



POSITIVE POLITENESS STRATEGIES IN BUSINESS CORRESPONDENCE: A PRAGMATIC ANALYSIS OF LETTERS FROM THE OXFORD HANDBOOK

Afriana^{1*}, Sipri Hanus Tewarat², Tomi Arianto³, Lisma Linda⁴

Universitas Putera Batam, Kepulauan Riau^{1,2}

Universitas Negeri Medan, Sumatera Utara³

Institut Seni Budaya Indonesia Aceh⁴

afrianaupb@gmail.com*

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Abstract

This study investigates the use of positive politeness strategies in formal business correspondence written by native English speakers. While politeness is widely recognized as a pragmatic tool in professional communication, little attention has been given to its systematic use in traditional business letters, as opposed to the growing body of research on digital communication. To address this gap, the study analyzes fifteen letters from the Oxford Handbook of Commercial Correspondence, applying Brown and Levinson's (1987) politeness theory alongside Nickerson's (1999) typology of business letter components. The analysis focuses on key structural elements such as salutations, context-setting, pre-closes, closings, signatures, and enclosures. Using a qualitative descriptive approach and the referential identity technique, the study identifies 121 instances of positive politeness strategies. The most frequent strategy was the use of appropriate forms of address (45 instances), followed by strategies such as establishing common ground, expressing optimism, and asserting shared knowledge. These strategies appeared consistently across letter components, indicating their role in achieving both clarity and relational effectiveness. This study contributes to the broader field of business communication by demonstrating that positive politeness is not merely a matter of courtesy, but a strategic rhetorical resource that reinforces professional tone, builds rapport, and facilitates cooperation. From a pragmatic perspective, the findings highlight how language functions to manage face and maintain social harmony even in highly structured written genres. These insights deepen our understanding of how politeness operates beyond spoken interaction and offer practical value for professionals aiming to enhance persuasiveness and relational dynamics in business letter.

1. INTRODUCTION

Effective communication is central to professional success, and written correspondence plays a vital role in formal business contexts. Business letters are not merely transactional tools but also instruments for managing relationships. Within these interactions, politeness functions as a critical strategy for achieving clarity, maintaining face, and building rapport (Brown & Levinson, 1987). Positive politeness, in particular, seeks to reduce social distance and foster affiliation through strategies that convey appreciation, agreement, and cooperation. As Afriana (2025) highlights, politeness is not just linguistic etiquette but a powerful pragmatic resource that facilitates social harmony in interaction, both spoken and written.

Existing studies have explored politeness strategies in various contexts—such as literary texts (Ricky & Afriana, 2024), films (Ramadhan & Afriana, 2024), social media (Sandjaja & Afriana, 2024), and even tourist interactions (Afriana et al., 2023)—revealing how politeness plays a key role in shaping meaning and maintaining social relationships. Prior research has also analyzed apologizing expressions (Gulo & Afriana, 2024) and negative politeness in business letters (Afriana, Ambalegin, & Suhardianto, 2023), contributing to our understanding of how politeness is realized in different genres and platforms. However, there is a notable gap in scholarship focusing on how native English speakers employ positive politeness specifically in formal business letters, a genre that remains relevant in situations demanding precision, professionalism, and hierarchy awareness.

This study addresses that gap by examining fifteen business letters written by native English speakers, selected from the Oxford Handbook of Commercial Correspondence (Ashley, 2003). Specifically, it explores two research questions: (1) What types of positive politeness strategies are employed in business letters? and (2) How are these strategies distributed across the structural components of the letters? To guide the analysis, the study employs Nickerson's (1999) typology to segment letter structure and applies Brown and Levinson's (1987) politeness framework to identify and categorize the strategies used. Adopting a qualitative descriptive approach, the study aims to provide an in-depth understanding of how positive politeness operates within the formal constraints of business correspondence.

By situating the findings within the broader fields of pragmatics and business communication, this research offers both theoretical and practical contributions. Theoretically, it expands current knowledge on the pragmatic use of politeness in written professional genres. Practically, the insights gained from this study are relevant for enhancing professional writing practices, improving communication training programs, and informing intercultural business correspondence—areas where polite language plays a critical role in maintaining clarity, setting the right tone, and fostering effective relationships.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Politeness in professional communication has long been recognized as a key linguistic mechanism for managing interpersonal relationships and preserving social harmony. Brown and Levinson's (1987) theory of politeness, which distinguishes between positive and negative face, provides a foundational framework in this area. Positive politeness strategies designed to reduce social distance and express solidarity are particularly relevant in business correspondence, where formality and professionalism intersect with relational dynamics. Complementing this framework is Leech's (1983) Politeness Principle, which proposes six maxims (Tact, Generosity, Approbation, Modesty, Agreement, and Sympathy) to explain the cooperative nature of politeness in discourse. These maxims are instrumental in guiding speakers and writers in minimizing face-threatening acts (FTAs) and maintaining interpersonal equilibrium, particularly in formal written genres. In business contexts, these strategies manifest in highly structured documents such as letters. Bílíková (2010) notes that native English business letter writers frequently use modals (e.g., could, would), indirect speech acts, and formulaic phrases to maintain politeness while projecting clarity and professionalism. Goudarzi, Ghonsooly, and Taghipour (2015) confirm that while both native

and non-native speakers favor positive politeness strategies, non-native writers often overapply them, particularly in formal openings and closings, to compensate for perceived social distance. Zheng (2015) introduces a rhetorical framework by linking politeness strategies to the AIDA formula (Attention, Interest, Desire, Action). Her analysis of persuasive business letters highlights the 'you-attitude' as a strategy that centers the recipient's needs effectively merging politeness with rhetorical persuasion. In line with this, Hollinger (2005) provides practical illustrations of linguistic mitigation techniques, including modal constructions, passive voice, and hedging, which are commonly used to soften requests or refusals. These findings emphasize that politeness functions not only as a social tool but as a rhetorical strategy in business communication.

Ren and Liu (2020) further analyze the application of Leech's maxims in letters communicating both positive and negative news, showing that politeness is strategically modulated based on communicative intent. Qian and Pan (2019) support this view by demonstrating that second-language learners often underutilize epistemic modality, leading to overly direct tone a gap that reflects limited pragmatic instruction in ESP programs. Beyond English business correspondence, politeness has also been studied in multilingual and intercultural settings. Zhang (2011) emphasizes the importance of "politeness equivalence" in the translation of business letters, particularly between English and Chinese. Drawing from both Western and Eastern frameworks, he argues that while politeness may differ in form, its relational function remains universal. Educational and cultural dimensions of politeness have also been explored. Afriana and Mandala (2018) assert that character education plays a critical role in shaping polite language behavior, while Wong and Esler (2020) stress the need for explicit pragmatics instruction in second language teaching. Meanwhile, Permadi (2018) and Ricky and Afriana (2024) extend the relevance of Brown and Levinson's model into fictional and literary contexts, confirming its broad applicability.

Recent studies have also applied politeness theory to workplace and service domains. Afriana, Ambalegin, and Suhardianto (2023) analyze Batam-based business letters and find patterns similar to those of native English writers, particularly in the use of indirectness and respectful address. Afriana, Nahariah, and Aslan (2023) additionally report that politeness in communication contributes directly to client satisfaction in tourism, reaffirming the practical value of politeness in applied communication settings. Taken together, this body of literature illustrates that politeness in business writing is not merely decorative, but strategic, context-sensitive, and cross-culturally relevant. The current study builds upon these findings by focusing on native English correspondence and mapping how positive politeness strategies align with structural components of business letters.

3. RESEARCH METHOD

This study employed a qualitative descriptive research design, suitable for examining pragmatic and discourse features within written texts. The primary data consisted of fifteen business letters authored by native English speakers, sourced from the Oxford Handbook of Commercial Correspondence (Ashley, 2003). These letters were purposively selected based on two main criteria: (1) they reflect authentic examples of formal business correspondence, and

(2) they contain sufficient structural and linguistic elements relevant for identifying positive politeness strategies. The selected letters cover a range of common business purposes (e.g., requests, responses, negotiations), ensuring representativeness across typical communicative situations in professional contexts. The sample size of fifteen letters is justified on the basis of depth-oriented qualitative analysis, which prioritizes detailed exploration over breadth. This number allows for manageable, rigorous examination while still providing variation in letter structure and content to observe recurring patterns of politeness strategies.

Data collection was conducted through non-participatory observation, following Sudaryanto's (2015) procedures, allowing for objective analysis of naturally occurring language without researcher interference. Brown and Levinson's (1987) politeness theory was employed to identify and categorize instances of positive politeness strategies. To structurally map these strategies within the letters, Nickerson's (1999) typology of business letter components such as salutation, context, pre-close, closing, and signature was applied.

The analysis focused on four prominent positive politeness strategies:

1. Use of appropriate forms of address
2. Establishing common ground
3. Asserting shared knowledge
4. Expressing optimism
5. The research process involved five stages:

Close reading of each letter to identify pragmatic features

1. Identification and coding of positive politeness markers
2. Classification of each instance by letter component and strategy
3. Tabulation and quantification of coded data
4. Interpretation of results within a pragmatic framework

To enhance reliability, a coding check was conducted by an independent linguist familiar with politeness theory. Discrepancies were discussed and resolved through consensus. Triangulation was also applied by comparing findings with patterns reported in previous studies on politeness strategies in business and public discourse (Afriana et al., 2023; Gulo & Afriana, 2024; Afriana, Nahariah, & Aslan, 2023). This methodological approach ensures both depth and consistency in analyzing how positive politeness operates in formal business letters.

4. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The analysis identified 121 instances of positive politeness strategies across the 15 business letters. The most frequent strategy was the use of appropriate forms of address (45 instances), followed by establishing common ground (15), being optimistic (14), and asserting knowledge (2). These strategies were distributed across components of the letter: salutations, closings, context, pre-close, and enclosures. For example, expressions such as "Dear Ms. Lowe" and "Sincerely" represent formulaic but respectful modes of address. Statements like "We look forward to hearing from you soon" illustrate the use of optimism to foster positive rapport. The consistency of these strategies across different types of letters highlights their function as both communicative and relational tools in formal business writing.

The positive politeness strategies were found in the *Oxford Handbook of Commercial Correspondence*. The frequency of the data analysis is shown in Table 1 below.

Table 1. Frequency of Positive Politeness Strategies in Business Letter

Strategy	Act	Example	Frequency
Use appropriate forms of Address	Salutation	Dear Ms. Lowe	15
	Close	Sincerely	15
	Signature	R. Gerlach, Sales Director	15
Establish common ground	Context	We can confirm that there would certainly be no trouble in supplying you with our wide selection of garments	15
Senders assert knowledge	Enclose	I am enclosing a cheque for €2Q000 on account.	2
Be Optimistic	Pre-close	We look forward to hearing from you soon	14
Total			121

Based on table 1 presents the distribution of positive politeness strategies identified in fifteen business letters taken from the *Oxford Handbook of Commercial Correspondence*. The strategies are categorized based on Brown and Levinson's (1978) framework and are further mapped to specific acts in business letter structure according to Nickerson (1999), such as salutation, closing, context, and pre-close. Each row shows an example from the data and its corresponding frequency of occurrence. The strategy of "using appropriate forms of address" appeared most frequently (45 instances), especially in the salutation, closing, and signature. This indicates that professional address and respectful tone are fundamental in maintaining politeness and professionalism in business correspondence. Across all letters, the consistent use of formal salutations and closings demonstrates a shared emphasis on respect and professionalism. The context sections often employed shared assumptions or reassurances, indicative of attempts to establish common ground and foster rapport. Pre-closing statements typically conveyed optimism about future communication or collaboration. These findings reinforce the idea that politeness is not merely decorative but instrumental in business discourse. Positive politeness strategies serve to maintain harmonious professional relationships and reduce social distance, particularly in hierarchical or formal interactions. The dominance of address-based strategies reflects a cultural and pragmatic norm in English business writing—one that prioritizes clarity, respect, and decorum. The consistent application of these strategies also illustrates their function as linguistic tools for negotiation, persuasion, and image-building in corporate correspondence. The results align with previous studies (e.g., Goudarzi et al., 2015; Afriana et al., 2023) that emphasize the communicative role of politeness in business and public communication.

Data 1

Salutation, closing, context, and pre-close were all included in the letter component. The 'salutation' was indicated in this letter using the phrase "Dear M. Gerard". The following component letter found in the letter was context, which uses politeness strategy to "establish common ground". It was stated in the sentence, "Thank you for your enquiry of 12 May in which you asked about the CDS we advertised in this month's edition of Lectron." The following letter component was pre-close, which uses an optimistic statement to demonstrate politeness strategy. It was evident from the statement, "Thank you for your interest". The next part uses the politeness strategy "appropriate form of address" and "Sincerely." Afterwards, there was the signature of the sender ", R. Gerlach", along with the job title "Sales Director".

Data 2

There are several strategies found in this letter. Firstly, the appropriate form is addressed in the salutation to show the politeness strategy, as in the statement "Dear Ms. Lowe." This is used to express respect for the recipient's letter. Additionally, the context for the letter sender's purpose for contacting the recipient was provided in the opening after the salutation. This part of the letter component is the context that establishes common ground in the sentence, "We were pleased to receive your enquiry today and are enclosing the catalogue and price list you requested". Moreover, the letter component was found to be pre-close using the "be optimistic" strategy as in the statement "please contact us, or go to our website at the address above". The last part used the appropriate politeness strategy 'using appropriate forms of address' such as "Sincerely" and the specific signature of the Company Manager.

Data 3

This letter contained salutation, close, signature, context, enclose, and Preclose act. The first begins with the salutation "Dear Mr. Crane". That sentence referred to the appropriate form of address. Furthermore, the next component is the context of the "establish common ground" strategy, which is found in the statement ", We can confirm that there would certainly be no trouble in supplying you with our wide selection of garments." Moreover, there was also strategy 'senders assert knowledge'. This strategy occurs in the enclose act as in the statement, "Enclosed you will find our summer catalogue and price list quoting prices CIF London"—that statement aimed to confirm the recipient, which the sender was concerned about what the recipient wanted. Moreover, the letter component that was found was pre-close by using the "be optimistic" strategy as in the statement ", We look forward to hearing from you soon." The last component found was a close act that referred to appropriate forms of address strategy as "Sincerely" and the specific signature of Sales Director.

Data 4

In this letter, the researcher found several politeness strategies. The first strategy employed was appropriate forms of address. The strategy consisted of salutation, closing, and signature. The statement "Dear Mr. Bellon" is illustrated as a salutation. Then, there was a context with its politeness strategy "establish common ground" that can be seen from the sentence "Our Surveyor, Iohn Pelham, visited the above premises on Wednesday 16 lune, and our costing department has not worked out the following estimate for fixtures and fittings." That sentence illustrated the purpose of the interaction between the sender and the receiver. In this letter, the sender said they would send their surveyor to provide an estimated job.

Moreover, pre-close showed in "We look forward to hearing from you soon." The pre-close revealed the sender's optimism before closing the letter in line with the explanation of positive politeness to be optimistic. Furthermore, the words "Sincerely" in the closing act aimed to make a proper complimentary close. The signature of the Director followed it.

Data 5

There were several strategies in this letter. It started with the appropriate forms of address, which contained salutation, close, and signature. The salutation found in the statement "Dear Sig. Causio." Furthermore, the close can be seen in the words "Yours Sincerely", which shows respect, the signature, and the occupation of the sender as the Chief Buyer. Additionally, there was an 'establish common ground' politeness strategy: "For this order, we accept the 15% trade discount you offered and the terms of payment (sight draft, CAD), but we hope you are willing to review these terms if we decide to order again." It referred to 'the context which showed the purpose of the letter written by the sender. Next was a pre-close. "We would appreciate delivery within the next six weeks, and we look forward to your acknowledgement." It is written by the sender that radiates optimism to keep a good relationship with the receiver. Afterwards, there was the sender's signature, "Peter Crane", and the job title "Chief Buyer."

Data 6

This letter contained a salutation by saying "Dear Mr Majid," which showed a positive politeness strategy 'appropriate forms of address'. Secondly, a context revealed the sender's intention to write the letter: "I am writing to you concerning your order, No. CU 1154/d, which you placed four weeks ago", which referred to the strategy 'establish common ground.' Moreover, the researcher found the pre-close in this letter: "Thank you for your consideration." Besides that, there was also a close that shows a positive politeness strategy, 'appropriate forms of address' in this letter by saying, "Sincerely." Last, the researcher also found the sender's signature and occupation.

Data 7

Several acts were identified in this letter that led to the politeness strategy. The first was the salutation in the words "Dear Mr Causio", which referred to strategy as an 'appropriate form of address'. Next, there was a context in the sentence, "We have accepted the sight bill, and the bank should send you advice shortly", which referred to the politeness strategy of 'establish common ground.' The next was the pre-close in the sentence, "If you need references, we will be glad to supply them." In this part, the sender showed the sender's enthusiasm for further interaction with the receiver. Moreover, there was a close that shows positive politeness strategy 'appropriate forms of address' in this letter by saying "Sincerely." Lastly, the researcher also found the sender's signature and occupation.

Data 8

The first act found in this letter was salutation. It referred to the politeness strategy as an 'appropriate form of address' in the words "Dear Ms van Basten." The next was the context in the sentence, "We were sorry to hear about the difficulties you have had and understand the situation." This sentence expresses the concern of the sender to the recipient. Furthermore, a pre-close was identified in the sentence, "We look forward to hearing from you soon." It

showed the politeness strategy of being optimistic for the upcoming conversation. The close act was found in the word "Sincerely" using the 'appropriate forms of address' strategy. The last was the signature, and the occupation of the sender is referred to as the proper etiquette for showing more detail about the sender himself.

Data 9

In this letter, some acts indicated a politeness strategy. First was salutation for the opening in the letter to give respect to the recipient. By using the politeness strategy in the phrase "Dear Mr. Bishkin", the sender employed an appropriate address form in this section. In addition, there was the context which appeared after the salutation. This letter could be seen in the sentence, "I regret to inform you that I will not be able to meet my bill, No. B/E 7714, for 35,498.00SF due on 6 June." The next was pre-close, which was found in the sentence, "I would be most grateful if you could help me in this matter.". In that sentence, the sender tried to give respect and a good relationship for the upcoming interaction. The final discovery was also closed in the phrase "Sincerely" using appropriate forms of address that convey politeness strategy. Last, the sender's signature and occupation were found in the last section of the letter.

Data 10

This letter contained several politeness strategies. It begins with the salutation act found in the phrase "Dear Mr. Frankse." It referred to the recipient by using the appropriate forms of address. Furthermore, the context existed as the topic of the letter as stated: "I was sorry to learn about the embargo your government has placed on exports to Zurimba and of the problems this has created," which referred to the 'establish common ground' strategy. The next was pre-close, identified in the sentence, "I hope that your negotiations with the Brazilian importers have a positive outcome and trust that this setback will soon be resolved." In that sentence, the sender attempted to convey respect and an excellent relationship for their next interaction. Then, there was the close in the phrase "Sincerely" to close the letter. Last, it occurred in the signature act as "N. Bishkin" followed by "Director" under the sender's name.

Data 11

This type of letter contained several politeness strategies. It begins with the salutation act found in the phrase "Dear Robert." It refers to the recipient by using the appropriate forms of address. Furthermore, the context existed as the letter's topic: "I am writing concerning our invoice No. H931 for £919.63, a copy of which is enclosed." That statement referred to the 'establish common ground' strategy. The next was pre-close, identified in the sentence, "Please let me know if I can be of assistance." In that sentence, the sender attempted to convey respect and an excellent relationship for their next interaction. Then, there was the close in the phrase "Sincerely" to close the letter. Last, it occurred in the signature act as "Richard Cliff" followed by "Director", which is the proper etiquette for showing more detail about the sender himself.

Data 12

In this letter, there are several politeness strategies. The first strategy was to 'use appropriate forms of address,' which occurred in "Dear Richard", which referred to the recipient's address. In addition, the context existed as the topic of the letter stated, "I was surprised to receive your letter of 20 November in which you said you had not received invoice

payment No. H931." The next was pre-close, identified in the sentence, "Could you please check this with Bamley's, and if there are any problems, let me know so I can make enquiries here?" Furthermore, in the close act, 'use appropriate forms of address' is used as "Sincerely." The words aimed to end the letter formally for a particular person. Then, it was followed by the sender's signature and name.

Data 13

There are five acts of politeness strategy found in this letter. The first act was salutation. It referred to the politeness strategy as an 'appropriate form of address' in the words "Dear Sig. Giordiano." The next was the context in the sentence, "Having dealt with you for some time, we are concerned that we have neither received your remittance nor any explanation as to why the balance of €6,000.00 has not been cleared." Furthermore, a close was identified in the sentence, "Please would you either reply with an explanation or send us a cheque to clear the account within the next seven days?" Next, the close act was found in the word "Sincerely" using an 'appropriate forms of address' strategy. The last was the signature, and the occupation of the sender is referred to as the proper etiquette for showing more detail about the sender himself.

Data 14

In this letter, the researchers also found several acts that indicate politeness strategy. The salutation was the first act found in the phrase "Dear Sr Costello." As in the previous letter, this part showed politeness strategy by using appropriate forms of the addressee for the letter's receiver. The next was 'context', which contained the letter's opening after the salutation, which was used to establish common ground. It can be seen in the sentence, "First, let me apologise for not having cleared our June statement or replied to your letter of 10 August." Moreover, the third strategy is 'senders assert knowledge'. This strategy occurred in the enclose act: "I am enclosing a cheque for €2Q000 on the account." These words aimed to confirm that the sender was concerned about what the recipient wanted. Furthermore, the pre-close act was in the sentence, "Could you please note our new address for future reference?" In this part, the sender gave a statement that expressed a positive possibility for the following discussion with the receiver. The last component was closed at the end of the letter. It could be indicated in the phrase "Sincerely" followed by the sender's signature and occupation.

Data 15

The last data contained four acts that showed its positive politeness strategies in this letter. The first is a salutation, "Dear Sig. Causio", with its positive politeness strategy that uses appropriate forms of address. Then, there was a context that explained the intention of the letter sent by the sender: "I am writing to you to complain about the shipment of sweaters we received yesterday against the above order." Moreover, the close act is an appropriate address politeness strategy; the sender wrote "Sincerely" before the last letter act, a signature. For the signature, the sender wrote his name and title job.

5. CONCLUSION

This study explored the application of positive politeness strategies in fifteen business letters written by native English speakers, taken from the *Oxford Handbook of Commercial Correspondence*. The findings show that these strategies are not just formal routines or polite expressions used out of habit. Instead, they are important pragmatic tools that help ensure effective communication, create a respectful tone, and maintain a professional image in written business interactions. The most common strategy identified was the use of respectful forms of address, such as formal greetings, closings, and signatures. This highlights the importance of structure and politeness in English business writing. Other strategies such as building common ground, showing optimism, and demonstrating knowledge were also frequently found, especially in the body and closing sections of the letters. These strategies help build trust, show consideration for the reader, and encourage continued cooperation. The results support previous research showing that politeness strategies depend on the context and purpose of the message. Their alignment with standard business letter structures, as outlined by Nickerson (1999), also confirms that politeness in writing is systematic and closely linked to the genre.

In conclusion, this study confirms that positive politeness strategies play an important role in business letters. They not only help deliver messages clearly but also maintain professional relationships, reduce pressure, and strengthen the sender's credibility. Future research could explore how these strategies vary across cultures or adapt to modern business formats like email and instant messaging.

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