

A STUDY OF THE CHARACTERISTICS
OF EFFECTIVE WRITTEN
BUSINESS COMMUNICATION

By

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Chapter	Page
I. THE NATURE OF THE PROBLEM	1
Introduction	1
Statement of the Problem	5
Purpose of the Study	6
Statement of the Hypothesis	7
Significance of the Study	8
Assumptions of the Study	9
Definitions of Terms	9
Delimitations	10
Limitations	11
Research Layout	11
II. REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE	13
Summary	43
III. PROCEDURES, SAMPLES, AND INSTRUMENTS USED IN CONDUCTING THE STUDY	45
Procedures Used in the Study	45
The Delphi Technique	45
Background	47
Advantages and Disadvantages	49
Early Studies	51
Selection of an Expert	52
Size of the Sample	53
Number of Rounds	54
Summary of the Delphi Technique	54
Selection of the Sample	55
Instrumentation	56
Round One Questionnaire	57
Round Two Questionnaire	58
Round Three Questionnaire	59
Data Analysis	60
Summary	61

Chapter	Page
IV. FINDINGS	63
Introduction	63
Presentation of the Data	65
Question One	66
Question Two	66
Question Three	68
Analysis of Characteristics in Relation to the Responses in Round-two and Round-three Questionnaires	72
Accuracy	76
Appearance	76
Clarity	78
Coherence	78
Completeness	79
Conciseness	79
Concreteness	81
Correctness/Preciseness	81
Courtesy	82
Mechanics	82
Planning/Organization	84
Positive Response	84
Punctuation	85
Readability	87
Sincereness	87
Spelling	88
Tone	89
Unity	89
Word Choice	91
You-attitude	91
Summary	92
V. SUMMARY OF FINDINGS, CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS	93
Introduction	93
Summary of Findings	94
Question One	94
Question Two	95
Question Three	96
Conclusions	98
Recommendations	99
A SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY	101

Chapter	Page
APPENDIXES	105
APPENDIX A - ROUND-ONE QUESTIONNAIRE AND COVER LETTER	106
APPENDIX B - ROUND-TWO QUESTIONNAIRE AND COVER LETTER	110
APPENDIX C - ROUND-THREE QUESTIONNAIRE AND COVER LETTER	114

LIST OF TABLES

Table	Page
I. Annual Costs of Wasting an Hour a Day	2
II. Average Cost of Written Business Communication	4
III. Characteristics of Effective Written Business Communications Cited by Selected Textbook Authors	15
IV. Rate of Response for Questionnaire Rounds One, Two and Three	64
V. Characteristics Identified as Important to Effective Written Business Communication in Round One	67
VI. Ratings of Characteristics in Round Two	69
VII. Percentile Ratings of Characteristics in Round Three	71
VIII. Rankings of Characteristics in Round Three	73
IX. Final Ranking of the Top Ten Characteristics of Effective Written Business Communication	74
X. An Examination of the Relationship Between the Ratings in Round Two and the Rankings in Round Three for the Characteristics: Accuracy, Appearance, Clarity, and Coherence	77
XI. An Examination of the Relationship Between the Ratings in Round Two and the Rankings in Round Three for the Characteristics: Completeness, Conciseness, Concreteness, and Correctness/Preciseness	80

XII.	An Examination of the Relationship Between the Ratings in Round Two and the Rankings in Round Three for the Characteristics: Courtesy, Mechanics, Planning/Organization, and Positive Response	83
XIII.	An Examination of the Relationship Between the Ratings in Round Two and the Rankings in Round Three for the Characteristics: Punctuation, Readability, Sincereness, and Spelling	86
XIV.	An Examination of the Relationship Between the Ratings in Round Two and the Rankings in Round Three for the Characteristics: Tone, Unity, Word Choice, and You-attitude	90

CHAPTER 1

THE NATURE OF THE PROBLEM

Introduction

Information exchange, be it verbal or written, is one of the most important functions in any organization today. Too frequently, individuals are unable to transmit messages through the normal communication channels of a business. Even when proper communication links are established, the information being transmitted is often ineffective for stimulating the desired actions. Therefore, the message is ineffective in promoting further action.

The costs of ineffective communication borne each year by American businesses are tremendous. Many valuable employee hours are wasted as a result of ineffective communication. An effectively written document will often settle a business transaction that might otherwise require two or three responses; therefore, time savings can result in dollar savings. A breakdown of the cumulative cost of wasting an hour of a day is shown in Table I. An employee earning \$18,000 a year who wastes one hour a day because of inability to communicate effectively will cost an employer \$2,250.

TABLE I
ANNUAL COSTS OF WASTING AN HOUR A DAY*

Salary	Cost to Employer
\$ 8,000	\$ 997
10,000	1,250
12,000	1,500
14,000	1,750
16,000	2,000
18,000	2,250
20,000	2,500
30,000	3,750
40,000	5,000
50,000	6,250

*Assumes an eight-hour day, a two-week annual vacation, and nine holidays resulting in 231 working days a year.

Not only do the costs of ineffective communication have to be considered, but also--and perhaps more importantly--the average costs of writing business communication must also be considered when looking at the importance of effective written business communication.

According to studies done by the Dartnell Corporation, Chicago, IL, the average costs of a written business communication has more than doubled during the last 10 years. Table II on page 4 discloses the rising costs of written business communication from 1974 to the present costs in 1984.

Table II illustrates the need for the initial written communication to be effective. Ineffective communication that requires several responses becomes a costly process. The challenge is to compose a concise message that will elicit the precise desired response the first time.

"Effective business communication requires a psychological pattern of organization; logic, unadorned, is not enough" (Locker, 1977, p. 36). Locker (1977) also describes the organizational pattern of the letter as being only the skeleton of effective communication. The writer must fill out the creation with effective arguments, well-chosen words, and well-written sentences.

TABLE II
AVERAGE COST OF WRITTEN BUSINESS COMMUNICATION*

Year	Cost
1973	\$3.31
1974	3.41
1975	3.79
1976	4.17
1977	4.47
1978	4.77
1979	5.59
1980	6.07
1981	6.63
1982	7.11
1983	7.60
1984	8.10 - estimate

*Dartnell Corporation, 4460 Ravenswood Avenue, Chicago, IL

According to Level and Galle (1980),

Effective writing is tricky and demanding. Just as bakers burn pies and teachers give bad tests, business professionals write ineffective letters and reports (p. 75).

"Writing effectively requires a keen mind, a sharp eye, plenty of self-criticism, a lot of practice, and adherence to sound writing principles" (Level & Galle, 1980, p. 75).

Gieselman (1977, p. 3) asks, "Just what paradigms do we have in communication writing that we can look to for heuristic guidance?" This question substantiates the purpose of this research. Little consensus has been reached as to which characteristics comprise effective written business communication, even though communication experts have identified the essentials of effective written business communication. After a thorough search of the literature, the investigator found a minimal amount of research pertaining to the characteristics of effective written business communication.

Statement of the Problem

The problem of this study was to identify and to prioritize the characteristics of effective written business communication. The Delphi Technique was used in the identification and prioritization of these characteristics.

Purpose of the Study

Being able to communicate effectively, whether it be within an organizational structure or everyday home-life setting, is an important criteria for success. Regardless of one's proficiency in information exchange, room for improvement usually exists. In effect, it has been noted by numerous communication experts that effective written business communication consists of careful planning and proper placement and application of words.

The ultimate purpose of this research was to provide information that will aid letter writers in improving the effectiveness of their written business communication. This was done through a research process using the Delphi Technique that resulted in the identification and prioritization of the most important characteristics of effective written business communication.

In order to lay a strong foundation for the study of the characteristics of effective written business communication, it was apparent that an understanding of the meanings of the various characteristics was essential. Therefore, another purpose of this study was to provide relevant information about the characteristics of effective written business communication for business communication

instructors. The study should also provide relevant information that can be used in the revision of curricula.

On the surface, effective communication appears fairly simple. In reality, effective communication is an extremely complex and intricate process. Without a concerted effort toward identifying and studying the characteristics of effective written business communication, we may find ourselves drifting away from what we would like to label "effective" communication.

The need to understand the essentials of effective written business communication is undoubtedly one of the basic steps to success. Regardless of the profession, the ability to write effectively is a vital tool and a crucial factor in determining success.

Statement of the Hypothesis

For the purpose of statistical treatment, the following hypothesis was tested in the null form:

There is no significant difference in the relationship between the ratings of the characteristics in Round two and the rankings of the same characteristics in Round three.

The following characteristics were tested:

1. Accuracy
2. Appearance
3. Clarity
4. Coherence
5. Completeness

6. Conciseness
7. Concreteness
8. Correctness/Preciseness
9. Courtesy
10. Mechanics
11. Planning/Organization
12. Positive
13. Punctuation
14. Readability
15. Sincereness
16. Spelling
17. Tone
18. Unity
19. Word Choice
20. You-Attitude

Significance of the Study

After a thorough review of the literature search that was undertaken to identify actual characteristics of effective written business communication, the researcher found ample literature discussing the importance of effective written business communication. However, no substantial research was found that identified specific characteristics of effective written business communication.

Realizing that communication affects every individual in a substantial way, the researcher found it ironic that there was no research identifying these characteristics. Therefore, it seemed appropriate that a study of this area was needed to determine the identification and prioritization of characteristics of effective written business communication.

The information provided from this study should be

helpful in stimulating more effective written business communication.

Assumptions of the Study

To complete this study, the following assumptions were made:

1. Effective written business communication is of value to individuals.
2. The randomly selected participants were knowledgeable and concerned with communication effectiveness and would respond honestly to the research instrument.
3. The Delphi Technique is useful for problem solving, forecasting, and prioritizing.
4. The design of the research instrument would yield data that accurately reflects the characteristics of effective written business communication.

Definition of Terms

In order to clarify the interpretation of this study, the following terms, as used in this research, are defined:

Characteristic refers generally to wording or distinctive qualities and features of written business communication.

Communication is the process of sharing information through either verbal or written channels.

Written communication refers generally to letters, reports, and memoranda.

Effective refers to a condition that produces desired results.

Delphi Technique is a questionnaire format consisting of three rounds of questioning that endeavors to focus on consensus of opinion without personal confrontation of individual group members. A detailed description of the Delphi Technique is included in Chapter III.

Delimitations

The study was limited to individuals who were members of the American Business Communication Association in 1982.

The study did not attempt to specify characteristics needed for each specific type of written business communication. But rather, it was designed to identify and prioritize characteristics of effective written business communication. No attempt was made to categorize the various types of written business communication, i.e., "yes" letters, "no" letters, or "persuasive" letters.

The study was not intended to provide precise guidelines for writing effective written business communication; however, it should provide the basic characteristics found in effective written business communication.

Limitations

The study was limited to the extent of the respondents' veracity and knowledge in the communication area.

The respondents, who were members of the American Business Communication Association in 1982, may not be totally representative of all experts in the area of communication.

Research Layout

The layout of this study was divided into five chapters. Chapter One discussed the statement, purpose, hypothesis, and significance of the study, as well as the delimitations and limitations. The assumptions of the study were listed, followed by the definitions of the terminology used in this study.

Chapter Two, the Review of the Related Literature, examined the research that has been completed in the area of effective written business communication, citing opinions of researchers concerning characteristics of effective written communication.

The procedures of the study were discussed in Chapter Three, followed by an examination of the Delphi Technique

used in opinion polling, the selection of the sample, and the actual instrument used in the study.

Chapter Four disclosed the findings of the study, while Chapter Five summarized the findings, stated the conclusions drawn by the researcher, and presented recommendations for future research.

CHAPTER II

REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

The literature review deals with cited opinions of selected textbook authors concerning the characteristics of effective written communication. While there is almost no reported research related to the actual characteristics of effective written business communication, there is a good deal of literature that discusses the importance of writing effective written business communication. Because of the lack of research-based information and because of the apparent need, this study was conducted.

Upon examining a variety of business communication texts, the investigator found a large discrepancy in the coverage of selected characteristics of effective written business communication. From an examination of texts, a list of characteristics of effective written business communication was compiled. To illustrate the incongruity among textbook authors in the identification of characteristics of effective written business communication, the investigator selected eight texts and examined the index of each text to determine if the previously compiled list of characteristics was covered

within each text (see Table III). Table III illustrates the wide disparity in the coverage of selected characteristics of effective written business communication found within the eight selected business communication textbooks. This disparity further substantiates the need for conducting research to identify and prioritize the characteristics of effective written business communication.

Effective communication is a never-ending challenge for leaders in all walks of life. Numerous studies have shown that good communication skills are essential for success in the business world. Success in most careers stems from some type of effective communication skill. An increasing number of jobs require effective, well-developed communication skills.

An indication of the need for effectively developed communication skills was found in a study conducted by Francis W. Weeks. According to Weeks (1974), in a six-year study of job listings, Weeks found that 340 jobs in thirty fields required the ability to communicate. Because of the increased awareness of the need for a good public image, Johnson and Sterkel (1984) identify effective writing skills as being invaluable to business. Written communication plays a most vital role in a company's public relations because it goes outside the company to a person who may base judgment of the whole organization on just one

TABLE III
 CHARACTERISTICS OF EFFECTIVE WRITTEN
 BUSINESS COMMUNICATIONS CITED BY
 SELECTED TEXTBOOK AUTHORS

Characteristics	Textbooks							
	Himstreet & Baty	Level & Galle	Persing	Quible, Johnson, & Mott	Rosenblatt, Cheatham, & Watt	Sigband & Bateman	Wilkinson, Clarke, & Wilkinson	Wolf, Keyser, & Aurner
Accuracy			X					X
Active Voice	X	X	X	X		X	X	
Adaptability		X	X	X			X	
Appearance		X				X	X	X
Clarity			X	X		X	X	X
Coherence	X	X	X	X		X	X	X
Completeness	X		X		X	X	X	X
Conciseness	X		X	X		X	X	X
Concreteness	X	X	X				X	
Conviction	X	X					X	
Correctness/Preciseness			X			X	X	
Courtesy			X	X		X	X	X
Emphasis	X		X	X		X	X	
Functionalism		X				X		X
Goodwill			X	X	X	X	X	
Grammar	X	X	X	X	X		X	X
Jargon		X		X			X	
Mechanics	X		X		X		X	
Naturalness		X				X	X	
Parallelism	X	X	X	X				X
Perception			X	X	X	X	X	
Persuasion	X		X	X	X	X	X	
Placement	X	X		X		X	X	
Planning/Organization	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Positive Response	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Readability	X		X	X	X	X	X	
Resale				X	X		X	
Review/Revise		X	X	X	X	X		X
Shortness	X	X	X			X		
Simplicity	X			X		X		
Sincereness	X		X				X	

TABLE III (Continued)

Characteristics	Textbooks							
	Himstreet & Baty	Level & Galle	Persing	Quible, Johnson, & Mott	Rosenblatt, Cheatham, & Watt	Sigband & Bateman	Wilkinson, Clarke, & Wilkinson	Wolf, Keyser, & Aurner
Spelling	X		X	X			X	
Style		X	X	X	X	X	X	
Tone	X	X	X	X	X		X	
Transition		X	X	X			X	X
Unity	X	X	X	X		X	X	
Variety	X		X			X	X	
Word choice	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
You-attitude	X		X	X	X	X	X	

piece of communication. Employees are more aware today than ever before of the far-reaching effect of every letter on company goodwill. Businesses are also aware of the need for reducing the costs of poor communications.

Regardless of how well developed a person's communication skills are, there is usually room for improvement. Effective written communication skills seem to be almost automatically possessed by some individuals, but most people continue to need help in developing their written communication skills.

Adelstein (1971) also realized the importance of effective communication as well as the difference between verbal skills and written skills. "Although communication involves both speaking and writing, speaking is not nearly as complex to learn or as difficult to master as writing" (p. 3). We speak far more often than we write; therefore, we are far more experienced and proficient at speaking. However, with experience, trial and error, feedback, and/or professional instruction, most individuals can show substantial improvement. Written communication has been exchanged between business persons for centuries, and researchers still agree that regardless of the purpose of a letter, "the way it is written can either build or destroy goodwill" (Krey, 1968, p. 11). The skill of business letter writing is now considered to be a highly developed

art. Adelstein (1972, p. 7) refers to writing as an art, "like that of piano playing or painting, it can be perfected only with instruction, practice, and supervision."

"The business writer has one primary purpose: to get a message across to the right person" (Weiss, 1977, p. vii). Therefore, the crucial test of effective written business communication is whether or not the writer can achieve the desired response that is being sought. Effective communication is, by definition, the process of conveying effective ideas and conveying them well. It is a truism that people often hear what they want to hear and read into material what they want to read. For this reason, in written communication, it is essential to be aware of assumptions that can affect the meaning of the message being sent.

Words not only mean different things to different people, but also they have different meanings according to how they are used. For example, the word "set" is said to have 200 different meanings, depending on its usage. This is just one example of how semantics creates "ladders of abstraction." Because the meaning of a word is not established by government fiat--but depends upon the way people use it--meanings can and do shift.

For written communication to be effective, it must ensure understanding of the exact meaning as portrayed by the sender. Quible, Johnson, and Mott (1981) stated:

In written communication, both what is said and how it is said are extremely important. . . communicating the exact intent of a message is often the difference between an effective and an ineffective letter (p. 17).

Word Choice

In written communication, the writer cannot convey his/her feelings by a smile, a gesture, or an inflection; rather, he/she must rely completely on written words. A speaker uses various vocal signals, such as emphasis, rate and pausing, and pitch inflections, to help make his/her sentences clear. But the writer, lacking these, must depend primarily on the wording he/she chooses and the positioning of ideas.

The appropriate use of words both in application and positioning is of utmost importance if thoughts are conveyed clearly. Brown and Reid (1979, p. 62) agreed by stating, "The effective writer must carefully select and place each word so that it is precise, alive, and direct." Business writing should be economical, with each word carrying its own weight. "Every word must contribute to conveying a message, clarifying a point, or enhancing

readability" (Weiss, 1977 p. 121). Krey and Metzler (1968) state:

Whether or not you are successful depends on the impression your words make on the reader. Ideas cannot always speak for themselves; the way you present your message, the point of view from which you write, and the impression of you that your words evoke--all these play a part in the success of your communication (p. 87).

Not only does wording affect the effectiveness of written business communication, but also the psychology of word choice plays a vital role. Weiss (1977) stressed that whatever the intellectual level of the readers, they should be addressed in words that are familiar to them. A high-level vocabulary will lose an uneducated audience, whereas low-level diction may offend an educated group. "All messages should be examined carefully to be sure that each word is proper and functional" (Level and Galle, 1980, p. 82).

Naturalness

To impress the reader through the selection of large words causes written communication to sound unnatural and somewhat stiff and formal. Krey (1968) emphasized the importance of writing in a natural tone. She suggested that writers should "talk" their letters. This means to write as if he/she were talking to the reader. "The writer

must strive to sound like a person, not a computer" (Adelstein, 1971, p. 261). Brown (1979) also wrote about the importance of a natural tone. "Good business writing should be natural, simple, and straightforward" (p. 68). Artificial diction is likely to cause the reader to doubt the sincerity of the writer. "Nothing irritates readers as much as insincerity, and nothing makes readers feel a writer's insincerity as much as jargon" (Adelstein, 1971, p. 265).

Using simple, straightforward language creates a natural tone. A constant repetition of mechanical or meaningless words and phrases should be eliminated in order for the written communication to flow smoothly and naturally. "If the writer can approximate in his writing the sparkle, the ease, the directness, the vitality, and the sincerity of speech, then he will write effectively" (Adelstein, 1971, p. 261).

Shurter (1971, p. 99) supports the concept of sincere writing when he stated: "Letter writers will do well not to 'dumb down' or 'dress up' their language but instead to keep it clear, simple, and sincere."

A reader finds it painful to wade through wordy, pompous writing. According to Weiss (1977, p. 99), "Pomposity is a form of foolishness that can be avoided without tricks--all that is required is thoughtfulness and

an audience-directed approach." Lewis (1982) concurs by stating:

Big words should be used to convey a precise meaning. But when you are trying to communicate with a wide audience, as you frequently are in business, it is best to stick with the shorter, more familiar words. They are generally more readily understood . . . and remembered (p. 92).

Chosen words should convey the message, not get in the way of the message. The gratuitous addition of words can lead a reader to infer a meaning the writer does not intend. For example, casually adding the phrase, "at this time" invites a reader to suppose that a different conclusion might have been drawn at another time. Ambiguous words are often used in ways not immediately obvious to our readers. Quible et al., (1981) suggests the writer let the meaning select the word rather than the word impose the meaning.

Planning/Organization

The majority of researchers suggest that effective communication is well organized and planned. Therefore, a starting place is in the planning and organizing stages. No one would start a business without careful advance planning. Nor should a writer approach a writing task without first knowing what is trying to be achieved and

what plan of action should be taken. Planning ensures that the letter will cover every point the writer intends to cover. Planning also affects the clarity of the message being sent.

Weiss (1977) speaks of organization and planning as an essential ingredient of effective letter writing by stating that:

There is no more effective a timesaver for a business writer than an outline, and no more essential an ingredient of a sound methodology. Serving as a framework on which to hang development and detail, an outline is indeed an indispensable tool for business writers (p. 54).

Krey and Metzler (1968) agree with Weiss on the importance of organization. They emphasize the need for a letter to be effective, to be well organized, complete, clear, precise, and to be grammatically correct. They conclude by saying, "The effective letter is the result of careful planning, the proper use of language, and attention to detail" (p. 47). Numerous researchers agree that effective written communication involves an organized plan as well as a combination of talent and application.

Organization not only gives structure and direction to what is being written, but also directs the writer in knowing what to include and where, as well as what to exclude. Effective planning guides the reader through the written message. Organized writing points out the main

ideas, followed by supporting ideas which aids in clarifying and pictorializing the message in its entirety. Wilcox (1977) feels the most obvious reason for organizing is to improve the clarity of writing which helps readers to grasp the essential message more clearly and quickly.

"Clear organization demands that you exclude nonessential information, which not only takes time to write and to read but clouds the essentials" (Krey, 1968, p. 49).

The concept of organizing and planning is supported by Thompson (1967). Thompson's study revealed that listeners/readers achieved higher comprehension scores when messages were well organized than when they lacked organization. Wilcox (1977) further supported the concept by saying:

When there is a rational sequence, the readers are less likely to get lost; they can stay with it better. A clear structure provides them with an overall frame of reference to which they can relate facts and details; they see a pattern that helps them "put it all together." They can then better sort out the main ideas, as opposed to the supporting ideas; thus, they can more readily see "what it all adds up to" (p. 67).

Transitions

One cannot talk of planning and organizing without including the concept of transitions. Transitions function like a coupling link by hooking on to a preceding sentence and attaching it to the following one. As a message moves

from one sentence, paragraph, or idea to the next, there should be a smooth flow so that the reader does not get lost or confused. In essence, you must mentally take the reader by the hand and lead him or her through the entire message.

Transitions tell the reader why he or she should want to read on. They bridge gaps between ideas and prepare the reader for what lies ahead if there is any change in direction. Transitions relate each segment to the central theme and bring coherence to the whole. "Failure to provide transitions will make the reader's journey through the ideas a vexing and tedious one" (Adelstein, 1971, p. 238). Brown (1979) addressed the importance of smooth, flowing ideas:

Your ideas should move like an arrow to the target, not lumber like a mud turtle through underbrush. Every word should contribute to the meaning or to the character of the message (p. 79).

A writer's message will be vague, dull, and perhaps even exasperating if thoughts and sentences are not clearly connected through the proper use of transitions. If the thoughts do not move smoothly, the reader may not have the time, interest, and energy in laboring to get the message. Carefully chosen transitional words or phrases help smooth

the natural sequence of ideas. Consider the following as examples:

And . . . besides, in addition, also

But . . . however, although, while

If . . . in case, assuming, providing

Coherence

The proper use of transitions links ideas and thoughts together; and they help maintain a sense of continuity and coherence within the written message. Continuity can be described as the flow of ideas, the forward movement, from sentence to sentence and paragraph to paragraph. Coherence is how well a paragraph "sticks together." Both play a role in making written communication flow smoothly.

According to Wilkinson, Clarke, and Wilkinson (1980),

Coherence comes best from a logical sequence with major emphasis on the important ideas, with less on the related but less important ones, and with any necessary conjunctions to indicate what relationships exist (p. 681).

Shurter (1981) concurred as he stated:

Coherence depends on good organization--arranging your topics and ideas in the proper sequence and linking them by logical transitions. This involves giving structure to your writing and a logical sequence to the development of ideas (p. 25).

Hagblade (1982) also recognized the importance of

coherence as he stated, "The three basic qualities, or principles of rhetorical structure that good expository writing must possess are unity, coherence, and emphasis" (p. 68).

Continuity, coherence, and transitions all affect the reader's ability to understand a written communication; and at the same time, "the reader's understanding of written communication determines whether or not the writing is effective" (Quible et al., 1981, p. 34).

Numerous researchers vary in their opinions relating to the qualities and characteristics they feel are most important to effective written communication. Brown and Reid (1979) shifted direction when they spoke of important qualities of business communication. They stated, "The three most important qualities of business correspondence are clarity, conciseness, and appeal" (p. 3).

Clarity

As one speaks of clarity, it is important to recall that what we hear or read is influenced and shaped by our individual "frame of reference." With this in mind, it is essential that the writer be aware of the readers' background and his/her needs. This allows the writer to write to the reader, writing in his/her terminology and on his/her level. "Transferring ideas from one mind to another

through the written word is a risky business at best, even when you use plain language" (Lewis, 1982, p. 92).

To write clearly, according to Wilkinson et al., (1980), the writer must make his material easy to read, have it carefully planned and use correct grammar, punctuation, wording, and sentence structure. He states, "Immediate clearness is a fundamental of good writing" (p. 681). Haggblade (1982, p. 55) recognized the importance of clarity in writing as he expressed, "Unclear writing generally reflects unclear thinking." For a written communication to be clear, every idea should be easy to understand and impossible to misunderstand. Adelstein (1971) concurred as he stated:

If the reader does not understand a sentence, if he can interpret it in another way, or if he must struggle to fathom the meaning, then the writer has failed to communicate effectively (p. 208).

Weiss (1977) expressed concern as he wrote about clarity in terms of precision. He feels many circumstances require a degree of precision that defeats readability or clearness. He states:

Some correspondence might include considerable detail; that must describe exceptions, limitation and variation and to do all of this in one piece of writing may not meet the requirements of also being readable. . . . Nevertheless, it is always necessary to work over heavy writing and make it as readable as possible without sacrificing necessary precision (p. 106).

Lewis (1982) suggests the trend in business these days leans toward simple, clear straightforward prose. He states:

The biggest problem in business writing today is the gap between the spoken and the written word. Most executives bark out clear, easy-to-understand orders. But frequently, when they write the same message, they resort to gobbledygook, the pompous language of officialdom, which sounds impressive but says little (p. ix).

Shurter (1971) speaks of the importance of clarity and conciseness as he describes jargon or gobbledygook as being:

A form of vagueness, of loose thinking, and it is the worst enemy of clarity and conciseness. . . . It is characterized by vague general words instead of precise, informative ones (p. 47).

Written communication should be clear and lucid; every paragraph should be so clear and unambiguous that even the simplest reader will not be able to mistake it nor obliged to read it twice in order to understand it. Clarity in writing will enable the reader to understand easily and quickly. Clarity in writing comes from using words that convey exact meanings.

Simplicity

Simplicity and directness are usually good guarantees

of clarity in a written business communication. "A reader finds it exasperating to slog through dense verbiage and come up with no clear ideas of its purpose" (Weiss, p. 19). Lewis (1982) suggests the use of shorter sentences and simpler wording as two means of clarifying communications. Shorter sentence lengths enable the reader to digest one fact before rushing to another. The average sentence length is between 15 and 20 words. However, making all sentences about 20 words long would result in choppy, monotonous writing. Varying sentence lengths aids in emphasizing the more important elements in the communication as well as helps smooth the flow of the writing. Shurter (1971) states:

Don't force your readers to go along until he is breathless from the sheer length of your sentences. By doing so, you merely divert the small amount of attention he has left for comprehending (p. 69).

Business topics are often dull and can become tiresome if the writing style grows monotonous; the effect on readers must be stifling. To counter this threat, Weiss (1977) suggests writers use variety in their writing. The length and complexity of sentences should be tailored to the type of message being written. Flowing thoughts and lively writing usually call for a variety of sentence lengths. In most situations, a mixture of short, simple

sentences complimented by longer, smoother ones will best hold the reader's attention.

Conciseness

Clarity and conciseness are closely related. Concise writing is described by Adelstein (1971) as writing that is complete, clear, and courteous but with no unnecessary words or ideas. By using words that convey the meaning in the most efficient manner, writing will be effective and in most cases concise. Wilkinson et al., (1980, p. 683) expressed his idea of conciseness by stating, "Conciseness depends on leaving out the irrelevant, leaving unsaid what you can adequately imply and cutting out deadwood."

A concise piece of writing conveys all that the writer wants to say and all that the reader needs to know in the shortest, most direct way. Shurter (1971, p. 65) suggested that "Irrelevancy is a major enemy of conciseness." Lewis (1982) feels there are two tests that will tell whether a communication is too long: (1) Does it say more than it needs to say? (2) Does it use too many words to say what it has to say? Needless words waste the reader's time and discourages the reader's interest while empty phrases and irrelevant details tend to confuse the reader. Added words sometimes have a way of intruding extraneous thoughts that

lead the reader astray, which destroys the effectiveness of the message.

Level (1980, p. 81) feels, "All communications should be concise," which means that the communicator understands the basic concept of economy words. This means achieving the greatest impact with the fewest possible words. However, the shortest response, at times, can be too concise. Brevity must be tempered with good judgment. A reply should not be so brief that it is abrupt; however, the writer must remember, "Words that don't carry their weight--commonly called deadheads, parasites, and roundabout expressions--can squeeze the vitality out of a sentence. . . ." (Lewis, 1982, p. 86). Brevity requires that every word serve a purpose. To write with brevity is not to write little, but to waste little.

In written communication, the writer should write not only so the reader will understand, but also so the reader will understand as quickly and easily as possible. The problems occurring when communications lack conciseness were summarized by Shurter (1971).

Lack of conciseness creates boredom, an inattention along with the same feeling or frustration that a bright student in a group of slow learners endures (p. 65).

Having covered two of Brown and Reid's (1979) three most important qualities of business correspondence--

clarity and conciseness--one must address the final characteristic, which is appeal. Appeal is usually discussed in terms of appearance, grammar, and punctuation.

Appearance

Balance and placement are a letter's first appeal to the reader's eye. It is during the first glance that both the writer and the message are judged by the physical appearance. "The appearance of your message is the first stimulus your reader perceives, and first impressions endure" (Wolf, et al., 1979, p. 103).

The appearance of a written communication can create, or bridge, communication gaps. For instance, the appearance of a written communication may be interpreted as evidence of a company's or writer's pride and ability. Inefficiency and carelessness are easily identified by the misplacement of the message on paper. "A neat, attractive format contributes to the positive character of the message" (Brown, 1979, p. 15).

Shurter (1971, p. 124) described the arrangement of a letter as, "The most noticeable feature of the letter and it can interest or prejudice the reader at a glance." Wilkinson et al., (1980) also agreed on the importance of the appearance of letters as they stated, "The appearance

of a letter, as of a person, should be pleasant but unobtrusive and should suggest that the writer is competent, accurate, neat, and alert" (p. 678). Brown (1979, p. 15) feels, "Attractive, proper appearance is effective communication."

Grammar

Grammar also plays a vital role in the appeal of written communication. Few people are tolerant of poor grammar and incorrect usage of words; however, the anything-goes school of grammar argues that whatever device succeeds in giving a reader comprehension of the message is acceptable as a means of communicating. Weiss (1977) contradicts that idea by saying, "Since standard usage is superimposed on a grammatical--which is to say, a logical--foundation, the true rules of grammar must not be flouted" (p. 118). Adelstein (1971) feels you can still communicate when writing grammatically incorrect, but:

You run the risk of incurring the disapproval of educated readers and of distracting them from the flow of your thoughts by the jarring discords of unconventional or disconcerting syntax (p. 80).

He also stated that in order to write effectively, one should write grammatically.

Punctuation

Punctuation, like grammar and appearance, is an integral part of a written communication. Punctuation can easily change interpretations of a message. For example:

VERSION A

I think so; do you?
Send this message to
John Jay.

VERSION B

I think. So do you.
Send this message to
John, Jay.

Punctuation marks are communication signals that tell the reader something about the structure of a sentence, and they enable the reader to grasp the meaning of the message more easily. They are guides to the development of thought in a sentence; they often help indicate to the reader the relationship of the various parts. Without them, the reader may have trouble placing emphasis on particular thoughts or even miss the main point of a message. According to Weiss (1977), punctuation is important; however, he feels business writers tend to worry too much about it. "The long-term trend in writing is toward less punctuation (p. 109)." He feels the tendency is to help readers move along quickly.

Punctuation, which follows the conventions of written English, is helpful to both reader and writer. However, any use other than the standard system, can be misleading--just as if words were used in unfamiliar ways.

Like faulty wording, faulty punctuation often not only confuses but distracts the reader's mind from the key idea. According to Quible et al., (1981, p. 390), "A key to clearness in writing is expert punctuation."

Accuracy

Whether or not written communication is punctuated properly, grammatically correct, and has a neat appearance, the presence of flaws in the information within the communication will cause a letter to fail. The factual message must be exact and clear. "Your letter, no matter how correct and up-to-date in style and form, must be a model of accuracy and neatness" (Krey and Metzler 1968, p. 36). Business demands accuracy. According to Wolf, et al., (1979, p. 53), "Accuracy requires valid, reliable, complete data; proper message format; appropriate word choice, grammar, spelling, and punctuation." Therefore, for the written communication to be accurate, it entails the responsibility of checking every fact, every figure, every word. Effective business communication strives to produce messages that cannot be misunderstood. Most researchers agree, that no written business communication should be signed unless the writer is certain it is accurate.

Tone

In written business communication, both what is said and how it is said are extremely important to the effectiveness of the communication. Regardless of how accurate the information is within the written communication, if it is written with an intimidating, condescending tone, the communication will run a greater risk of failing to accomplish its intended purpose.

"It isn't what he said--it's the way he said it"; we have all heard this expressed at one time or another. Hand gestures, voice inflections, eye contact--they all affect the tone of spoken words, sometimes even more than the words themselves. The same point applies in written communication. To build goodwill in writing, the writer must control the tone of the message. Krey and Metzler (1968) remind writers that the intention of a good business letter is not merely to transmit information, but rather it is to build a relationship between the writer and the reader. It is through proper tone that human behavior can be influenced. Too often a writer thinks only of the words that are written, failing to realize that these words convey a mood both in what they say outright and what may be read between the lines through the tone.

According to Wolf, Keyser, and Aurner, (1978), tone can be proved through evidence of data organization. To

display good tone, Wolf feels the written message must be organized for the convenience of the reader rather than the writer. The organization of the message will influence the reader's response. This can be easily illustrated. When a message contains good news, that information should be expressed first before other details. It is the good news that is of utmost importance to the reader. The reader is looking for the good news, preferring not to have to wade through other information to find the answer. Once the reader finds it, the writer has accomplished two things: he has set the tone of the letter, and he has made the reader happy.

Written communication cannot always be a bearer of good news; sometimes it is necessary to say no. When disappointing news opens a message, it immediately stimulates negative feelings within the reader. With this organization, the writer risks closing the mind of the reader. At that point, the reader may choose not to continue reading and may never get to the explanation and reasoning of the situation.

A negative reply can be easily handled by expressing sympathy and understanding of the reader's situation. An example might be, "I know how you feel, but . . ." This type of comment helps lead into an explanation of why the request cannot be granted. An explanation of some type is

always important when saying no. Even though replies cannot always bear good news, they can always be courteous. Friendliness and courtesy are always highly valued by readers. "A few polite words can serve to relieve the starkness of overly tense writing" (Weiss, 1979, p. 79).

Positive Response

Regardless of whether a message is saying "yes" or "no," the writer should organize the information and choose words that connote positive rather than negative feelings. An idea can be expressed either positively or negatively; however, the reaction of the reader will depend in part on which method the writer chooses. Weiss (1977) states:

The best business writing avoids negatives for the most part. The avoidance is intended not only to obviate problems but also to emphasize a positive tone (p. 120).

Negative words are obstacles to the reader's acceptance of an idea. They tend to sound discouraging and often arouse doubts. Words that present ideas positively, on the other hand, gain approval and open the way for cooperation.

According to Level and Galle (1980),

The tone of a message is not usually set by any one or two words, but persistent and frequent use of negative words and expressions generates a negative tone (p. 88).

Certain words that frequently have a negative impact are unintentionally antagonistic. Such words are offensive because they diminish the importance of integrity of the reader. Some examples might be:

you don't know
you don't realize
you failed to
you have ignored
your company needs

These examples frequently give the impression that the writer is condescending. Lewis (1982) expressed his ideas on good tone as he wrote, "Tone is as important to a letter as good muscle tone is to an athlete. A negatively phrased letter can have the same effect as an abrasive personality" (p. 104).

Brown (1979, p. 122) feels, "To get the desired response from your reader, your letter must have a positive tone." When Lewis (1982) talks about tone, he suggests, "The tone of your letter should reflect the same ease in conversation that you enjoy when talking about your favorite hobby, business, or pastime" (p. 107).

Courtesy

Courtesy and tact are important characteristics in creating goodwill and good tone. Being courteous is being considerate of the other person's feelings. Tact can be

defined as the absence of any element that might offend the reader needlessly. These two preventive characteristics, courtesy and tact, eliminate many "thorns" in communicating while at the same time giving the written communication a better chance to accomplish its purpose.

A written business communication can take the color of many shades--positive or negative, courteous or impertinent, helpful or indifferent, all of which are controlled by the tone used by the writer.

You-Attitude

A well-written communication will bring a writer and a reader closer together mentally. This is usually done through reader-oriented writing. Psychologists say that each individual is basically interested in himself--always wanting to know "what's in it for me?" The tone conveyed in a written communication should be one that nourishes the reader's ego. To accomplish this, researchers suggest writing in the point of view known as the you-attitude. "The you-attitude is a method of developing a desirable relationship with the reader" (Wilcox, 1977, p. 281). Lewis (1982) says this can be done by having the writer place himself in the reader's shoes and then writing from that point of view.

We are each the center of our own world. So, too, the

reader is the core of his world. Krey and Metzler (1968) stressed that to get a reader to read a message and act upon it, the writer must place the reader in the center of the stage--tell him what the message can do for him, answer any questions, and use language that is meaningful to him. Shurter (1971) stated, "Nothing related to business correspondence is more important than the you-attitude." Writing will get a better response if it impresses the reader with his importance and with the writer's concern for him.

Most researchers agree that writers can most readily persuade their readers to respond the way they want them to by demonstrating that it is to their advantage to do so. An illustration of this concept is mentioning the benefits that the reader will receive when ordering merchandise from the company rather than merely telling the reader that his order is appreciated.

By appealing to the reader and by focusing on his behalf and the benefits he will derive, the message possesses the you-attitude. Weiss (1977, p. 4) reinforces the importance of the you-attitude as he states, "Business persons should write with their reader's wants and needs in mind." Quible et al. (1981, p. 17) states, "Writing with a you-attitude shows a sincere concern for the reader." Writing with the you-attitude demonstrates sincerity and

concern by placing emphasis on the reader's viewpoint rather than on the writer's. To write in the you-attitude requires imagination. It requires that the writer play many roles and be able to visualize the reader's desires, circumstances, and probable reactions.

Researchers suggest the usage of the terms "you" and "your" rather than the first-person pronouns "I," "me," "mine," "we," and "our." The mere usage of "you" and "your" throughout a written communication, however, will not guarantee a you-attitude. The you-attitude is contingent upon creating a positive state of mind through suggestions and descriptive benefits to the reader. Wilkinson et al., (1980), summarizes the true reasoning behind the you-attitude as he states:

The hard business reason for you-viewpoint presentation is that when you show you are aware of and are doing something about another person's needs or problems, your suggestion will get a more favorable reaction. In other words, you can get the action you want--if--and only if--you show benefits worth the cost and trouble (p. 83).

Summary

Researchers agree with Dean (1953, p. 279), "There are no standard rules for the actual writing process that fit the needs of all people and the requirements of all situations." However, after reviewing literature in the

area of effective written business communication, the literature suggests that there may be some characteristics that play a more vital role than others in making an effective written business communication. Even though the literature offers suggestions and opinions on characteristics that affect written business communication, it appears that no actual studies have been completed that focus on the identification and prioritization of those characteristics that produce effective written business communication. In view of this fact, it seems appropriate to use research methodology to identify and to prioritize the characteristics of effective written business communication.

CHAPTER III

PROCEDURES, SAMPLES, AND INSTRUMENTS USED IN CONDUCTING THE STUDY

Procedures Used in the Study

This study was designed to identify and prioritize the characteristics of effective written business communication. The study made use of the modified Delphi Technique to determine these characteristics. The researcher proposed to: (1) generate characteristics of effective written business communication, (2) rate the importance of the characteristics generated, and (3) establish a rank order of characteristics in terms of their importance.

The purpose of Chapter III is to describe the Delphi Technique, the method by which the sample was selected, the design of the instrument, and the procedures used in collecting data.

The Delphi Technique

The Delphi communication process begins with a problem statement directed to selected participants. The first-round questionnaire often suggests ideas pertaining

to the question posed and requests respondents to express opinions regarding the topic being researched. The researcher collates and organizes the responses which are then redistributed to all participants in the form of another questionnaire. The new round asks each participant to evaluate, usually by a ranking or rating criterion, all previously submitted responses. The criteria that are often used are: degree of importance, likelihood of success, probability of occurrence, etc. Should a participant request additional information about the problem area, the information will be supplied to all participants.

With each successive round of questionnaires, revised statements of the previous responses are provided. The participants are asked to consider the opinions of the group and then to reconsider their own position before responding again. As the range in opinions narrows, the tendency toward consensus emerges. The number of rounds used depends primarily on whether a convergence of opinions or a full consensus is wanted. The opinion formed reflects the unbiased thinking of the participants. A meeting of the minds--the reaching of a consensus or convergence--is the concept underlying the Delphi Technique.

Background

The Delphi Technique, a method for developing and improving group consensus, was originated at Rand Corporation in 1948 by Olaf Helmer and his colleagues. Gray (1970) described the Delphi Technique as a means of securing expert convergent opinion through written responses rather than bringing the experts together in face-to-face confrontations. It eliminates committee activity and replaces it with a carefully designed program of sequential interrogations, interspersed with information, and opinion feedback (Cyphert and Grant, 1970).

Although this technique was developed mainly as a forecasting model, the Delphi Technique applications have broadened beyond technological forecasting. Helmer (1967) suggested that the Delphi approach might prove expedient for soliciting ideas for changes in curriculums or in teaching methods. It has also become a multiple-use planning tool (Delbecq, 1975). The technique can be used in various ways: to identify problems, set priorities, establish goals, and identify problem solutions. According to Delbecq (1975), the Delphi Technique, by drawing upon the current knowledge of experts, provides a more updated

exchange of scientific or technical information than a literature search.

The rationale for the Delphi Technique was described as the age-old adage, "Two heads are better than one," or, more generally, "n heads are better than one (Dalkey, Rourke, and Synder, 1972 p. 15). The idea of pooling ideas is found throughout our society--committees, juries, boards, panels, and legislatures. Therefore, on any given question, there is at least as much information in n heads as there is in one.

The traditional way of pooling individual opinions is the face-to-face discussion. According to Dalkey (1969) some serious difficulties can occur with face-to-face discussion: (1) dominant individuals tend to influence (2) semantic noise distorts and (3) group pressure causes conformity. When any one of these difficulties occur, the final consensus chiefly expresses the thinking of that influential member instead of the thinking of the entire group. The design of the Delphi Technique minimizes the biasing effects of dominant individuals, irrelevant communications, and group pressure toward conformity. The Delphi Technique helps eliminate the undue influence of certain psychological factors which occur during the round-table discussion (Gray, 1970). The anonymity of participants in the Delphi Technique, an essential

ingredient of the process, protects participants' ideas from being submerged. It affords the opportunity to reevaluate the many potential solutions and privately change one's initial opinion.

Regarding the validity of the Delphi Technique as a procedure for systematically developing group judgment, Dalkey et al., (1972) stated:

One of the plain facts of life is that practically all important decisions, whether at the national level, or at the level of everyday life, involve issues which cannot be decided on the basis of hard data or well validated theories. . . . Surrounding such decisions there is a cloud of uncertainty, attended by mysterious things called 'intangibles', which usually make it impossible to arrive at a firm choice. This means that ultimately the decision must rest on the judgment of some individual or group. . . . A fairly good test whether a given question is highly uncertain is to ask a group of the most knowledgeable people on that subject that can be found and examine the distribution of answers. If the members of the group report much the same answer, there is a good likelihood that the group answer is correct. On the other hand, if the group reports a wide diversity of answers, then there is a high probability that the issue is uncertain (p. 3).

Advantages and Disadvantages

According to Dalkey (1969), the Delphi procedures improve the statistical treatment of individual opinions with controlled feedback. The three features of this technique are: (1) anonymity, (2) interaction and controlled feedback, and (3) statistical group response.

It should be remembered that Delphi represents a distinct improvement over either individual experts or face-to-face panels (Martino, 1972). Sackman (1975, p. 6) suggested that "the payoff of a Delphi study is typically a presentation of observed expert concurrence in a given application area where none existed previously." Weaver (1972, p. 47) reports in his critique of the Delphi methods, that, "although Delphi was intended as a tool for scientific and technological forecasting it . . . may aid in probing priorities."

Bramson and Parlette (1978) spoke of four advantages for using the Delphi Technique. They included: (1) the opportunity to use experts at a low cost, (2) the opportunity to refine issues and solve problems, (3) the opportunity for time for reflections and building of concepts, and (4) minimal time required of respondents. Cone (1978) also listed three advantages of the Delphi process:

1. Each respondent has an opportunity to be involved in each step of the process.
2. No member being polled is ever required to defend his or her position before another who may be a threatening figure or simply a better debater.
3. The process allows for natural development of a trend or consensus (p. 12).

Bramson and Parlette (1978, p. 246) cited the

following weaknesses of the Delphi Technique: high investment in staff time, long calendar time required to complete the process, the possibility of staff bias, and difficulties in resolving conflicts that arise during the process. Helmer (1967), the originator of the Delphi Technique, asserted that this technique presents one method in which the intuitive, informed individual's opinion can become a part of forecasting. However, he concluded that the programmed use of informed opinion may lack the elegance and cohesiveness of scientific theory, but it is nevertheless an effective device for exploring the future and aiding the decision-making process.

Early Studies

The Delphi Technique, an outgrowth of the Rand Think Tank, was pioneered by the Rand Corporation in Santa Monica, California during the late 1940s (Dalkey et al., 1972). The first use of the Delphi came in the early 1950s as an Air Force-sponsored Rand Corporation study. It was used for a classified project to obtain the most reliable consensus of opinion of a group of experts (Helmer, 1967).

Although the Delphi was developed mainly as a forecasting model, many today see the technique as a way to encourage consensus or a convergence of opinion (Weaver, 1971). Its applications broadened beyond technological

forecasting and became a multiple-use planning tool.

In 1966, the Institute of Government and Public Affairs at the University of California in Los Angeles did one of the first studies in education using the Delphi (Adelson, Alkin, and Helmer, 1967). The purpose of the study was to develop some useful perspectives on thinkable changes in American education.

Edwin Griffith used the Delphi Technique, in 1973, to involve selected members of a community to set educational goals. He found that this system provided increased community-school communications and produced desirable results in setting goals.

"Since the inception of the Delphi method, it has experienced increased application" (Brockhaus, 1977, p. 103). According to Dalkey (1968), the increased interest in the Delphi Technique has resulted in large increases in application by educational organization. Adelson, et al., (1967, p.29) agrees with Dalkey as he states:

The Delphi Technique is being modified and improved so as to be useful in a variety of ways in education decision-making.

Selection of an Expert

The term expert has been associated with the Delphi Technique since its origination. According to Webster's

New World Dictionary (1970, p. 493), an expert is "a person who is very skillful or highly trained and informed in some special field."

Brown and Helmer (1964, p. 45) asked, "How is an expert to be judged an expert?" They see years of professional experience, status among peers, and the amount of relevant information to which one has access, all as possibilities. Delbecq, Van de Ven, and Gustafson (1975, p. 88) suggests the respondents should be "well-known and respected individuals from members within a target group if the Delphi is aimed at experts. . . ."

Size of the Sample

The number of respondents has varied from study to study. According to Turoff (1970, p. 153), "A Delphi can be given to anywhere from ten to fifty people. . . ." In 1958, Rand conducted a study with 150 university students (Dalkey, 1969). It was indicated by Brockhaus (1977) that two percent of the studies he conducted had five or fewer respondents while 40 percent had more than 40 respondents. The Delphi Technique has been adaptable to various numbers of participants based on the layout of the study being done.

Number of Rounds

The flexibility of the Delphi Technique is evidenced also in the number of rounds of feedback information necessary. The number of rounds of feedback has varied from three to six. During the earlier studies, the goal was consensus; therefore, more supplementary feedback was provided, which increased the number of rounds. The more recent studies, however, have shifted into an attitudinal or perceptual orientation--with the goal being convergence--rather than the traditional non-data base. This shift has reduced and many times eliminated the need to provide supplemental information between rounds, causing the number of rounds to lessen.

Summary of the Delphi Technique

The Delphi Technique is essentially a tool which elicits ideas from participants, while maintaining anonymity, and has as its goal the reaching of a convergence of opinions. Upon reviewing the Delphi Technique, the researcher has determined that it can and does lend itself to a wide range of flexibility and opportunity for judgment in procedural matters.

Selection of the Sample

Since the purpose of this study was to identify and to prioritize characteristics of effective written business communication, it was decided that opinions of people involved in the field of business communication should be sought. A listing of the 1982 membership of the American Business Communication Association was used for the random selection of 30 individuals. The selected participants in this study, because of their work and/or training in the field, were viewed as knowledgeable individuals on the subject of business communication.

A letter, along with a copy of Questionnaire I, were mailed to the 30 selected individuals. The letter explained the purpose of the study and briefly described the Delphi Technique. The selected experts were asked to indicate their willingness to participate by completing and returning the Round-one questionnaire.

Of the original 30 individuals asked to participate, 20 (67 percent) responded--indicating that they were willing to participate in the study. From the indication of their willingness to participate, the two succeeding rounds were mailed to the same population of 20 participants. Each round included a cover letter, and participants were given a 15-day response time before they

were mailed a follow-up letter. All participants were supplied with a self-addressed stamped envelope for the return of their questionnaire.

Instrumentation

The Delphi Technique was used to collect the data for this study. Three rounds of questionnaires were used to collect the data perceived necessary to determine the importance and priority of characteristics of effective written business communication.

The first questionnaire listed various characteristics that selected experts in the field believe are important in effective written business communication. Participants were then asked to identify those characteristics which they felt were important to effective written business communication and to add any additional characteristics. The total process of identifying and prioritizing the characteristics of effective written business communication was concluded after the third questionnaire. (See Appendix A, B, and C.) Each round was examined by colleagues to determine continuity of thought. Based on those examinations, questionnaires one, two, and three were refined and the suggestions and recommendations were incorporated before the questionnaires were sent.

The cover letter, accompanying each round, stated the

purpose of that particular round as well as reinstated the purpose of the study as a whole. A copy of each correspondence accompanied by its questionnaire can be found in Appendix A through C.

Round-One Questionnaire

The purpose of the first questionnaire was to compile a list of characteristics that the participants felt were necessary for effective written business communication. A listing of 39 characteristics was compiled by the researcher after reviewing literature concerning written business communication. These characteristics were then listed on the first questionnaire as well as an "other" category for any additional characteristics that the participants felt were important to effective written business communication.

The 30 selected participants were requested to identify those characteristics that they believe are important to effective written business communication. They were asked to place a check mark beside each characteristic they felt was important to effective written business communication and to list any additional characteristics they believed to be important. Three additional characteristics were added upon the return of

the Round-one questionnaire. They were: (1) continuity, (2) nondiscriminatory, and (3) punctuation.

Space was also provided for any comments the participants might want to make concerning each characteristic. A copy of Round-one questionnaire may be found in Appendix A.

Round one of the questionnaire resulted in 20 returned questionnaires, a response rate of 67 percent. The information generated from Round one was then used to formulate Round two of the Delphi questionnaire.

Round-Two Questionnaire

The returned Round-one questionnaires resulted in a total of 42 characteristics identified as being important to effective written business communication. These 42 characteristics were recorded on the Round-two questionnaire. Round two was mailed to the same 20 participants who responded to Round one.

The respondents were asked to review the list compiled by themselves and other experts in the literature and then rate each characteristic as to whether it was (1) Important; (2) Slightly Important; (3) Neither Important Nor Unimportant; (4) Slightly Unimportant; (5) Unimportant as a characteristic of an effective written business communication.

The response to the second round resulted in 20 returned questionnaires, or 100 percent, the same number of responses as in Round one. A copy of Round-two questionnaire may be found in Appendix B. The information taken from the responses of Round two was used to compile Round three, the final round of questionnaires used in this study.

Round-Three Questionnaire

The purpose of Round three, the final round, was to determine the prioritized ranking of the characteristics of effective written business communication identified as important through Round two.

After tabulating the importance of votes received by each characteristic listed in Round two, the researcher then compiled Round-three questionnaire. The 20 characteristics rated as being most important by the respondents were listed on Round three. Round-three questionnaire consisted of a consensus criterion of 84 percent, and included the characteristics given a composite rating in the upper 84th percentile. To prevent the influencing of respondents' opinions, the tabulation of each characteristic was not recorded on the questionnaire but rather each characteristic was listed alphabetically, a procedure consistent with both of the earlier rounds.

In the Round-three questionnaire, respondents were asked to review each characteristic that was listed and to then select the 10 characteristics they felt were the most important to effective written business communication. After having chosen the 10 most important characteristics, the respondents were then asked to give a value of 10 to the most important characteristic, a 9 to the next most important characteristic, and continue until a value of 1 was assigned.

Round three brought a 100 percent response; twenty questionnaires were returned. A copy of Round-three questionnaire can be found in Appendix C.

Upon receipt of the final round of questionnaires, the data were examined, analyzed, and interpreted in keeping with the purpose of the study.

Data Analysis

The relationship between Round-two and Round-three questionnaires was analyzed with the use of the crosstabulation section of the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) computer program.

The Chi-square and Kendall's Tau were used in analyzing the data compiled through the Delphi Technique. The Chi-square and the Kendall's Tau were administered to determine if a significant relationship existed between

variables in Round two and Round three. Each test was evaluated on the basis of the 90 percent confidence level. If the relationship between the ratings in Round two and the rankings in Round three was statistically significant, the hypothesis was rejected.

The findings from the examination of the data collected for the research are presented in the next chapter. Supporting evidence is presented in tabular form to aid in the explanation of the findings.

Summary

The purpose of this study was to aid letter writers in preparing effective written business communication while also providing relevant information about the characteristics of effective written business communication so that it can be used as an aid in the designing and revising of curricula. Therefore, it was decided that the American Business Communication Association membership list would contain knowledgeable experts who should be consulted in identifying and prioritizing the characteristics of effective written business communications.

After determining a list of characteristics of effective written business communication in Round one, it then became necessary to rate the importance of each characteristic. Upon establishing the rating of important

to unimportant for each characteristic, the researcher took one more step to establish the ranking of the characteristics listed as most important. The final round of questionnaires resulted in a list of the ten most important characteristics of effective written business communication as identified within this study.

CHAPTER IV

FINDINGS

Introduction

The primary purpose of this study was to aid letter writers in preparing effective written business communication while also providing relevant information about the characteristics of effective written business communication. This was accomplished by using the Delphi Technique in identifying and prioritizing the characteristics of effective written business communication. The sample for the study was composed of 30 members of the 1982 American Business Communication Association, 67 percent of whom responded to the three mailed questionnaires. (See Table IV). Answers to three basic questions were sought:

1. What are the important characteristics of effective written business communication?
2. What is the importance of each of the characteristics of effective written business communication?
3. What are the individual rankings of the top ten characteristics of effective written business communication?

TABLE IV
RATE OF RESPONSE FOR QUESTIONNAIRE
ROUNDS ONE, TWO AND THREE

Questionnaire	Number Mailed	Number Returned	Percentage Returned
Round-One Questionnaire	30	20	67%
Round-Two Questionnaire	20	20	100%
Round-Three Questionnaire	20	20	100%

The findings related to these questions are presented in this chapter, and the conclusions and recommendations resulting from this study are presented in Chapter V.

Presentation of the Data

A three-stage questionnaire was developed and administered to the participants. The results of the questionnaires were tabulated and are shown in Tables V, VI, VII, VIII, and IX.

The hypothesis tested in this study was:

There is no significant difference in the relationship between the ratings of the characteristics in Round two and the rankings of the same characteristics in Round three.

These relationships were analyzed by the Chi-square test of significance and the Kendall's Tau. The purpose for using the Chi-square analysis and the Kendall's Tau was to determine if a significant relationship existed between the ratings given to the characteristics in Round two and the rankings given to the characteristics in Round three. The 90 percent confidence level was used to measure a significant difference. The findings resulting from the data analysis used in this study are shown in Tables X, XI, XII, XIII, and XIV.

Question One

What are the important characteristics of effective written business communication?

The Delphi Technique was used in compiling a list of characteristics which the participants felt were necessary for effective written business communication. The researcher developed a list of various ideas identifying what some researchers believe are characteristics of effective written business communication. Participants were asked to identify those characteristics they felt were important to effective written business communication as well as to add any additional characteristics they felt were important. Table V shows a list of the 42 characteristics identified by the participants. These characteristics formed the basis for answering Question 2 and 3 of the study.

Question Two

What is the importance of each of the characteristics of effective written business communication?

To answer Question 2, the Round-two questionnaire listed the 42 characteristics important to effective written business communication as determined by the participants in the Round-one questionnaire. The Round-two

TABLE V
CHARACTERISTICS IDENTIFIED AS IMPORTANT TO EFFECTIVE
WRITTEN BUSINESS COMMUNICATION
IN ROUND ONE

Characteristics

Accuracy
Active Voice
Adaptability
Appearance
Clarity
Coherence
Completeness
Conciseness
Concreteness
Continuity
Conviction
Correctness/Preciseness
Courtesy
Emphasis
Functionalism
Goodwill
Grammar
Jargon
Mechanics
Naturalness
Nondiscriminatory
Parallelism
Perception
Persuasion
Placement
Planning/Organization
Positive Response
Punctuation
Readability
Resale
Review/Revision
Shortness
Simplicity
Sincereness
Spelling
Style
Tone
Transition
Unity
Variety
Word Choice
You-attitude

questionnaire asked the participants to rate the characteristics they had previously listed in Round one. Using a rating scale from 1 (1 being unimportant) to 5 (5 being important) the participants indicated their perceived importance of the characteristics of effective written business communication.

To arrive at a consensus of rating, the researcher summed the ratings assigned by the participants to each characteristic. Results of the participants' responses are shown in Table VI. Those characteristics given a composite rating in the upper 84th percentile were considered to have attained group consensus. Therefore, those characteristics in the upper 84th percentile were used to formulate Round-three questionnaire. Table VII shows a list of the characteristics in the upper 84th percentile.

Question Three

What are the individual rankings of the top ten characteristics of effective written business communication?

After identifying the characteristics in the upper 84th percentile in Round-two questionnaire, this information was used to compile the Round-three questionnaire that listed the top 20 characteristics,

TABLE VI
RATINGS OF CHARACTERISTICS IN ROUND TWO

Characteristics	Total Points Received
Accuracy	100*
Active Voice	81
Adaptability	74
Appearance	92*
Clarity	100*
Coherence	97*
Completeness	100*
Conciseness	92*
Concreteness	88*
Continuity	83
Conviction	78
Correctness/Preciseness	94*
Courtesy	86*
Emphasis	82
Functionalism	76
Goodwill	80
Grammar	80
Jargon	56
Mechanics	85*
Naturalness	81
Nondiscriminatory	72
Parallelism	83
Perception	66
Persuasion	81
Placement	82
Planning/Organization	94*
Positive Response	85*
Punctuation	91*
Readability	97*
Resale	63

TABLE VI (Continued)

Characteristics	Total Points Received
Review/Revision	72
Shortness	54
Simplicity	69
Sincereness	84*
Spelling	95*
Style	75
Tone	93*
Transition	82
Unity	86*
Variety	75
Word Choice	94*
You-attitude	90*

*Indicates the characteristics receiving ratings among the upper 84th percentile.

TABLE VII
 PERCENTILE RATINGS OF CHARACTERISTICS
 IN ROUND THREE

Characteristics	Top 84th Percentile
Accuracy	100
Clarity	100
Completeness	100
Coherence	97
Readability	97
Spelling	95
Word Choice	94
Planning/Organization	94
Correctness/Preciseness	94
Tone	93
Conciseness	92
Appearance	92
Punctuation	91
You-attitude	90
Concreteness	88
Courtesy	86
Unity	86
Mechanics	85
Positive Response	85
Sincereness	84

resulting from the analysis of Round-two questionnaire. To prevent the influencing of participants' opinions, the tabulation of each characteristic was omitted on the questionnaire and the characteristics were listed alphabetically, a procedure that was consistent with the previous rounds of questionnaires.

Participants were asked to review the characteristics they had selected previously and then to select the ten characteristics they felt were the most important to effective written business communication. After they chose the ten most important characteristics, the participants were asked to rank the ten characteristics. Using a ranking scale of 1 (1 being the least important) to 10 (10 being the most important), participants individually indicated how they perceived the characteristics should be ranked.

To arrive at a consensus of ranking, the researcher summed the rankings assigned by the participants to each characteristic. Table VIII shows the sum of points and the rankings each characteristic received. The ten top-ranked characteristics of effective written business communication are presented in Table IX. One is assigned to the characteristic rated least important; and 10 is assigned to the most important characteristic.

TABLE VIII
RANKINGS OF CHARACTERISTICS IN ROUND THREE

Characteristics	Total Points	Rank Most Important to Least Important
Accuracy	124*	10**
Appearance	41*	1
Clarity	107*	8
Coherence	85*	6
Completeness	102*	7
Conciseness	48*	2
Concreteness	20	
Correctness/Preciseness	71*	5
Courtesy	38	
Mechanics	35	
Planning/Organization	119*	9
Positive Response	14	
Punctuation	27	
Readability	55*	3
Sincereness	24	
Spelling	29	
Tone	70*	4
Unity	29	
Word Choice	32	
You-attitude	30	

*Indicates the top 10 characteristics of effective written business communication as indicated by the participants of the study.

**10 is rated most important; 1, least important.

TABLE IX
FINAL RANKING OF THE TOP TEN CHARACTERISTICS OF
EFFECTIVE WRITTEN BUSINESS COMMUNICATION

Characteristics	Rank
Accuracy	10
Planning/Organization	9
Clarity	8
Completeness	7
Coherence	6
Correctness/Preciseness	5
Tone	4
Readability	3
Conciseness	2
Appearance	1

Note: 10=most important characteristic; 9=next most important, etc.

Analysis of Characteristics in Relation
to the Responses in Round-two and
Round-three Questionnaires

The relationship between the ratings given to each of the characteristics in Round two and the rankings given to the same characteristics in Round three was examined as part of the data-analysis process. An analysis of each characteristic rated in the upper 84th percentile is discussed individually in terms of its statistical significance and its importance. The data derived from the analysis of the relationships between the responses in Round two and Round three are presented in Tables X, XI, XII, XIII, and XIV.

The following hypothesis was tested:

There is no significant difference in the relationship between the ratings of the characteristics in Round two and the rankings of the same characteristics in Round three.

The following characteristics were tested:

1. Accuracy
2. Appearance
3. Clarity
4. Coherence
5. Completeness
6. Conciseness
7. Concreteness
8. Correctness/Preciseness
9. Courtesy
10. Mechanics
11. Planning/Organization
12. Positive Response

13. Punctuation
14. Readability
15. Sincereness
16. Spelling
17. Tone
18. Unity
19. Word Choice
20. You-attitude

Accuracy

Respondents showed no significant difference of opinion relative to the responses in the rating of the characteristic of accuracy in Round two and their ranking in Round three. Of the respondents who rated accuracy important or slightly important in Round two, 79.0 percent ranked it among the top ten important in Round three. In contrast, 21.1 percent of the respondents who gave it a rating of important or slightly important in Round two did not rank it in the top ten in Round three. Seventy-nine percent of the respondents indicated accuracy was a high-priority characteristic by ranking it among the top ten characteristics in Round three. (See Table X.) The hypothesis cannot be rejected for the characteristic of accuracy.

Appearance

No significant difference of opinion in relation to the responses given in Round two and the responses given in Round three was indicated for the characteristic of

TABLE X

AN EXAMINATION OF THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THE RATINGS IN ROUND TWO
AND THE RANKINGS IN ROUND THREE FOR THE CHARACTERISTICS:
ACCURACY, APPEARANCE, CLARITY, AND COHERENCE

Characteristics	Round-three Rankings	Round-two Ratings			Analysis	
		Important & Slightly Important (5 and 4)	Neither Important Nor Unimportant (3)	Slightly Unimportant & Unimportant (2 and 1)	Chi-square	Kendall's Tau
		Accuracy	Ranked Not Ranked	79.0% 21.1%	0 0	0 0
Appearance	Ranked Not Ranked	63.2% 36.8%	0 0	0 0	.45	.13
Clarity	Ranked Not Ranked	89.5% 10.5%	0 0	0 0	.05*	.05*
Coherence	Ranked Not Ranked	68.4% 31.6%	0 0	0 0	.38	.46

*Significant at the .10 confidence level

appearance. (See Table X.) Therefore, the hypothesis cannot be rejected. Appearance received a rating of important or slightly important in Round two by 100 percent of the respondents; however, 36.8 percent did not rank it among the top ten in Round three. On the other hand, 63.2 percent of the respondents did recognize appearance as being important or slightly important and ranked it among the top ten characteristics in Round three.

Clarity

For the characteristic of clarity, respondents had a statistically significant difference of opinion in relation to the responses in Round two and Round three as revealed by both the Chi-square test and Kendall's Tau test. (See Table X.) Clarity was rated important or slightly important in Round two by 100 percent of the respondents and 89.5 percent of the respondents ranked it among the top ten in Round three. Less than 11 percent of the respondents who rated clarity important or slightly important in Round two felt it should not be ranked among the top ten characteristics in Round three. The hypothesis was rejected for the characteristic of clarity.

Coherence

Coherence was rated important or slightly important in

Round two by 100 percent of the respondents. Variations in opinions became apparent in Round three as 68.4 percent of the respondents ranked it among the top ten characteristics in Round three while 31.6 percent did not rank it. No statistically significant difference of opinion was indicated for the characteristic of coherence. (See Table X.) Round three indicated that 68.4 percent of the respondents, by ranking it among the top ten characteristics, recognized the importance of coherence in effective written business communication. The hypothesis cannot be rejected for the characteristic of coherence.

Completeness

No statistically significant differences of opinion was indicated for the characteristic of completeness. (See Table XI.) Therefore, for the characteristic of completeness, the hypothesis cannot be rejected. In Round two, all of the respondents felt completeness should be rated important or slightly important. In Round three, by comparison, 84.2 percent of the respondents felt that completeness should be ranked among the top ten characteristics, while 15.8 percent of the respondents felt it should not be ranked.

TABLE XI

AN EXAMINATION OF THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THE RATINGS IN ROUND TWO AND THE RANKINGS IN ROUND THREE FOR THE CHARACTERISTICS: COMPLETENESS, CONCISENESS, CONCRETENESS, AND CORRECTNESS/PRECISENESS

Characteristics		Round-two Ratings			Analysis		
		Round-three Rankings	Important & Slightly Important (5 and 4)	Neither Important Nor Unimportant (3)	Slightly Unimportant & Unimportant (2 and 1)	Chi-square	Kendall's Tau
Completeness	Ranked	84.2%	0	0	.29	.22	
	Not Ranked	15.8%	0	0			
Conciseness	Ranked	52.6%	0	0	.12	.07*	
	Not Ranked	47.4%	0	0			
Concreteness	Ranked	22.2%	0	0	.05*	.03*	
	Not Ranked	77.8%	0	100%			
Correctness/ Preciseness	Ranked	68.4%	0	0	.38	.12	
	Not Ranked	31.6%	0	0			

*Significant at the .10 confidence level

Conciseness

Kendall's Tau test revealed a statistically significant difference of opinion in the responses between Round two and Round three for the characteristic of conciseness. (See Table XI.) To illustrate the differences in responses, 100 percent of Round-two respondents gave conciseness a rating of important or slightly important. However, 47.4 percent of those rating it important or slightly important in Round two did not rank it among the top ten characteristics in Round three. Conciseness was ranked among the top ten characteristics by 52.6 percent of the respondents. The hypothesis was rejected for the characteristic of conciseness.

Concreteness

A statistically significant difference of opinion was indicated by the Chi-square test and the Kendall's Tau test for the characteristic of concreteness. (See Table XI.) Of the respondents who gave concreteness a rating of important or slightly important in Round two, 77.8 percent did not rank it among the top ten characteristics in Round three. Of the respondents who rated concreteness important or slightly important in Round two, 22.2 percent continued to rank it among the top ten in Round three. Therefore, concreteness was not ranked among the top ten

characteristics. The hypothesis was rejected for the characteristic of concreteness.

Correctness/Preciseness

Respondents showed no significant difference of opinion in relation to the responses given in Round two and Round three concerning correctness/preciseness. (See Table XI.) Round-two responses showed a 100 percent rating of important or slightly important while Round-three responses were distributed among the ranks. Analysis of the data showed 68.4 percent of the respondents ranked correctness/preciseness among the top ten characteristics, while 31.6 percent gave it no ranking. The hypothesis cannot be rejected for the characteristic of correctness/preciseness.

Courtesy

Kendall's Tau test showed a statistically significant difference of opinion in responses given in Round two and Round three for the characteristic of courtesy. (See Table XII.) None of the respondents who rated courtesy slightly unimportant or unimportant in Round two ranked it among the top ten in Round three, and none of the respondents who rated it neither important nor unimportant gave it a ranking among the top. A change of opinion appeared when

TABLE XII

AN EXAMINATION OF THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THE RATINGS IN ROUND TWO AND THE RANKINGS IN ROUND THREE FOR THE CHARACTERISTICS: COURTESY, MECHANICS, PLANNING/ORGANIZATION, AND POSITIVE RESPONSE

Characteristics		Round-two Ratings			Analysis		
		Round-three Rankings	Important & Slightly Important (5 and 4)	Neither Important Nor Unimportant (3)	Slightly Unimportant & Unimportant (2 and 1)	Chi-square	Kendall's Tau
Courtesy	Ranked	35.2%	0	0	.52	.04*	
	Not Ranked	64.7%	100%	100%			
Mechanics	Ranked	22.2%	0	0	.01*	.11	
	Not Ranked	77.8%	0	100%			
Planning/ Organization	Ranked	89.5%	0	0	.05*	.04*	
	Not Ranked	10.5%	0	0			
Positive Response	Ranked	16.7%	0	0	.98	.50	
	Not Ranked	83.3%	100%	0			

*Significant at the .10 confidence level

64.7 percent of the respondents who rated it important or slightly important in Round two failed to rank courtesy among the top ten characteristics in Round three. Only 35.2 percent felt it was important enough to rank. As a result, courtesy was not ranked among the top ten characteristics, and the hypothesis was rejected.

Mechanics

Using the Chi-square test, a statistically significant difference of opinion in relation to the responses in Round two and Round three was found for mechanics. (See Table XII.) Of those rating it important or slightly important in Round two, 22.2 percent consistently ranked it among the top ten in Round three. The other 77.8 percent who rated it important or slightly important in Round two changed their responses and did not rank it in Round three. Therefore, mechanics was eliminated as one of the top ten characteristics. The hypothesis was rejected for the characteristic of mechanics.

Planning/Organization

Both Chi-square and Kendall's Tau indicated a statistically significant difference of opinion in relation to the responses in Round two and Round three for planning/organization. (See Table XII.) One hundred

percent of the respondents rated it important or slightly important in Round two. In Round three, 89.5 percent of the respondents ranked planning/organization among the top ten. Less than 11 percent of the respondents did not rank it. The hypothesis was rejected for the characteristic of planning/organization.

Positive Response

No statistically significant difference of opinion in the responses of Round two and Round three was found for the characteristic of positive response. (See Table XII.) One hundred percent of those rating it neither important nor unimportant in Round two gave it no ranking in Round three. Data indicate that 83.3 percent of those who rated it important or slightly important in Round two did not rank it among the top ten characteristics in Round three. Positive response did not rank among the top ten characteristics. The hypothesis cannot be rejected for the characteristic of positive response.

Punctuation

Using the Kendall's Tau test, a statistically significant difference of opinion in relation to the responses in Round two and Round three was found for punctuation. (See Table XIII.) Therefore, the hypothesis

TABLE XIII

AN EXAMINATION OF THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THE RATINGS IN ROUND TWO
AND THE RANKINGS IN ROUND THREE FOR THE CHARACTERISTICS:
PUNCTUATION, READABILITY, SINCERENESS, AND SPELLING

Characteristics		Round-two Ratings			Analysis		
		Round-three Rankings	Important & Slightly Important (5 and 4)	Neither Important Nor Unimportant (3)	Slightly Unimportant & Unimportant (2 and 1)	Chi-square	Kendall's Tau
Punctuation	Ranked	27.8%	0	0	.34	.09*	
	Not Ranked	72.2%	100%	0			
Readability	Ranked	63.1%	0	0	.45	.13	
	Not Ranked	36.8%	0	0			
Sincereness	Ranked	29.4%	0	0	.98	.36	
	Not Ranked	70.6%	100%	100%			
Spelling	Ranked	36.8%	0	0	.75	.24	
	Not Ranked	63.2%	0	0			

*Significant at the .10 confidence level

for the characteristic of punctuation was rejected. Round-two responses showed a rating of important or slightly important for punctuation. Those respondents rating it neither important nor unimportant also chose not to rank it in Round three. Of those responding with a rating of important or slightly important in Round two, 72.2 percent did not rank it among the top ten characteristics in Round three, while 27.8 percent of the respondents ranked it among the top ten characteristics. Punctuation was not ranked among the top ten characteristics.

Readability

Responses given for readability indicated no statistically significant difference of opinion in relation to the responses in Round two and Round three. (See Table XIII.) Therefore, the hypothesis cannot be rejected for the characteristic of readability. Of the 100 percent of the respondents rating readability important or slightly important in Round two, 63.1 percent ranked it among the top ten characteristics, while 36.8 percent did not rank it in Round three. Although there was some variation from Round two to Round three, respondents ranked readability among the top ten characteristics.

Sincereness

No statistically significant difference of opinion was found in relation to the responses given in Round two and Round three for the characteristic of sincerity. (See Table XIII.) One hundred percent of those who rated it slightly unimportant or unimportant were consistent and did not rank it in Round three; likewise, those who rated it neither important nor unimportant did not rank it. Of those who rated it important or slightly important, 29.4 percent ranked it among the top ten while 70.6 percent did not rank it among the top ten. Sincerity did not rank among the top ten characteristics. The hypothesis cannot be rejected for the characteristic of sincerity.

Spelling

All of the respondents gave spelling a rating of important or slightly important in Round two. Although the data showed no statistically significant difference in opinion from Round two responses to Round three, a variation in opinion is apparent. (See Table XIII.) The variation appeared in Round three when 36.8 percent felt it should be ranked among the top ten characteristics. Spelling was not ranked by 63.2 percent of the respondents. The hypothesis cannot be rejected for the characteristic of spelling.

Tone

For the characteristic of tone, respondents showed a statistically significant difference of opinion in relation to the responses given in Round two and Round three using the Kendall's Tau test. (See Table XIV.) Therefore, the hypothesis was rejected. Of the 100 percent who rated tone important or slightly important in Round two, 73.7 percent continued to rank it among the top ten characteristics in Round three. Of that 100 percent, 26.3 percent of the respondents did not rank tone in Round three. Tone was ranked among the top ten characteristics.

Unity

Using the Kendall's Tau test, a statistically significant difference of opinion was found for unity. (See Table XIV.) Those respondents rating unity neither important nor unimportant or slightly unimportant or unimportant in Round two also gave it no ranking in Round three. However, it was ranked among the top ten by 23.6 of the respondents and 76.5 percent of the respondents did not rank it. The hypothesis was rejected for the characteristic of unity.

TABLE XIV

AN EXAMINATION OF THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THE RATINGS IN ROUND TWO
AND THE RANKINGS IN ROUND THREE FOR THE CHARACTERISTICS:
TONE, UNITY, WORD CHOICE, AND YOU-ATTITUDE

Characteristics	Round-three Rankings	Round-two Ratings			Analysis	
		Important & Slightly Important (5 and 4)	Neither Important Nor Unimportant (3)	Slightly Unimportant & Unimportant (2 and 1)	Chi-square	Kendall's Tau
		Tone	Ranked Not Ranked	73.7% 26.3%	0 0	0 0
Unity	Ranked Not Ranked	23.6% 76.5%	0 100%	0 100%	.37	.04*
Word Choice	Ranked Not Ranked	36.8% 63.2%	0 0	0 0	.75	.24
You-attitude	Ranked Not Ranked	31.6% 68.4%	0 0	0 0	.80	.26

*Significant at the .10 confidence level

Word Choice

Word choice scored a rating of important or slightly important by 100 percent of the respondents. However, 63.2 percent of the respondents did not rank it in Round three after giving it a rating of important or slightly important in Round two. Word choice received a top ten ranking by 36.8 percent of the respondents. No statistically significant difference of opinion in relation to the responses given in Round two and Round three was found, nor was it ranked among the top ten characteristics. (See Table XIV.) The hypothesis cannot be rejected for the characteristic of word choice.

You-attitude

No statistically significant difference of opinion was shown for the characteristic of you-attitude. (See Table XIV.) Even though 100 percent of the respondents rated you-attitude important or slightly important in Round two, 68.4 percent did not rank it among the top ten characteristics in Round three. You-attitude was ranked among the top ten characteristics by 31.6 percent of the respondents. The hypothesis cannot be rejected for the characteristic of you-attitude.

Summary

According to the data provided by the respondents in this study, positive concensus was reached by the 20 participants in identifying the top ten characteristics of effective written business communication. (See Table IX.)

The following hypothesis was tested in the null form:

There is no significant difference in the relationship between the ratings of the characteristics in Round two and the rankings of the same characteristics in Round three.

After statistically testing the null hypothesis for each of the 20 characteristics that were ranked in the upper 84th percentile, the null hypothesis could not be rejected for 11 of the characteristics, but was rejected for nine of the characteristics. Therefore, there was a significant difference of opinion in relation to the responses given in Round two and Round three for those nine characteristics.

The summary of the findings, conclusions, and recommendations made as a result of this study are presented in Chapter V.

CHAPTER V

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS, CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Introduction

The purpose of this study was to provide information that will aid letter writers in improving the effectiveness of their written business communication while also providing relevant information about the characteristics of effective written business communication. Another purpose of the study was to provide relevant information that could be used in the revision of curricula.

To accomplish this purpose, the researcher chose an evaluation method involving a panel of experts in the field of business communication. The panel of experts, selected randomly from the 1982 membership of the American Business Communication Association, was asked to identify characteristics important to effective written business communication.

The Delphi Technique was chosen as the instrument used in this study. A three-round Delphi questionnaire was used to culminate the responses of the panel of experts in identifying and prioritizing the characteristics of effective written business communication. A

cross-tabulation analysis was performed to examine the data for significant differences between responses given in Round two and Round three on each characteristic. Two tests of significance were used: Chi-square and Kendall's Tau. The findings of this study were stated in terms of the identification of the top ten characteristics of effective written business communication and the significance of the characteristics in relation to the hypothesis.

Summary of Findings

The summary of findings of this study were presented in two parts. The first part answered the three questions posed in Chapter IV while the second part addressed the null hypothesis tested in this study.

Question One

What are the important characteristics of effective written business communication? To answer this question, input was obtained from the selected panel of experts.

A list of characteristics which the participants felt was necessary for effective written business communication was compiled. These 42 characteristics are shown below:

Accuracy	Coherence	Conviction
Active Voice	Completeness	Correctness/
Adaptability	Conciseness	Preciseness
Appearance	Concreteness	Courtesy
Clarity	Continuity	Emphasis

Functionalism	Placement	Simplicity
Goodwill	Planning/	Sincereness
Grammar	Organization	Spelling
Jargon	Positive Response	Style
Mechanics	Punctuation	Tone
Naturalness	Readability	Transition
Nondiscriminatory	Resale	Unity
Parallelism	Review/Revision	Variety
Perception	Shortness	Word Choice
Persuasion		You-attitude

Question Two

What is the importance of each of the characteristics of effective written business communication? Answers to this question were obtained through the Round-two questionnaire that was sent to the selected panel of experts. Participants were asked to rate the importance of the characteristics they had listed in Round one. A rating scale from 1 (1 being unimportant) to 5 (5 being important) was used to indicate the importance of each characteristic as perceived by each participant.

The panel of experts agreed, at the 84 percent consensus level, that 20 of the original 42 characteristics were important to an effective written business communication. These 20 characteristics are shown below:

Accuracy	Correctness/	Readability
Appearance	Preciseness	Sincereness
Clarity	Courtesy	Spelling
Coherence	Mechanics	Tone
Completeness	Planning/	Unity
Conciseness	Organization	Word Choice
Concreteness	Positive Response	You-attitude

Question Three

What are the individual rankings of the top ten characteristics of effective written business communication? To answer this question, the Round-three questionnaire, which listed the 20 characteristics that were rated in the 84 percent consensus level in Round two, was mailed to the panel of experts. The participants were asked two questions: (A) What are the ten most important characteristics of effective written business communication? (B) After having selected the ten characteristics most important to effective written business communication, how would you rank them using a ranking scale of 1 (1 being the least important) to 10 (10 being the most important).

When responses to these questions were tabulated, ten characteristics were identified and ranked as the ten most important characteristics of effective written business communication. The top ten ranked characteristics of effective written business communication are presented below:

Accuracy	Conciseness
Appearance	Correctness/Preciseness
Clarity	Planning/Organization
Coherence	Readability
Completeness	Tone

The null hypothesis was accepted for 11 and rejected for nine of the 20 characteristics. If the relationship

between the ratings of the characteristics in Round two and the rankings of the same characteristics in Round three was statistically significant, the hypothesis was rejected.

No significant relationships were found between the ratings of the following characteristics in Round two and their ranking in Round three: accuracy, appearance, coherence, completeness, correctness/preciseness, positive response, readability, sincerity, spelling, word choice, and you-attitude.

Conversely, significant relationships were found for the following characteristics: clarity, conciseness, concreteness, courtesy, mechanics, planning/organization, punctuation, tone, and unity. The findings indicate that for nine of these characteristics, four characteristics (clarity, conciseness, planning/organization, and tone) were also ranked in the top ten characteristics in Round three. It was also noted that of those characteristics which received ratings in the top 12 in Round two, ten of those same characteristics also received rankings in the top ten characteristics of an effective written business communication in Round three.

Conclusions

The following conclusions are based on the data collected in this study:

(1) Even though there are numerous characteristics cited as being important to effective written business communication, some characteristics are of greater importance than others.

(2) Four characteristics of effective written business communication ranked as most important: accuracy, planning/organization, clarity, and completeness.

(3) Of the ten characteristics ranked most important, appearance and conciseness ranked least important to effective written business communication.

(4) The emphasis put on these characteristics in business communication textbooks does not coincide with the findings of this study. Accuracy, the characteristic ranked as most important to effective written business communication, is given little emphasis within most business communication texts. Conciseness and appearance, the characteristics ranked as least important to effective written business communication, are heavily stressed.

(5) There is a noticeable absence of handbooks, guidelines, and published research designating which

characteristics are most important to effective written business communication.

Recommendations

As a result of the findings of this study, the following recommendations were made:

(1) A similar study should be conducted using a larger sample of the same population. By increasing the sample size, the possibility of statistical error decreases. A comparison should be made of the responses of the sample population in this study and a larger sample population using the same study.

(2) Using a stratified process, a comparison study should be made to determine whether sufficient differences of opinions exist as to what characteristics are important to effective written business communication. This process should address sample populations in such areas as: education, business, medicine, government, and etc. A comparison of the findings should then be done.

(3) Researchers and textbook writers in written business communication should consider the findings of this study in writing or revising course materials.

(4) The developing of a handbook to include the top ten characteristics of effective written business

communication should be considered for use by those who frequently prepare written business communication.

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APPENDIXES

APPENDIX A

ROUND-ONE QUESTIONNAIRE AND COVER LETTER



Oklahoma State University

STILLWATER, OKLAHOMA 74078
(405) 624-5064

COLLEGE OF BUSINESS ADMINISTRATION
April 14, 1982

Because of your level of expertise in written business communications, you have been chosen to participate in a study that uses the Delphi Technique to determine the characteristics of effective written business communications.

As you may already know, the Delphi Technique is designed to produce consensus judgment in inexact fields. The information gathered in this study will help us develop appropriate curriculum materials for use in teaching written business communications. Your participation and input are vital to the success of this study.

This first round is directed toward accumulating a wide range of opinions of characteristics of effective written business communications. In the second round, you will be given a listing of characteristics of effective written communications and will be asked to rank the importance of the characteristics.

All individual responses on questionnaires are confidential and will be seen only by the researcher. Only anonymous listings and statistical feedback will be given to you on the second round. Individual responses will be destroyed after the final report is prepared. If you would like, I will send you a summary of the final results once they are available.

If at all possible, round one should be returned to me by April 28, or at your earliest possible convenience.

We are soliciting your help in this study. Since it is necessary that respondents participate in all the rounds of questionnaires, we are asking that you indicate your willingness to participate in the first two rounds and possibly a third one by completing and returning the enclosed questionnaire for round one.

Sincerely,

Robbie A. Story
Doctoral Candidate

Dr. Zane K. Quible
Associate Professor

Please enclose your summer address if it will be different than the address to which this was sent. Also provide the effective date of the summer address.

Research indicates various characteristics are necessary in composing effective written business communications. Below you will find a partial listing of various ideas identifying what some researchers believe are characteristics of effective written business communications.

What do you believe are the necessary characteristics of effective written business communications?

INSTRUCTIONS: Read through the following list of characteristics of effective written business communications.

1. By placing a check mark in the appropriate column, identify those characteristics that you believe comprise effective written business communications.
2. Under the "other" category, list any additional characteristics that you believe are important.
3. Under the "comments" section, provide additional information about any of the characteristics.

CHARACTERISTICS	CHECK	COMMENTS
ACCURACY		
ACTIVE VOICE		
ADAPTABILITY		
APPEARANCE		
CLARITY		
COHERENCE		
COMPLETENESS		
CONCISENESS		
CONCRETENESS		
CONVICTION		
CORRECTNESS/PRECISENESS		
COURTESY		
EMPHASIS		
FUNCTIONALISM		
GOODWILL		
GRAMMAR		
JARGON		
MECHANICS		
NATURALNESS		
PARALLELISM		
PERCEPTION		
PERSUASION		

APPENDIX B

ROUND-TWO QUESTIONNAIRE AND COVER LETTER



Oklahoma State University

COLLEGE OF BUSINESS ADMINISTRATION

STILLWATER, OKLAHOMA 74078
(405) 624-5064

May 20, 1982

Having identified the characteristics of effective written business communications in round-one of our questionnaire, we now ask you to rate the importance of each characteristic that has been identified. So that we may focus more clearly on the collective opinions of our respondents, please indulge a further request of your time and talent to rate the importance of each of the characteristics listed.

As you well know, to write an effective business letter, many characteristics are essential to produce a letter that yields the action you are seeking. This research is designed to identify the most important characteristics of effective written business communications. This questionnaire is composed of the various characteristics listed by yourself and other selected experts in written communications. The purpose of this round-two questionnaire is to rate each characteristic identified as important to effective written business communications.

Upon reviewing the characteristics listed, please rate each characteristic as to its importance to effective written business communications. After having rated each characteristic, please return your response in the enclosed envelope by May 28, or as soon as possible.

It is through your continued participation that makes this study possible. Thank you for responding to round-one and the continued use of your time.

Sincerely

Robbie Story
Doctoral Candidate

Dr. Zane K. Quible
Associate Professor

The purpose of round-two is to determine the importance of the characteristics of effective written business communications. The list of characteristics below was compiled from round-one questionnaire including additional characteristics that were identified by respondents in round-one questionnaire.

How would you rate the importance of each of the characteristics of effective written business communications listed below?

Instructions: Read through each of the following identified characteristics.

- Rate the importance of each characteristic by placing an X in the appropriate box on the scale of 5 to 1.

- 5 = IMPORTANT
- 4 = SLIGHTLY IMPORTANT
- 3 = NEITHER IMPORTANT NOR UNIMPORTANT
- 2 = SLIGHTLY UNIMPORTANT
- 1 = UNIMPORTANT

- Please return your response in the enclosed envelope by May 28, or as soon as possible.

CHARACTERISTICS	IMPORTANT	SLIGHTLY IMPORTANT	NEITHER IMPORTANT NOR UNIMPORTANT	SLIGHTLY UNIMPORTANT	UNIMPORTANT
	5	4	3	2	1
ACCURACY					
ACTIVE VOICE					
ADAPTABILITY					
APPEARANCE					
CLARITY					
COHERENCE					
COMPLETENESS					
CONCISENESS					
CONCRETENESS					
CONTINUITY					
CONVICTION					
CORRECTNESS/PRECISENESS					
COURTESY					
EMPHASIS					
FUNCTIONALISM					
GOODWILL					
GRAMMAR					

CHARACTERISTICS	IMPORTANT	SLIGHTLY IMPORTANT	NEITHER IMPORTANT NOR UNIMPORTANT	SLIGHTLY UNIMPORTANT	UNIMPORTANT
	5	4	3	2	1
JARGON					
MECHANICS					
NATURALNESS					
NONDISCRIMINATORY					
PARALLELISM					
PERCEPTION					
PERSUASION					
PLACEMENT					
PLANNING/ORGANIZATION					
POSITIVE					
PUNCTUATION					
READABILITY					
RESALE					
REVIEW/REVISION					
SHORTNESS					
SIMPLICITY					
SINCERENESS					
SPELLING					
STYLE					
TOPE					
TRANSITION					
UNITY					
VARIETY					
WORD CHOICE					
YOU ATTITUDE					

APPENDIX C

ROUND-THREE QUESTIONNAIRE AND COVER LETTER



Oklahoma State University

COLLEGE OF BUSINESS ADMINISTRATION

STILLWATER, OKLAHOMA 74078
(405) 624-5064

August 27, 1982

Having identified characteristics of effective written business communications in round-one, having rated the importance of these characteristics in round-two, we now ask you to take the final step of selecting and ranking the ten characteristics that you feel are the most important to effective written business communications.

This research is designed to identify the most important characteristics of effective written business communications. This final questionnaire is comprised of the characteristics having rated in the top 84 percent, as determined by yourself and other experts in written communications, in round-two.

As your final participation in this research, please review the characteristics listed, selecting the ten characteristics you feel are the most important to effective written business communications. Upon selecting the ten most important characteristics and assigning number values to them, please return your response in the enclosed envelope by September 15, or as soon as possible.

As with any research, each step must be completed if valid results occur. Your consistent participation continues to make this study possible. Thank you for your willingness to participate faithfully in this study.

Sincerely

Robbie Story
Doctoral Candidate

Dr. Zane K. Quible
Associate Professor

By indicating on the enclosed questionnaire, I shall be happy to send to you a copy of the results of this study.

The purpose of round-three, the final round, is to determine the prioritized ranking of the characteristics of effective written business communications identified through round one and two. The list of characteristics below was compiled from characteristics placing in the top 84 percentile as determined from respondents in round-two questionnaire.

How would you rank the characteristics of effective written business communications listed below?

Instructions: Review each of the following identified characteristics.

1. Select the 10 items you feel are the most important to an effective written business communications.
2. Assign a value of 10 to the most important characteristic, a 9 to the next most important characteristic, continuing until a value of 1 is assigned to the least important characteristic.
3. Please return your response in the enclosed envelope.

PRIORITY RANKING	CHARACTERISTICS RANKING IN THE TOP 84 PERCENTILE
_____	ACCURACY
_____	APPEARANCE
_____	CLARITY
_____	COHERENCE
_____	COMPLETENESS
_____	CONCISENESS
_____	CONCRETENESS
_____	CORRECTNESS/PRECISENESS
_____	COURTESY
_____	MECHANICS
_____	PLANNING/ORGANIZATION
_____	POSITIVE
_____	PUNCTUATION
_____	READABILITY
_____	SINCERENESS
_____	SPELLING
_____	TONE
_____	UNITY
_____	WORD CHOICE
_____	YOU ATTITUDE

DO YOU WANT A COPY OF THE RESULTS OF THIS STUDY _____ or _____
YES NO

VITA²

Robbie A. Story Mullins

Candidate for the Degree of

Doctor of Education

Thesis: A STUDY OF THE CHARACTERISTICS OF EFFECTIVE
WRITTEN BUSINESS COMMUNICATION

Major Field: Business Education

Biographical:

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Education: Graduated from Alex High School, Alex,
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1982-84; Assistant Professor of Marketing, Oklahoma
Baptist University, 1984.

Professional Organizations: Member of Delta Pi Epsilon,
National Business Education Association, Mountain-
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