

Managing your Writing: Using the Deming Cycle [PDCA] to Improve your Business Correspondence

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Abstract

効率と生産性を大きく向上させる上で、マネジメントシステムは超大衆的なものとなり、ISO9001/14001やトヨタのカイゼン活動、モトローラのシックス・シグマなどのシステムは基礎ビジネス用語になり、現在は教育を含む多様な分野に適用されるようになった。PDCAは、経営上の問題解決や、マクロ目標の達成、さらに全体像に焦点を合わせるために使えるものである。この各システムを実行するためには数々のプロセスや、組織が包括的目標を達成する上で必要なタスクを確実にこなすための手順が重要である。さらに、論理的かつ有効的なことから、例えばライティングの演習といった、マクロ目標による管理がない状況においても援用が可能である。この論文ではJABEEによるマントラの手引きの一つであるデミング/シューハートサイクルを学生によるビジネス文書作成のスキルに活かすことを提案、方法論を示したものである。

Introduction

With organizations desperately trying to improve efficiency and productivity, management systems have become uber-popular. Systems such as ISO 9001/14001, Toyota's Kaizen, and Motorola's Six Sigma are basic business lingo. These systems are not only used in companies; they have been applied to a variety of institutions including academics. To illustrate this point you need only to walk through the corridors of the various Colleges of Technology throughout Japan and count how many times you hear the letters PDCA.

For the most part these systems are used for administrative problem-solving and for fulfilling macro-objectives; in other words, they focus on the big picture. To do this each system relies on a multitude of processes and procedures to ensure that an organization completes tasks required to achieve its overall goal.¹ Most of these processes are logical and highly useful and there is no reason that they cannot be used in a non-administrative setting with micro-objectives, for example in a classroom to practice writing. This paper will take one of the guiding mantras from the Japan Accreditation Board for Engineering Education (JABEE), the Deming/Shewhart Cycle, and apply it to the skill of business writing. It is my hope that such an exercise will improve students' writing and be of benefit to them in their future careers.

PDCA Cycle Explained

The Plan-Do-Check-Act Cycle is often called the Deming Cycle in honor of the management guru who popularized it, W. Edwards Deming. But he himself called it the Shewhart Cycle after the man who taught it to him, his teacher Walter A. Shewhart.² Further complicating things, the Cycle is sometimes called the PDSA Cycle, where the word Check has been replaced with Study. While what to call it may be baffling, the Cycle itself is quite easy to understand and use.

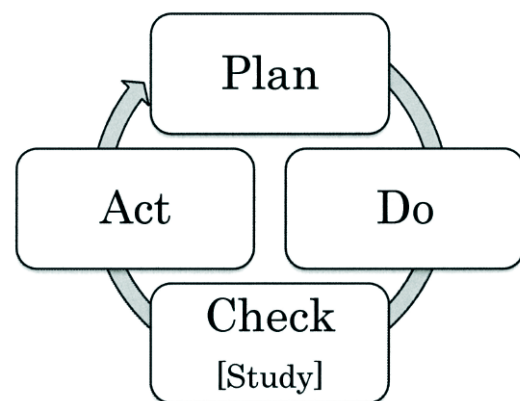


Fig. 1 The PDCA[PDSA] Cycle

The Cycle is composed of 4 stages. In the **Plan** stage, either a new idea or an existing process, product or service is analyzed for improvement. Here you also document your desired outcome. **Do** involves testing out the new idea or change. At the **Check** stage, the test is reviewed and the results are analyzed. Finally **Action** is taken based on the study in step 3.³ If improvement has been shown then the Cycle ends, if not then a different plan should be made and passed through the Cycle again. Continuous passage through the Cycle should result in a perfected idea or change.⁴ Expectations need to have been well documented in the **Plan** stage, so that they can be compared to the results from the **Check** stage. Without this you will not be able to readily identify what you learned.⁵ With that brief explanation, let's put the PDCA Cycle to work and apply it to business writing.

Plan

The first thing you should consider is "who" you are writing to: what is the level of your relationship? Generally speaking, all business correspondence should aim to be as formal and professional as possible⁶, and with familiarity comes relaxation of

those rules. But you should pay attention to the addressee's position or rank. If the person holds a position above yours then it is up to them to relax the rules.

Secondly, you must think about "why" you are writing and "what" information you would like to share. This will be largely determined by whether you are the initial correspondent or the person responding. If you are starting the communication, then you decide the contents. If you are replying, then you should take note of any questions that were asked and any information that might have been requested. Either way, make a checklist of what information you are hoping to communicate. At this point it is critical to start documenting your desired outcome.

Finally, you have to decide "when" and "how" you would like to communicate the information. A printed letter with a signature is more formal than email and arguably has more of an impact [attachments don't count]. However, you have to justify the turnaround time. Due to phenomena such as globalization and broadband Internet, business has become 24-7 and placed more importance on the age-old saying; time is money. Not only is email faster, it's cheaper too.

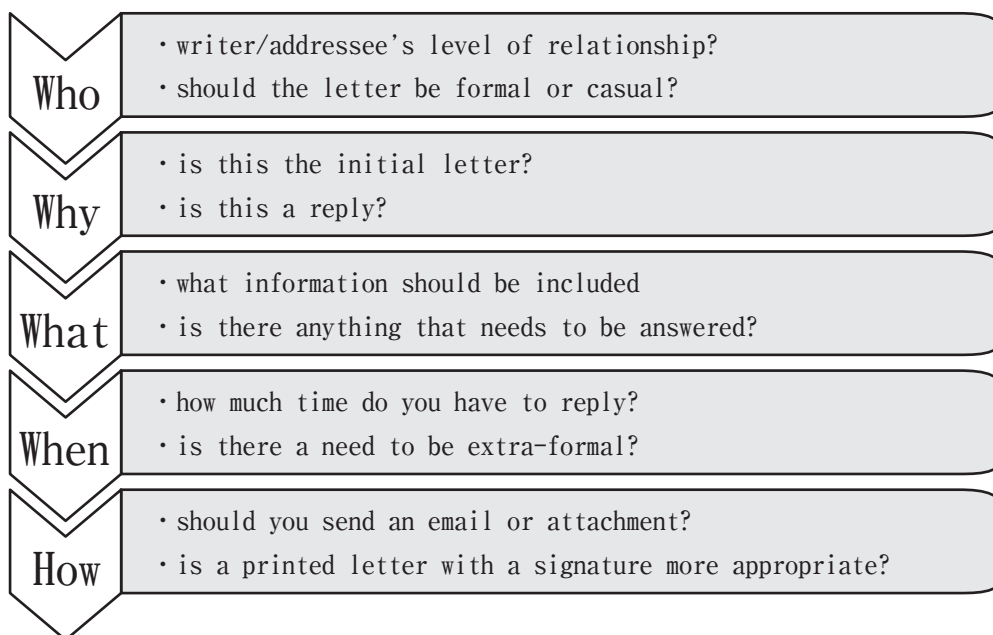


Fig. 2 Planning Procedure

Do

Based on the information gathered from the **Plan** stage, the next step in the process is to write your initial draft. While there may be a lot of information that you would like to include, you need to remember that business writing should focus primarily on two points: precision and practicality. Writing for business "always seeks to accomplish something: it reports, persuades, sells, evaluates, summarizes, proposes, responds, inquires ... always a means to an end."⁷

The easy-to-understand, simple message will always trump the elegantly-written but difficult-to-read letter. Be concise in what you say. A good business letter is defined by the McGraw-Hill

Handbook of Business Letters as usually being one page long.⁸ With an email, don't make it any longer than necessary.⁹ A good guide is to use 3 sections: 1] why you are writing, 2] information & details and 3] what to do next. For the first and third sections, 1-3 sentences will suffice. For the second section a series of several short paragraphs or lists is recommended.¹⁰

A basic format is also required for business correspondence, complete with subject, contact information, etc. Please refer to figure 3 for the typical layouts of business letters and email. The items are listed in order from top to bottom as they would normally be found in the correspondence. Note the variation in the order of the information between the two.

Business Email	Business Letter on Paper
Name, Date, To, Subject	Letterhead: Company's stationery
Date	Date
To:	Recipient's name and address
Subject	Salutation: Dear...
Salutation: Dear...	Subject of letter
Body	Body
Closing	Closing
Sender's Name, Position	Signature
Contact Info	Sender's Name and Position

Fig. 3 Typical Business Correspondence Format¹¹

Check

Now, you will proofread what you wrote. Proofreading can be very time-demanding but business is all about paying attention to detail. And if you were successful in communicating your message in a concise way, then you shouldn't need much time. Please keep in mind, that in theory, proofreading [and to some extent the PDCA Cycle itself] could continue indefinitely in the quest for perfection. Also realize that excessive time-usage will surely result in lost business. Your "aim is to make your writing as accurate and readable as possible within your time constraints."¹²

Proofreading should be done several times. The first time you should check for comprehension. If you can't understand what you wrote, you can be

guaranteed that nobody else will either. With the rise of Web 2.0 came a lot of translation websites. Unfortunately many people rely only on the English words generated by these tools, and not the English they have spent a long time learning. Please remember that free translation tools are probably free for a reason. Translation software is good for words, but don't depend on it for grammar and long sentences. Use the language you know.

While proofreading the second time, check the information you wrote against the checklist you made in the **Plan** section, to confirm that you included all the information you had planned to write. Review the planning flow-chart, [fig.2] to ensure your correspondence is written in the intended style. Finally, confirm you have included all the typical

elements of correspondence [as shown in fig.3].

After you confirm that all necessary information, style elements and formatting has been included, the article should be checked for spelling, punctuation and grammar errors. If you are using a computer, there is no excuse for spelling mistakes. Use a spell check program, and be careful that the program fixes the spelling mistake and doesn't change the word altogether. Double-check the spelling of proper names and companies with previous correspondence or information in print [phonebooks, directories] or

digital form [company website].

If you are unsure whether or not a certain phrase is commonly used and you are using a computer, then copy the phrase and add quotation marks at the beginning and end of it. Paste this phrase into the Google search box, hit search and you will soon see the number of hits. While this is not as good as a proper grammatical reference book, a large number of hits will signify that the phrase is widely used, a low number of hits might signify that there is a problem with your sentence construction.¹³

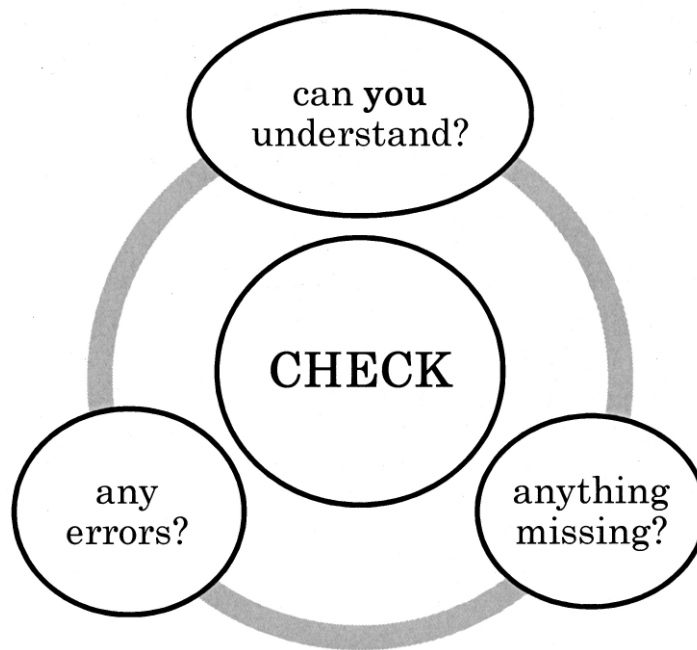


Fig. 4 Proofreading Chart

The more often you do something, the more familiar you become and the quicker you can do it next time. It becomes routine. Think about the first time you went to a new school or a new job. The first time you went there seemed to take so long, but after a few times it became routine and the travel time seemed to pass more quickly. The same is true for proofreading, familiarity will hasten the process and errors will be missed. You need to take your time and check everything carefully. A good method to slow down the process and increase the likelihood of catching errors is to first read each sentence slowly from start to finish. Then read each paragraph in isolation, starting with the last paragraph. Finally read the sentences in isolation, starting with the last

paragraph and working your way to the first one. This method should help you limit the hastiness often caused by familiarity.

Act

Depending on the information and results obtained in the previous Plan-Do-Act stages, this is either the end of the Cycle or the beginning of a new one. In fact, the PDCA Cycle never really stops, as you can never reach perfection. But you have to be realistic about the time you take to finish. Deming himself defined quality as results of work efforts divided by total costs.¹⁴ In business writing, your result is what you have written, and your cost is the time you used. It can be expressed in the following

equation:

$$\text{Quality} = \frac{\text{written work}}{\text{total time}}$$

Simply put, increasing the time you spend on writing and checking does not necessarily cause an increase in quality.

So you must make a decision. Does the correspondence rise to the standard discussed previously? Is it readable with few errors? Does it complete the initial objective? If the answer is YES, go ahead and send the email or letter. If the answer is NO, then you should re-evaluate your objectives and return to the **Plan** stage.

Summary

Management systems are quite popular in business because of the results they effect. They are pervasive; they can be applied to almost every facet of work. But it is this pervasiveness that often leads to a feeling of invasiveness among the people who are

being managed. People don't like being micro-managed. And this is probably how Deming felt as well. In his famous 14 points for management, point #1 concerned constantly striving towards improvement and point #3 spoke of not depending on inspection or supervision but rather building quality from the ground up.¹⁵

While people don't like to be micro-managed, in the quest for quality and improvement, there is no reason they can't be their own managers. This is why the PDCA Cycle was created. With it anybody can manage their own work, focusing on quality at each and every step. The PDCA Cycle can be used in just about any environment from running a huge multi-national company to writing a resume to work at that very same place.

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