented in the most logical order. The paragraph moves between the event timeline, meeting information, and program details without a clear connection between ideas. Instead, try something like this:

The library's summer reading program begins next month and will include reading challenges, workshops, and community events. During Tuesday's staff meeting, employees will review assigned responsibilities and discuss program preparation.

This revised paragraph groups related ideas together and creates a clearer flow of information for the reader.

Concreteness

Concreteness refers to using specific details, facts, and examples to support a message. Concrete professional writing helps readers understand information by providing tangible details rather than relying on general statements. Concrete writing is especially important when describing outcomes or providing instructions.

For example, the following sentence should be revised for concreteness:

The workshop was successful because many participants found it helpful.

This sentence provides a general statement that does not include specific information about what made the workshop successful or how participants benefited. More specifics would be beneficial:

The workshop received positive feedback from 85% participants, who noted that the practice activities helped them feel more prepared for their upcoming presentations.

This revised sentence provides specific evidence and details that support the original claim, making the message more meaningful and credible.

Completeness

Completeness refers to including all of the information necessary for a recipient to understand a message and take appropriate action. Thorough professional writing provides enough context for the reader without overwhelming them with unnecessary information. Writers should consider what their audience needs to know and include the information required to achieve the purpose of the message.

For example, consider the following email requesting attendance at a meeting:

We are having a meeting next week that you should attend.

This message does not provide enough information for the recipient. The recipient does not know when or where the meeting will take place, what the meeting will cover, or what they should prepare.

When selecting these details, however, writers should thoughtfully consider how much information to include. Consider the following excerpt, which includes too much information:

We are having a department meeting next Wednesday, March 12th, from 2:00–3:00 PM in Conference Room B. The meeting will cover updates to the new scheduling system, including the background for the project, the history of previous scheduling methods, feedback collected from employees over the past several months, notes from earlier discussions, and a detailed explanation of every feature that will be discussed. Please bring your laptop, a notebook, the scheduling documents from last month, your previous meeting notes, and any questions you may have about the system, even if those questions are unrelated to the current discussion.

The above example includes more information but overwhelms the reader with additional details that are not fully needed before the meeting. Consider applying a more balanced approach:

The department meeting will take place on Wednesday, March 12th, from 2:00 p.m.–3:00 p.m. in Conference Room B. We will discuss updates to the new scheduling system. Please bring your laptop and any questions you have about the changes.

This message provides the recipient with the essential information needed to attend and prepare for the meeting without including unnecessary details.

Striking a Balance

Although the 7 Cs provide useful guidelines for effective professional communication, writers may sometimes need to prioritize certain principles over others. For example, a message that is extremely concise may leave out important details, while a message that is fully complete may become unnecessarily lengthy. Thoughtful professional writers consider their audience, purpose, and context to determine which aspects of communication require the most attention.

Striking a balance between the 7 Cs requires thoughtful decision-making. Writers should aim to provide enough information for their audience to understand and act on a message while avoiding unnecessary complexity or detail.

Applying the Guidelines to Professional Writing

The 7 Cs can be applied across many forms of professional writing, such as emails, reports, proposals, presentations, and workplace documentation. While different types of writing may require different approaches, each genre benefits from communication that is clear, accurate, respectful, and purposeful.

The strategies writers use to apply the 7 Cs may vary depending on the type of professional writing they are producing. For example, emails often benefit from clarity and conciseness to communicate information efficiently, while reports and proposals may place greater emphasis on completeness and concreteness by providing sufficient detail and supporting evidence. Regardless of the genre, considering the audience, purpose, and context of a message can help writers determine which aspects of communication to emphasize.

Activity

The following examples each struggle to adhere to one of the 7 Cs of professional communication. Revise each example to improve its effectiveness; then compare your revisions to the sample answers. Answers may vary.

1. Students showed improvement after participating in the tutoring program.
2. Our survey received responses from 500 customers, 750 of which enjoyed using our product.
3. You forgot to lock the penguin enclosure again. This cannot keep happening.
4. Join us for the career workshop next week!
5. The patient information needs to be reviewed and updated accordingly.
6. The tidepool cleanup project begins in April. Pollution affects local wildlife. Volunteers will collect samples throughout the cleanup. The research team hopes to better understand changes in water quality.
7. I am writing this email to inform you that I really wanted to reach out and let you know that I will not be able to attend the scheduled class meeting that is planned for next Monday. I have a prior commitment that I must attend.

Answer Key for Activity

1. **Concreteness:** After participating in the tutoring program, students increased their average math assessment scores from 71% to 85%.
2. **Correctness:** Our survey received responses from 500 customers, 250 of which enjoyed using our product.
3. **Courtesy:** The penguin enclosure was not locked after the evening shift. Please remember to follow the closing checklist before leaving, and let me know if you have any questions.
4. **Completeness:** Join us for the Career Preparation Workshop on Wednesday, November 12, from 3:00 p.m.–4:30 p.m. in Student Center Room 200. The workshop will cover resume writing and interview preparation. Register online by November 8!
5. **Clarity:** The nursing staff should review each patient's emergency contact information and update any outdated phone numbers and email addresses in the electronic health record system.
6. **Coherence:** Pollution affects local wildlife populations, which is why our research team is studying changes in water quality. During the tidepool cleanup project this April, volunteers will collect samples to support this research.
7. **Conciseness:** I will be unable to attend next Monday's class because I have a prior commitment.

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