American and French business correspondence show similarities and differences. Business Communicators in both countries advocate clarity and reader adaptation. Many of the differences result from differences in culture and value. French letters tend to be more formal than American letters. The French are not very concerned with minimizing price and presenting negative news positively. The format of letters is different. Particularly, the inside address, salutation, and signature block differ from American letters. To communicate successfully, a businessperson writing to a French audience should be familiar with the fundamentals of French business communication practices.

A COMPARISON OF AMERICAN AND FRENCH BUSINESS CORRESPONDENCE

Iris I. Varner
Illinois State University

Communication is culture specific. As a result, the language, format, organization, and tone of business correspondence reflect the values of the writer and his or her environment. An effective American business letter may not be effective in France, Germany, Japan, or Mexico. To write letters that are effective in other countries, it is important to understand the business communication principles of other countries.

The objective of this study was to examine similarities and differences between French and American business correspondence, particularly in the areas of format, organization, tone, and style. The comparison is based on American and French textbooks on the subject and samples of French business letters.

In both countries textbooks present the ideal letter. In reality, business letters may seldom reach the ideal. Nevertheless, the books illustrate what writers should strive for in their business correspondence.

DISCUSSION

Format

A comparison of the standard parts of a business letter illustrates similarities and differences. Usually the French use the indented style for business letters; the blocked style is rarely used.

1This article was accepted for publication by the previous editor and editorial associates.
When writing the date, the French put the name of the city where
the letter originates in front of the date. The name of the month is
spelled out. The date, even in blocked letters, tends to be typed on the
right side of the page, and sometimes the date follows the inside ad-
dress. In American letters, on the other hand, the date always precedes
the inside address.

The inside address in French letters is typed on the right-hand side.
The zip code precedes the name of the city by French postal regula-
tions. A typical arrangement looks as follows: France: (Marie, p. 100).

Pierre Thinot
198, Avenue Daumesnil
75012 Paris
R.C. Paris A 412 604 212

Monsieur le Directeur
Succursale No 456 du
Credit Lyonnais
1, Place Felix Eboe
75012 PARIS

Paris, le 10 decembre 19..

Monsieur le Directeur,

In an American letter, this information would be arranged as fol-
loows:

Pierre Thinot
198 Avenue Daumesnil
Paris 75012
R.C. Paris A 412 604 212

December 10, 19..

Monsieur le Directeur
Succursale No 456 du
Credit Lyonnais
1 Place Felix Eboe
Paris 75012

Dear Sir:
The *initials* of the secretary and the writer of the letter follow the inside address in French correspondence. Often they are omitted. In contrast, the initials come at the end of an American business letter. Most French business letters have a *subject line*, called the Objet.

Objet: Notre commande No-721
Subject: Our order number 721

The *salutation* is followed by a comma rather than a colon as is the case in the United States. Salutations are more formal. Typical salutations are:

Monsieur, Monsieur (followed by title), Chère Monsieur, Madame, Chère Madame.

Sometimes the salutation may read, Monsieur, regardless of whether the recipient is a man or a woman, and French women do not seem to mind. At least they do not openly criticize the practice. First names are used very seldom in official correspondence even if the writer and reader know each other quite well. Americans should stay on a formal basis using last name and "vous," the polite form of "you." First names should be used only if the French specifically ask that first names be used. Even if first names are used, the French often continue to use "vous" rather than "tu."

The American, who wants to be on a friendly basis immediately, may have a hard time and actually turn off potential business partners with his or her outgoing approach. It is important to recognize that formal style of address does not necessarily mean disinterest, coldness, and unfriendliness. Personal relationships take a long time to develop in France.

The *body* of the French business letter is single spaced and often indented.

The *complimentary close* tends to be more formal in French letters than in American letters. The title of the writer precedes the name of the writer. The signature appears either in between the title and the typed name or after the typed name:

Le Directeur des Ventes or Le Directeur des Ventes
F. Rivel

If the writer knows the reader well, he or she may simply sign the letter without a typed signature block.

The following abbreviations are frequently used in signature blocks:

- p.p. (par procuration—on behalf of)
- Pour ordre (when the signature is not authorized)

According to Ponthier (p. 17), business letters may also be hand written. In fact, sometimes French businesses conduct an analysis of the
handwriting to determine character, reliability, honesty, etc. While this is usually done in job application letters, the practice also occurs with other business letters. Americans may smile at that practice or even consider it an indication of possible discrimination, but in France this is serious business.

Writing Principles

The French emphasize the following writing principles: clarity, precision, audience adaptation, politeness, and avoidance of superlatives. Often, however, the definition of terms is quite different in the two countries. For example, both French and American communicators encourage writers to use short sentences. The ideal length recommended by American writers is between 16 and 20 words. A brief examination of French letters shows that sentences are considerably longer and use more adverbs and relative sentences. As a result, the style is more involved. The longer sentences help to connect ideas, but they also can be rather complex and obscure.

In comparison to Americans who use a rather concrete style with many examples, the French use abstract language. They are strong on theory and theoretical explanations. Where the Americans give examples to make an idea very clear, the French will simply present the idea without the example. Abstract writing is wordier and more complex than concrete writing. The difference between American and French writing in this area is probably based on different cultural backgrounds and different educational systems. Americans are pragmatists rather than theoreticians.

French writers use the conditional tense much more frequently than American writers. To write well in French, one has to master the subjunctive. It makes the language more polite and adds nuances to the language. These fine shades of meaning are often lost in English translation.

Sinon, nous nous trouverons obligés, a notre grand regret, de remettre votre dossier à notre agence de contentieux, afin de recouvrer notre créance (Marie, p. 77).

Otherwise, we will find ourselves under the obligation, to our regret, to give your account to our collection agency, in order to collect our money.

French books on business communication do not mention anything about the use of active voice and passive voice. Possibly the more theoretical approach and the use of the subjunctive also foster a more passive style. At any rate, the passive voice is simply not an issue.

French communicators advise writers to avoid superlatives or exaggerations in their letters. There is a practical reason for the advice.
Legally one is not allowed to write that one grants better conditions than one of the competitors (Ponthier, p. 37). One is also not allowed to advertise that one has the best product. Germany has similar legal regulations. For Americans who are used to comparative advertisement, this is a big difference. Since the rules are strictly enforced, international business people should be aware of the different rules and regulations.

Beginnings and Endings of Letters

Both French and American writers are concerned about beginnings and endings of letters. Both are very formal in French, but the endings also tend to be very flowery for business letters. The complimentary close varies according to the sex of the receiver, the nature of the relationship between the sender and the receiver, and the subject of the letter. Examples: (Marie, p. 1B)

If the writer knows the receiver rather well, he or she might say:
Veuillez agréer, Monsieur, l'expression de mes sentiments les meilleurs.
Sir, please accept the expression of my best feelings.

If the writer does not know the receiver very well, he or she might say:
Veuillez agréer, Monsieur, l'expression de mes sentiments ez agréer, devouee.
Sir, please accept the expression of my devoted feelings.

If the recipient is a woman, the complimentary close might read:
Je vous prie d'agréer, Madame, mes respectueuses salutations.
I beg you, Madam, to accept my respectful salutations.

To a supervisor or someone higher in the hierarchy one might say:
Veuillez agréer, Monsieur, l'expression de mes sentiments respectueux.
Sir, please accept the expression of my respectful feelings.

To a subordinate or someone at the same level in the hierarchy one might write:
Croyez, Monsieur, à mes sentiments les me.
Believe, Sir, in my best feelings.

Letters of request might end by thanking the reader in advance.
Avec nos remerciements anticipés (Ponthier, p. 54).

With our anticipated thanks.

Je vous serai reconnaissant de bien vouloir rectifier le relevé que je vous retourne ci-joint, et vous en remercie par avance (Marie, p. 71).
I would be grateful if you would modify the enclosed receipt, and I thank you in advance.

To American readers these closings sound rather stilted and old fashioned, but they are very acceptable and polite in France.

Requests and Positive Messages

Generally, the content of requests and positive letters is the same for both countries. However, some differences exist in the style and in the organization of the letters.

American textbooks emphasize that the main idea should be stated first. The letter goes from specific points to more general ones. In France, letters often go from general to more specific points.

For example, the sequence for a routine claim would be handled as follows:

France: Statement of the problem and its consequences
    (background information)
    Request for a specific action to solve this problem
U.S.: Request for a specific action
    Explanation of why such action is desirable

The examples illustrate the different approaches.

France: La société des Transports du Centre vient de me livrer les 20 ouvrages que je vous ai commandés le 28 Octobre.
    Malheureusement, le colis est arrivé en très mauvais etat....
    Comme les livres, tous plus ou moins déteriorés sont invendables, je vous les retourne, en port dû, et vous prie de me les remplacer d'urgence (Marie, p. 60).

The Transports du Centre Co. just delivered to me the 20 books that I ordered from you on October 28th. Unfortunately, the package came in a very bad shape...
    As these books, all more or less damaged, are improper for selling, I return them to you, at your cost, and pray you to replace them urgently.

U.S.: Please send a replacement copy of the book that is attached.
    When it was delivered in response to my order (see copy attached), pages 17 through 32 were missing.
    I shall appreciate a complete volume in exchange (Himstreet and Baty, p. 141).

American business communicators recommend to end requests on a positive note. This is not necessarily the case in French correspondence. The French might end the letter with the actions they would have to take in case the request is not granted.

Si je n'étais pas le 20 en possession de ces parfums, je me trouverais dans l'obligation de mettre en cause votre responsabilité et de vous demander un dédommagement (Marie, p. 57).
Thus, I demand from you to complete your delivery as soon as possible. If I am not in the possession of these perfumes by the 20th, I will have to enforce your responsibilities and demand damages from you.

Order acknowledgments in America usually close with the encouragement for more orders. The French have a tendency to state the financial arrangement or speak about the invoice at the end.

Nous apporterons tous nos soins à l'expédition et espérons que votre clientèle appréciera la qualité de notre production. Vous trouverez sous ce pli la facture correspondante (Marie, p. 40).

We will bring all our care to the shipment and we hope that your customers will appreciate the quality of our production. You will find enclosed, the matching invoice.

In this French example, the writer does not tell the reader what to do with the invoice. There are no directions what to do next. In contrast, American communicators advise the writer to give the reader precise instructions.

When you decide to order tools, remember that Harris, Inc., carries a full line of manual and power tools. Use the enclosed order blanks and postage-paid envelope for placing your next order. We look forward to serving you again (Huseman, p.123).

French letters emphasize appreciation and "thank you" more than American letters. The "thank you note" usually comes in the first sentence in the French style but in the last one in the American letters, if it is mentioned at all.

Himstreet and Baty classify the "thank-you" for an order at the beginning or end of a letter as a cliché. Both of the following examples are used for illustrations of poor communication.

Thank you for your order which we are very glad to have.
Thank you for your patronage (Himstreet and Baty, p. 152).

In the French example the "ideal opening" includes a thank-you for the order.

Nous avons bien reçu votre bon de commande No. 720, et nous vous en remercions (Marie, p. 50).

We just received your order-form number 720, and we thank you for it.

Negative Messages

In the United States, the writer is encouraged to end the letter on a positive note and to shift the emphasis away from the refusal. To reach that goal, writers should, therefore, avoid using negative words.

Himstreet and Baty also recommend to avoid apologies. They say: Don't apologize for the action taken. We should take a course of action only when we have a good reason for doing so. We should be glad to stand by our reasons (p. 178).
They also advise the writer to avoid using words such as "surprise," "regret," and "inconvenience" (p. 170).

The following example illustrates the positive ending.
The casings you sent to us can be filled with a variety of reload combinations...
Although we are not filling your order as requested, we would like your permission to reload with 28 grains of powder behind 1 and 1/8 ounces of No. 8 shot... To authorize reloading according to our suggestions, just check the appropriate square on the enclosed card and return the card in the enclosed envelope (p. 170).

In France, it is not considered as important to end on a positive note or to avoid negative words. On the contrary, it is recommended to apologize for the mistakes or inconvenience and to express regret (Marie, p. 59).

Based on Marie, order problems should be handled as follows:
Nous recevons votre lettre du 15 d'embre dans laquelle vous nous indiquez ne pas avoir reçu, à cette date, des articles commandés le 2 et que notre représentant M. DUBORGEL, vous avait promis pour le 12 au plus tard.
Nous regrettons de n'avoir pu respecter la promesse de M. DUBORGEL.... Nous espérons que ces difficultés ne vous seront pas trop préjudiciables et que nous continuerons à avoir de bonnes relations d'affaires (p. 58).

We received your letter from December 15 in which you indicate to us that by this date you had not received some items ordered on the 2nd which our sales representative, Mr. Duborgel, promised to you for the 12th at the latest.
We regret that we could not grant Mr. Duborgel's promise.
We hope that these difficulties will not inconvenience you too much and that we will continue having good business relationships.

Price is handled differently in the two countries. In France, prices are often set by the government. Businesses, therefore, simply refer to government issued price increases. The implication is that businesses are innocent and cannot change the situation. There is less effort to avoid the negative aspect of the price increase.

In many cases price is not handled in the letter at all. Businesses advertise their products. They sell the product based on quality and introduce it to the customer. Then a sales representative contacts the customer to discuss the product. At that meeting the sales representative introduces the issue of price. If at this stage the customer is convinced of the merit of the product, he or she may be willing to pay a somewhat higher price. Price may simply not be a major issue. A letter often would handle price as illustrated below:

Vous trouverez, ci-joint, la facture correspondante qui tient compte de la hausse des prix de 10% autorisée, hausse que vous aurez vous-même à appliquer normalement à vos clients.
Nous vous prions en conséquence de nous couvrir de la somme de.... (Marie, p. 50).

You will find enclosed the invoice that takes the authorized 10% price increase into account. You will also have to apply this increase to your customers.
Therefore, we ask you to pay us the sum of....

Persuasive Messages

Sales Letters

There are no major differences between the French and the American principles for writing good sales letters. Both methods advocate reader orientation and the AIDA (Attention, Interest, Desire, Action) principle.

Collection Letters

In France, less attention is paid to being gentle with the customer in collection cases. The French seem to come to threats more quickly; no efforts are made to appeal to some interests of the reader. The French are not looking for explanations why the customer does not pay, and they do not make any offer to help the customer to facilitate payments as the Americans sometimes do. In most cases they simply state the date by which the payment should be made and state an ultimatum.

The French come to the point more directly, and they usually come to the point in the first sentence. The assumption is that the customer bought the product, used the product, knew the price of the product, and, therefore, should pay for the product. In the United States, on the other hand, the idea is that any efforts to retain the customer are worth while.

The two examples show the differences. The American example actually never asks for the money, it simply reminds the reader of the overdue account.

France: Nous n'avons pas recu le règlement de...F à valoir sur notre facture No.... que vous aviez promis de nous verser le....
Nous sommes persuadés qu'il s'agit d'un oubli de votre part. En conséquence, nous vous serions obligés de bien vouloir nous faire parvenir cette somme par retour (Marie, p. 78).

We did not receive the payment of ...F of your bill No...... from...that you had promised to pay on the....
We are convinced that you just forgot (overlooked the bill). Therefore, we would be obliged to receive your payment on receipt of this letter.
U.S.: Most of our customers appreciate a reminder when their balance is overdue. Therefore, we would like to remind you of the overdue account (Huseman, p. 201).

A second reminder in France is worded very strongly. There is absolutely no doubt about what is expected.

Nous vous demandons instamment de nous faire parvenir dans les 10 jours, par chèque bancaire ou virement postal, la somme due. Sinon, nous nous trouverons obligés, à notre grand regret, de remettre votre dossier à notre agence de contentieux, afin de recouvrer notre créance (Marie, p. 77).

We instantly demand from you to send us within 10 days, by check or postal order, the amount due. Otherwise, we will find ourselves under the obligation, to our great regret, to give your account to our collection agency, in order to receive our money.

The complex sentence structure and the frequent use of the subjunctive can result in a combination of politeness and severity which may appear peculiar to Americans.

CONCLUSION

Based on the comparison of French and American business writing, the following conclusions can be drawn:

1. American and French letters share similarities, but there are also many differences.

2. From an American viewpoint French business letters have a more traditional and less action-oriented format. Convenience and time required for typing do not seem to play as an important role as in the United States.

3. The style of French letters is less concise. This may be a result of a greater use of the subjunctive and a more abstract writing style.

4. French openings and endings of letters are very polite and very formal. In fact, Americans might look at them as stilted and old-fashioned. When writing to French business people, Americans should use a more formal writing style.

5. Generally, the French emphasize the same writing principles as the Americans, but they are not concerned about the use of the passive voice. Sentences tend to be quite a bit longer in French letters than American letters.

6. The organization of letters in some cases follows different principles. The French handle collections and negative messages more directly. On the other hand, they tend to show more appreciation for orders and receipts of letters.
REFERENCES


ANOTHER VALUABLE BOOK FOR YOUR LIBRARY

Information Systems and Business Communication
Edited by Raymond W. Beswick and Alfred B. Williams

In his introduction to this book Larry D. Hartman, Past President of ABC, says "Information Systems and Business Communication provides one of several excellent orientation series about the integration of business communication and business systems and the researching and teaching of business communication."

The product of ABC's Committee on Integrating Information Systems and Communication, chaired by Raymond W. Beswick, this book offers several interesting articles on voice store-and-forward, integration of data and word processing, automating the small office, the database, word processing, audio teleconferencing, and other subjects of interest to business communication teachers faced with introducing the new high-tech concepts into their classrooms.

You won't want to be without this book.

$6.60; discounted to $5.60 for ABC members.

Order from:

Association for Business Communication
University of Illinois
608 South Wright Street
Urbana, IL 61801

Prepaid orders only, please, in U.S. funds.

Foreign orders: $25 (U.S.) minimum.