



# How To ... Written Communications

A guide to effective written communication

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# 1. Introduction

This “How To” guide has been created to help Soroptimists write effective communications both internally and externally to our organisation.

This document does not cover any brand guidelines for communications, this is available on the website ([www.sigbi.org](http://www.sigbi.org)) and all members are encouraged to use this as a basis for any written communication especially when trying to reach a non Soroptimist audience. Throughout the document you will find tips, protocols and best practice to assist you with writing an effective communication.

When communicating with the Media, it is strongly advised that you refer to the Media Pack (available in the members’ area of the SIGBI website - <http://sigbi.org/members> under communications) in addition to this guide.

## 2. Communications Aims Grid

<p style="text-align: center;"><b>Who is the audience?</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Who requested it?</li> <li>• Who will use the results?</li> <li>• Who will benefit from the work?</li> <li>• Who else has an interest in the outcome?</li> </ul> <p><b>Note:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Identifying the target audience can help find the right tone and language to ensure effective communication</i></li> <li>• <i>It is important to find out what specific standards or expectations the person who asked for the communication may expect or need</i></li> </ul>	<p style="text-align: center;"><b>What does it need to achieve?</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Why is this being done?</li> <li>• What is it for?</li> </ul> <p><b>Note:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Think beyond the what (end result) to the why – the purposes, what it is for, what benefits are required</i></li> <li>• <i>Knowing why something has to be done- helps you judge what is fit for purpose and even suggest better ways of achieving the same thing</i></li> <li>• <i>Asking the question ‘why?’ several times can produce many different purposes, all of them valid. Why has this been asked for? Why is it important? Why now? etc</i></li> <li>• <i>Thinking beyond the immediate purpose also helps you to see how your activities fit with the wider scene and if there is a link with what other people or groups are trying to do or have done</i></li> </ul>
<p style="text-align: center;"><b>The finished communication</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What do I want to end up with?</li> <li>• What will it look like/be like?</li> <li>• What impact do I want it to have?</li> <li>• How long do I want it to be?</li> <li>• Will I have images/branding?</li> <li>• Where will it feature?</li> <li>• For how long?</li> <li>• How much will it cost?</li> </ul> <p><b>Note:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>A description of what you will end up with</i></li> </ul>	<p style="text-align: center;"><b>Measuring Success</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• How will I know if the communication has been successful?</li> </ul> <p><b>Note:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>This should be measurable wherever possible, and cover both the end result and the purposes</i></li> </ul>

### 3. Tone & Content

Before starting any written communication ask yourself the following questions:

**1. Am I writing this as a Soroptimist?**

If you are writing as a Soroptimist and not for personal or work purposes, then think about the Soroptimist Vision – “Soroptimist International is a vibrant, dynamic organisation for today’s professional and business women. We are committed to a world where women and girls together achieve their individual and collective potential, realise aspirations and have an equal voice in creating strong and peaceful communities worldwide.”

Ensure that your message is vibrant, dynamic, professional and business-like.

**2. What do I want to communicate?**

Think first about what you want to communicate and why – (Single Overriding Communications Objective – the acronym SOCO may be a helpful reminder) – so that you can control the message(s) effectively.

For example if the objective of the communication is to raise the profile of Soroptimism then focus on success and achievements.

**3. Who am I trying to communicate with?**

Select a medium that will reach your target audience e.g. Soroptimist News (sent to all members), Club Mailings (passed on by Club Secretaries). If you are trying to communicate with a select group within the organisation, try to identify a method of communication already being used rather than creating another one e.g. Membership newsletters which go to all membership officers; Federation mailings which go to all secretaries. Decide if you need to create and maintain an email distribution list for repeat communications to a distinct group.

**4. What do I want the audience of the communication to do with the information I give?**

If you want to inform the audience with a piece of information or news that requires no response, you may decide to use a blog or magazine article to convey your message. Letters (as text in emails, email attachments or by post) should be used when you would like a response to your communication or the communication requires an official tone e.g. from Federation Office regarding a matter of policy or procedure. Within the letter you should clearly detail what you want the recipient to do and by when. Email subject headers should indicate the action required by the recipient(s).

**5. How do I want the audience to feel about the communication when reading it?**

When communicating with a large audience of differing experiences and perspectives then consideration needs to be given as to how each demographic will respond to the communication (positively and negatively), as you may be able to overcome some of these reactions within the communication itself.

If you are trying to engage with an audience on a topic / proposal that you want them to support and/or understand, then you need to make sure you clearly articulate the rationale behind the decision, reassure those who might have misgivings (showing their views have been considered) and give the opportunity for input in some way.

If you are looking to share ideas on a topic without any expectation of response / action from the audience, then it should be made clear to the audience at the beginning of the communication.

**6. What type of language should I use within the communication?**

If you are using a blog or magazine article to communicate your message the tone of the communication can be more informal; as though you were having a chat with the audience and you can include colloquialisms and slang if desired. If you are writing a letter then the tone of the communication should be more formal, respectful of the position of the audience without being too austere.

Be careful when writing any communication that the tone is not misinterpreted by the audience, this can be more difficult when sending to large audiences, as this could result in the communication not achieving the desired effect.

**7. How should I send the communication to the audience?**

If you are using an already established method of communication, then this will have been answered for you already. However if you are writing a letter or establishing a new method of communicating with a group you need to think carefully about how to send it. With the advent of technology we are able to send information / communications to people a lot faster using e-mail but thought should be given first to the following considerations:

- Is every member of the intended audience on e-mail? If not, those members of the audience who are not may feel disenfranchised – how will you address them?
- Would a face to face discussion or telephone conversation be better? This will very much depend on how large and geographically disparate your audience is, but sometimes a quick phone call or meeting can convey a message much more successfully than a hastily written e-mail.
- Would you be happy if the communication was sent out to a wider audience? The beauty of e-mail is that messages can be sent on to other people at the touch of button, however this can also cause issues and you should be mindful of this when writing any message.
- Once you have answered the above questions you can start drafting your communication, making sure you follow these simple rules below.

## 4. Simple Rules for Written Communication

1. Keep to the point – focus on the objective of the communication (reminder Single Overriding Communications Objective - SOCO). Additional information or details should be placed in an appendix or supplementary document rather than adding unnecessary details to the communication.
2. A communication should contain a maximum of three points as more than that the audience loses interest before finishing the communication.
3. Do not repeat yourself.
4. Make sure any actions / outcomes required by the audience are clear and concise.
5. Do not use CAPITAL LETTERS to make a point as it can be considered shouting.
6. Limit the use of expressive punctuation eg. Exclamation marks (!), speech marks (“”) as these can be misinterpreted by the audience.
7. If you need to use an abbreviation or acronym make sure that you provide the full definition on first use with the abbreviation or acronym in brackets afterwards and then revert to the abbreviated version e.g. Federation Management Board (FMB).
8. Make sure you use spell check on your communication, typing mistakes can distract the reader from your message.
9. Is the tone of your communication vibrant, dynamic, professional and business-like?
10. Once you have drafted the communication leave the draft for at least five minutes before re-reading the document and making any amendments.
11. Once you are happy with your draft ask someone to review the communication by putting themselves in the position of the audience and asking how they would feel / respond on receiving the information.

## 5. Formatting Written Communications

### **Recipients**

The expectation is that the person that a communication is being sent 'to' is expected to act on the message or to respond. The person sent a copy in the 'cc' field is being sent for information. When using e-mail if you want to copy this to other(s) but you do not want other recipients to know about this, use the 'bcc' field. Anyone else should not be included.

### **Subject of the communication**

Use the subject field of an e-mail or an appropriate header to identify clearly what the content of the communication is about.

### **Version control**

Always include the date the communication was written, this is automatically included in e-mails, but for all other types it needs to be manually added. By its inclusion the recipient is able to discern whether the writer was aware of all the same facts when writing as they are on reading it e.g. a letter could take a week to be delivered and other information may have come to light.

Using a version control system for reports or guides (anything that will potentially have a long shelf life) is important so that readers do not get confused as to which is the latest version. This also assists when updates are made to the documents; details of changes made should be included in any release to recipients so that they can review the changes only and not the whole document.

### **Alignment**

Most written communications use left alignment as standard for business use, however there may be circumstances when central or right alignment would be suitable e.g. posters, flyers or newsletters.

### **Paragraphs**

Try to avoid using too many paragraphs in your communication; each paragraph should convey a single point / item to the recipient.

### **Bullet points**

Bullet points should only be used when detailing a list of 3 or more items, each item should be no more than a single sentence. If you need to add more detail to each point you should revert to using paragraphs instead of bullet points.

### **Types and size of fonts**

When writing a communication it is important to consider the font type and size of font being used to ensure that:

- The recipient will be able to read it easily
- The communication does not waste any unnecessary paper e.g. when a letter goes onto a second page with only 2 lines on it
- The look of the communication is appropriate for the audience e.g. if you are trying to convey yourself in a business like manner using a font like wingdings would be inappropriate and will turn the reader off

**Signing off**

Identify yourself in any written communication; include your name and any Soroptimist position at the end, and a relevant web address – the SIGBI one ([www.sigbi.org](http://www.sigbi.org)) or your own Club, Region, National Association if more appropriate to the audience. Omit details such as home phone number and address unless you are sure that you want to be contacted in this way and want all recipients to have this information. Signatures can be set up automatically to save time and provide a formal style response.

## 6. Protocols

### E-mail

1. Emails should be regarded as the electronic equivalent of a postcard. Anyone can read its content along the delivery path.
2. Never email in haste, consider the facts and consequences of the message. Imagine yourself in the position of the recipient and read the content through to gauge how you would feel about receiving the message.
3. Consider the sensitivities of the potential recipient and alter or tone down any phraseology as appropriate. Be professional and careful about what you say about others as emails are easily and sometimes inappropriately or accidentally forwarded.
4. If you are sending an email to a large group of people, check that they all need to receive it. Do not copy in a long list of people in a response email unless you are sure that all the recipients, and not just the originator, need to see your reply.
5. If you are forwarding an email received from someone else, check that all the content in previous emails in the 'string' are appropriate to be forwarded to a third person. Offence can be caused or sensitive information can be inadvertently forwarded at the end of a long exchange between other people.
6. If it is important to you to know that your email has been received by the recipient, it is advisable to set it up so that you are automatically advised when it is received or opened. Most email accounts allow for you to set 'acknowledge receipt' or 'request receipt' before you press 'send'.
7. It is important that you regularly check any e-mail accounts you set up so that email does not go unanswered or unacknowledged.
8. Attachments should always be sent as a common file type, e.g. Word, Excel or as a pdf wherever possible. Sound and graphics attached to emails will reduce the speed of delivery to your recipient; avoid attaching these items if they are not pertinent to the message being sent.
9. The sender should always state on the email what the attachment is and the purpose for which it is sent.
10. Careful consideration should be given before sending large attachments, especially if you are uncertain of the capacity of the recipient's in box or of the resilience and speed of their internet connection.
11. Sensitive information should always be sent by post or via a secure transfer system. Marking emails as 'confidential' or 'private' does not ensure their security. It is possible to password protect the content of an email or of files sent as attachments and if this is done, it is advisable to send the password to the intended recipient via an alternative means (eg phone call, text message).

12. If you prepare your content in another package, such as Word, and paste it into your email, you may find that formatting, codes, punctuation or even language does not translate readily to the e mail package in which it is being read.
13. Avoid sending unnecessary information, keep emails brief and to the point. It is good practice if possible to focus on one topic per email.
14. Using the 'priority' or 'urgent' flag when sending an email that requires urgent attention helps your recipient to identify that urgent action is required. Do not misuse this or the object will be defeated.
15. Many members choose to use their workplace email account for Soroptimist activities. You should check with your line manager or equivalent that this is acceptable and it is always best to get approval for this in writing. If you are using your workplace email with the appropriate permission, check also that they are happy for you to add your Soroptimist signature at the end. If your employer does not wish you to use your work email account for Soroptimist communication, it is very easy (and free) to set up a personal e-mail account e.g. google, yahoo, hotmail etc.

### **Letters**

1. Wherever possible address a letter to an individual by name using the correct title. If you do not have a name to write to just a role, then try and find out their gender so that you can start "Dear Sir" or "Dear Madam" rather than "To whom it may concern".
2. Consider the sensitivities of the potential recipient and alter or tone down any phraseology as appropriate. Be professional and careful about what you say about others as letters can be shared or may be retained for longevity.
3. Consider the facts and consequences of the message. Imagine yourself in the position of the recipient and read the content through to gauge how you would feel about receiving the message.

### **Social Media**

The term "Social Media" refers to the use of web-based and mobile technologies to turn communication into an interactive dialogue.

1. Social Media websites (e.g. Facebook, Youtube, Twitter) are electronic interactive notice boards that can be viewed by anyone from anywhere in the world. Who can view depends on privacy settings and who you have allowed to view so you will need to think about these things in your set-up and decide what private information you want to make available publicly.
2. Remember that any post is instantly available to your audience and can be further shared by audience with others in a very quick timeframe!
3. Never post an update on a social media site in haste. The post can be viewed by a large audience in a very quick timeframe even after the post is deleted.

Please note the social media section of protocols is under development awaiting the SIGBI social media strategy to be produced.

## **7. Copyright & Legal Issues**

Be aware of copyright and libel issues for example when sending scanned text, pictures of information downloaded from the internet. Be aware too of data protection issues when sending personal information by email. Do you have permission to disclose this information? An email can be contractually binding. Therefore care should be taken when expressing personal views that these cannot be misinterpreted as belonging to SIGBI. Never send an email that is offensive, threatening, defamatory or illegal. Emails can constitute harassment and can be used as evidence of such. Emails have also been used successfully in defamation and libel cases.