Chapter 6

Administrative Communication by Written Correspondence

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Introduction

The purpose of this chapter is to highlight those characteristics of written administrative communication that distinguish it from other forms of writing. Understanding the basic fundamentals of good writing represents only a part of all that is required for effectively transmitting a message accurately, clearly, and appropriately. Fundamentals used as a guide to writing will be described. But more important, the use of these basic rules will be discussed within the context of a systematic "inventory" approach as to how we can improve administrative written communicative skills. Styles used in certain situations will be discussed, and finally the mechanics of using certain communication instruments will be demonstrated.

Billions of dollars are spent yearly in business, industry, and educational institutions on written forms of communication. Yet little thinking and effort are expended in improving the effectiveness of administrative writing. There are several reasons for this disparity.

Somehow, there is a mistaken notion that basic fundamentals of writing, if strictly adhered to, serve equally well in all writing situations. This thought is implied in the question frequently heard in discussions of writing, "What is so different about administrative writing?"

During the last two decades, the widespread use of advanced methods of communication such as the telephone, audio-video tapes, new tele-

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video communication systems with computer storing capability, and word processors has given some persons the incorrect impression that written communication is archaic and will rapidly become "a thing of the past."

And finally, little emphasis is being given in educational institutions as to the value of the skill and art involved in administrative writing. In this regard, topics concerning administrative written communication are increasingly being added to curricula in faculty development and administrative enrichment programs.

The historian, scholar, scientist, educator, artist, businessman, and news reporter all find writing necessary for success and have developed specific models for its use. So too, administrative communication by written correspondence deserves special attention to meet the specific objectives necessary in business and medical administration.

Administrative writings are mainly for the purpose of communication among faculty, employees, and related public. It is important for the reader to understand the subtle, but real difference between communicating and communication. The simplest definition of communicate (Webster Unabridged Dictionary) is the following: A verb defined to mean, to make another or others partakers of: impart, transmit as news, a disease, or an idea. However, communication is a noun which defines the act of communicating: intercourse, exchange of ideas, conveyance of information as in correspondence. Communication is a dynamic process by which a writer documents an item that is to be communicated to which there is an anticipated tacit, emotional, or physical response. This is unlike the verbal messages presented by radio, TV, or similar modality which are heard and viewed, but do not serve the purpose of communication unless responded to by individuals concerned. Thus, administrative communication by written correspondence takes on a true meaning of personal interaction and is unlike many other writings such as found in medical literature or novels, in which the author may not necessarily anticipate nor be interested in the reader's response.

The skill and art involved in a written letter or memorandum are more than what you say; it is how you say it. As stated by Fielden (1982), "Your message, your real intentions, can get lost in your words." Viewing the entire message a communication can convey is more than understanding the dictionary's definition of the words you choose. It is also discerning the intentions, the emphases, and the relationships reflected in the connotations of those words and the sentence structures you use. Writing an effective letter is far more than stating the basic message you wish to give to someone. It is also conveying how you wish to relate to the recipient, and what you want that person to feel in response—which is important because it may determine what the reader does about the message.

One of the purposes of written communication is persuasion (Moore, 1962). It becomes a strategy of power, a model of building friendships and influencing people. Its antithesis is misunderstanding or ignorance of the