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Can You Read Me Now? Effective Communication at Work
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Two Emails—and No Popcorn!

From: Becker, Bob [Carnival Cruise Lines]
Sent: Wednesday, February 18, 2004
Subject: No Popcorn

Attention all: I have nothing against Orville Redenbacher. The reason for no popcorn is that 60% of all fire alarms in office buildings are because some idiot let it burn in the microwave. Last night we had another incident.....Based on our last 2 weeks, we have made anywhere from [removed] to [removed] bookings after 8 O'clock. Therefore this popcorn cost us between \$[removed] and \$[removed] that will not be recoverable. If you must have popcorn, buy it already made in a bag or a tin. If you have microwave popcorn at your desk you will be terminated.....Period! Thank you.

Bob Becker
Vice President
Consumer Research
1-800-xxx-xxxx Ext xxxxx¹

From: Xxxx, Dave
Sent: Wednesday, January 24, 2007 2:59 PM
To: Kenan-Flagler Students; Kenan-Flagler Faculty and Staff
Subject: Fire Alarms

On January 16, we had another fire alarm due to microwave popcorn being burned. This is the second such occasion over the past year and has created disruption across the school that we feel is completely avoidable. We experienced interrupted classes, interviews with recruiters cut short, inconvenienced employees and students etc. We cannot afford to risk future disruption to the school's operations from this issue. Therefore, we are instituting a policy prohibiting the use of microwave popcorn throughout the school. We will be removing microwave popcorn from all vending machines and Café McColl in support of this policy. We realize this may seem like an extreme reaction to some but we've tested this direction with several constituencies and the bottom line is that we're doing all we can to minimize future disruptions to the core mission of the school. In addition, we continue to receive feedback that microwaves are frequently left unattended when in use. If you're cooking anything in a microwave you should never leave it unattended. Thank you for your cooperation. Regards, Dave.

¹ From internalmemos.com

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What pieces do I need in business documents?

You can employ the same skeleton for most business messages—just extend the length of the third section to accommodate the complexity of your message.

1. **Friendly opening:** optional. You can use it to enhance a positive relationship with the audience or to prepare your audience for bad news. Make sure you're sincere and express a sentiment related to the message you're about to convey. Keep it to 1-2 sentences.
2. **Bottom line:** the reason you're writing this message—to explain, convey, recommend, or propose a new policy, a new product, or bad news. State it in one or two sentences, as clearly as possible. Position the bottom line near the beginning or the end of a paragraph to make it easy to find.
3. **Reasons/details/benefits/clarifications:** the nuts and bolts, the hows and whys, the way your message will change your audience's work life. Keep the paragraphs short and organized with strong topic sentences to make them easy to skim.
4. **Forward-looking closing:** end on a positive note. Keep it related to the message and look to the future. You can also offer for the audience to contact you here (but make sure you tell them how to contact you, too).

How do I change my writing to fit with business style?

Business writing prizes clarity and conciseness. Strive for sentences of about 20 words (on average); as a visual marker, sentences over two lines long may need some editing.

- Use **active voice** rather than passive voice—that is, put the emphasis on the actor, not the action...unless you need to place blame.
- Employ **plain English** rather than multisyllabic words or technical language.
- Eliminate the fluff. Cut out any words that simply pad your sentences, such as:
 - **False subjects** like *it* (“It is necessary that...” or “It has come to my attention”) and *there* (“there is” or “there are”)
 - **Camouflaged verbs** that are made into nouns, usually ending in *-ion* (“make a *decision*,” “the *communication* of information”): change them back to verbs
 - **Weak verbs**, forms of *to be* and *to have*, which tend to make sentences longer but could be replaced with more dynamic, active verbs

How can I improve the tone of business messages?

You can create a conversational tone in two main ways: using **pronouns** and **contractions**. Your goal: to transfer the tone of a face-to-face conversation to paper.

How can I make documents look inviting?

Busy readers won't want to read your document unless you make it look inviting. Use short, no-indent paragraphs and put a line of space between them. Other strategies:

- Use a serif **font** for print documents and a sans serif font for electronic messages
- Use meaningful **headings** to label your document's parts and make information easy to find. Keep more space above than below a heading, and use a **bold sans serif font**.
- Keep plenty of **whitespace**—at least 1” on all sides—and at least 10-point font for readability
- Use **bold** for items you want to pop off the page, *italics* for items you want to pop out of the paragraph. Avoid underlining (except for hyperlinks) and NEVER USE ALL-CAPS!