
A Glimpse into A Modern Way of Conversation and Communication in Commercial English

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Prologue

The British nation and the United States use the same language — English.

It is already two hundred years since the United States became an independent nation. During the first independent century, the influence of the British English remained prevalent. But during the second century of its independence, the American English gradually developed. This development can be contributed to the heavy immigration of people from non-English speaking countries. The British English remained rather conservative while the American English can be termed progressive.

So the American usage of English is now more common outside the British Commonwealth and its allied nations. Especially in the international trading market where American influence is strongly felt (“the Dollar Area”), we must use American way of expression both in speaking and in correspondence. But in “the Pound Area” where British influence is stronger, the British usage of English, which has not much

changed for a dozen of years, should be used, though its area is now 20% less than the Dollar Area.

Commercial English (American) or Business English (British) is essentially the same as common everyday English in its diction, grammar, and structure of sentences only except for some ways of expressions peculiar to business English such as they call "Business Expressions" and "Business Technics". Even in commercial correspondence, a conversational way of letter writing is generally advisable. Therefore, the more our everyday English is improved, the better we can speak or write commercial English. Informal words and phrases are preferable in almost all business writing, though with some reservations.

If our English has been improved to some extent, then the first thing we must learn is to know the present day English, especially the one commonly used by the American people. In Japanese schools English education had long been grounded upon the British language (both in pronunciation and in grammar). Only recently our beginners' English has partly been changed to American English, though most of their teachers have been taught British English and its grammar and so they had to study the American way of expression anew. For example, it was only a few years ago that teachers in Japan started to teach in schools, "Do you have something?" instead of saying "Have you anything?" We were taught in

schools that “compare to” means “there is likeness between...” such as “Poets have compared sleep to death.” But nowadays American people seem to use “compare to” in the same meaning as “compare with”. In another example, they say, “You suggested that I go to see him today, so I did.” instead of saying, “You suggested I should go...” Here the British grammar, sequence of tenses, is completely ignored.

The Basic C's of Effective Writing

It is generally understood that there are four basic C's in effective writing in commercial letters, that is, 1. Conciseness or Compactness 2. Clearness 3. Correctness or Preciseness and 4. Courtesy.

1. Conciseness — The compact letter which includes essential materials in the fewest words without sacrificing clearness of expression is most effective, for it economizes time and brain energy and concentrates attention.

In the following sentences those marked with × mean wordy ones, while those marked with ○ show compact or concise ones.

× (a) I wish every person who receives this letter and has a suggestion to make, write it, sign it, and drop it in the mail at once, so that I may know his opinion as soon as

possible.

○ (a) Please write your suggestions on the enclosed card and mail it at once.

× (b) As to the article you required for, we made an inquiry with the manufacturers, but they say that they are not making it at present. (including many subjects)

○ (b) Upon inquiry with the manufacturers, we have learned that the article you mentioned is now out of stock. (Just one subject)

× (c) we are writing to ask whether the domestic science table *which* we shipped you on April 10 is the exact type of table *that* you need for your purposes. (Which and that as relative pronouns are to be omitted.)

○ (c) Is the domestic science table shipped to you on April 10 the exact type you need? (Which and that are omitted here.)

2. Clearness ---- The following five sentences are often quoted as model entrance examination questions for college, but not easy nor comprehensible enough at a glance, so they are unsuitable for business talks or correspondence.

× (a) He has not more than ten dollars.

× (b) He has no more than ten dollars.

× (c) He has not less than ten dollars.

× (d) He has no less than ten dollars.

× (e) We do not require both of them. (partial negation)

- (a) He has at most ten dollars.
 - (b) He has only ten dollars.
 - (c) He has at least ten dollars.
 - (d) He has as much as ten dollars.
 - (e) We require only so and so. (showing the number or quality of the definite article)
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The word expressing negation should come to the first part of the sentence and not to the rear.

- × (f) The boss thought that George was not worth his salt.
 - (f) The boss did not think that George was worth his salt.
 - × (g) We think that the yen will not be devalued in the near future.
 - (g) We don't think the yen will be devalued in the near future.
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- × (h) We have received your letter of May 10. We understand that you wish to cancel your order No. 100, but we cannot comply with your request, because we have already started to manufacture.
- (h) Your letter of May 10 requesting us to cancel your order No. 100 arrived this morning, but we had already

started to manufacture. We regret, therefore, that we are unable to comply with your request.

3. Correctness — If a sentence or a paragraph has no errors in spelling, punctuation, grammar and usage, we call it a correct one. The writer should not neglect even a single mistake in spelling, punctuation, and grammar in order to give the reader's mind a clear impression of the business contents.

4. Courtesy — Anything which sounds compulsory to the reader should be avoided. 'You shall' or even 'He shall' would preferably be avoided. In America the simple future of the first person is mostly denoted by 'will'. Thus they say, "Will I? --- We will" instead of saying, 'Shall I? --- We shall ---' in most cases.
 - × (a) You shall receive our reply tomorrow.
 - (a) You will receive our reply tomorrow.
 - × (b) Our agents shall attend to the matter immediately.
 - (b) We have instructed our agents to attend to the matter immediately.

'Cannot' and 'must' often sound too strong or peremptory, so they should also be avoided unless inevitable. Besides, in business transactions, it would often be better to refrain from using decisive expressions as seen

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in the examples of (h) and (i).

- × (c) We *cannot* comply with your request.
- (c) We are not in a position to comply with your request.
- × (d) We *cannot* send the samples by air mail, because we *must* pay enormous charges.
- (d) Please excuse us for sending the samples by sea mail. (As there is ample time, we are sending the samples by sea mail.)
- × (e) We cannot accept your offer unless you reduce the price by 10 %.
- (e) We shall be able to accept your order if you can reduce the price by 10 %.

Stress the “You” point of view rather than the “We” point of view.

- × (f) *We* will dispatch the 50 pairs of men’s shoes you ordered as soon as you inform us of the colors you require.
- (f) The 50 pairs of men’s shoes you ordered will be dispatched as soon as ----- .
- × (g) *We* cordially invite you to the dinner party which we will give on Saturday evening at 7.
- (g) You are cordially invited to the dinner party to be given
- × (h) I want to buy your cotton crepe shirts.

○ (h) I'm interested in your cotton crepe shirts.

× (i) We want to buy carpenter's tools.

○ (i) We're in the market for carpenter's tools.

Besides the above-mentioned 4 C's largely known among those Japanese concerned, Completeness, Concreteness, Suggestiveness, and Creativeness are said to be indispensable factors in effective writing according to the opinions of some specialists in business languages,

5. Completeness Whether it may be telephone call, telegram, letter, or conversation, give as complete an understanding of the problem as possible. However simply and directly you can say, you should not sacrifice completeness for brevity. Orders or inquiries that cannot be filled, because of lack of information, cause delay and bad feeling between buyer and seller.

6. Concreteness..... There goes a saying, "One picture is worth ten thousand words." So, create a definite and vivid picture in the reader's mind by using specific, concrete words. Avoid abstract, vague, general terms. However flowery the writer's words may be, if they do not appeal to the reader's mind, it means nothing. All the necessary explanations should be made in the briefest and concrete terms.

7. Suggestiveness The writing which includes all the

above factors may not be enough if the reader needs to be persuaded. The writer should aim *to stimulate the reader to action*. Appeal to the heart as well as to the mind by choosing suggestive words.

8. Creativeness..... This quality chiefly depends on the writer's imagination. Each of the C's of good business writing depends first on creative thinking and creative expression.

Additional Remarks

I was influenced by Professor Charles C. Parkhurst's *Business Communication for Better Human Relations* in my writing of this short article. Several examples given above have been quoted from the *Beginners' Business English Series* published by Kenkyusha Co., Ltd. especially the one written by Professor Saburo Haneda. Some Japanese scholars add "Character" to 4C's as an essential factor, but as Professor Parkhurst suggests, "Suggestiveness" and "Creativeness" are more concrete and comprehensible expressions in denoting the other important factors to be added to 4 C's, I think.