

**The  
80/20 Guide™  
to Business Writing**

*How You Can QUICKLY Improve  
Your Business Writing Skills*

By

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## **80/20 Guide™ to Business Writing**

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# 80/20 Guide™ to Business Writing

By: Scott W. Kunkel, Ph.D.

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## *Introduction*

### *The Epidemic*

The national news media has reported frequently that bad business writing is becoming an epidemic in the U.S. Corporate America spends 3.1 billion dollars per year on remedial writing training. Over 255 billion dollars are lost by businesses each year because of bad reading, writing, and math skills. A contributing factor in the crash of the space shuttle Challenger was badly written memos that were misinterpreted.

In a survey of the Fortune 1,000 companies, 76% of top executives said that they believe that good writing is crucial to business success, yet only 26% offer any kind of training to help their employees to write professional quality business letters, memos, and reports to customers, suppliers, and each other.

Most managers I meet in my teaching of MBA courses and in my consulting practice tell me that they wish they felt more secure in their business writing skills. Most senior executives are disappointed in the quality of the reports, memos, and letters they receive from their subordinates, and are frequently appalled at the letters that go out to their customers and suppliers from junior managers.

Do you wish you could write better, more professional quality reports, letters and memos? Do you feel that your lack of ability in this important skill is holding back your career? Do you wish you could find a short, quick, easy and painless way to make significant improvement in your professional business writing in a short time? If so, the program suggested in the *80/20 Guide™* is for you.

Are you an employer who wants to help his/her employees to improve their business writing skills? Would you like to find a cost efficient way to help your junior executives (and some senior executives) learn how to write better, more professional letters, memos and reports? If so, the program outlined in the *80/20 Guide™* may be what you are looking for.

Quality professional writing is like your golf game – it takes some practice and a coach to really improve. Rather than suggesting expensive speakers and trainers, this program is based on the simple process of having the client's writing evaluated by a writing coach, and having the coach make specific suggestions for improvement. Then the client edits and

rewrites their own writing to improve it, for re-evaluation by the coach.

This book provides the program and the tools. This book then offers you suggestions on how to find a coach for yourself if that's your choice. But this book also offers you a complete program, including access to a set of professional writing coaches who are familiar with the *80/20 Guide*<sup>™</sup> approach for improving business writing who will work with you or your employees to help improve your business writing skills by doing.

## ***Why Is This Book Called the 80/20 Guide<sup>™</sup> ?***

You have probably heard reference to the “80/20 rule.” The “80/20 rule” was first proposed by the Italian economist named Pareto who discovered in the late 1800s that 80% of the land in Italy was owned by 20% of the people.

J. M. Juran, the quality expert, generalized what he called the “Pareto Principle” to say that 80% of your results will come from 20% of your effort. He talked about “the vital few and the trivial many” in any inputs to outcomes relationship.

Richard Koch, in his book, *The 80/20 Principle*, explains that the “80/20 rule” shows that although patterns are not linear, there are patterns, and one of the most persistent patterns in our universe is that the universe is unbalanced. The “80/20 rule” illustrates that a few things are vitally important and many things are relatively trivial.

Examples of the application of the 80/20 rule include estimations such as:

- 80% of sales will be made to 20% of your customers;
- 80% of your sales are made up of 20% of your products;
- 80% of your costs are in 20% of your purchases;
- 80% of waste is in 20% of your processes;
- 80% of your problems will come from 20% of your employees;
- 80% of your results come from 20% of your efforts.

Although the 80/20 ratio is just an estimate that may overstate or understate the importance of the “vital few,” the conceptual framework of the “vital few and the trivial many” helps us learn to concentrate on the most important inputs that have the greatest impact on outcomes.

The 80/20 rule applies to this *80/20 Guide*<sup>™</sup> program by recognizing that not all grammatical and writing rules are equally important in helping executives to write better; 80% of all the occurrences of grammatical and style errors are the same 20% of possible errors repeated over and over.

Most style guides, in their attempt to be comprehensive, wind up burying the “vital few” most frequently occurring grammatical and style errors beneath a mountain of “the trivial many” grammar rules you’ll never use. Who wants to read a 300 page grammar book and then a 300 page style guide for referencing and formatting reports? The *80/20 Guide*<sup>™</sup> attempts to help you identify and correct the 20% of potential grammatical and style errors that make up 80% to 90% of the occurrence of errors in business writing, and does it in less than 70 pages.

An executive can read the less than 70 pages of this *80/20 Guide*<sup>™</sup> and follow the *80/20 Guide Program* and can significantly improve his/her skill in business writing in less than 30 days. After completing the 30 days, that person can then use the *80/20 Guide* as a desk reference for quick answers to style, referencing, or grammatical questions.

## ***How Is the 80/20 Guide<sup>™</sup> An Improvement Over Other Style Guides?***

There are many style guides and books on writing on the market today. Most of them are much larger than this one. Some concentrate on grammar, punctuation, and writing style. Some concentrate on referencing style for reports. However, I have not found one that in a single small book fulfilled a student’s or an executive’s need for an easy-to-read, easy-to-use guide that discusses the most important points that a businessperson needs to know in order to produce professional quality business letters, memos, and reports. It is for that reason that the *80/20 Guide*<sup>™</sup> to Business Writing was born.

This guide makes no attempt to be comprehensive in its handling of grammar, punctuation, or referencing and construction of bibliographies. It does, however, in fewer than 70 pages, answer the majority of the most frequently asked questions and provide a framework on which you can build to improve your writing skill. It can also act as a desk reference that will continue to guide you on the preparation of professional quality business letters, memos, and reports throughout your working career.

## ***What Kinds of Documents are Covered in this 80/20 Guide<sup>™</sup>?***

There are three types of written correspondence that will make up the majority of the written work you will need to do in the business world:

1. Memos (both e-mail memos and paper memos)
2. Letters (in two styles, block form and semi-block form)
3. Reports

---

## § 1. *The Writing Process*

Writing is a process made up of five significant steps, each of which includes several actions, as shown in Table 1.

---

### § 1.1 *Stages of the Writing Process*

The writing process is made up of the five distinct stages shown in Table 1.

1. STARTING	making lists, diagrams, clusters, maps, and doodles, journal writing, talking with people, incubating.
2. SEARCHING	library researching, interviewing and asking, observing, remembering.
3. COMPOSING	with pencil or computer, connecting and focusing, imagining your reader, throwing away your first page.
4. REVISING & REWRITING	re-reading and rethinking, reorganizing and rewriting, developing and supporting, asking for feedback, using scissors and staples or cut and paste on the computer.
5. EDITING	clarifying and sharpening, combining and condensing, omitting needless words, proofreading: spelling punctuation grammar documentation making sure that you have followed the proper form.

Remember, writing is not a fixed linear process. Each of these five actions can occur any time and many times while you write.

---

## § 2. *Most Common Grammatical Errors*

This section covers some of the most common grammatical errors that I find in my students' papers. These are the kinds of grammatical errors that are frequently made by the less educated in our society. Therefore, when you make one of these errors, readers tend to think of you as one of the educationally deprived in our society, rather than a competent, well educated individual. I suggest that you go to great lengths to learn these rules and overcome any bad grammatical habits that you have.

---

### § 2.1. *Subject and Verb not in Agreement*

The subject and verb must agree in number. Example:

Original: Each one of the employees are eligible.

Revision: Each one of the employees is eligible.

The subject of the above sentence is the word *one*. *One* is singular, so the verb must be singular.

---

### § 2.2. *Misusing Collective Nouns*

Collective nouns like team, group, company, organization, etc., are all singular nouns since they refer to one team, one company, etc. Therefore, collective nouns call for singular verbs and singular referent pronouns unless the collective noun is plural, i.e., companies, groups, teams, etc..

Original: The company treat their employees well.

Revision: The company treats its employees well.

Original: Both companies treat its employees well.

Revision: Both companies treat their employees well.

There are occasional exceptions to this rule. For example, the word *couple* can be either singular or plural depending on the context. Whenever a word is meant to refer to a single unit or a whole, then it should be treated as singular:

The couple is surrounded by friends.

The couple of students remaining were given the review

### § 2.3. *Misusing Indefinite Pronouns*

*Each, every, many a,* and the indefinite pronouns such as *everybody, anyone,* and *somebody* are all singular and call for singular verbs. The pronoun *none* can be singular or plural. If the noun following *none* is singular, then use a singular verb. If the noun following *none* is plural, then use a plural verb:

None of the information was correct.

None of the children were finished in the time allotted.

---

### § 2.6. *Confusing Plurals and Possessives*

Recognize the difference between possessives and plurals.

§ 2.6.1. *Plurals (e.g., The two companies compete . . .)*. Plurals refer to more than one. In the sentences below, the underlined words are plural. Examples:

Seven managers were there.

Both organizations failed.

Dave has four assistants.

Bill reports to two bosses.

Plurals DO NOT use an apostrophe before the *s*.

§ 2.6.2. *Possessives (e.g., One company's product . . .)*. Possessives show ownership. To form a possessive, if the word does not end in *s*, add 's. If the word does end in *s*, add the 's when you pronounce the added syllable and only an apostrophe if you do not pronounce the added syllable. In the sentences below, the underlined words are possessive. Examples:

It was my manager's clipboard.

This is the organization's strategy.

He schedules all four assistant's hours.

It is my boss's birthday.

(Note that in the plural possessive word *boss's* the 's is added since the extra *s* is pronounced.)

§ 2.6.3. *Plural possessives (e.g., Several companies' products . . .)*. To create a plural possessive (meaning that something belongs to more than one person), use the plural form of the word and follow the rules for possessives. The plural form of each of the above root words ends in *s*. Therefore, the possessive of each of the plurals is formed by adding an

apostrophe to the plural form of the word. In the sentences below, the underlined words are plural possessive.

Those are the managers' hats.  
This will help all seven organizations' employees.  
All four of the assistants' jobs were eliminated.  
All four of the bosses' coats are still on the rack.

However, the possessive of the plural noun that does not end in "s", such as "men" is formed by adding 's.

All of the men's coats were waiting for them.

**§ 2.6.4. *Its versus It's.*** The word "It" is different from most plurals and possessives. **Without** an apostrophe (*its*) the word is possessive. Example:

The team gave its best.

**With** the apostrophe ("it's") the word is a contraction of "it is."

It's a shame we confuse the use of "its" and "it's."

---

## § 2.10. *Comma Splices (Run-on Sentences)*

A comma splice (also referred to as a run-on sentence) is created by joining together two independent clauses with a comma. An independent clause can stand alone as a sentence. Each independent clause must either be made into a separate sentence or the two must be joined by a conjunction, such as *and* or *but* or *however*, or by a semicolon. Example:

Original: These two clauses are independent clauses, they need to be either separated into two sentences or joined with a conjunction or a semicolon.

Revision 1: These two clauses are independent clauses. They need to be either separated into two sentences or joined with a conjunction or a semicolon.

Revision 2: These two clauses are independent clauses and they need to be either separated into two sentences or joined with a conjunction or a semicolon.

Revision 3: These two clauses are independent clauses; they need to be either separated into two sentences or joined with a conjunction or a semicolon.

---

### § 3. *Most Commonly Confused Words*

This section covers some of the most commonly confused words, such as *there* versus *their* versus *they're*. These are the kinds of wording errors that are frequently made by the less educated in our society. Therefore, when you make one of these errors, readers tend to think of you as one of the educationally deprived, rather than an educated, competent individual. I suggest that you go to great lengths to learn the difference between these commonly confused words.

---

#### § 3.1. *Using There, versus Their, versus They're*

*There* is an adverb designating a place.

Correct: Put the case there.

*Their* is the third person possessive pronoun.

Correct: It was their car that was stolen.

*They're* is a contraction for “they are.”

Correct: They're going to the dance together.

---

#### § 3.2. *Using Wear versus Were versus Where*

*Wear* is a verb, meaning to clothe oneself in something – to wear a hat.

Correct: They always wear new shoes to the dance.

*Were* is the past tense of the plural verb *are*.

Correct: They were in the classroom at noon.

*Where* is an adverb stating the location of something.

Correct: He asked where the books were.

---

### § 3.2. Using To versus Too versus Two

*To* is a preposition which specifies a direction toward something.

Correct: John went to the store.

*Too* is an adverb which means "also" or "excessively."

Correct: I, too, think that John is an excellent manager.

Correct: John is too tall to get into the plane.

*Two* is an adjective specifying a number.

Correct: Two of the dancers had to drop out.

---

### § 3.4. Using Affect versus Effect

*Affect* is always used as a verb meaning *to influence*.

Correct: The amount of rain will affect the corn.

*Effect* is most often used as a noun meaning *the result*, but it can be used as a verb meaning *to bring about*.

Noun: One effect of the car accident was a bent fender.

Verb: She could not effect the changes she had planned.

---

### § 3.5. Using Accept versus Except

*Accept* is a verb meaning "to receive."

Correct: Did Tom accept your offer?

*Except* is a verb meaning "to leave out." Used as a preposition it can mean "with the exclusion of."

Correct: Everyone enjoyed the party except Jane.

---

### § 3.6. Using Than versus Then

*Than* is used with the second member of a comparison.

Correct: She was a better manager than he was.

*Then* used as an adverb means “at that time” or “next”; *then* used as a noun means “at a particular time.”

Correct (adverb): First line them up, and then count them.

Correct (noun): If we win the election, we will be in office three months from then.

---

## § 4. Most Common Punctuation Errors

There are hundreds of rules for punctuation. I have only included here a few of the punctuation errors I see most often in student projects.

---

### § 4.1. Offsetting with Commas

Use commas before and after to offset words like “Inc.,” “Jr.,” and “Sr.” Examples:

Correct: Jones, Inc., was our contractor.

Correct: Henry Jones, Sr., gave his son, Henry, Jr., stock in the company.

Also, words that are “asides,” or nonessential to the main point of the sentence, such as people’s titles and words like “however,” “furthermore,” and state names should be offset from the main text of the sentence by commas.

Correct: Henry Jones, the manager, explained the assignment.

Correct: It is important, however, for you to arrive on time.

Correct: Denver, Colorado, was John’s home.

---

### § 4.2. Using Hyphens and Dashes

**§ 4.2.1. Creating Hyphens and Dashes.** The short-line character on the keyboard on the same key with the underline (-) is a hyphen, not a dash. To create a dash, type a space, two hyphens and a space. When you type that combination in order, Word and WordPerfect change the two hyphens into a long dash – as shown here. If the word processor does not change the space-two-hyphens-space sequence into a dash, leave the two hyphens to represent a dash -- as shown here. Do not use a hyphen where a dash should go or a dash where a hyphen should go.

**§ 4.2.2. Using Hyphens.** Hyphens are used to connect multiple words that are being used as one, such as “He ran a record-setting pace.” There is no space before and after a hyphen. Any time you use two or more words as if they were a single adjective to modify a noun, the words should be hyphenated to form a single hyphenated word.

**§ 4.2.3. Using Dashes.** Dashes are used to set aside a phrase or clause in a sentence or to replace the words “such as.” Using too many dashes tells the reader that you don’t know how to organize your thoughts well in writing.

---

### **§ 4.3. Punctuation Around Quotation Marks**

When using quotation marks, always use double quotation marks (“) except for quotations within quotations.

Place commas and periods *inside* the final quotation mark.

Correct: “I love to fly small planes,” Mary said.

Correct: Peter replied, “I especially love flying my Cessna.”

Place semicolons and colons *outside* the final quotation marks because they apply to the entire sentence rather than just the quotation.

Correct: I sent you an article on “Bootstrapping”; I hope you received it.

Place an exclamation points or question marks *inside* the final quotation mark when the mark applies only to the quoted statement and *outside* the final quotation mark when it applies to the statement outside the quotation marks.

Correct: “Help!” Henry shouted.

Here, “Help” is the exclamation so the exclamation point goes inside the quotation marks.

Correct: “Are you there?” Henry asked.

Here the questions is “Are you there?” so the question mark goes inside the quotation marks.

Correct: I was shocked when she said, “I may resign”!

Here, the exclaimed part is the sentence “I was shocked,” not the quoted part, “I may resign,” so the exclamation mark goes outside the quotation marks.

Correct: Would you quit if he said, “I’m resigning”?

Here, the question is “Would you quit,” not the “I’m resigning” part, so the question mark goes outside the quotation marks.

---

## § 7.2. *Body of Your Report*

At this point in your career, you are undoubtedly writing and editing your letters and reports using word processing software on a computer. For a manager, being computer illiterate in the 21<sup>st</sup> century is what being unable to read was in the 1950s. Today, you can’t compete as a farmer if you can’t drive a tractor, and you can’t compete as a business professional if you can’t use a computer.

In typing your reports, the following guidelines should be followed:

§ 7.2.1. *Typing and backing up your work.* Since computers crash and files get accidentally deleted, make sure to provide for adequate backup of your work.

§ 7.2.2. *Printers and Fonts.* The easiest font on the eye is Times-Roman. Use Times-Roman 12 point font or its equivalent for the main body of your reports. This is Times-New-Roman 12 point, available in Windows.

For effect, headings may be larger size and bold. This guide uses Times-New-Roman 18 point bold italic type for headings. *Italics type styles are to be used for emphasis only and for headings, following APA form.*

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§ 7.2.12. *Organizational headings.* Any report longer than two pages must use headings to break the report into logical sections. Organization headings help the reader follow your writing and provide a logical sequence for your communication. Headings are used to clarify the organization of the report and to guide the reader through transitions from one major topic to another. There can be several paragraphs under each heading.

There are four levels of organizational headings in APA style below the title heading; from one to three levels below the title heading are commonly used in papers and professional

reports. APA has a relatively complicated process for deciding what headings to use based on the total number of headings that you will be using in the document. For example, level 2 is only used if you need four levels, so if only three levels are used you would use levels 1, 3, and 4 below the title heading. If you want to follow APA style exactly, see an APA Style Guide in the library or search for APA Guide on-line.

For purposes of this 80/20 Guide, and since more than 3 levels of headings below the title heading are seldom needed except in very long academic papers or technical reports, I will present a simplified form of APA headings. The four types of headings, including the title heading, shown below should be used sequentially.

In other words, under the title heading, major headings are the first type used to divide the material of your report into sections. Side headings are used to divide material within a major heading section into subsections. Paragraph headings are used to divide material within a side heading subsections into sub-subsections. Indented paragraph headings are presented but seldom needed.

Headings are normally not numbered, but you may number your headings (as I have done in this 80/20 Guide) if it helps to make the report better organized. The four levels of headings recommended in this 80/20 Guide are formatted as follows:

**Title Heading: Centered, Bold,  
Uppercase and Lowercase** (Level 1)

***Major Heading: Centered, Bold, Italicized,  
Upper and Lowercase*** (Level 2)

***Side Heading: Flush Left, Bold, Italicized,  
Upper and Lower Case*** (Level 3)

***Paragraph heading: Indented, bold, italicized, lowercase, ending  
with a period.*** (Level 4)

## § 7.3. *Citing Sources in the Body of the Report*

§ 7.3.1. *Why cite sources?* It is important to cite your sources of information clearly so that the reader can decide for himself/herself how much credence to put on particular statements. Proper citing of sources is sometimes thought to be an academic exercise, but well designed business reports must be referenced properly because someone other than the report writer will be making a decision based on the information in the report and they can't do that well without being able to judge the credibility of the sources of the information in the report.

If I put in my report that the Earth is going to collide with Mars next year, you would want to know whether that information came from the Palomar Observatory or from my drunken uncle Charlie. Therefore, it is important for the reader at all times to have a clear indication of where the writer obtained each particular piece of information.

Another reason for proper citing of sources in research reports is that you can never tell when you will want to produce an updated version of your own report. If you have no idea where you got a particular statistic or fact, how can you go to an updated version of the source to get a more up-to-date statistic or fact?

There are two primary reasons why citing sources is important:

§ 7.3.1.1. *Credibility of your report.* Without proper citations the reader has no idea how much credibility he/she can place in the information. Business information is much more credible from CNN.com than it is from Joe Blow's Blog.

§ 7.3.1.2. *Your personal credibility.* Failing to cite sources of your information is plagiarism. Plagiarism can brand you as lazy and incompetent, unethical and immoral, or illegal and criminal. Since you don't want the reader to attribute any of those adjectives to you, make sure that the reader can tell where you got every piece of information. That can be done by a proper citation methods shown below or by just making it clear to the reader in the text where you got the information, i.e., "Jim Collins in Good to Great states 'Good enough usually isn't.'"

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## § 8. *The References (Bibliography) Page(s)*

Every reference cited in the text must appear in the reference list (bibliography) which follows the body of the report. References are presented in **alphabetical order** by first author's last name (or first word in the reference), using the style of the examples presented in § 8.9 and § 8.10 below. Note that all types of reference materials appear in a single list – books, articles, interviews, etc.

Every reference in the References page should be cited somewhere in the text – references not cited in the text should not appear in the references list. To include materials used for background information but not cited in the text, a separate list titled “References Not Cited” can be added.

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## ***§ 9. Suggestions for Effective Oral Presentations***

The purpose of oral presentations is to give you practice at one of the most important skills you will ever use in your business career. Each classroom presentation is intended to simulate a presentation to your co-workers on information which you have researched for the group.

An oral presentation is not a formal written speech. Therefore, some of the techniques for an outstanding oral presentation may differ slightly from what you may have learned in a speech class. Here are some guidelines for you to follow:

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### ***§ 9.1. Posture***

Stand straight with both feet on the floor and your hands at your sides except when making gestures to enhance your presentation. Do not keep your hands in your pockets, but putting a hand in a pocket for a few moments during a presentation can present an air of confidence and comfort on the stage.

Standing with your weight on one foot or nervously shifting your weight from foot to foot presents insecurity, which the audience may interpret as your being unsure of your facts. Walking around casually is perfectly acceptable, but nervously pacing back and forth decreases your effectiveness. The important point is for your presentation habits to distract from the message as little as possible so that the audience can concentrate on your message. You want to look natural and comfortable as you speak. If you are using cards or notes, you may wish to stay behind the podium.

You want to look relaxed and comfortable on the stage, but you do not want to look lax or less than excited about your topic. Gripping the podium makes you look terrified. The audience will wonder if you are afraid because you don't know what you're talking about. Leaning on the podium makes you look like you are just too tired and bored with this topic to stand up straight. If your topic bores you this much, guess what it will do for your audience!