

Seventh Edition

WORKPLACE COMMUNICATIONS

THE BASICS



GEORGE J. SEARLES

Seventh Edition

Workplace Communications

The Basics

George J. Searles

Mohawk Valley Community College

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Contents

Preface viii

1 The Keys to Successful Communication: Purpose, Audience, and Tone 1

Purpose 2

Audience 2

 Global Audience 3

Tone 6

Exercises 17

2 Workplace Correspondence: Memos, E-mail, Text Messages, and Business Letters 23

Memos 24

E-mail 26

 Checklist: Evaluating a Memo or E-mail 30

Text Messages 30

 Checklist: Evaluating a Work-Related Text Message 32

Business Letters 32

 Format 37

 Checklist: Evaluating a Business Letter 42

Exercises 42

3 Effective Visuals: Tables, Graphs, Charts, and Illustrations 46

Principles of Effective Visuals 47

Tables 48

Graphs 49

Line Graphs 49

Bar Graphs 50

Charts 52

Flow Charts 52

Organizational Charts 53

Gantt Charts 53

Circle Charts 53

Illustrations 55

Photographs 55

Drawings 56

Diagrams 58

Checklist: Evaluating a Visual 61

Exercises 62**4 Short Reports: Page Design, Formats, and Types 64****Page Design 65****Report Formats: Memo, Letter, and Booklet 69****Types of Reports 69**

Incident Report 70

Recommendation Report 71

Progress Report 75

Travel Report 79

Checklist: Evaluating a Memo Report 82

Exercises 82

Checklist: Evaluating a Letter Report 83

Checklist: Evaluating a Booklet Report 84

5 Summaries 86**Types of Summaries: Descriptive, Informative, and Evaluative 87**

Summarizing Written Sources 89

Summarizing Oral Sources 90

Checklist: Evaluating a Summary 95

Exercises 96

6	Fliers, Brochures, Newsletters, and Web Sites	98
	Fliers 99	
	Checklist: Evaluating a Flier	99
	Brochures 101	
	Checklist: Evaluating a Brochure	102
	Newsletters 103	
	Checklist: Evaluating a Newsletter	106
	Web Sites 108	
	Checklist: Evaluating a Web Site	111
	Exercises 112	
7	Instructions and Procedure Descriptions	113
	Instructions 114	
	Procedure Descriptions 119	
	Avoiding Liability 120	
	Checklist: Evaluating Instructions and Procedure Descriptions	122
	Exercises 122	
8	Job Application Process: On-Line Search, Letter, Résumé, Interview, and Follow-Up	125
	Job Search 126	
	Application Letter 127	
	Résumé 130	
	Traditional Résumé	134
	Scannable Résumé	136
	Interview 139	
	Follow-Up 141	
	Checklist: Evaluating an Application Letter, Résumé, and Follow-Up	143
	Exercises 144	
9	Oral Presentations: Preparation and Delivery	152
	Preparation 153	
	Preliminaries	153
	Rehearsal	154

Delivery 154

- Introductions and Conclusions 156
- Vocal Factors 157
- Physical Factors 157
- Eye Contact 158
- Presentation Aids 158
- Enthusiasm 161
- Evaluation of a Presentation 162
- Checklist: Evaluating a Public Speaker 164

Exercises 164**10****Proposals 166**

- Solicited Proposals 167
- Unsolicited Proposals 167
- Internal and External Proposals 167
- Formats of Proposals 168
- Objectives of Proposals 168
- Checklist: Evaluating a Proposal 187

Exercises 187**11****Long Reports: Format, Collaboration, and Documentation 189****Identification and Evaluation of Sources 190**

- Books 190
- Magazines 190
- Newspapers 191
- Academic Journals 191
- Web Sites 192

Integration of Sources 193

- Summary 193
- Paraphrase 193
- Quotation 193

Report Format 194

Transmittal Document 194

Title Page 194

Abstract 194

Table of Contents 194

List of Illustrations 195

Glossary 195

Text 195

Visuals 195

Pagination 195

Collaboration 196**Documentation** 199

Bibliography 200

Parenthetical Citations 205

Checklist: Evaluating a Long Report 219

Exercises 220**Appendix A: Ten Strategies to Improve Your Style** 222**Appendix B: Review of Mechanics: Spelling, Punctuation, and Grammar** 238**Index** 256

Preface

What's New in the Seventh Edition?

The seventh edition retains all the essential features of the earlier versions while incorporating much new material:

- Ongoing focus on international communications
- New exercises that address cross-cultural dynamics
- Collaborative exercises in all chapters
- Coverage of work-related text messaging
- Advice on writing for Web sites and other on-line media
- Enhanced guidance about on-line job searching
- Updated model documents throughout

Hallmark Approach of *Workplace Communications*

Workplace Communications: The Basics originated as the solution to a problem. Semester after semester, I had searched unsuccessfully for a suitable text to use in my English 110 course, Oral and Written Communication, at Mohawk Valley Community College. Designed as an alternative to traditional first-year composition, the course satisfies curricular English requirements for students anticipating careers in such fields as welding, heating and air conditioning, and electrical maintenance. As might be expected, English 110 is a highly practical, hands-on course that meets the specialized needs of its target audience by focusing exclusively on job-related communications.

Although some excellent texts had been written in the fields of business and technical communication, nearly all were aimed at the university level and were therefore quite beyond the scope of a course like English 110. Finally, I decided to fill the gap and meet my students' needs by creating a textbook of my own. My students at Mohawk Valley responded enthusiastically, citing the book's accessibility, clarity, and pragmatic, down-to-earth emphasis as particularly appealing qualities. To my great satisfaction, it has met with similar success at many other colleges both here and abroad, with new editions appearing in 2003, 2006, 2009, 2011, and 2014.

Short on theory, long on practical applications, and written in a simple, conversational style, it's exceptionally user-friendly. The book is appropriate not only for recent high school graduates but also for returning adult students and other non-traditional learners. It's comprehensive and challenging enough for trade school and

community college courses such as English 110 and for similar introductory-level classes at most four-year institutions.

Like the earlier editions, this seventh edition includes many helpful features:

- Learning objectives and outlines for each chapter
- Numerous examples and sample documents based on actual workplace situations
- Useful checklists at the ends of most sections
- Realistic exercises that reflect each chapter's focus

Supplements

Instructor's Manual. The updated Instructor's Manual offers teaching guidelines for each chapter, sample course outlines, keys to the exercises, and additional material. All the visuals are available at high-quality resolution to facilitate the creation of PowerPoint slides. Please send me your comments and suggestions by e-mail to gsearles@mvcc.edu or by conventional mail to the Center for Arts & Humanities, Mohawk Valley Community College, 1101 Sherman Drive, Utica, NY 13501.

MyTechCommLab. This supplement saves time and improves results by offering you the best available online resources for technical communication. This dynamic, comprehensive site offers engaging and interactive content that will help you improve the technical communication skills you will need most—writing, research, and document design. A built-in grade book allows you to track progress with a click of the button.

PowerPoints. PowerPoints that cover key concepts discussed in the text are available for you to download and use in your classes.

Test Bank. Each chapter of *Workplace Communications* has a corresponding chapter in the Test Bank with thirty-five multiple-choice questions and six short essay questions.

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On a more personal note, I wish also to thank my students and colleagues, who have taught me so much over the years. And I would be remiss indeed if I failed to acknowledge the assistance of Mohawk Valley Community College librarians Colleen Kehoe-Robinson and Barb Evans. In addition, I salute my lifelong friend Frank Tedeschi and my “basketball buddy,” John Lapinski; both continue to provide much-appreciated diversion, encouragement, and companionship.

Most importantly, of course, I thank my wife, Ellis; and my sons, Jonathan and Colin.

GEORGE J. SEARLES, Ph.D.
Mohawk Valley Community College

The Keys to Successful Communication: Purpose, Audience, and Tone

1

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

When you complete this chapter you'll be able to:

- determine your purpose for writing.
- identify your intended audience.
- perform productive prewriting activities.
- complete revision-ready first drafts.
- rewrite effectively to achieve appropriate tone.

Every instance of workplace writing occurs for a specific reason and is intended for a particular individual or group. Much the same is true of spoken messages, whether delivered in person or by phone. Therefore, both the purpose and the audience must be carefully considered to ensure that the tone of the exchange is appropriate to the situation. Although this may seem obvious, awareness of purpose, audience, and tone is crucial to ensuring that your communication succeeds. Equally important is the need to understand that writing is actually a three-step process involving not only the writing itself but also prewriting and rewriting. This opening chapter concentrates on these fundamental concerns, presents a brief overview of the basic principles involved, and provides exercises in their application.

Purpose

Nearly all workplace writing is done for at least one of three purposes: to create a record, to request or provide information, or to persuade. For example, a caseworker in a social services agency might interview an applicant for public assistance to gather information that will then be reviewed in determining the applicant's eligibility. Clearly, such writing is intended both to provide information and to create a record. On the other hand, the purchasing director of a manufacturing company might write a letter or e-mail inquiring whether a particular supplier can provide materials more cheaply than the current vendor. The supplier will likely reply promptly. Obviously, the primary purpose here is to exchange information. In yet another setting, a probation officer composes a presentencing report intended to influence the court to grant probation to the offender or impose a jail sentence. The officer may recommend either, and the report will become part of the offender's record, but the primary purpose of this example of workplace writing is to persuade.

At the prewriting stage of the writing process—before you attempt to actually compose—you must first do some *thinking* to identify which of the three categories of purpose applies. Ask yourself, “Am I writing primarily to create a record, to request or provide information, or to persuade?” Once you make this determination, the question becomes, “Summarized in one sentence, what am I trying to say?” To answer, you must zoom in on your subject matter, focusing on the most important elements. A helpful strategy is to use the “Five W’s” that journalists use to structure the opening sentences of newspaper stories: Who, What, Where, When, Why. Just as they do for reporters, the Five W’s will enable you to get off to a running start.

Audience

Next, ask yourself, “Who will read what I have written?” This is a crucial part of the prewriting stage of the communication process.

An e-mail, letter, report, or oral presentation must be tailored to its intended audience; otherwise, it probably won't achieve the desired results. Therefore, ask yourself the following questions before attempting to prepare any sort of formal communication:

- Am I writing to one person or more than one?
- What are their job titles and/or areas of responsibility?
- What do they already know about the specific situation?
- Why do they need this information?
- What do I want them to do as a result of receiving it?
- What factors might influence their response?

Because these questions are closely related, the answers sometimes overlap. A good starting point for sorting them out is to classify your audience by level: layperson, expert,

or executive. The layperson doesn't possess significant prior knowledge of the field, whereas an expert obviously does. An executive reader has decision-making power and, one hopes, considerable expertise. By profiling your readers or listeners this way, you'll come to see the subject of your planned communication from your audience's viewpoint as well as your own. You'll be better able to state the purpose of your communication, provide necessary details, cite meaningful examples, achieve the correct level of formality, and avoid possible misunderstandings, thereby achieving your desired outcome.

In identifying your audience, remember that workplace communications fall into four broad categories:

- **Upward communication:** Intended for those above you in the hierarchy. (Example: An e-mail reply to a question from your supervisor.)
- **Lateral communication:** Intended for those at your own level in the hierarchy. (Example: A voice mail to a coworker with whom you're collaborating.)
- **Downward communication:** Intended for those below you in the hierarchy. (Example: An oral reminder to an intern you've been assigned to train.)
- **Outward communication:** Intended for those outside your workplace. (Example: A letter to someone at a company with which you do business.)

These differences will influence your communications in many ways, particularly in determining format. For in-house communications (the first three categories), the memo was traditionally the preferred written medium. The memo has now been almost totally replaced by e-mail. And text messaging, of course, has become another major form of in-house communication. For outward communications, such as correspondence with clients, customers, or the general public, the standard business letter has been the norm. Business letters are either mailed or transmitted by fax machine. Even for outward communications, though, e-mail is often the best choice because of its speed and efficiency. If a more formal document is required, a confirmation letter can always be sent later.

Global Audience

Increasingly, outward communication involves transcultural interactions. In the global marketplace, you face particular challenges when composing documents intended for readers in other countries. Although it's always foolish to embrace cultural and ethnic stereotypes, cultural differences do indeed exist. In fact, specialized terminology has been developed to address this issue. For example, experts in the field of communications differentiate between *high-context* and *low-context* cultural mind-sets. Business and technical communications in high-context cultures such as many in Asia, the Middle East, and South America typically exhibit an emphasis on background information and often contain an interpersonal component. Those in low-context cultures such as Australia, much of western Europe, and certainly the United States do not. Such differences can result in very dissimilar handlings of essentially identical situations, as Figures 1.1 and 1.2 illustrate.

3-D_{ynamics}

**221 River Street
Hoboken, New Jersey 07030**

February 2, 2015

Mr. Yukio Tanaka
Shinchoku International
7-3-1 Hongo
Bunkyo, Tokyo 113-8654
Japan

Dear Mr. Yukio Tanaka:

Everyone at 3-Dynamics enjoyed your recent visit to our corporate offices, but we must apologize for the frigid New Jersey weather. We are sure that your wife and family are glad that you have returned safely and are delighted with the lovely gifts you bought for them at Bloomingdale's, one of our most highly regarded department stores.

As you know, 3-Dynamics was founded in 2010 and was an early leader in three-dimensional printing. Since then we have expanded and become the most well-known American company in this field. Much of our success is the result of our decision to develop both hardware and software, rather than focusing exclusively on one area of this exciting technology.

Certainly we are enthusiastic about the prospect of cooperating with Shinchoku International in a joint venture. Such an undertaking would be very rewarding for both companies, allowing us to capture a much greater segment of the world-wide market than either can claim at present.

With your permission, we will contact you in the very near future to arrange for the next step in establishing our partnership.

Respectfully,

Edward Ahern

Edward Ahern
Assistant Director of Marketing

FIGURE 1.1 • Letter to an overseas reader

3-D_{ynamics}

**221 River Street
Hoboken, New Jersey 07030**

February 10, 2015

Mr. Richard Gray
SxSW Technologies
50 Sixth Street, Suite 56
Austin, TX 78700

Dear Richie,

Thanks for making the trip east last week to discuss our possible merger.

Everybody here agrees it's something we should explore further, with an eye toward capturing a much greater share of the rapidly expanding 3-D market. Could be a major win-win for both SxSWT and 3-Dynamics.

Someone here will contact you very soon to start putting the wheels into motion. Stay tuned!

Best,

Ed

Edward Ahern
Assistant Director of Marketing

FIGURE 1.2 • Letter to American Reader

The letter to the Japanese company “shoots the breeze” through its more formal tone and conclusion of personal detail before getting down to the “take-away.” The letter to the American company “cuts to the chase.” Idioms such as these, while well-known by American English speakers, might be quite confusing—in fact meaningless—to readers elsewhere. Indeed, that’s the definition of an idiom: an expression that defies direct translation. This is another key feature of global communication. Colloquialisms vary greatly around the world, even among native speakers of English in England, Ireland, Scotland, Wales, Canada, and elsewhere. Therefore, they should definitely be avoided when writing to readers outside the United States. Even contractions—which can be seen as too informal—should not appear. The same is true of slang, abbreviations, acronyms, and other varieties of nonstandard phrasing. Of course, it’s *always* better to avoid such expressions in workplace writing, but especially so in transcultural situations. These usages not only increase the likelihood of miscommunication but are difficult or impossible to translate meaningfully if your writing must be recast in your reader’s language.

Also important when writing in an international setting is to use familiar, commonplace vocabulary and strive for direct, straightforward sentence structure that follows the basic subject/verb/object pattern. This is always preferable to a complex, roundabout style, but never more so than in the global context.

In addition, it’s necessary to avoid cultural references, which may not be understood by readers in other countries. Many American idioms presuppose a familiarity with our popular culture, particularly sports. If we refer to a “hail Mary,” for example, or a “slam dunk,” we’ll be understood “in a New York minute,” but only if our reader is also from this country. Such expressions are useful only in rather informal exchanges and are never appropriate when addressing readers in other parts of the world.

This is equally true of attempts at humor, which may not only puzzle but perhaps unintentionally insult the reader. While we must always consider questions of audience when composing workplace documents, attention to this fundamental issue is absolutely paramount in the international context.

Tone

As Table 1.1 reflects, the drafting stage of the three-part writing process is the least complicated. If you’ve devoted enough time and attention to prewriting, you’ll know what you intend to say, you’ll have *enough* to say, and you’ll know what goes where, so you’ll be able to compose fairly quickly. Indeed, at the drafting stage, you should simply push ahead rather than stopping to fine-tune because it’s best not to disrupt the flow of your ideas. Of course, if you notice an obvious miscue (a typo, for example), it’s OK to correct it, but keep the emphasis on completing the draft before you run out of time and energy. Any additional polishing that may be needed can be done during the final, most challenging stage of the process, rewriting.

Prewriting	Drafting	Rewriting
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Identify your purpose and your intended audience. • Decide what needs to be said. • Choose the most appropriate format (e-mail, letter, report). 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Create a first draft, concentrating on content rather than fine points of mechanics, style, and tone. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Consider the organization of the content. • Check for accuracy, completeness, and ethical validity. • Revise for style, striving for concision and simplicity. • Adjust the tone to suit the audience. • Edit for mechanical errors (typos, spelling, grammar, punctuation).

TABLE 1.1 • Writing: A Three-Step Process

Nobody produces good writing on the first try. You *must* rewrite. But rewriting involves far more than simply correcting mechanical errors. For example, what may have seemed sufficient and logical at the drafting stage might now strike you as much less so. Therefore, you might want to add something here and there or take something out. How about organization?

- Are the individual words in each sentence precisely the right ones, and is each exactly where it belongs?
- Are the sentences in each paragraph presented in the best possible order?
- Are the paragraphs in the best sequence, or should they be rearranged?

In addition, you should look for ways to tighten your style by avoiding wordiness and expressing yourself as simply and directly as possible. Very important, is your tone appropriate to your purpose and your intended reader?

Your hierarchical relationship to your reader plays a major role in determining your tone, especially when you're attempting to convey "bad news" (the denial of a request from an employee you supervise, for example) or to suggest that staff members adopt some new or different procedure. Although such messages can be phrased in a firm, straightforward manner, a harsh voice or belligerent attitude is seldom productive.

Any workforce is essentially a team of individuals cooperating to achieve a common goal: the mission of the business, organization, or agency. A high level of collective commitment is needed for this to happen. Ideally, each person exerts a genuine effort to foster a climate of shared enthusiasm. But if coworkers become defensive or resentful, morale problems inevitably develop, undermining productivity. In such a situation, everyone loses.

Therefore, don't try to sound tough or demanding when writing about potentially sensitive issues. Instead, appeal to the reader's sense of fairness and cooperation. Phrase your sentences in a nonthreatening way, emphasizing the reader's viewpoint by using a reader-centered (rather than a writer-centered) perspective. For obvious reasons, this approach should also govern your correspondence intended for readers outside the workplace, especially those in other countries.

Here are some examples of how to creatively change a writer-centered perspective into a reader-centered perspective:

Writer-Centered Perspective	Reader-Centered Perspective
If I can answer any questions, I'll be happy to do so.	If you have any questions, please ask.
We shipped the order this morning.	Your order is on its way.
I'm happy to report that . . .	You'll be glad to know that . . .

Notice that changing *I* and *we* to *you* and *your* personalizes the communication. Focusing on the reader is also known as the "you" approach. Another important element of the you approach is the use of *please*, *thank you*, and other polite terms.

Now consider Figures 1.3 and 1.4. Both e-mails have the same purpose—to change a specific behavior—and both address the same audience. But the first version adopts a writer-centered approach and is harshly combative. The reader-centered revision, on the other hand, is diplomatic and therefore much more persuasive. The first is almost certain to create resentment and hard feelings, whereas the second is far more likely to gain the desired results.

In most settings, you can adopt a somewhat more casual manner with your equals and with those below you than with those above you in the chain of command or with persons outside the organization. But in any case, avoid an excessively conversational style. Even when the situation isn't particularly troublesome and even when your reader is well-known to you, remember that "business is business." Although you need not sound stuffy, it's important to maintain a certain level of formality. Accordingly, you should never allow personal matters to appear in workplace correspondence. Consider, for example, Figure 1.5, an e-mail in which the writer has obviously violated this rule. Although the tone is appropriately respectful, the content should be far less detailed, as in the revised version shown in Figure 1.6.

A sensitive situation awaits you when you must convey unpleasant information or request assistance or cooperation from superiors. Although you may sometimes yearn for a more democratic arrangement, every workplace has a pecking order that you must consider as you choose your words. Hierarchy exists because some individuals—by virtue of more experience, education, or access to information—are in fact better positioned to lead. Although this system sometimes functions imperfectly, the supervisor, department head, or other person in charge responds better to subordinates whose communications reflect an understanding of this basic reality. Essentially, the rules for writing to a person higher on the ladder are the same as for writing to someone on a lower rung. Be focused and self-assured, but use the "you"

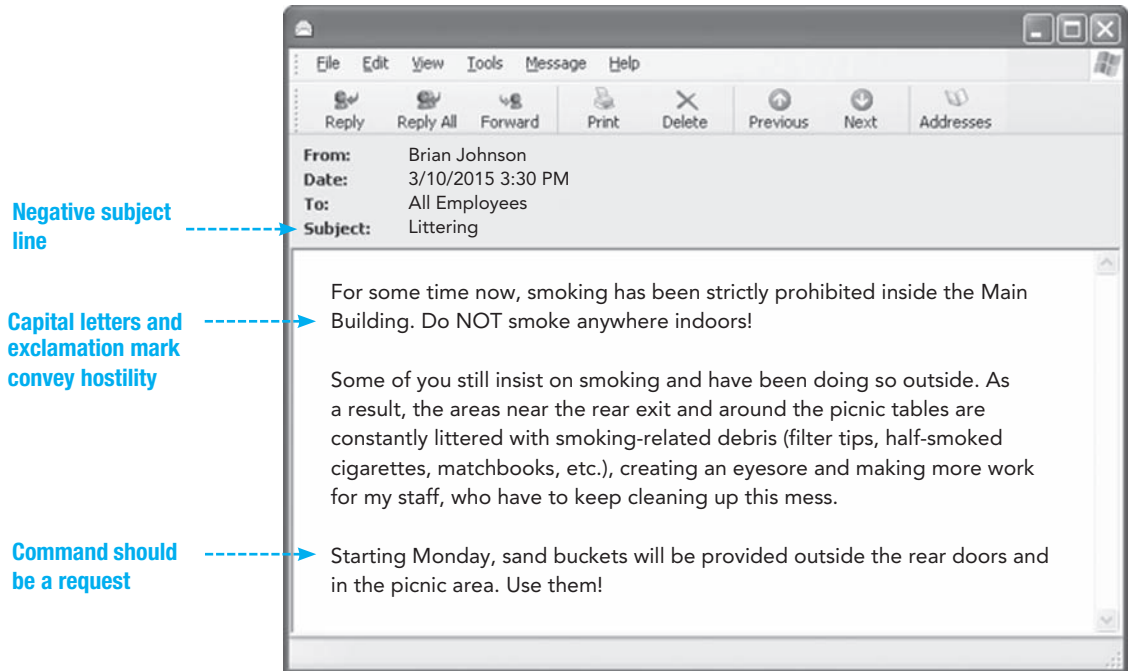


FIGURE 1.3 • Original E-mail

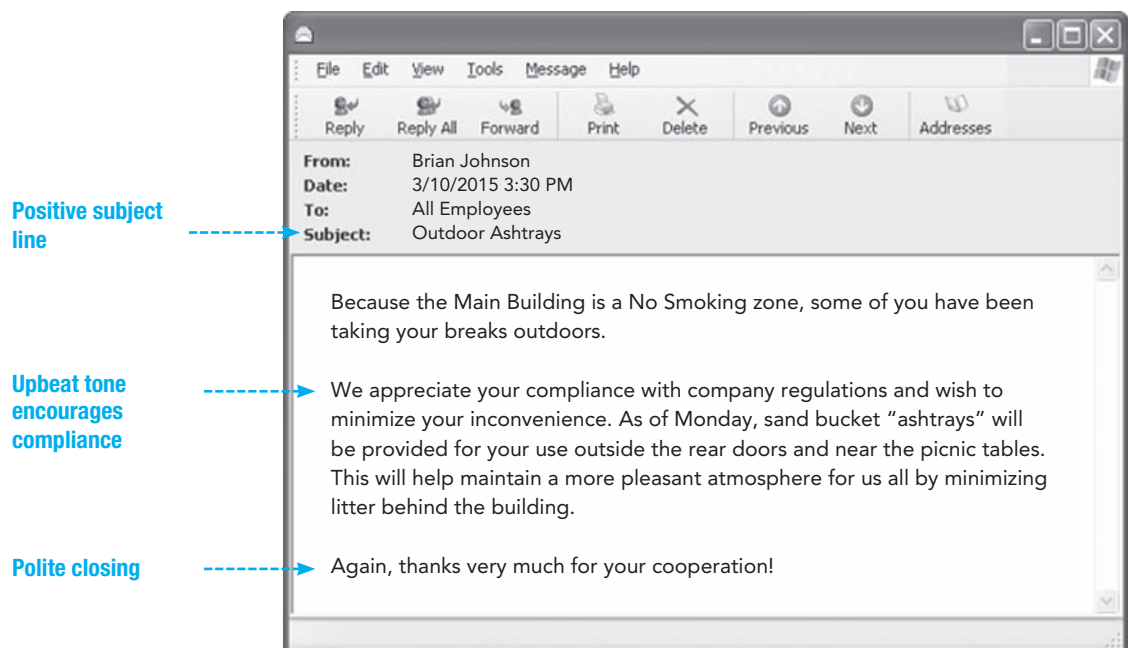


FIGURE 1.4 • Revised E-mail