From Classroom to Workplace: Common Pitfalls in Written Business Communication

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Abstract: *Over the past decade, written business communication has changed significantly as a result of technological innovation, globalization, and shifting workplace norms. Traditional, highly formal business correspondence has been supplemented—and in some cases replaced—by faster, more conversational digital channels such as e-mails, instant messaging platforms, and collaborative online tools. While these developments have increased efficiency and accessibility, they have also introduced new challenges related to tone, clarity, professionalism, and etiquette. This article explores the gap between classroom-based Business English instruction and the realities of workplace communication by examining common pitfalls observed in students' written business texts. Drawing on practical examples from Business English classrooms, the study highlights recurring issues such as the absence of appropriate greetings and closings, overly informal language, unclear subject lines, poor message structure, inappropriate tone in requests and complaints, misuse of CC and BCC, weak response management, and insufficient cultural awareness. The findings suggest that many communication problems do not stem from inadequate language proficiency, but rather from limited awareness of professional conventions and audience expectations. The article argues that effective written business communication requires a balance between efficiency and professionalism, as well as sensitivity to organizational and intercultural contexts. By addressing these issues during their studies, students of Business English can develop stronger professional writing skills and transition more successfully from academic settings to modern workplace environments.*

Key words: *Business English, digital communication, professional etiquette, workplace writing, written business communication.*

1. INTRODUCTION

Over the past decade, written business communication has undergone a profound transformation, driven primarily by rapid technological advancement, globalization, and evolving workplace cultures. Email, once the dominant and carefully structured medium of professional exchange, now coexists with a wide array of digital platforms, including instant messaging tools, collaborative workspaces, and social networking applications. These changes have not only altered the speed and volume of communication but have also reshaped expectations regarding tone, formality, responsiveness, and etiquette in professional writing.

Compared to business communication practices of twenty years ago, many previously accepted conventions are no longer considered effective or appropriate. Lengthy, highly formal e-mails, rigid salutations, delayed responses, and strictly hierarchical communication structures have given way to more concise, direct, and conversational forms of writing. At the same time, the blurring of boundaries between professional and personal communication has introduced new challenges, including the risk of ambiguity, misinterpretation, and a diminished sense of professionalism if digital messages are not carefully crafted.

In this evolving landscape, professional written business etiquette requires a balance between clarity, efficiency, and respect. Modern standards emphasize audience awareness, purposeful brevity, appropriate tone across platforms, and sensitivity to cultural and organizational norms. Understanding which practices are effective and which are outdated is crucial for professionals seeking to communicate successfully in contemporary business environments. This article examines common mistakes and pitfalls in modern written business communication and provides guidance for students of Business English, based on classroom observations over recent years.

2. MISTAKES IN MODERN WRITTEN BUSINESS ETIQUETTE: OBSERVATIONS FROM BUSINESS ENGLISH CLASSROOMS

In teaching Business English, it has become evident that students are generally confident users of digital communication tools, yet this confidence does not always translate into effective professional writing. While students are familiar with e-mail as a daily communication channel, their messages often reflect informal habits rather than adherence to professional business writing conventions. The following sections outline the most common mistakes observed in the lecture room, illustrated with real-life examples adapted from student practice, followed by improved versions that align with professional written business etiquette.

2.1. Absence of Appropriate Greetings and Closings

Students frequently begin e-mails abruptly, omitting a greeting or closing, treating it as a text message rather than a professional document. Such openings can create an impression of impatience or lack of respect, particularly when communicating with clients, supervisors, or external partners.

Example (student version):

I'm writing about the invoice you sent. There is a problem with the price.

Improved version:

Dear Ms Taylor,

I am writing regarding the invoice you sent. There appears to be an issue with the listed price.

Kind regards,

Anna Novak

2.2. Overly Informal or Conversational Language

While modern business communication is less rigid than in the past, excessive informality—such as slang, emojis, or casual abbreviations—can undermine clarity and professionalism.

Example (student version):

Hi John ☺ just wanted to check if u got my last mail. Thx!

Improved version:

Dear John,

I would like to check whether you received my previous e-mail.

Thank you in advance.

Best regards,

2.3. Unclear or Missing Subject Lines

Students often neglect to write meaningful subject lines, reducing the effectiveness of the message and delaying responses. A clear subject line functions as a guide to the content and purpose of the e-mail.

Example (student version):

Subject: Question

Improved version:

Subject: Question Regarding Delivery Schedule

2.4. Lack of Structure and Clarity

Messages are frequently written as long, unstructured paragraphs, combining multiple points without clear organization. This can confuse the reader and reduce the impact of the communication.

Example (student version):

I am writing about the meeting next week and also the presentation because I am not sure who is responsible and I wanted to ask if the time is confirmed and also about the report.

Improved version:

I am writing regarding the meeting scheduled for next week.

Could you please confirm?

- who will be responsible for the presentation, and

- whether the meeting time has been finalized?

In addition, I would like to ask about the status of the report.

2.5. Inappropriate Tone in Requests and Complaints

Students may sound too direct or even impolite without intending to do so, especially when transferring patterns from their first language into English.

Example (student version):

You didn't send the documents. Send them today.

Improved version:

I have noticed that the documents have not yet been sent.

Could you please send them by the end of today?

2.6. Misuse of CC and BCC

Another challenge observed is the inappropriate use of carbon copy (CC) and blind carbon copy (BCC). Students often copy multiple recipients unnecessarily or reply to all without consideration. Misuse of BCC can be perceived as manipulative or unethical.

Example (student version):

To: Manager

CC: Head of Department, HR, Finance

I already asked for this last week. Please respond.

Improved version:

To: Manager

Dear Ms Patel,

I am following up on my previous message regarding the requested data.

Please let me know if you require any additional information.

Best regards,

2.7. Negative First Impression

Further observation from classroom practice shows that many students' e-mails create a negative first impression before the message content is even processed. Vague subject lines, missing greetings, abrupt openings, or unsigned messages are particularly common. In digital business communication, the first written message often replaces the handshake; it establishes tone, professionalism, and credibility. When this opening frame is careless or incomplete, the sender may be perceived as unprofessional, inattentive, or even discourteous, regardless of their actual intention.

2.8. Response Management

Response management represents another significant challenge. Ignoring messages, responding after an unreasonable delay, or failing to acknowledge receipt of important information is frequently interpreted in professional contexts as indifference or disrespect. At the same time, classroom discussions reveal that some students expect immediate replies, even outside standard working hours. This reflects a lack of awareness of professional boundaries and differing organizational cultures. Effective business etiquette requires both timely responses and respect for reasonable response expectations, rather than constant availability.

Example (student version):

(No reply for several days to an urgent e-mail)

Improved version:

Dear Mr Stein,

Thank you for your message. I have received the documents and will review them by Friday.

Kind regards,

2.9. Assumptions about Shared Communication Styles

Assumptions about shared communication styles also lead to recurring problems, especially in international business contexts. Students often write as if all recipients share the same expectations regarding formality, directness, use of titles, or speed of response. In reality, these conventions vary widely across cultures, industries, and organizations. Failure to adapt tone and style accordingly can easily result in misunderstanding, unintended offence, or perceived rudeness. Developing sensitivity to these differences is therefore a crucial component of Business English competence.

Example (student version):

Hi Ken,

Send me the figures today.

Improved version:

Dear Mr Tanaka,

Could you please send the figures at your convenience today?

Thank you very much.

2.10. Overuse of Templates and Automation

While templates and automated messages save time, overly generic or impersonal messages may appear cold, careless, or insincere, particularly in relationship-oriented communication. Automation without personalization can weaken professional relationships and negatively affect the sender's professional image. Students must therefore learn to balance efficiency with personalization, ensuring that even standardized messages retain a human and context-aware tone.

Example (student version):

Dear Customer,

Your request has been received. Do not reply to this e-mail.

Improved version:

Dear Ms Novak,

Thank you for contacting us. We have received your request and will get back to you by the end of the day.

Kind regards,

3. DISCUSSION

All of the above examples are drawn from classroom observations over recent years rather than published research. They highlight that effective written business communication requires more than grammatical accuracy: it depends on audience awareness, tone management, clarity, structure, ethical judgment, and cultural sensitivity. Students must learn to adapt digital habits from informal contexts to professional standards, balancing efficiency, personalization, and relational awareness.

4. CONCLUSION

The observations discussed in this article demonstrate that many difficulties in modern written business communication stem not from a lack of language knowledge but from insufficient awareness of professional etiquette and audience expectations. As noted in Business English classrooms, informal

habits can unintentionally convey impatience, disrespect, or unprofessionalism in workplace communication.Developing effective business writing skills requires learning to structure messages clearly, manage tone and formality, respect professional boundaries, and adapt to cultural and organizational contexts. By addressing these common pitfalls during their studies, students of Business English can effectively prepare for real-world professional communication and ensure a smooth transition from the classroom to the workplace.

REFERENCES

All examples are based on classroom observations conducted by the author over several years.

AUTHOR'S BIOGRAPHY

Tatjana Koropec is a professor of English and Slovenian languages. She is a lecturer in Business English at the Faculty of Economics and Business, University of Maribor, Slovenia. In her work, she strives to actively engage students in the learning process and prepare them for their future professional lives. She is interested in many things and explores various topics: other cultures, customs, and traditions that shape our lives and the business world; storytelling and listening to stories; and creative writing.