
The Oxford Guide to **Effective Writing and Speaking**

Preface to first edition

A book like this, which covers a wide range of topics, has to draw on the knowledge and experience of many different advisers. I have been fortunate to receive the help of readers who have given great time and care to commenting on early drafts of the manuscript and advising how it might be improved. In particular, I should like to thank Brigid Avison, Alison Baverstock, Tim Cracknell, David Elsmore, Jacky Hart, Caroline Hartnell, Andrew Heron, and Samantha Manning in the UK, while Dr Nelson Ong of New York offered an American perspective. They will probably recognize where their advice and comments have produced changes in the final text. For this I am deeply grateful, but, of course, the final responsibility is my own.

I should like to thank the staff at Oxford University Press who have patiently supported this project, in particular Kate Wandless and Kendall Clarke, for their encouragement and advice.

Closer to home, Katherine and Timothy Seely gave excellent and critical ‘consumers’ comments’, especially about the communication needs of students and those seeking and gaining their first jobs. (I knew those long years of parenting would pay off eventually!) My debt to my wife, Elizabeth, is immeasurable. Although we have both worked as writers and editors for many years, I can only say that this time I was even more vague and abstracted than usual, but she bore it with great good humour. As ever, she read the manuscript with a critical eye and made many trenchant and invaluable comments, and it is with gratitude that this book is dedicated to her.

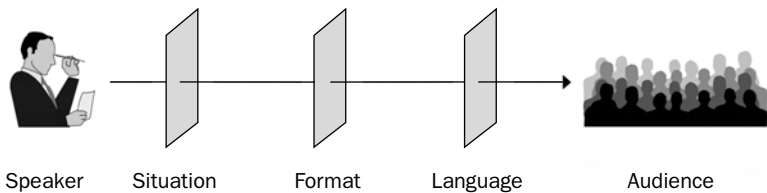
Preface to second edition

I have taken the opportunity of this new edition to make a number of changes. I have added a new chapter on emails, and have made extensive revisions to the chapter on job applications reflecting current practice. In addition, there are numerous small changes throughout the book designed to bring the text up-to-date.

1

Introduction

At times the process of communicating with other people in speech or writing can seem straightforward and simple. At other times we may find it difficult and complicated. *The Oxford Guide to Effective Writing and Speaking* is organized so that readers can look at writing and speaking in four different ways. Three of them are shown in the diagram below:



At one end we have the speaker (or writer), with ideas to communicate. At the other is the audience—the people who are waiting to receive the speaker’s message. In between are three screens through which the message has to pass. Each of these screens corresponds to a major section in this book.

Situation



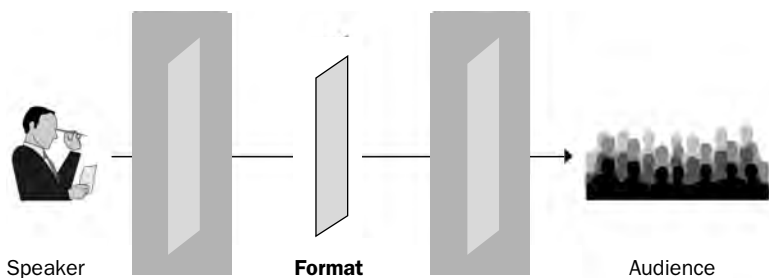
Before we can begin to frame our message effectively we have to consider the situation within which we are communicating. In particular we have to find answers to these questions:

- **What?**
Exactly what is my subject matter?
- **Who?**
To whom do I wish to communicate it?
- **Why?**
What is my purpose in communicating it?
- **When and where?**
Are there features about the place and time which affect how I should write or speak?
- **How?**
What type of communication am I aiming at—narration? description? exposition? argument?

These five questions are the subject matter of section B, *Getting the message across*.

Format

The format is the particular type of communication demanded by the situation.

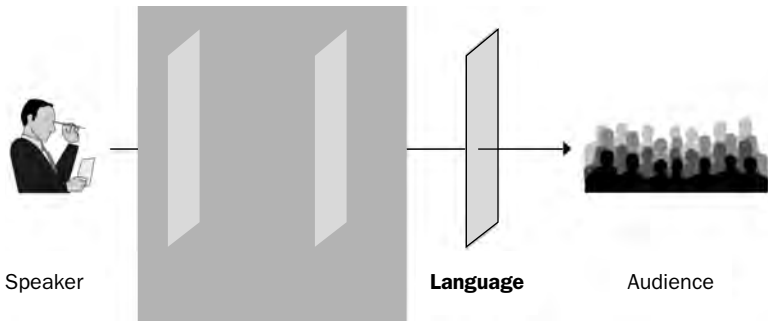


In Section A, *Communicating in everyday life*, we look at the most important formats in which people may have to communicate:

- 2 **Business Letters**
- 3 **Email**
- 4 **Job applications**
- 5 **Organizing a meeting**
- 6 **Presentations**
- 7 **Reports**
- 8 **Essays, papers, and dissertations**
- 9 **The media**

Language

None of this is any use, of course, unless we have a good control over the medium of communication: the English language.



Section C, *The English language*, provides guidance on:

15 Talking about English

The different ways in which it is possible to describe the language.

16 Introduction to grammar

The basics of English sentence structure.

17 More about grammar

The structure of complex sentences.

18 Vocabulary

19 Spelling

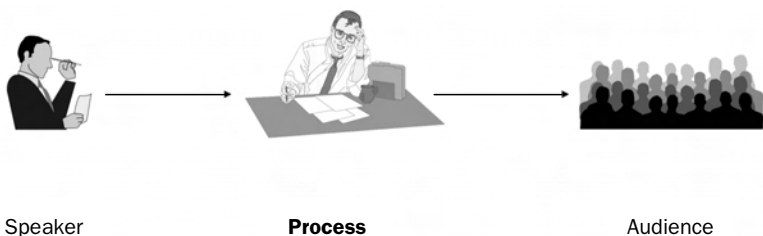
20 Punctuation

21 Speech

The technicalities of effective spoken communication.

Process

Situation, format, and language provide us with a lot to consider before communicating. Indeed, if we tried to take all these factors into consideration at the same time, we should probably give up the whole business. We need a strategy to tackle these things in a logical and structured way.



Section D, *The process of writing*, covers the main stages of writing:

22 Planning and research

23 Writing, drafting, and revising

24 Presentation

3

Email

Email is a medium which has revolutionized the way in which we communicate with each other. It is relatively new and very popular. But it is sometimes used without sufficient thought. In particular it is important to consider:

- 1 Why you are using email.
- 2 The ways in which emails differ from letters and telephone conversations. These affect:
 - how the email is 'topped and tailed'
 - the structure of the email
 - how attachments are used
 - how the email is formatted
- 3 How to use emails as effectively as possible. This involves:
 - perspective
 - reflection
 - response
 - organization
- 4 Email etiquette:
 - formality
 - formatting
 - flaming
 - emoticons
 - initialisms

Email basics

The advent of email has revolutionized business and personal communication. Email makes it possible to communicate cheaply and almost instantly with people anywhere in the world—provided they have access to a computer. (And with internet cafés springing up in the most unlikely places, that means almost anybody.) You can send any type of message, from a single word to a book-length document complete with pictures and sound files. The recipient can respond at once, or think carefully before replying. You can communicate just with one person or with a large group, every member of which can participate as much or as little as they wish.

Emails inhabit a space somewhere between personal meetings, telephones, and letters. They share advantages with each of these means of communication. Like face-to-face meetings they are instant and direct and allow a number of people to participate. Like telephone calls they are quick and inexpensive. Like letters they allow those involved to keep a permanent record of messages sent and received. But they also have disadvantages. Like letters they rely on written language. When you send them you cannot monitor the recipient's reaction to your message and then modify your message; when you receive them you may misjudge the sender's tone, because you only have words on the screen to go by. One

of the great advantages of emails is that they are quick to send. On the other hand, as in a face-to-face or telephone conversation, it is easy to say something that we soon regret. By contrast, letters take longer to compose and seem to allow more time for reflection before sending. And because emails are a fairly new technology, the ‘rules’ governing them are less well established—different people have different ideas about the conventions and etiquette of the medium.

What are you using email for?

Emails are used for a wide range of different purposes. Imagine that you weren’t able to send a particular email. What would you do instead? The answer is usually one of these three:

- Make a telephone call, or
- Send a fax, or
- Write a letter.

The answer you choose tells you something about *why* you want to send an email:

■ Telephone call

If so, you want an immediate (or very rapid) response and you don’t need a permanent record of the dialogue.

■ Fax

You want a speedy response, if possible, but the message (and possibly the response) need to be in visual form so that there is a permanent record, or because there is some kind of facsimile (e.g. a picture or a copy of a letter) that the other person needs to see.

■ Letter

Similar to a fax, but you are not in a hurry or there are other reasons, such as formality, that prevent you sending a fax.

So here there are three variables: time, permanence, and visual elements. But other factors also affect how you use an email.

1 Is the email a one-off, or part of an extended exchange of messages?

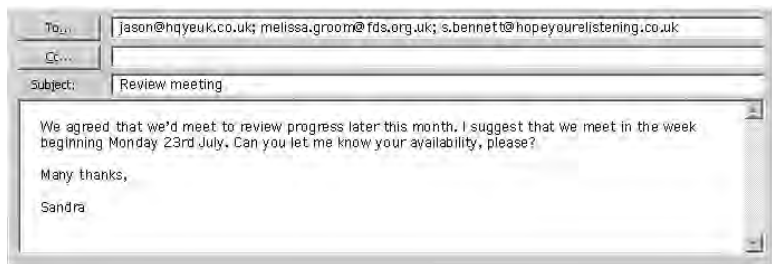
In the first case, you have to make it clear at the beginning of the message what it is about. The ‘Subject’ line will help with this, but



usually the first sentence or two also need to offer some kind of explanation. On the other hand if the email is part of a sequence, then this is unnecessary.

2 Is this exchange of messages just between two people, or is it part of a group communication?

In the exchange illustrated above, there were only two people involved, but email is also used to communicate with groups of people. Suppose Sandra was trying to set up a meeting involving a group of people working for different organizations. She might email them like this:



There are more people to consider here, so Sandra can't just suggest a time; she has to ask people when they are free to meet. The others have a choice about how they reply to her message:

There is more about the question of 'Reply to all' later in this chapter. (p. 30)

a They can just reply to Sandra by hitting the 'Reply' button.



b They can let everyone in the group know when they are free by hitting 'Reply to all'.

3 Is this a business message, or a personal one?

As with other forms of communication, the relationship between the sender and recipient of a message affects its content, form, and tone. Here there are similarities between letters and emails. Once a letter or email has been sent the writer has no control over who will read it. Emails are even more likely than letters to be read by people other than the intended recipient. Some organizations routinely monitor emails going to employees. Errors occur and an email can end up in the inbox of someone completely unknown to the sender. This is why many people prefer to use the telephone—or even arrange a face-to-face meeting—if they have anything confidential to discuss.