
SPECIAL FEATURES OF BUSINESS ENGLISH

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Business English is an important tool used by importers and exporters in negotiating business with their customers abroad and drafting letters and commercial documents. Just like literary or scientific English, it has its own characteristics. In this article, owing to the limited space, I shall discuss only some of its special points in language and euphemistic expressions.

I. Special Features in Language:

(1) Omission of articles, prepositions and objects:

In accordance with grammar rules, the articles, prepositions and objects in brackets in the following sentences should be used, but in commercial letters for the sake of brevity they can be omitted or are customarily not used.

1. Omission of articles:

A. In sentences of acknowledging receipt of letters:

- a. We acknowledge (the) receipt of your letter of 10th May.
- b. We received your letter of 20th April, (the) contents of which have been duly noted.

B. Before a trade mark or a brand:

- a. We thank you for your enquiry of the 3rd Nov. in respect of (the) "Acrex" Cutlery. (Manual of Commercial Correspondence by Roland Fry P. 48)
- b. We are obliged for your letter of 22nd May quoting for (the) "Kleenkwick" cleaning powder at £9.25 per case of 120 cartons of 16 ozs. (Model Business Letters by Garside p. 87)

C. Before the name of a magazine:

As a general rule, if the magazine's name already has a definite article, we needn't add any more; if not, we add one. But in business communication, the definite article "the" does not have to be added.

- a. I am writing for permission to reprint a letter which appears on page 179 of (the) "Northern Nurse" by Elliot Merrick, published by Scribner's in 1942. (The Bantam Book of Correct Letter writing by Lillian Eichler Watson)
- b. We have seen your advertisement in (the) "Modern Motor Cycle" and are interested in Electric Motors.

D. Before s. s. or m/v + a ship's name:

- a. You will shortly receive by (the) s. s. Demosthenes a consignment of 500 boxes of currants. (Manual of Commercial Correspondence P. 154)
- b. We are informed that the cargo has been transhipped to (the) m/v EARAMATHA, which is expected to dock at ... on 16th August. (Modern English Business Letters)

E. Before the pronoun " same " , the definite article " the " may be omitted:

We have checked the statement and found (the) same correct.

F. On shipping terms:

a. (The) shipment is to be made during May/June.

b. (the) delivery can be made ex-stock and your order despatched within 24 hours.

G. On payment terms:

We require (the) payment by (an) irrevocable letter of credit available by draft at sight.

H. On insurance terms, unless a particular insurance is referred to:

(The) insurance should be covered by the sellers against All Risks for 110% of the invoice value.

I. In sentences respecting discount and commission, etc. , the indefinite article "a" or "an" may occasionally be used:

a. We hope that you will allow us (a) 3% discount.

b. If you can sell more, we can grant you (an) 8% commission.

2. Omission of prepositions and prepositional phrases:

A. We have accepted your order for 1,000 cases (of) Toilet Soap.

B. We have shipped the goods on board (of) the s. s. "Blue Sky".

C. With regard to your Order No. 770, we can probably arrange (for) July shipment. (If the object after the verb "arrange" is either a thing or a person, the proposition "for" has to be retained. cf. We have arranged for a new reception room. I have arranged for an interpreter.)

3. Omission of objects:

The verb "quote" is a transitive verb. In commercial letters its object can sometimes be omitted.

Will you please quote (your lowest prices) for the following items. (Modern English Business Letters)

(2) Commodities' names are usually capitalized:

According to grammar rules, trade marks or brand names should be capitalized, but the rules do not require us to capitalize the word "Brand" or the name of a commodity. In commercial letters, commodities occupy a prominent position in a business and in order to emphasize them, it is common to capitalize their names and the word "Brand". Furthermore they are usually written in plural unless they are uncountable nouns.

1. We are interested in " Watson " Brand Electric Desk Fans.

2. We are sending you our trial Order No. C-103 for 100 pieces (of) "Sea Gull" Brand Cameras, Model DF.

In addition to the above, the word "Brand" is seldom used in business letters written by English speaking people, for instance,

The demand for FINEX HOUSEMAN paints has been so heavy this month that our stocks have fallen to a minimum. (The Language of English Business Letters P. 39)

(3) According to grammar, the pronoun standing for a company should be either "It" or "They", but in business correspondence "They" is used more often than not.

In reply to your letter of yesterday. we write to inform you that we have known Messrs.

Sterling & Co. for many years. They have built up an excellent business. (instead of "It has built up an excellent business") (English Commercial Practice & Correspondence P.178)

- (4) In order to make the statement as vivid as talking face to face, we usually use present tense instead of past tense for things which just passed away.

The shipment of 500 sets Color TV Receiver under S/C456 has been received. We find that twenty of them have been damaged. (instead of "We found that twenty of them had been damaged")

- (5) Although the following sentences are passive in sense, we generally use verbs in active voice, as

1. Our Teleprinter sells fast. (= is sold fast)
2. The amendment (cable, clause, etc.) reads "Transshipment is allowed".

- (6) There are a lot of borrowed words commonly used in business letters and commercial documents, such as:

ad hoc, ad valorem, ad interim, as per, bona fide, brochure, del credere, en route, ex, ex officio, ex post facto, force majeure, duplicate, triplicate, quadruplicate, quintuplicate, prima facie, proforma, pro rata, Re.

1. The freight for Silk is to be charged ad valorem.
2. The contract will be in effect ex post facto of the negotiations.

- (7) In English most of the nouns and verbs are different in forms, such as ship and shipment, intend and intention, advice and advise. But in business correspondence in its limited scope of vocabulary, there are a lot of words, of which nouns and verbs are in same forms, such as:

advance, address, cable, charge, contact, contract, credit, damage, decline, debit, decrease, delay, detail, demand, discount, duplicate, export, fall, grade, import, increase, invoice, list, lapse, limit, make, must, mark, mail, offer, order, purchase, post, price, plan, supply, trade, visit, warehouse, for example:

Debit: { 1. There is a debit balance of Stg. 150.-(n.)
2. Please debit our account. (v.)

Invoice: { 1. Enclosed please find our Invoice No. 2002 in triplicate. (n.)
2. You may invoice the goods at F. Frs. 500.- per piece. (v.)

Credit: { 1. Kindly place these funds to the credit of our account. (n.)
2. Please credit us with this amount. (v.)

Price: { 1. We wish to have your lowest price for Table Cloth. (n.)
2. Please price the goods as low as possible. (v.)

Warehouse: { 1. You are invited to come to our warehouse to examine the goods yourself. (n.)
2. They have warehoused the goods in the free trade zone. (v.)

- (8) Business letters can generally be classified, according to the process of business, into about 8 kinds, such as the establishment of business relations; making an enquiry, an offer or a counter-offer; acceptance; sending a contract; asking for amending an L/C; claim and its adjustment. The predominant feature of a routine business letter is the lack of variety as the sentence structures and phrases used for each kind of the above-mentioned subjects are usually set ones. This can be proved by any book

of business correspondence.

- (9) Sentence patterns of "It is..." or "There is..." are generally used instead of the pattern "We...", so as to avoid too many "We's" in a paragraph or a letter.

1. It is hoped that you will ship the goods within the stipulated time. (instead of "We hope that you will ship the goods...")
2. We regret that there is no alternative but to cancel the contract. (instead of "We regret that we have no alternative but to...")

- (10) A lot of adverbs with the prefix of "here", "there" and "where", such as hereafter, hereby, herein, hereof, heretofore, hereunder, thereby, therein, thereof, thereto, thereunder, whereby, wherein, whereof, wheresoever are commonly used in commercial documents.

1. We have today issued in your favour an irrevocable L/C and hereby undertake that all drafts drawn in compliance with the terms hereof will be fully honoured.
2. The commodities to be traded hereunder shall be Soybeans, Sugar and Cotton.
3. We are badly in need of the goods. In case you fail to ship them within the stipulated time, all the losses arising therefrom shall be for your account.
4. After sellers have placed the goods on board the vessel, buyers are responsible for any loss and/or damage incurred thereafter.
5. All disputes in connection with this contract or the execution thereof shall be settled by negotiation between two parties.

II. Special Features in Expressions:

In general, business letters are written politely and sometimes in a roundabout way. The following are some examples:

- (1) When we are unable to meet our client's request or to supply what our customer inquires for or unable to accept our customer's counteroffer, it is not advisable to reply bluntly, as

1. We can't supply the goods you require.
2. We can't accept your counteroffer.

Practice goes that we usually express our regrets first, then decline their request, as

We thank you for your order of 5th Sept. for 1,000 long tons Tin Foil Sheets but very much regret that we are unable to accept it owing to heavy demand.

Or, we may thank our clients for their kindness or efforts first, then turn down their request, as

While we appreciate your good intention, we regret that we are not in a position to entertain any fresh order for the time being.

On some occasions, we may express that we share the same feeling with our clients, but as circumstances stand, we can't meet their requirements, as

However desirous we may be to commence business with you, we regret that we are unable to

accept your counteroffer because our price has been cut to the minimum.

When a negative reply is made, it is customary to give the customer a promise to meet his demand in future so as not to disappoint him too seriously, as

We regret that the goods enquired for are not available for the time being, however we shall revert to the matter when opportunity arises.

- (2) On occasion, we are anxious to conclude business, but our clients can't make up their minds. Under the circumstances, persuasion is generally made in a friendly and roundabout way, as

We have not the slightest intention of rushing you into a decision, but as stocks are running low, we would advise you in your own interest(s) to send us your cable acceptance promptly.

- (3) Sometimes, although certain facts have been established, we use "appear" or "seem" tactfully.

1. We do not appear to have received your letter of 23rd March.

2. Therefore, it would seem to us that you are the logical party liable for the refund of the extra freight paid by us as a result of the discrepancy in weight.

- (4) At times our customers fail to open their L/C in spite of our repeated reminders, instead of lodging a claim, we often write as follows:

Owing to the fact that you have failed to open the relevant L/C in spite of our repeated reminders, we shall not be responsible for reserving the goods for you any longer.

- (5) Using "one" instead of "you" to soften down the tone of the sentence.

Once a contract is signed, one should fulfil one's obligation. (instead of "Since you have signed the contract with us, you should fulfil your obligation")

- (6) Modal verbs, such as "should", "would", "may", "might", "could", are extensively used to express politeness.

1. We should appreciate it if you would quote us your lowest prices for "Double Red Horse" Men's Shirts.

2. May we remind you that the time of shipment of Contract 975 is before 20th August.

