

**BUSINESS ENGLISH AND
CORRESPONDENCE; A PRACTICAL
TREATISE ON THE METHODS BY WHICH
EXPERT CORRESPONDENTS PRODUCE
CLEAR AND FORCEFUL LETTERS TO MEET
MODERN BUSINESS REQUIREMENTS**

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Business English and correspondence; a practical treatise on the methods by which expert correspondents produce clear and forceful letters to meet modern business requirements by Charles R. Barrett

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BUSINESS ENGLISH*

PART I

INTRODUCTORY

We convey our ideas to other men by means of words, either spoken or written. If we do not speak or write correctly—that is, according to the rules of English—we are liable to be misunderstood, and to suffer inconvenience, the loss of time, and often the loss of money. The use of correct English facilitates business and lessens materially the chance of misunderstandings and mistakes. An order correctly worded, a complaint put in concise, specific terms, will be handled more promptly and satisfactorily than one which lacks these qualities, because the recipient knows at once your meaning, and therefore wastes no time trying to determine it.

The rules governing the correct use of English are neither many nor difficult. There are few inflections in English—that is, few words change their form to indicate their specific use. That fact lessens the amount of matter which you must “learn by heart,” but it also requires you to give special attention to sentence structure and to the position of the word in the sentence. “Successful business men are hard workers” contains the same word forms as “Hard workers are successful business men,” but the change in position of the words makes the two sentences state quite different ideas.

This textbook is designed to give you an understanding of English grammar as applied to everyday use in business; it does not attempt to go into the literary use of the language. While it is necessary that you should learn and understand the rules presented here, it is equally necessary that you should put them into constant practice, both in writing and in speaking, so that you will come unconsciously to use the correct word and the most effective form of expression. The study of the text and the working of the exercises will profit you little, unless you watch your everyday speech and train yourself to use what you learn. You will never write much more correctly than you speak.

*The Author acknowledges his indebtedness to Josephine Turek Baker's "Correct English," Adams Sherman Hill's "Foundations of Rhetoric," and Reed and Kellogg's "Higher Lessons in English," to which he has often referred during the compilation of this text.

As a part of your study of the English language, learn to use a dictionary. Keep at your elbow a recent edition, not too abridged, and refer to it as often as need be for the meaning of a new word, for synonyms, for correct pronunciation, etc. Do not be content with only half-comprehending what you read, or with avoiding the use of words which you do not exactly understand. You cannot have too many words at your command, nor can you know too much about your mother tongue.

And because English is your mother tongue, do not get the idea that it should come natural to you, and therefore requires no study. Strictly speaking, English is no more natural to you than French or German. You could learn to speak either of those languages as easily, and as incorrectly, if you had never heard any other and were to depend only upon what you picked up from hearing the language spoken. Because English is your mother tongue, you should take pride in speaking it correctly, and this you can learn to do only by studying it carefully.

This text is supplemented by an Appendix, in which are explained certain grammatical rules and usages requiring too much space to be included in the Lessons. Frequent references to the Appendix will enable you to study this additional matter in its proper place. Do not neglect to look up all such references as you come to them. They direct your attention to additional knowledge that you must possess, both to understand the Lessons that follow, and to make correct use of the language in business; for Business English is only simplified English.

LESSON I

THE SENTENCE

You express what is in your mind by the means of words, which you group according to the meaning that you wish to convey. The person whom you address will understand your meaning only if he understands your language—that is, if he uses the same words in the same way that you do. The study of language, is, therefore, the study of the *usual method* of expressing what you think. The *usual method* is that used by the majority of those who speak the same language. The strange sounds made by a baby are a form of speech; you cannot understand them because you do not understand the rules governing the baby's language.

1. The sign of a person, a thing, an idea, or any mind picture, is called a *word*.

Examples.

John, man, business, money, labor, joy.

You use the word "joy" to picture to another an idea in your mind; a baby would crow to express a similar idea. You can explain the cause of your joy, and the extent of it; but you cannot understand the baby's attempt to do so.

2. A group of words expressing a complete thought is called a *sentence*.

Examples.

Man is an animal.

John talks.

Business is a paying occupation.

("Man," "John," "business," and all the other words in these sentences suggest thoughts, but do not completely express them; and the thoughts suggested may not be at all what the writer intended to express. For example, when you first saw these three words listed under ¶ 1, they probably did not express to you exactly the thoughts expressed in these three sentences. To complete the thought it was necessary to complete the sentences by adding the words that would make the writer's meaning unmistakable.)

Note that, as a general rule, a single word, as "business," does not express a complete thought. Yet such words as "Come!" and "March!" seem to express complete thoughts, because their context—that is, the words which would be joined with them to complete the thought—are clearly understood by the hearer.

The English language is based primarily upon the sentence. A letter, a market report, or a book, is composed of a succession of sentences—that is, of thoughts completely expressed—which form a perfect whole because each is related to the other in thought.

3. A sentence which states—that is, declares—a fact is called a *declarative sentence*.

Examples.

Money is the root of all evil.

If the corn crop fails, I cannot meet my bills.

I cannot recommend Mr. Smith for the position of head bookkeeper, although, as an assistant, he has been satisfactory to us.

Note that declarative sentences may vary in length and in form.

4. A sentence that asks a question is called an *interrogative sentence*.

Examples.

Is money the root of all evil?

If the corn crop fails, can you meet your bills?

Can you recommend Mr. Smith for the position of head bookkeeper?

Note that a change in the position of the words—that is, in the structure of the sentence—is the chief difference in form between the interrogative sentence and the declarative.

5. A sentence that expresses a command or an order is called an *imperative sentence*.

Examples.

Pay me now. Go! Hurry!

Give Mr. Smith a strong recommendation.

Duplicate my last order.

Note that an imperative sentence may consist of only one expressed word. (See "Note" under ¶ 2.)

6. Every complete sentence must contain a word, or a group of words, about which a thought is expressed. This is called the *subject* of the sentence.

Examples.

John works. ("John" is the subject.)

The red book is mine.

To be good is to be happy.

7. Every complete sentence must contain a word, or a group of words, which expresses a thought about the subject. This is called the *predicate* of the sentence.

Examples.

John works. ("Works" is the predicate.)

The red book is mine.

To be good is to be happy.

8. The subject of a declarative sentence usually *precedes* the predicate.

Examples.

The new stenographer is here. ("The new stenographer" is the subject; "is here" is the predicate.)

His business requires all his time. ("His business" is the subject; "requires all his time" is the predicate.)

If, however, you wish to give particular emphasis to a word that is not the subject, you may change the order without changing the sentence from the declarative form. "Here is the new stenographer" puts particular emphasis on the presence of the stenographer; but the sentence is still declarative.

9. The subject of an interrogative sentence usually *follows* the predicate.

Examples.

Is the new stenographer here?

Does his business require all his time?

Note the change in the predicate of the second example, required by the change to the interrogative form. The word "does" is added to the predicate, and the word "require" drops the final "s." The subject stands in the midst of the predicate. "Requires his business all his time?" is not idiomatic—that is, not according to the ordinary manner of expression.

10. The subject of an imperative sentence is not usually expressed.

Examples.

Send me a dozen cases at once. ("You," not expressed, is the subject.)

Be on hand at one tomorrow.

Go thou and do likewise. ("Thou," expressed, is the subject of the predicate "go;" "thou," not expressed, of the predicate "do likewise.")

Since the subject of an imperative sentence refers directly to the person addressed, its expression adds nothing to the understanding of the sentence; it does, however, add to its emphasis, and it may be expressed for that purpose. The expressed subject is seldom found, except in poetry.

11. Every sentence should begin with a *capital* letter.

Examples.

The last lot of oranges sold well. (Declarative.)

Have you any more of them? (Interrogative.)

Send me a dozen cases at once. (Imperative.)

The capital letter is an arbitrary sign to notify the reader to expect the expression of a new thought, and so to make easier his understanding of any change in the subject matter, or in the manner of expression.

12. Every complete declarative sentence should be followed by the sign of completion, which is called a *period* (.).

Examples.

John talks.

The irrigated lands of the West offer opportunities for investment which makes the banker's offer of three per cent a year appear much too little for any except the most conservative investors.

The period in writing corresponds to the full pause which you make in speaking, to indicate the completion of a thought.

13. Every complete interrogative sentence should be followed by the sign of interrogation, which is called an *interrogation point*, or *question mark* (?).

Examples.

What is the price of eggs today?

Shall we ship C. O. D., or draw on you through your bank?

The interrogation point in writing corresponds to the rising inflection of the voice with which you indicate a question when speaking.

Note that the second example contains two complete thoughts, which might be complete in themselves, but which are joined here to complete the thought of the writer. This sentence could be written: "Shall we ship C. O. D.? or shall we draw on you through your bank?" Note that "or" would not be capitalized, showing that the thought has not been completed.

14. Every complete imperative sentence should be followed by either a *period* or an *exclamation point* (!).

Examples.

Come. Come!

Catch that man. Catch that man!

Send me a dozen cases at once. Send me a dozen cases at once!

The exclamation point in writing corresponds to the force which you give to a thought in speaking.

Note the emphasis, the added imperative force, that the exclamation point gives to the second example in each case. Remember, however, that the exclamation point loses all force, if used too frequently. Learn to express your thoughts forcefully without depending too much upon such marks.

15. Signs which are used to make the structure of written sentences quickly apparent to the reader are called *marks*, or *points*, of punctuation.

The ordinary marks of punctuation are: period (.); interrogation mark (?); exclamation point (!); comma (,); semicolon (;); colon (:); apostrophe ('); dash (—); hyphen (-); quotation marks (" " or ' '); parentheses (); brackets [].

(The use of the other punctuation marks will be explained later.)

The signs mean nothing in themselves; they were fixed arbitrarily in order to insure uniformity of punctuation. They have, however, a very definite value in showing quickly the relation of the various thought groups into which words naturally divide themselves. A series of uncapitalized and unpunctuated sentences would be very difficult to understand, however close their connection in thought.

Example.

your order of the 15th will receive prompt attention if ready money is scarce we shall be willing to accept your note at 60 and 90 days because of your previous promptness in meeting your bills we agree with you that you are entitled to this consideration though it is not our practice to alter the conditions stated in our catalogue we are willing to send you half a case of #248 to allow you to introduce the goods to your trade shall we ship by freight or express

Punctuation marks correspond very closely to the "breath stops" which you make in your ordinary conversation. Like those stops, they have different values. You ordinarily drop your voice, and take a breath, when you reach the end of a spoken declaration, just as you would place a period at the end of a written one. You indicate other less important thought groups by shorter pauses, just as you will learn to indicate them in writing by something less than the "full stop" of the period. The speaker who intersperses his words with frequent "well's" and "but's" that have no meaning, is merely placing unnecessary emphasis upon his punctuation marks.

EXERCISES

1. Use the following subjects to form complete declarative sentences:

Honesty. Business. Typewriting. Your account. Fresh eggs. Our shipping clerk. An error in bookkeeping. Bank cashier. Men of wealth. This black pencil.

2. Use the following predicates to form complete declarative sentences:

Labor. Works busily. Is due today. Owes me money. Is mine. Earns money. Was lost on the street. Advertised for a boy. Answered the advertisement. Gave me a recommendation.

3. Change ten of the declarative sentences just written into interrogative sentences.

4. Write ten* imperative sentences, using some of the ideas from your declarative sentences.

* Note that the change to the imperative form requires more than a change in the order of the words.