Business English Workshop

15 Mar 2018

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Hello!
Always make a firm handshake!
Self-Introduction

- Imagine that you’re working in your dream job!
- Take 5 minutes to write down:
  - what you do and
  - describe yourself, including your academic background and your personal interests/hobbies
- Don’t worry about using perfect English; just get your thoughts on paper.
Two Sides of Business English
Image Hacks

- Proper dress
- Proper etiquette (including handshakes)
- Proper name
  - Choose a normal English name. Look to leaders in politics or the business community.
  - Do not use unusual names of famous people such as “Elon”.
  - Do not use names of celebrities or rap musicians unless they are normal names – “Jay” is fine; “Jay-Z” is not. “Angela” is fine; “AngelaBaby” is not.
There are very few absolute rules. Most rules have exceptions. The customs in your workplace are usually more important than rules of grammar, etc.

Don’t talk about Fight Club!
Rule No. 2

Know Your Limits!
- Vocabulary?
- Grammar?
- Slang?

“It’s better to keep your mouth shut and appear stupid than open it and remove all doubt.”
~Mark Twain
Rule No. 3: Use the Five Cs

- Clear
- Complete
- Concise
- Courteous
- Correct
Clear

- Make sure your meaning is clear.
- Your primary sentence construction should be **Subject-Verb-Object** (S-V-O).
- Use short, familiar words unless professional jargon is required.
- Write in the **active voice**, except in situations we will discuss later.
S-V(-O)

- I aced the interview.
  - ("to ace": to do very well)
- I attend Hong Kong City University.
- I enjoy playing video games.
- I don’t like arrogant people.
- The conference is already full.
Include all the information the reader or listener needs to have. Use **5 Ws**: 
- Who 
- What 
- Where 
- Why 
- When 

All 5 may not be necessary, but think before omitting any of them.
Concise

- Make sure your communication is *short and direct*. Avoid adverbs.
- Eliminate unnecessary words or thoughts.
- Concise ≠ Blunt or Rude
Courteous

- Address your audience *politely*.
- Use correct degree of *formality* (mirroring).
- Know when to use titles, first names, or last names. *(Age, position, preference).*
Correct

- Eliminate grammar, spelling and punctuation errors.

- Pay special attention to subject-verb agreement, correct verb tenses, and gender pronouns.
Chinese vs. Western Language Evaluation

Westerners emphasize:

- Verb tense
- Gender pronouns
Dear Mr. John Smith:

I wish to draw your attention to an upcoming event that we are organizing for the purpose of celebrating the retirement of our Director of Communications, Mr. Thomas Goldman. The event will take place on the 17th of November and we anticipate your attendance at this event.

You are cordially invited to a dinner being held at the City Convention Centre at 6:30. The dinner will be a formal affair so you must wear formal clothes. You can bring your wife if you care to do so. If you have any questions, please contact Julie Johnson at ext. 451 and she would be happy to furnish you with any additional information that you may require.

Sincerely,

Dudley Deadfoot
Dear Mr. John Smith:

I wish to draw your attention to an upcoming event that we are organizing for the purpose of celebrating the retirement of our Director of Communications, Mr. Thomas Goldman. The event will take place on the 17th of November and we anticipate your attendance at this event. You are cordially invited to a dinner being held at the City Convention Centre at 6:30. The dinner will be a formal affair so you must wear formal clothes. You can bring your wife if you care to do so. If you have any questions, please contact Julie Johnson at ext. 451 and she would be happy to furnish you with any additional information that you may require.

Sincerely,

Dudley Deadfoot

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**Better Cs**

- Attendees should wear formal clothes and may bring their spouse or partner.

**Notes:**

- “Must wear” is an uncourteous/impolite demand.
- Be sensitive to inclusive language – partner vs. boyfriend/girlfriend.
- “Formal clothes” = “black tie” = tuxedo for men and formal evening wear for women, not business attire.
Bad Cs

Dear Mr. John Smith:

I wish to draw your attention to an upcoming event that we are organizing for the purpose of celebrating the retirement of our Director of Communications, Mr. Thomas Goldman. The event will take place on the 17th of November and we anticipate your attendance at this event. You are cordially invited to a dinner being held at the City Convention Centre at 6:30. The dinner will be a formal affair so you must wear formal clothes. You can bring your wife if you care to do so. If you have any questions, please contact Julie Johnson at ext. 451 and she would be happy to furnish you with any additional information that you may require.

Sincerely,

Dudley Deadfoot

Better Cs

- Please contact Julie Johnson at 555-5555, ext. 451, to [RSVP and] ask for any additional information you require.

OR

- Please contact Julie Johnson at 555-5555. ext. 451 to tell her if you are coming, if you are bringing a guest, and to ask for any additional information you require.

Note: “RSVP” originally meant “reply to let us know if you are coming or not”. Now it means “if you do not reply, we assume you are coming” and is sometimes replaced with “Regrets Only”.
Better Cs

What degree of formality is required?

Dear Mr. John Smith: [note full name and use of colon ( : ) ]

- Formal enough: “Dear Mr. Smith,”
- Less formal: “Dear John,”

“Dear Mr. John Smith” sounds like junk mail. Colons are generally avoided in modern usage.
Rule No. 4: Use the Active Voice (Unless...)

Write primarily in the active voice. It is clearer and more concise than the passive and takes the S-V-O form.

Using the active voice allows you to take responsibility for your mistakes.

- Passive: Many helpful lessons are learned from our mistakes.
- Active (concise): Mistakes teach us many helpful lessons.
- Passive: Mistakes were made in the report.
- Active (responsibility): I made mistakes in the report.
Unless...

- You don’t want to blame someone for a mistake. (Courteous)
  The passive voice allows you to withhold the subject’s name.

Active (blame):
- The boss gave me the wrong data for my report.
- Our group didn’t finish its report because John neither came nor RSVPed.

Passive (courteous):
- I was given the wrong data for my report.
- The report wasn’t finished because not all of the members participated.
Change the following sentences from passive to active (unless ...)

1. My first visit to Hong Kong will always be remembered.
   I will always remember my first visit to Hong Kong.

2. The tycoons of the 19th century are not respected today.
   Today we do not respect the tycoons of the 19th century.

3. Mistakes were made by my secretary in typing the final report.
   Mistakes were made in the final report. (Why remove “in typing”?)

4. His first day at work was remembered as an embarrassing experience.
   He remembered his first day of work as an embarrassing experience.

5. The Chairman of Business Operations was considered out of touch with modern practices.
   The Chairman of Business Operations considered out of touch with modern practices.
Rule No. 5: Know When to Use Formal or Informal English

Substance

- Grammar
- Vocabulary

Medium and Audience

- Superior / Peer / Subordinate
- Letter
- Email
Modern Trend is Increasingly Casual

- Emails and even SMS messages are replacing formal letters and memos
- Internal communications are more casual
- External communications and communications to superiors within the organization retain more formal structures

Note: As Chinese students, your English is already likely to be more formal than that of a native English speaker. You will usually need to be more casual rather than more formal.
Characteristics of Formal English

- More sophisticated vocabulary
- No slang
- Few if any contractions
- Formal salutations and closings
  - “Dear Mr./Mrs./Ms. X
  - Sincerely yours,
  [Full name]
Characteristics of Informal/Casual English

- Simpler vocabulary
- Slang (verbal vs. written)
- Contractions
- Casual salutations and closings
  - “Hi Mary,”
  - Yours/Cheers/Regards,
    John
Dear Jen:

I am writing to follow up on my interview from last week. First of all, it was awesome to meet you. You are a really cool lady. I believe I would be a pro at all the stuff you mentioned that would be required of me in this job. I am not a workaholic, but I do work hard and “take care of business.” Haha. Please contact me if you have any questions or concerns.

Sincerely,

M. Ernest

Identify the medium and audience to determine the degree of formality required.
Formal or informal?

- Letter to client
- Email to subordinate
- Email to boss
- Memo to subordinate
- SMS to friend
- Thank you email to interviewers
Dear [last name from business card],

I enjoyed meeting with you on Wednesday and was impressed by your accomplishments \textit{[personal]} and your company’s vision \textit{[impersonal]} for the future. I look forward to helping you \textit{[plural]} achieve your goals. Please let me know if I can furnish any additional information. I wish you and your company continued success.

Sincerely,

John Smith
Rule No. 7: Use Parallelism

- Parallelism is the use of similar structure in related words, clauses, or phrases.

- In particular, we want to match the same prepositions, verb forms, and subject/object forms within the clauses of the same sentence or within items in a list.

- When we match prepositions, we usually only include it before the first item, though we may include it before every item.
Good and Bad Parallelism

Bad: Kelly had to iron, do the washing, and go shopping before her parents arrived.

Better: Kelly had to iron, wash, and shop .... (Problem?)

Best: Kelly had to do the ironing, washing and shopping ....

Bad: John prefers jeans to wearing a suit.

Better: John prefers jeans to suits. (Problem?)

Correct: John prefers wearing jeans to wearing a suit.
Parallelism Exercises

In groups, correct the following sentences:

1. Driving a car requires coordination, patience, and to have good eyesight.

2. The Germans, the Italians, Spanish and Irish people are often considered to have hot tempers.

3. Classes are taught in spring, winter, and in summer.

4. I’ve read the book, but I haven’t watched the movie version.

5. How you look in the workplace is just as important as your behavior.
Parallelism Answers

1. Driving a car requires coordination, patience, and to have good eyesight.
   ➢ Driving a car requires coordination, patience, and good eyesight.

2. The Germans, the Italians, Spanish and Irish people are often considered to have hot tempers.
   ➢ The Germans, Italians, Spanish and Irish are often considered to have hot tempers. (Why passive?)

3. The school holds classes in spring, winter, and in summer.
   ➢ The school holds in spring, winter, and in summer.

4. I’ve read the book, but I haven’t watched the movie version.
   ➢ I’ve read the book, but haven’t watched/seen the movie.

5. How you look in the workplace is just as important as your behavior.
   ➢ How you look in the workplace is just as important as how you behave.
Rule No. 8: Use Slang, but Cautiously

Slang is commonly used among colleagues and in social meetings outside the office.

Slang should not be confused with personal information. Avoid TMI (too much information) traps.

- “I got divorced because my husband couldn’t keep it in his pants.” (“keep it in his pants”)
- “I went into business because my father drank too much and was always broke.” (“broke”)

Some common slang terms and a caveat (warning)

Slang changes frequently. If you’re not sure whether your slang is up to date, don’t use it.

**Aced and nailed** = to do extremely well:
I aced the interview. He nailed the presentation.

**All-nighter** ("pull an all-nighter") = to work all night to meet a deadline:
I pulled an all-nighter to get ready for the test.

(To look like a) **deer in the headlights** = to be startled and unprepared:
John looked like a deer in the headlights during his speech.
When the director called my name, I felt like a deer in the headlights.
More slang terms

**Freeze/froze** = stop in mid-sentence or be unable to respond to a question:
- When the interviewer asked me my expected salary, I froze.
- John froze when they turned the cameras on.

**Not a clue/don’t have a clue** = to know nothing about a particular subject:
- I don’t have a clue what he’s talking about.

**Up in the air** = to be undecided, or in the case of a situation, to be unresolved:
- The issue of salary raises is still up in the air.
- Mary’s still up in the air about which offer to take.
Rule No. 9: Use Additional Resources to Expand Your Limits

- Get a copy of Strunk and White’s “The Elements of Style”
- Read English language newspapers and business journals in your field of interest
- Watch and listen to English language programs on the television, radio, and internet.
  - Pay special attention to poor reporting that does not provide the 5 Ws of information, but uses unprofessional language to stir people’s emotions.
- Make English speaking friends
Rule No. 10: Don’t Be Afraid to Ask Questions!

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