

## PECULIARITIES IN BUSINESS ENGLISH WRITING

## OSOBITOSTI PÍSOMNEJ OBCHODNEJ ANGLIČTINY

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**Abstract:** The aim of this paper is to analyze peculiarities of English writing in the business context and present results of the research within the KEGA project E-Portfolio as Pedagogy Facilitating Integrative Learning (012EU-4/2023) carried out at the Bratislava University of Economics and Business, Faculty of Applied Languages, Bratislava, and the Trnava University, Faculty of Education, Trnava. In particular, the author tries to attract attention to the role and importance of developing writing skills in the business and academic settings. Students' e-portfolios reveal problems and difficulties in business English writing for Slovak learners of English at the C1 level, which help to analyze specificities in business English writing and give the possibility to come up with certain suggestions and recommendations for learners and teachers.

**Keywords:** abbreviations, authentic learning, e-portfolio, peculiarities in business English writing, writing skills.

**Abstrakt:** Cieľom tohto príspevku je analyzovať špecifika písania v anglickom jazyku v obchodnom kontexte a prezentovať výsledky výskumu v rámci projektu KEGA E-Portfólio ako pedagogika podporujúca integrovanú výučbu (012EU-4/2023) realizovaného na Ekonomickej univerzite v Bratislave, Fakulte aplikovaných jazykov, Bratislava a na Trnavskej univerzite, Pedagogickej fakulte, Trnava. Autorka sa snaží upriamíť pozornosť najmä na úlohu a význam rozvoja písomných zručností v obchodnom a akademickom prostredí. E-portfólia študentov odhalujú problémy a ťažkosti v písomnej obchodnej angličtine u slovenských študentov angličtiny na úrovni C1, čo pomáha analyzovať špecifiká písomnej obchodnej angličtiny a dáva možnosť prísť s určitými návrhmi a odporúčaniami pre študentov a učiteľov.

**Kľúčové slová:** skratky, autentické učenie, e-portfólio, špecifiká písomnej obchodnej angličtiny, písomné zručnosti.

### Introduction

As international trade and scientific and political exchange intensify, there is a growing effort on the part of academics, multinational organizations, and even governments to improve communication, and within it, to improve dialogue as well as writing. It is becoming increasingly apparent that in pursuit of this goal it is desirable not only to learn foreign languages on a much wider scale and to show sympathy to other people's customs, societies, and cultures, but it is very important to pay attention to one's mother tongue to be able to master it in order to communicate effectively in any communicative interaction, spoken or written, within a culture or across cultures.

In the business setting, communication is vital to organizations. Within them, it fulfills three main functions: transmitting information, coordinating effort, and sharing opinions, emotions, and feelings. Transmitting information is essential for an organization's capacity to function. Coordinating effort helps people work towards the same goals. Sharing opinions, emotions, and feelings bonds teams and unites people in times of celebration or crisis. Effective communication helps people grasp issues, build rapport with co-workers, and achieve consensus.

Many famous people in the past as well as today have expressed their opinions on the variabilities of communication, spoken or written, in many different ways, pointing out numerous aspects of the process of exchanging messages, coded and decoded, and its impact on people's way of life, thinking, or behaviour. Here are a few examples of them, e.g., the Greek Stoic philosopher Epictetus in the early second century AD used to teach his students how best to live, offering pragmatic reflections on various aspects of life, including communication. His words, *"first learn the meaning of what you say, and then speak"*, are eternal, always true. Washington Irving, an American author of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, pointed out the possibilities for improvement in language and communication, saying that *"the tongue is the only instrument that gets sharper with use."* Several other well-known authors pointed out the importance of writing and its uniqueness, for example, Thomas Mann, who said that *"a writer is someone for whom writing is more difficult than it is for other people. Writers are unique beings. They don't consider it a waste of time to spend ten minutes hunting for the perfect word to convey a difficult concept"* (Mann, 1947, p. 440). Thus, communication as such cannot be understood in isolation since communication skills overlap and complement each other.

In the theory of communication, many scholars have used to define communication in various ways, but what these definitions have in common is the fact, that it is the exchange of messages that are encoded by a sender and decoded by a receiver of the message, using a communication channel and set into a certain context. Shirato defines it as *"the practice of producing and negotiating meanings; a practice which always takes place under specific social, cultural and political conditions"* (Schirato, Yell, 2000), which means that it is a process of negotiating cultural meanings on the one hand and is a complex cultural form on the other.

Clear and effective writing is essential for professional success. For proficient non-native English speakers, practice and training are very important. They help to communicate with greater precision, efficiency, and impact, whether writers compose daily emails, draft reports, or refine persuasive proposals. They learn how to elevate their writing without losing an authentic human voice.

In business English writing, there are certain peculiarities, certain specificities, very often culturally biased, that need learners' attention. Students' e-portfolios within the KEGA project E-Portfolio as Pedagogy Facilitating Integrative Learning (012EU-4/2023), carried out at the Bratislava University of Economics and Business, Faculty of Applied Languages, Bratislava, and the Trnava University, Faculty of Education, Trnava, reveal problems and difficulties in business English writing for Slovak learners of English

at the C1 level. The author of this paper gives examples of the most common problems in business

English writing and tries to highlight the importance of developing writing skills for those who would like to work in the business or academic environment.

### Communication in business settings

Business communication is the process of sharing information between people within the workplace and outside a company. Effective business communication is a way how employees and management interact to reach organizational goals. Its purpose is to improve organizational practices and reduce errors. It is important to work on both - communication skills and communication processes to achieve effective business communication.

The process of communication in business has a number of components involved, as it does in any communication situation. Communication in business appears to be a closed system with all parts interacting in a synergistic fashion. Some essential parts of the communication system are: (a) source – the sender or originator of the messages; (b) messages – information emitted by the source and directed to the receivers; (c) media – the various carriers or transmitters of the messages (e.g., radio, newspapers, billboards); (d) receivers – those for whom the messages are intended; and (e) feedback – customer reactions, demographic information, and other facts returned by or drawn back from customers to assist management in its decision making.

Oral and written forms of communication are equally important in the business setting, although much of the day-to-day communication within organizations is written (e.g., memos, e-mails, reports). When it comes to correspondence, we speak about writing skills, i.e., skills a person uses to write effectively and succinctly in order to communicate the point. Writing skills apply to nearly every field, even if a writer does not work in a creative career. They do not include only the physical act of writing, but they also include skills like research, planning and outlining, editing, revising, spelling and grammar, and organization of the text. These are critical components of the writing process. Thus, writing is a technical skill that allows a person to communicate effectively through the written word. And, as Maierová assumes, "*the development of writing skills requires a sequential approach, with the acquisition of the skill initially occurring in one's native language, followed by the learning of the skill in a second language. Furthermore, when writing within the context of ESAP (English for Specific Academic Purposes), it is essential to adhere to the specific characteristics of the discourse and genres typical for the specific academic field.*" (Maierová, 2024, p.76) Thus, it is a complex process to be learned and trained in any communicative context, and not only in a foreign language.

Today, "*writing takes centre-stage in the digital age*", as Talbot assumes (Talbot, 2023, p.5). People use computers, tablets, and smartphones to write. Less frequently, they use paper, pens, or pencils. Handwriting has become less modern. Even in the unstoppable digital workplace, people are discovering more than ever that writing is the new talking. Even though people write something to somebody daily, there is little

training out there, especially in the professional environment. It is not about getting written words to say what we mean to say. It is also about getting the results we need, preferably first and every time.

Writers, be they professional business writers or people in everyday communicative interactions, should be aware of the reasons why they write, who their readers are, and what types of writing styles to use – persuasive, narrative, expository, or descriptive. At the same time, it is important to bear in mind the 7 C's of writing. It has to be clear, concise, concrete, correct, coherent, complete, and courteous.

Business writing is increasingly diverse in style. How formal or informal a writer needs to be can be a special challenge for some cultures. Asian cultures, for example, place great emphasis on hierarchy, where people of senior grades are treated with noticeably more respect than those in junior grades. Informality can also be a challenge for nationalities where there is a distinction between a familiar and a formal form of the pronoun *you*.

Different cultures can communicate differently. Talbot assumes that *“a typical Western style of writing comes over as structured and fairly direct. On the other hand, if to look at Asian cultures, it is possible to find extremely polite, formal, self-effacing communication. It can be considered bad style to get to the point too quickly and rude to make points too directly”* (Talbot, 2023, p. 116). Therefore, such cultures are likely to have a stronger focus on introduction, setting the respectful tone, developing rapport, and only then ending on the main points, which they may imply rather than express. Concerning this fact, it is possible to say that effective business writing gives people the right feeling, alongside producing the right performance.

### **Peculiarities in business English writing**

However, when writing in English, business English writers should be aware of certain peculiarities or specificities referring to such aspects as English spelling rules (with the focus either on British English spelling rules or American ones), certain writing conventions (i.e., the agreed-upon rules that make writing clear, organized, and readable) including grammar, punctuation, capitalization, sentence structure, and formatting, or the use of various abbreviations.

English spelling can be thorny because there are exceptions to almost every rule. And there are some common spelling rules that writers can count on, but also the rules for breaking them the right way to avoid spelling mistakes. Here is a more detailed look at some key spelling rules:

- **Forming plurals:** Generally, *-s* is used to form the plural of most nouns. However, nouns ending in *s, x, ch, sh*, or *z* add *-es*. Nouns ending in *y* preceded by a consonant change the *y* to *i* and add *-es*, e.g., *a city/cities*.
- **Contractions:** Letters and spaces in words are replaced with an apostrophe to form contractions, such as *do not* becoming *don't*.
- **Silent e:** A silent *e* at the end of a word often indicates a long vowel sound (e.g., *hope* vs. *hop*).

- Double consonants: The final consonant of a one-syllable word is doubled when adding a suffix that starts with a vowel (e.g., *run* becomes *running*).
- Prefixes: When adding a prefix to a word, the spelling of the prefix and the base word usually remains the same (e.g., *misspell*).
- Letter *y* as a vowel: When a word ends in a consonant + *y*, the *y* changes to *i* before adding *-es* or *-ed* (e.g., *try* becomes *tries*).
- Adding suffixes: When adding a suffix to a word ending in a silent *e*, the *e* is often dropped before adding a suffix starting with a vowel (e.g., *hope* becomes *hoping*).
- Letters *k* or *ck*: *-ck* is usually used after a short vowel sound (e.g., *duck*) and *k* after other vowel sounds (e.g., *walk*).
- Every word has at least one vowel. Every syllable has at least one vowel.
- *Q* is always followed by a *u* (e.g., *the queen*, *a queue*, *a question*, *quick*, *a quadrat*e).
- Doubled consonants *f*, *l*, and *s* at the end of a one-syllable word that has just one vowel (e.g., *stiff*, *spell*, *pass*).

This is not a complete list of English spelling rules. However, the above-mentioned examples illustrate the need for learners to understand and pay attention to their importance.

As Talbot states, some words repeatedly cause businesses confusion. Sometimes, though, it is because different people within the same company set their computer spellcheck to different varieties of English. Often, homonyms confuse. These are the words that have the same sound but can have different meanings and spellings, for example, “*the word mean would indicate average in a financial report, but indicate unpleasant if referring to a person*” (Talbot, 2023, p. 162).

Other examples of spellings that commonly confuse might include *stationary/stationery*, *compliment/complement*, *licence/license*, *practice/practise*, or *receive/recieve*. In case of *stationary/stationery*, the spelling rules indicate the difference in the meaning of words – *stationary* means standing still (e.g. The careless driver crashed into a *stationary* car.), and *stationery* means writing and printing materials (e.g. I have ordered new business *stationery* for my office). *Compliment* is a noun or verb meaning praising or admiring (e.g., We are always delighted to receive a *compliment* from a customer.), and *complement* is a noun or verb meaning a thing that completes something else (e.g., When dining, the right *ambiance* complements the meal.). Examples of *licence/license*, *practice/practise* might be confusing because in British English (or UK English as well as Australian and Canadian English), the nouns relating to these words end in *-ce*, the verbs end in *-se*, for example: Which doctor's *practice* do you go to? (*practice* – a noun that refers to the doctor's place of work) / You should *practise* more (*practise* – a verb).

In American English (US English), *practice* (note the *c*) is used as both a noun and a verb, e.g., The best *practice* (a noun) is to *practice* (a verb) what you preach. The spelling *license* (note the *s*) is in American English used as both a noun and a verb, e.g., He has a valid *license* (a noun), so he is *licensed* (a verb) to drive here. (Talbot, 2023, p. 163).

As for certain English writing conventions, they include some correct ways of writing dates in English, writing numbers and their interpretation by different nationalities, writing time, and writing measurements in English. Some confusion can also be caused when referring to days and weeks, especially in an intercultural setting. Here are a few examples referring to writing dates in English:

- In British English (as in many European countries), the structure D/M/Y is used, where D is day, M – month, and Y – year. Examples that are all acceptable in British English (or UK English) are: 14 September 2025, 14<sup>th</sup> May 2025, 14 Apr 2025, 14<sup>th</sup> Apr 2025, 14/04/25.
- In American English, the structure M/D/Y (month/day/year) is preferred, but it is also possible to see the format Y/M/D (year/month/day) used not only in the USA, but, for example, in Japan or internationally, where even the format YYYY – MM – DD is frequently used. YYYY refers to all the digits (e.g., 2025), MM refers to the month (01 for January or 12 for December), and DD refers to the day (01 to 31). Thus, American English uses a month/day/year format, and in this case, dates are written as June 10 2025, or June 10, 2025, or 06/10/25. Where readers do not understand the difference between the UK and US conventions, they could have problems with such types of dates, if written as 06/10/25. For the Americans, it is June 10<sup>th</sup> 2025 (the format M/D/Y), for the British, it is 6<sup>th</sup> October 2025 (the format D/M/Y).

When it comes to writing numbers in English, it is also necessary to realize that the British people and different nationalities may interpret numbers differently. For example, words *billion* or *trillion* can have completely different meanings in the UK, Germany, France, Slovakia, and the United States. The number with six zeros is *a million* everywhere. But what is confusing is the fact that the number with nine zeros (a thousand million) is *a milliard* in most European countries, including Slovakia, and *a billion* is the number with 12 zeros (a million million). But in the UK, the word *billion* is used for the number with nine zeros (instead of *a milliard*). This can be confusing for foreigners, who use a million – a milliard – a billion – a billiard – a trillion...format. Simply, for the British, as well as many Americans, the format is a million – a billion – a trillion... Instead of *a milliard*, they say *a billion*, which is one thousand million, i.e., 1,000,000,000. Instead of *a billiard*, they say *a trillion*, which is one million million, i.e., 1,000,000,000,000. Or, in other words, *one milliard* and *one billiard* are not used in English.

When writing such big numbers, or, in other words, when writing numbers comprising four or more digits, in English texts, a comma is placed after each three digits counting from right to left, for example, 1,000 (*one thousand*), 10,000 (*ten thousand*), 1,000,000 (*one million*). This might be confusing for those who, in their language, use a comma for writing decimals. In UK English texts, when writing decimal fractions, a decimal point (not a comma) is used, for example, 9.6.

### Abbreviations in the written business communication

New inventions and concepts with multiword names in the world of business create a demand for shorter, more manageable names. Various types of shortenings, acronyms, and initialisms are useful ways to succinctly express a concept. These might be such well known shortenings in the economic contexts as PR (Public Relations), HR (Human Relations), CEO (Chief Executive Officer), CFO (Chief Financial Officer), CMO (Chief Marketing Officer), BoD (Board of Directors), R&D (Research and Development), PLC (Public Limited Company), Ltd (Private Limited Company), SWOT (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, Threats), STEP (Social, Technological, Economic, Political analysis), USP (Unique Selling Proposition), PIN (Personal Identification Number), ATM (Automated Teller Machine), HO (Head Office – in business, or Home Office – not only in business), CSD (Customer Service Department), or acronyms that frequently have a specific meaning used in an industry sector or an organization and its internal correspondence. However, the terms (and the concepts they represent) are well understood and correctly used only by the members of the group, and simplify 'in-house' communication for them. Some of them are quite common, some of them are not....

Confusion can arise when these randomly formed acronyms are used outside the group. The lack of clarity causes problems when writers assume readers understand the acronyms. Readers will not necessarily be familiar with the specialized acronyms used in-house. Thus, the abbreviated forms need to be explained in order to let readers gain a basic understanding of what is being communicated to them. It can be useful to test whether or not to include a term by asking a few people outside the environment. Consistency in the use of acronyms is also important. The same acronyms should be used the same way every time, so readers should not be confused by inconsistencies.

Particular rules shall be applied for using in-house acronyms and other abbreviations: not using an abbreviated form in signature blocks, especially when indicating a particular line of business, various departments, not using an acronym or initialism without defining it first, for long electronic documents, it is recommended to include hyperlinks to spelled-out versions of abbreviated forms, if an abbreviated form is commonly used but not universally recognized in the organization, it is recommended to include the spelled-out version too.

Since the use of abbreviations in business correspondence is very common, it is worth mentioning what some of them mean and which writing conventions should be respected. An abbreviation *pp* (without the full-stops) means *pages*, and *PS* is an abbreviation from the Latin expression *Post Scriptum*, and precedes an addition to the letter following the signature. Some other *P* abbreviations are frequently used in business correspondence, e.g., *p.a.* – per annum, or annually, yearly, *PA* – Personal Assistant, *p.c.* – or *pct* – per cent, *pd* – paid, *p/e* – price-earnings ratio, *PO* – Post Office, *PPS* – additional postscript (Post Post Script), *PR* – Public Relations, *PRO* – Public Relations Officer, *pro term* – an abbreviation of the Latinism *pro tempore* – for the time being (e.g. He was appointed director pro term.), *proximo* – the Latinism used in naming dates, meaning of *the next month* (e.g. The goods will be delivered on the 6<sup>th</sup> proximo).

The opposite is *ultimo*, e.g., The goods were delivered on the 20<sup>th</sup> ultimo (meaning *the preceding month*). (Tilley, 2005, pp. 63-64)

There are also many types of business abbreviations and acronyms that can help professionals send messages quickly and efficiently. Some of these are quite common in professional settings, while others are specific to departments, such as finance, technology, or sales. Learning these terms can help people communicate more effectively in work environments and understand their co-workers better, e.g. *B2B* which stands for *business-to-business* and refers to intermediary companies that sell products to other businesses. An example of a B2B business would be a company that produces fabrics and sells them to clothing designers. In contrast to B2B, *B2C* stands for *business-to-consumer* or *business-to-customer*. It refers to a retail business model in which a company sells its products or services directly to customers. An example of a B2C company would be a small T-shirt maker that sells its products via an online store.

*BID* is short for *break it down*. It identifies components of a task that employees can divide into simple, understandable parts. A professional may also use this acronym if they want a colleague to explain something more fully. *EOD* stands for *end of day*. This abbreviation conveys deadlines or other processes that employees need to complete by the end of the workday. For example, a supervisor may send a message to an employee that says: Please, submit your final reports by Thursday EOD. *ETA* is an acronym that stands for *estimated time of arrival*. This is a common abbreviation in business and everyday speech, for example, if a supervisor wants to inform an employee about a delivery of products. *FIFO* is an acronym for *first in, first out*. This acronym is especially common in retail and food service. It means that employees should sell or discard products in the order they received them from suppliers. *IMO* is an acronym that is short for *in my opinion*. A variation of this acronym is *IMHO*, or *in my humble opinion*. These abbreviations are common in business communications, informal text messages, and online direct messages, for example, someone might say: IMO, the best time to meet would be Sunday at 4:30 p.m. *OOO* stands for *out of office*. Professionals may use this acronym to differentiate who is in the office and who is absent. They may also include this acronym on calendars or schedules to indicate when they plan to be away.

The examples of the above-mentioned abbreviations give an overview of the newly developed shortenings that are used in written communication in companies between employees, as well as when dealing with business matters between businesses. The abbreviations might differ according to specific departments of the companies. It is essential for business colleagues to be constantly familiar with the newly developed abbreviations that are frequently created in order to economize written communication. It is also necessary to point out that although the abbreviations have their justification in this type of communication, they often cause misunderstanding and misinterpretation of the text, and can therefore impede communication between employees or business partners.

### Some examples of the most common problems in business English writing

Within the KEGA project “e-Portfolio as Pedagogy Facilitating Integrative Learning” (012EU-4/2023), carried out at the Bratislava University of Economics and Business, Faculty of Applied Languages, Bratislava, and the Trnava University, Faculty of Education, Trnava, certain difficulties in business English writing for Slovak learners of English at the C1 level have been revealed.

During the winter and summer semesters of 2024/2025, students from various faculties of the University of Economics in Bratislava were to gradually submit their written assignments and create their e-portfolios. In the winter semester, the genres were as follows: an informal e-mail, a formal e-mail, meeting minutes, and a text summary. In the summer semester, they focused on a job application, a report, and a covering letter. All these genres corresponded to the economic topics discussed.

Based on qualitative research (combined with quantitative research), the following conclusions were reached. All the problematic areas in business English writing for Slovak students at the C1 level could be grouped into three main categories: vocabulary, grammar, and style. To a certain extent, Slovak-English interference was also noticeable.

In the lexical field, or vocabulary field, the most common problem was the incorrect choice of words, e.g., *concurrence* instead of *a competition*, *termine* instead of *a deadline*, *(ex)changing a product* instead of *replacing a product* (during a complaint process), informal *give money back* instead of the professional word *refund*, *guys* instead of *colleagues*, or *reclamation* instead of *a complaint*. In the area of grammar, the most problematic seemed to be the English spelling rules (as described above in this article), verb patterns, word order, definite and indefinite articles, indirect questions, tenses, and if clauses of all types.

The most difficult area for students was stylistics. Students also had problems with text structuring. Regarding text styling, formal e-mails were written in an informal style, using abbreviated forms instead of full forms, or using informal words in the formal letters, job applications, or covering letters, such as *wanna*, *gonna*, *a guy of mine*, etc. In some cases, the addressing of people was also inappropriate (e.g. *Hi!* used by some students in formal e-mails). In most cases, however, if the addressee was correctly addressed, for example, *Dear Mr Brown*, then the closing formula was incorrect. Most writers do not use the closing formula *Yours sincerely* when addressing the recipient by name. When addressing an unknown recipient as *Dear Sir/Madam*, they forgot to use the polite closing formula, *Yours faithfully*.

Polite requests were expressed stylistically incorrectly, using the imperative, for example, *Send us some photos a.s.s.p.* Not only is the imperative mood inappropriate, but abbreviations are also inappropriate. It seems that students are accustomed to communicating informally even in written correspondence.

Certain difficulties were encountered concerning the structuring of the text, too. In many cases, there was no introduction explaining why somebody was writing, there were missing linking words, an illogical sequence of thoughts, or no paragraphs. In the case of text summaries, students mostly resorted to reproducing the text without

abstracting or generalizing it. The problem was to select the main ideas of the text and generalize them.

### Conclusion

The notion of a portfolio or e-portfolio as a systematic process of students' learning, self-assessment, and reflection on what they know, as well as their better learning achievement, has gained increasing attention in recent years. It enables teachers to work with students at all levels, including universities, as they place their work into portfolios throughout the year. It enables students to see their growth, their development in the given field as they work with e-portfolios over a period of time. A portfolio gets students involved in a process of learning actively and leaves them with a product they can be proud of.

However, the results of our research show that the problem is not so much in creating e-portfolios or recognizing their importance in the teaching process, but rather in focusing on linguistic, especially stylistic, aspects of communication, of expressing ideas, whether in an oral or written way. Communication has become generally informal, and students find it difficult to distinguish between informal and formal styles of expression. Modern technologies force communicators to express themselves briefly and concisely. And, on the other hand, surprisingly, it is difficult for some learners to summarize long texts, to see the main idea of it, and say it in a shorter way, or in an abstract form, which is very important in both business as well as academic environments. We believe that this is one of the challenges for the future of language teaching.

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