Business Writing for Budding Professionals

Self-assessment Questions and Answers

The views expressed in this document are not necessarily those of the Seta’s.
1. Planning and constructing documents

Question 1

What is the value of the written word?

Answer (See p3 of the manual)

The written word is vitally important in business:

- It provides a permanent record of the communication
- It can be shared among many people
- It is readily accessible when stored on paper or magnetic media (memory stick, hard disk)
- It can be re-used and be expanded upon for new ideas.

Question 2

What is freewriting?

Answer (See p5 of the manual)

Freewriting is a tool to use at the beginning of your writing process as well as at points where you have blocks or need to think out something. Freewriting is private writing. You write only for yourself.

Question 3

How would you plan writing a letter, agreement, proposal, report; etc.?

Answer (See p8 of the manual)

Follow the sequence of steps below.

- Understand why the document is required.
- Plan how you will proceed to gather information.
- Plan how you will meet the deadline.
- Proceed with your information gathering.
- Record the results of your information gathering.
- Consider the information. You need to plan some time to evaluate your conclusions.
- Consider what can be done about the problem or to meet the objective.
- Draft the document and let it sit a while.
- Redraft the document.
- Proofread it and check the presentation.
Question 4

How would you overcome writer’s block?

Answer (See p13 of the manual)

1. Create an environment that is conducive to writing.
2. Start brainstorming.
3. Ease into your writing.
4. Do not start at the beginning if you can make better progress further down.
5. Take some time out.
6. Revisit the last few pages.
7. Use the tried and true ‘carrot’ trick. Reward yourself!
8. Apply Pressure Cooker Tactics.
9. Change the time and venue.
10. Meditate or go walking.

2. Avoiding common errors and grammar mistakes

Question 5

What system do you need to follow to enhance your writing skills?

Answer (See p14 of the manual)

The system focuses on four rules:

- A clear objective
- Correct grammar
- Proper structure
- Attractive layout.

Its foundations are:

Accuracy
Brevity
Clarity.

The ABC of good writing.
**Question 6**

How many tenses do we use in the English language? List the tenses.

**Answer** (See p17 of the manual)

Twelve tenses. They are:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>TENSES</th>
<th>PAST</th>
<th>PRESENT</th>
<th>FUTURE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>SIMPLE</td>
<td>I wrote</td>
<td>I write</td>
<td>I will write</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CONTINUOUS</td>
<td>I was writing</td>
<td>I am writing</td>
<td>I will be writing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PERFECT</td>
<td>I had written</td>
<td>I have written</td>
<td>I will have written</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PERFECT CONTINUOUS</td>
<td>I had been writing</td>
<td>I have been writing</td>
<td>I will have been writing</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Question 7**

What is good practice in selecting appropriate words for our writing?

**Answer** (See p18 of the manual)

- Do not impress the reader by deliberately using long words.
- Use words whose meanings are precise and not open to doubt.
- Use a short word (or even two or three) instead of one long one. However, at times we may need to use some long word for variety and precision. Try to keep long words below 10% of the total by cutting out the unnecessary ones.
- Write to express not impress!

**Question 8**

What do we mean by “useless” or “weasel” words?

**Answer** (See p21 of the manual)

These are words that do not add anything to your writing. They are also called “meaningless qualifiers.”

Examples:
- Actually
- Hopefully
- Definitely
- Quite sure
- Relatively
- Extremely.

**Question 9**

Why is it important to use positive words?

**Answer** (See p27 of the manual)
A positive tone encourages a favourable, desirable association with a product or service. A negative tone is a “red flag” word. It plants seeds of doubt or conveys an image that is unfavourable, undesirable, unattractive or even frightening. However, too positive a tone will lead to accusations of “pushy”.

Question 10

What do we mean by the rules of number?

Answer (See p29 of the manual)

A verb must agree with its subject in number and person. A pronoun must agree in number, person and gender with the noun it refers to.

Question 11

What are the general rules of listing?

Answer (See p31 of the manual)

When listing items within a sentence, it is correct usage to precede the list with a complete sentence and a colon. The colon is used incorrectly when it separates major sentence parts from each other, e.g. most frequently verb from object.

When items are listed, use parallel structure. If the first item listed is in fragment form, the subsequent items must also be fragments. If the first item appears in complete sentence form, subsequent items must also appear in complete sentences.

Question 12

What is the difference between active and passive voice?

Answer (See p34 of the manual)

In the active voice you have an actor at the beginning of the sentence that is responsible for the verb. For example: John drives the truck.

In the passive voice the actor is at the end of the sentence and the verb has at least tow words. For example: The truck is driven by John.

Question 13

What is best practice for sentence construction?

Answer (See p36 of the manual)

Sentences should on average be about 15 - 25 words long – more than this and ideas can become clouded.

Sentence structure is just as important as length

- The more difficult a text is, the simpler its structure should be.
• The best order for a sentence is: subject, verb, direct object, e.g. “The company secretary writes the minutes”.
• The essence of the message should be in the first part of the sentence, as the reader always retains this part better.

**Question 14**

What is best practice for paragraph construction?

**Answer** (See p37 of the manual)

Every paragraph should begin with a brief statement of theme. This topic sentence acts as a signpost to help the reader. The first sentence should not be more than 15 – 20 words. There should be one, clear idea per paragraph.

**Question 15**

What is the function of punctuation marks? Which are the most commonly used punctuation marks?

**Answer** (See p38 of the manual)

Its object is to help in making the sentence and grammatical relationships easier to understand and thus to avoid ambiguity.

• Full stop
• Comma
• Semicolon
• Colon
• Dash
• Hyphen
• Apostrophe

### 3. Producing documents which are clear, effective and professional

**Question 16**

What is meant by ambiguity? What is meant by bi-monthly? Do we mean twice a month or once every two months?

**Answer** (See p43 of the manual)

Ambiguity results whenever a word or phrase can have more than one distinct and valid meaning.

Dictionaries indicate that bi-monthly can indeed have the two meanings mentioned above.
**Question 17**

What constitutes style?

**Answer** (See p45 of the manual)

Style is the personal aspect of writing. It is hard to pin down precisely but the following factors will certainly influence our style:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Aspect</th>
<th>Influence on Style</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Word choice</td>
<td>Use of adjectives</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sentence construction</td>
<td>Abbreviations, e.g. can’t, won’t</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Using names and/or personal pronouns</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asking direct question of the reader</td>
<td>… ask yourself what would happen if …</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Using the imperative</td>
<td>&quot;Do not contact Dr Mathers without first …&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The blend of active/passive voice</td>
<td>Use of headings and layout</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Paragraphing</td>
<td>Creating an atmosphere</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Imagery</td>
<td>Formal, light-hearted, commanding, inviting</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tone</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Question 18**

What constitutes tone in business writing?

**Answer** (See p47 of the manual)

Tone in writing refers to the writer’s attitude toward the reader and the subject of the message. The overall tone of a written message affects the reader just as one’s tone of voice affects the listener in everyday exchanges. Tone is present in all communication activities. Ultimately, the tone of a message is a reflection of the writer and it does affect how the reader will perceive the message.

**Question 19**

What does the acronym AIDA represent and for what purpose is it generally used?

**Answer** (See p48 of the manual)

The acronym stands for:
- Attention (or Attract)
- Interest
- Desire
- Action.

The acronym AIDA is a handy tool for ensuring that your advertising copy, or other writing, grabs attention.

**Question 20**

What are the consequences if a consumer document is not drafted in plain language?
Both the NCA and CPA provide that a consumer may file a complaint of non-compliance with the relevant ombud or other designated body, such as the National Credit Regulator (in the NCA) and the National Consumer Commission (in the CPA). The CPA, in particular, purports to protect the consumer from what it defines as ‘unconscionable’, ‘misleading’ or ‘deceptive’ business practices or contractual terms that are unfair and unjust (s 52).

Question 21

What are the questions you should ask yourself when drafting a document in plain language?

Answer (See p50 of the manual)

- Who is the audience?
- How am I going to write for this specific audience?
- Does what I have drafted make sense?
- Does a person from my intended audience understand the drafted document?
- Have I cut out the jargon and legalese as much as possible?

4. Writing for a specific readership and for different circumstances

Question 22

What is meant by the AVO Technique and for what purpose is it applied?

Answer (See p52 of the manual)

Before you begin to write a letter, an orderly outline is essential. The following three procedures will help you plan your correspondence:

- Analyse
- Visualise
- Organise.

Question 23

What are the components of the structure of a letter?

Answer (See p54 of the manual)

1. Writer’s address
2. Reference
3. Date
4. Addressee
5. Salutation
6. Subject line
7. First paragraph
8. Body of letter
9. Conclusion  
10. Complimentary close  
11. Signature  
12. Typed name

**Question 24**

When would you sign your letter with “Yours faithfully” and “Yours sincerely”?

**Answer** (See p55 of the manual)

If you have addressed the letter to a specific person, you should end it with “Yours sincerely.” If you started with “Dear Sir/Madam”, then you should end with “Yours faithfully.”

**Question 25**

How do you break bad news tactfully in a letter?

**Answer** (See p60 of the manual)

This is a difficult letter to write but keep it short and simple and follow these guidelines:
- Thank the reader for the application or request.
- Advise with regret that the request cannot be fulfilled.
- Give reasons or an explanation.
- You can also include a suggestion of an alternative.
- Close on a friendly note.

**Question 26**

How would you ensure that an email message achieves your communication objective?

**Answer** (See p62 of the manual)

Make email messages meaningful by adhering to these guidelines:
- Include the name of the person to whom the email is directed in the message.
- Include the purpose of the email in the subject line.
- Ask for a specific action or the specific response you require.
- Include your telephone number and when it is best to reach you.
- State the urgency of your message.
- Be sure to include your name.

**Question 27**

What is the process of précis writing?

**Answer** (See p65 of the manual)

1. Identify the reader and purpose of the précis  
2. Read the original document  
3. Underline the key ideas and concepts
4. Prepare a draft summary
5. Write the précis
6. Review and edit

**Question 28**

What is the purpose of using mind maps in brainstorming?

**Answer** (See p67 of the manual)

Mind Maps are very important techniques for improving the way you brainstorm content and drafting your document. By using Mind Maps, you show the structure of the subject and linkages between points, as well as the raw facts contained in normal notes. Mind Maps hold information in a format that your mind will find easy to remember and quick to review.

Mind Maps are useful for:
- Summarising information
- Consolidating information from different research sources
- Thinking through complex problems
- Presenting information that shows the overall structure of your subject.

**Question 29**

What are the major headings you would use to compile a draft report?

**Answer** (See p70 of the manual)

A convenient way of structuring the contents of your report is:
- Terms of reference
- Introduction and background
- Procedures
- Findings
- Conclusion
- Financial implications
- Recommendation
- Appendices.

**Question 30**

What is the function of an executive summary and what topics should it cover?

**Answer** (See p73 of the manual)

This is a most important part of many reports and may well be the only section that some readers read in detail. It must contain the main point that you want to get across. It should be carefully written and should give a complete overview of the message in the report, with a clear summary of your recommendations.
It should include the:
- Purpose of the report
- Research methodology
- Findings
- Conclusion
- Recommendation.

Question 31

How can you make financial and statistical reports more reader friendly?

Answer (See p74 of the manual)

The use of such visual aids as highlighting noteworthy items and the presentation of simple graphs and diagrams to reveal trends that are not so easily identifiable from schedules or figures greatly enhance the value of the data submitted. Comparative figures for the corresponding period - be it a month, a quarter or a year - should always be provided.

The resourceful report writer may well add to the usefulness of the diagrams and graphs by appending a brief report emphasising the salient features and significant movements in the figures presented.

Question 32

What makes a good report?

Answer (See p77 of the manual)

It leads to action, gets to the point, and it must have a structured layout which displays:
- A descriptive title
- A table of contents
- Identifiable chapters
- Headlines
- Spacious presentation
- Logical sequence of arguments
- Clear findings
- Simple language
- Correct grammar.

Question 33

What are the stages in the cycle of a meeting?

Answer (See p84 of the manual)

- First draft of minutes – One day after the meeting
- Chairperson’s approval – Two to three days after meeting
- Minutes dispatched – Five days after meeting
- Routine administration
- Deadline for agenda items – Around eight days before next meeting
• Draft agenda – Seven days before next meeting
• Agenda Dispatched – One week before next meeting
• Briefing – One or two days before next meeting
• The meeting

**Question 34**

What aspects should a notice of a meeting contain?

**Answer** (See p85 of the manual)

The notice of a meeting should include the following details:
• The day, date, time and venue of the meeting
• The type of meeting and details of any special business to be transacted
• The date of the notice and the name of the convenor of the meeting
• Request for items on the agenda
• RSVP person’s name and telephone number as well as a date.

**Question 35**

What aspects should an agenda of a meeting contain?

**Answer** (See p86 of the manual)

• Welcome
• Apologies
• Declaration by chairperson that meeting is duly constituted
• Approval of minutes of the previous meeting
• Matters arising from minutes
• Matters outstanding from the previous meeting
• Reports/ correspondence/ updates
• Specific agenda items:
• Any other business/ general
• Date of next meeting

**Question 36**

Why are minutes of a meeting a necessity?

**Answer** (See p59 of the manual)

The principal uses and value of minutes may be summarised as follows:
• They constitute the permanent official record of the business transacted at meetings.
• They are available for inspection by interested parties, e.g. the directors, the secretary and the auditors.
• They can be produced as evidence in legal proceedings.
• They provide a written reminder of what members have undertaken to do and by when.
Question 37

What are minutes of narration?

Answer (See p90 of the manual)

They describe the procedures of the meeting:
- The nature of the meeting
- The date, time and place at which it was held
- How the meeting was constituted.
- Any apologies for absence that have been received by the chairperson or the secretary
- The names of persons attending as ex officio, e.g. attorneys, auditors, etc., who may have been present and of all paid officials who were in attendance
- A statement that the chairperson declared the meeting duly constituted
- A record of the approval of the minutes of the previous meeting, if indeed they were approved at the meeting.

Question 38

What is recorded in minutes of resolution?

Answer (See p90 of the manual)

Decisions:
- Each decision should be recorded in a separate sentence commencing: ‘it was RESOLVED: That’, the exact wording of the resolution (as amended, if such was the case) being reproduced.
- In addition to the decisions taken at the meeting, the minutes should explicitly record full details of all contracts, matters of a financial nature, appointments and other actions that were approved or authorised, but trivial matters should be rigidly excluded.
- Where a draft agreement or other important document is submitted to a meeting of members for their approval, the nature and, if practicable, the main terms of the agreement should be stated in the minutes or the document should be otherwise identified.
- It is advisable to attach a copy of the agreement to the minutes that record the approval thereof, unless this is too bulky to be practicable.

Question 39

What should be covered as a minimum in a resumé?

Answer (See p94 of the manual)

- Your contact Information
- An “objective” for contributing your skills and experience to the business of the new employer
- A customised section called “Career Highlights / Qualifications” that relates to the position for which you apply
- For each former employer, clearly indicate the company name, your position and the dates of your employment
- For each former employer, include a list of “key contributions” or “key achievements”
- Education: state dates of attendance, degrees, certificates, diplomas and from which institutions
- A section that lists awards and other recognition
- A personal section that highlights accomplishments beyond the work place.
5. Analysing and editing your own documents

Question 40

What is the purpose of proofreading?

Answer (See p97 of the manual)

Proof-reading pays particular attention to the conventions of grammar, mechanics and punctuation and to spelling errors that may have slipped through the editing process. Proofreading also checks for and corrects layout errors and serves as a final check to make sure all necessary revising and editing have been done. The first step of proofreading is to make use of your computer's spell-checker. Thereafter it is necessary to perform a manual proofreading process to ensure faultless presentation.

Question 41

What are the aspects you will focus on when editing your writing?

Answer (See p98 of the manual)

- The purpose
- Information: main points
- Accuracy
- Graphics
- Format
- Language
- Presentation
- Relevancy

Question 42

How would you enhance the presentation of your document?

Answer (See p98 of the manual)

- Perfect the overall impact
- Clearly rank headings
- Consistent numbering
- Spacious layout
- Plenty of white space
- Appropriate fonts
- Graphics.
Question 43

How would you rate the readability of the paragraph below? Give reasons for your answer.

With internet connectivity and mobile phones, many young South Africans have access to free media, free expression and easy access to information – a comparative privilege to the generation of the seventies who only got exposure to television in 1976. In the media, celebrated youth leaders are in politics, sports and entertainment and many of their achievements are notable but they do not provide sustainable, integrated examples of what the young generation can learn or aspire to. Leadership is not just about technical knowledge and competence or about charisma, it is also about courage, practising good judgement, emotional intelligence, empathy and passion.

Answer (See p103 of the manual)

In the example we have 101 words and three sentences. It results in an average of 33 - 34 words per sentence. There are 28 words with more than three syllables (when pronouncing them). Using the fog index, the formula is 34 + 28 = 62, multiplied by 0.5. It gives a factor of 31.

Measuring it against the Gunning Readability index which shows a maximum of 18, it indicates the paragraph is very difficult to read. The main culprit is the long sentences.

Question 44

How would you best convert learning into practice?

Answer (See p104 of the manual)

- Put the principles you have learnt on this course into effect immediately.
- Practise these principles every day and you will soon see an improvement.
- Write and keep on writing, until competent writing becomes second nature to you.
- Learn from others. Read with a critical eye the letters and memos you receive.
- Edit other peoples’ letters.
- Set aside some time, perhaps once a month, to review your writing.