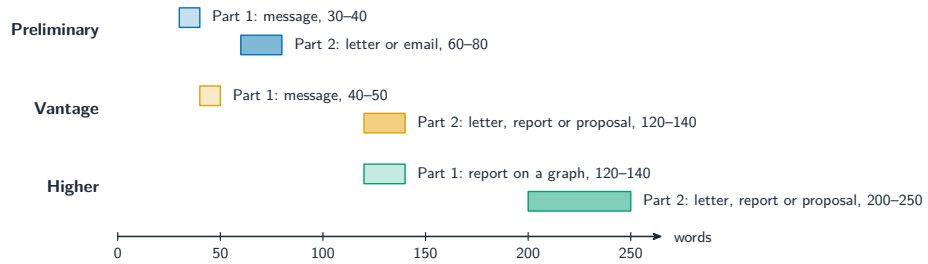
Writing: messages, letters, reports and proposals

BEC Business English

What this topic covers

Every BEC level has **two writing tasks**. The first is short and usually internal (to a colleague); the second is longer and usually for someone outside the company or for a manager. This topic shows each task at each level, the shape of a good answer, model answers, and how examiners give marks.



Two tasks at each level: the second one is longer and counts more

	Preliminary	Vantage	Higher
Time	inside the 1 h 30 min Reading and Writing paper	**45 min**	**1 h 10 min**
Part 1	note, message, **memo** or email to a colleague, **30–40** words	the same, **40–50** words	a short **report** on a graph or chart, **120–140** words
Part 2	letter or email to someone outside the company, **60–80** words	letter or email, **or** a short report or **proposal**, **120–140** words	**one task from three**: letter, report or proposal, **200–250** words

- Part 2 is worth **twice** as much as Part 1, so give it about **two thirds** of your writing time.
- Keep to the **word count**. A much shorter answer usually misses information; a much longer one usually adds things nobody asked for.

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Part 1: a short message with three jobs

The task gives **three content points** as bullets. You must cover **all three**, and you usually have to invent small details: a day, a reason, a number.

> **Task (Preliminary):** You have to change the time of next week's sales meeting. Write an email to your team: say which meeting is changing, give the new time, explain why.
>
> *Hi everyone, Thursday's sales meeting is moving from 10 a.m. to 2 p.m., because the new price list will not be ready until midday. Please bring your monthly figures. Thanks, Lin*

- 31 words. The three points: **which meeting** (Thursday's sales meeting), **the new time** (2 p.m.), **why** (the price list). One clear purpose. A short message needs **no** long greeting and **no** "I am writing to inform you".
- Start with the most important information. Your colleague should understand the change from the first line.

Part 2: letters and emails

Greeting	*Dear Ms Wang,*
Point 1: say sorry	*Thank you for your email. I am very sorry that …*
Point 2: the reason	*This was because …*
Point 3: what you will do	*We have now changed to …*
Point 4: an offer	*To apologise, we would like to offer …*
Ending	*Yours sincerely, David Chen*

One paragraph for each content point, and a clear next step

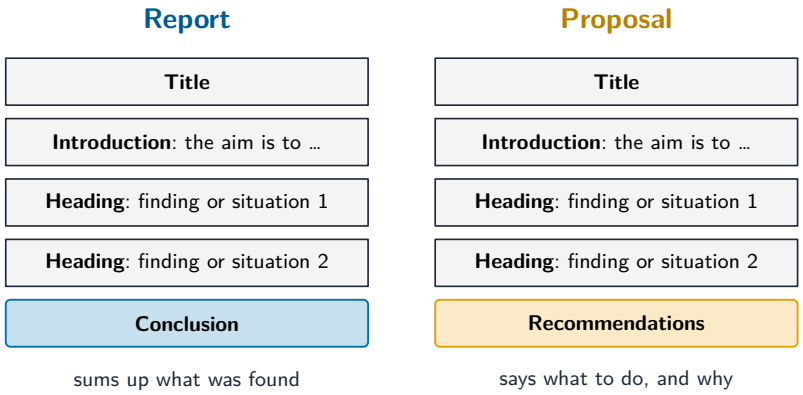
> **Task (Preliminary):** A customer has complained that her order arrived late. Reply: apologise, explain the reason, say what you will do, offer something.
>
> *Dear Ms Wang, Thank you for your email. I am very sorry that your order arrived three days late. This was because our delivery company had problems with its vans last week. We have now changed to a new company, and your next order will arrive within two days. To apologise, we would*

like to offer you 10% off your next order. Yours sincerely, David Chen

- 66 words. Each content point has its own sentence or paragraph.
- Choose the **register** for the reader: a customer you don't know needs *Dear Ms Wang* and *Yours sincerely*; a colleague you know can get *Hi Tom* and *Thanks*.

Reports and proposals

A **report** describes what happened or what was found. A **proposal** describes a situation and gives a **recommendation**: it tries to persuade the reader to do something. The two look almost the same on the page.



Headings help a busy manager find the point in seconds

- Use a **title** and **short headings**: *Introduction*, *Current situation*, *Recommendations*.
- Start with the purpose: *The aim of this report is to…*
- Use neutral, impersonal language: *It was found that…*, *Most staff said…*, *I would recommend that…*
- **Higher Part 1** is a report on figures from a graph or table. Describe the biggest changes and compare them. △ Don't explain causes the graph doesn't give.

How examiners mark your writing

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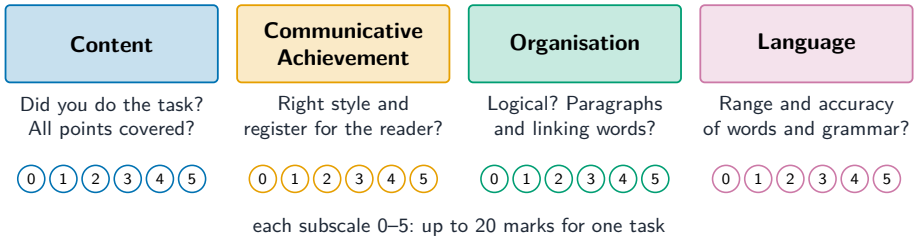

Four equal subscales: grammar is only one of them

- Each answer gets **0–5** on each of four **subscales**, so up to **20** marks per task.
- **Content:** all the points, with enough detail; the reader is fully informed.
- **Communicative Achievement**: the right style and register for the reader and the purpose.
- **Organisation:** paragraphs, headings, and **linking words** (*however*, *as a result*, *which*) that join ideas.
- **Language:** a range of business words and grammar, used accurately enough that the reader never has to guess.
- △ Perfect grammar can't make up for a **missing content point**.

Your writing routine

1. **Read the task twice.** Underline the content points and the reader.
2. **Plan for two minutes:** one line per paragraph.
3. **Write**, ticking each content point as you cover it.
4. **Check for two minutes:** points, register, word count, your typical errors (articles, plurals, tense).

Watch out: traps for Chinese speakers

- △ **Too formal for a colleague, too friendly for a customer.** *Dear Sir, I hereby inform you…* to a teammate sounds strange; *Hi dude* to a customer loses marks.
- △ **Missing articles and plurals.** *Please send invoice* → *Please send **the** invoice. Two order* → *two order**s***.
- △ **Learned phrases that don't fit.** Opening every email with *With the development of the economy…* wastes words and the reader's time.
- △ **Skipping a content point to save words.** Every point counts for Content.

Try it

Cover the answers first.

1. A Part 1 task has three bullets. Your answer covers two very well. Which subscale loses most?
2. Rewrite for a customer: *Hi! Sorry about the mess. We'll fix it ASAP.*
3. Report or proposal? *"I would recommend moving the training to Fridays."*
4. Which register: an email to a supplier you have never met?
5. Correct the sentence: *Please send me price list before Friday.*
6. Vantage Part 2: you have written 95 words. What is probably wrong?

Answers. 1 **Content**: one point is missing. 2 For example: *Dear Mr Li, I am very sorry for the problem. We will correct it as soon as possible.* 3 **Proposal**: it recommends an action. 4 **Formal**: *Dear Mr…*, *I would be grateful if…*, *Yours sincerely.* 5 *Please send me* ***the*** *price list before Friday.* 6 It is too short (120–140 needed): a point is probably missing or has too little detail.

Check yourself

Answer first, then read the explanation.

1. How many words in Vantage Part 1? – **40–50**.
2. Which part counts more? – **Part 2**, twice as much as Part 1.
3. What are the four subscales? – **Content, Communicative Achievement, Organisation, Language**.
4. What is the difference between a report and a proposal? – A proposal **recommends** an action and tries to persuade.
5. What must you do with every content point? – **Cover it**, with enough detail.

Vocabulary card meanings

memo: A short written message sent inside a company. report: A document that describes what happened or what was found, often with headings. proposal: A document that describes a situation and recommends what to do. word count: The number of words a task asks for, or the number you have written. content point: One thing the task tells you to include in your answer. register: How formal or informal your language is, chosen for the reader. recommendation: A suggestion about what someone should do. subscale: One of the separate parts that a piece of writing is marked on. Communicative Achievement: How well the writing suits its reader and purpose, the right style and register. linking word: A word such as however or as a result that joins ideas.

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