

A photograph of a business meeting. Several people in business attire are seated around a table, writing on documents. There are four white coffee cups on the table. The image is partially obscured by a blue banner at the bottom.

## CHAPTER 7

# Positive and Informative Messages: Writing Letters, Memos, and Emails



### LEARNING OUTCOMES

1. Analyze a writing situation to decide whether a letter, a memo or an email is the appropriate genre of document to send
2. Differentiate between the purposes and ways of organizing positive and informative messages
3. Organize positive messages appropriately to build goodwill with readers
4. Adapt informative messages to emphasize positive elements and build goodwill



## GETTING STARTED

Letters and memorandums (aka memos) are the oil that makes the modern corporate machine work. In fact, they are arguably the most essential tools for getting work done in the modern business world. The memo came into existence when the invention of the typewriter made it easy to communicate through paper. That ability to communicate through easily duplicated paper messages enabled corporations to grow to sizes that were previously unheard of. One hundred years later, the invention of the computer and then the Internet spawned a new genre: email messages. The ability to communicate through electronic messages in turn helped develop work arrangements that span the globe.

Organizations exchange information through letters or memos, whether electronic (email) or print form. Print memos generally communicate important information among employees within the same organization, whereas printed letters generally communicate information between individuals at different organizations. For example, the human resources manager of a medium-sized financial services organization might draft a memo to inform all employees within an organization of the new guidelines for submitting trip reports. When an administrative assistant writes to clients, they would use the genre of the letter to communicate outside the organization. Communicators in business generally use email for brief or informal transactions, but for communicating formal and important information or inquiries, they might send a print letter across town by courier.

**Figure 7.1** What distinguishes a memo from a letter?

The generic conventions of formatting a letter or memo are easy to learn. It is also fairly easy to decide when to write a letter and when to write a memo (see Figure 7.1). However, organizing and presenting your message within the genre can be a major challenge. There are four different kinds of messages that you will find yourself writing frequently: positive messages, informative messages, negative messages, and persuasive messages. Positive messages deliver good news to readers. Informative messages convey neutral information. Negative messages deliver bad news to readers; writers of bad-news messages want to manage readers' emotions and maintain goodwill toward the organization. Persuasive messages present complex information that readers may react to with mixed emotions; this type of message requires writers to manage reader emotion or motivate readers to act when they might not particularly want to. In this chapter, you will read several examples of messages that deliver good news or information. This chapter also outlines patterns of organization that you can use or adapt to the different writing situations that you encounter. In the Rhetorical Situations of this chapter you will apply your knowledge of how to write short messages in the different contexts described there.



## CHOOSING THE MESSAGE TO FIT YOUR SITUATION



*Analyze a writing situation to decide whether a letter or a memo is the appropriate genre of document to send*

Communication tasks are not usually labeled as positive or negative (see Figure 7.2). Instead, you must analyze the **rhetorical situation** to determine what kind of message or response fits best. The main focus of your analysis should be your readers. Examine the situation from their viewpoint to decide how they will respond to your communication: Will they be happy to hear your news? Indifferent? Disappointed? Angry?

**rhetorical situation:**

The context in which a writing or speaking event takes place, including information about the audience, purpose, and message

**Informative messages:** If you expect readers to respond neutrally to the information you communicate, the message is informative.

**Positive messages:** If you expect readers to be happy about the information you communicate, the message is positive.

**Negative messages:** If you expect readers to be angry or disappointed by the information you communicate, the message is negative.

**Persuasive messages:** If you expect readers to be resistant or opposed to your message, it is a persuasive one.

**Figure 7.2** Different types of messages.

For example, if you were the administrative assistant in a medium-sized business that sponsored an academic award at the local community college, you might find yourself having to write to both successful and unsuccessful applicants for the award. Some of your readers should be pleased to hear that they have won. Therefore, this letter is a positive message. You will use the positive organizational pattern outlined in the next section of this chapter to develop your message. In contrast, when you write to unsuccessful applicants, your news is rejection, so you expect your readers to be disappointed or even angry at losing. To develop a bad-news letter to losing applicants, you will use a different organizational pattern.

To decide what type of message best fits your rhetorical situation, learn to distinguish one type of message from another. Use the checklist in Figure 7.3 to decide which pattern to use. For example, as you start to draft the letter to the successful award applicants, you might review the checklist in Figure 7.3 to determine that you are writing a positive message (sharing good news) as well as an informative message (informing the reader of details about accepting the award). You also know, based on your analysis, that you should format the messages as letters because they are going outside the organization.



ASK THE QUESTION	IDENTIFY THE RHETORICAL SITUATION	OUR RECOMMENDED MESSAGE PATTERN
<b>What is the main reason for my communication?</b>	To share good news	Use the <b>positive and informative</b> message pattern outlined in Figure 7.4.
	To communicate important information	Use, accordingly, the <b>positive and informative</b> message pattern outlined in Figure 7.4 or the negative message pattern discussed in Chapter 8.
	To communicate bad news	Use the <b>negative</b> message pattern. (see Chapter 8)
	To argue a particular point with which readers may not agree	Use the <b>persuasive</b> message pattern. (see Chapter 9)
<b>What are the elements that I must include in this message?</b>	My situation lacks some elements from the pattern	Omit those elements listed in the pattern. Discuss the elements you do have in the order recommended in the pattern.
	My situation has reasons from more than one pattern	Use the pattern that fits best with your <b>main</b> reason for communication. Adapt elements from other patterns as necessary.
<b>Should I format my message as a memo or letter?</b>	I am writing to someone who works for my organization	Use a <b>memo</b> format.
	I am writing to someone who works for a different organization	Use a <b>letter</b> format.

**Figure 7.3** Use this checklist to analyze your message.

## HOW TO WRITE POSITIVE AND INFORMATIVE MESSAGES



*Differentiate between the purposes and ways of organizing positive and informative messages*

Like most business and professional communications, positive and informative messages usually have more than one main purpose. They generally aim to

- inform or share good news



- have recipients read the message, understand it, and respond positively to it
- downplay any negative elements

Simultaneously positive and informative messages have several secondary purposes:

- to have the reader think well of the writer and his or her organization
- to reduce or end further correspondence on this subject

Figure 7.4 is an example of a positive and informative message. Note the information that it contains and how it organizes and presents this information. The annotations in Figure 7.4 show how to organize a positive or informative message. If we examine the annotations, we quickly note that the sample letter could be improved upon to make a more effective positive and informative message. For example, the negative elements in the message are not stated as positively as they could be.



## Exercise 7.1: State Negative Elements as Positively as Possible

Rewrite the negative sentences reproduced from Figure 7.4 so that the points are stated as positively as possible, while remaining clear and comprehensible. Review Chapter 3 for information about how to revise negative statements into positive ones.

1. Please note that your vehicle has been rated for personal use only, which does not include a commute to work.
2. We have confirmed that the vehicle is not modified or customized in any way, nor is it used for commercial purposes such as delivery, courier, etc.
3. If these conditions should change, please advise our office as soon as possible to ensure that your coverage is not negatively impacted.
4. Other than those drivers already listed on the policy, we understand that no one else is using the vehicle on a regular basis.
5. If you do have additional drivers in the household not currently listed, please contact our office to discuss.

## Motivating Your Reader

The sample informative and positive letter in Figure 7.4 provides excellent additional details to motivate the readers, Horace and Bertha Baxtrom. The writer, Vivian, does this by requesting that the readers send her a copy of the new vehicle ownership to ensure her records are complete. Of course, the Baxtroms want her information about their insurance requirements to be complete. To continue the topic of complete insurance records, Vivian reports that the policy currently lists Horace as the principal vehicle driver. She invites the Baxtroms to inform her if there



**ROBERTS & MANJIT INSURANCE/BENEFITS/FINANCIAL SERVICES**

January 4, 2020  
Horace and Bertha Baxstrom  
10,972 S. Qu'Appelle No. 157,  
R.R.# 4  
Mclean, SK S0G 3E0

Dear Horace and Bertha:

As per your request, we confirm that we have advised Southern Prairie Mutual to process the following change to your policy #0867143 effective January 4, 2020.

Add coverage on the 2020 Toyota Tundra as follows:

- Liability - \$1,000,000 limit
- All Perils - \$500 deductible
- Rental Vehicle coverage (SPCF #12/89)
- Waiver of Depreciation (SPCF #26)
- Claims Protection

Please note your vehicle has been rated for personal use only, which does not include a commute to work. We have confirmed that the vehicle is not modified or customized in any way, nor is it used for commercial purposes such as delivery, courier, etc. If these conditions should change, please notify our office as soon as possible to ensure that your coverage is not negatively impacted.

To complete our files, we would appreciate receiving a copy of the ownership, which may be faxed, mailed, or scanned and emailed to our office. We have the registered owner and principal driver of the vehicle listed as Horace Baxstrom. Other than those drivers already listed on the policy, we understand that no one else is using the vehicle on a regular basis. If you do have additional drivers in the household not currently listed, please contact our office to discuss.

Enclosed are liability slips for your use. The documents amending your policy will follow from Southern Prairie Mutual in the next few weeks. Please review these, as it is important that all the information be correct.

Should you have any questions or if we can be of further assistance, please contact me at (123) 456-7890 or [vivian.pierugi@romanjit.com](mailto:vivian.pierugi@romanjit.com). Thank you for continuing to entrust your insurance needs to Roberts & Manjit.

Sincerely,

*Vivian Pierugi*

Vivian Pierugi, CAIB  
Insurance Advisor

1. Briefly present the main points and share any good news.

2. Add details, and include all information that Horace and Bertha need.

3. Include any negative elements, but state them as positively as possible.

4. Add details to show readers how they benefit (in other words, reader motivation).

5. Add good-will ending.

**Figure 7.4** Sample informative and positive message.



are more possible operators of the vehicle than are listed on their current policy. For example, if one of Horace and Bertha's family members has moved home (perhaps their son, while he helps out on the farm over the summer), they should notify Vivian so that she can make changes to their records. If their son crashes the new truck and it turns out he has been a regular driver of the vehicle over the summer but was never listed on the insurance policy, Horace and Bertha may find the insurance adjustor unwilling to process their claim. Vivian uses this argument as a motivator to prompt the Baxtroms to update their coverage details.

To decide whether you need to motivate your reader to accept your information, consider the following questions:

- Should you manage readers' responses toward the information or your organization? If you want readers to respond positively, include reasons why they should do so.
- Does your message present a new organizational policy? Often new policies are obvious as to how they benefit the organization; how they benefit the individual employee or customer is often less obvious. Highlight for readers how the new policy or change in an existing policy benefits them as well.

## Concluding Positive and Informative Messages



*Organize positive messages appropriately to build goodwill with readers*

Concluding a short positive or informative message gracefully can be a challenge. Some people fall back on the weak and negative invitation, "If you have any questions, please don't hesitate to call." Avoid this type of closing for two reasons: one, it invites readers to create more work for you (calling you with questions when your message should have answered them clearly), and it introduces a negative into an otherwise positive situation ("do *not* hesitate"). Alternatives are to end the communication without a closing or to use a goodwill closing that addresses readers directly. To build **goodwill**, close by referring to the business relationship that you have with your reader (rather than personal aspects).

In Figure 7.4, Vivian Pierugi uses a variation on "If you have any questions, please call," but her approach is successful because she phrases the invitation positively. It is feasible that her letter might prompt questions or notification of changes to the existing policy records. Her conclusion also includes a direct effort at building goodwill with readers by thanking them for their business.

**goodwill:** A positive disposition that the reader has toward you as the writer or your organization





## Exercise 7.2: How Effective Are These Closings?

Evaluate the quality of the following brief endings for a positive or informative message. If you decide it is a poor conclusion, discuss ways to make it better.

1. Please don't be afraid to email me back if I've missed explaining something.
2. I'm really sorry that I won't be able to make it to the banquet, but when I return from my trip to Europe, I will definitely contact you to arrange to pick up my award.
3. I do hope we have the opportunity to meet at the banquet in May so that we can discuss further the ways in which Roberts and Manjit Insurance may contribute to the development of your knowledge of insurance and finance through our internship program.
4. Thanks for your consideration.
5. Together we can stem the growing disaster that the unchecked spread of the pine beetle represents to the timber reserves of this province.



## Rhetorical Situation 7.1: Congratulations, You Have Won a Lily's Choice Award



Dirk Pelham, administrative assistant to Lilian Fung, realizes he isn't done for the day the moment Lilian Fung, owner of the Lilian Fung Collection, Inc., sweeps into the room brandishing a three-inch stack of file folders. She asks him to draft letters notifying the three winners of this year's Lily's Choice Awards. She places the folders on his table and begins searching in the large bag that hangs from her shoulder.



Dirk picks up the top folder and looks through its contents. He had noticed the competition information on the company website (see Figure 7.5). The website describes the award and the contest rules and information about how award winners are selected.

Lilian explains that the company contacts the fashion program directors at post-secondary schools around the country every fall and invites their students to send in their designs. Students submit a portfolio of women's fashion designs, and she selects three students as "Young Designers to Watch" through her Lily's Choice Awards. Every year they get more submissions. This year they got 25 applicants; in the first year they started with just five. The contest is starting to catch on.

The three winners are in the green file folders on top. The rest of the folders contain the other submissions. From her bag Lilian extracts several pages of handwritten notes with her comments on the designs and her criteria for selection. Dirk's job is to make one or two specific references to the work in each letter using the notes. She advises him to look through the designs before drafting the letters. Lilian points out that the designs in the second green folder are particularly exciting, but warns Dirk not to spend too much time browsing through the entries. She wants the notification letters in the mail by early next week.

Dirk is unclear, though, about when she wants to see the letters: is Monday okay or does she want to read a draft sooner? Lilian replies that he should draft the first one and email it to her. She can look at it in the airport on Friday evening. Once Dirk receives her feedback, he can draft the other letters.

Dirk says this sounds straightforward. Lilian notes that in addition to knowing why they won, the winners also need details about the award presentation ceremony. The awards are usually given out at each school's formal awards banquet at the end of term. Lilian asks Dirk to contact the program directors at the three winners' schools for banquet details. He will also need to arrange for one of Lilian Fung's representatives to attend.

Once Lilian leaves his office, Dirk begins reviewing the winning student design portfolios with interest. He knows that the kind of recognition that comes from a Lily's Choice Award can really jump-start a young designer's career, especially because of the internship with the Lilian Fung Collection that comes with the award. He is also interested in picking up some cutting-edge ideas for his own work.

After a few minutes, he sets aside the design folders to begin the task of writing the letters. He will take them home with him tonight to study them more closely. He needs to check the Lilian Fung website for details about the awards and then make some phone calls for details on how and when the awards will be made.

## Analysis: Writing a Letter of Congratulations

Before drafting the letter to contest winners, Dirk analyzes his writing situation. He quickly identifies his main reasons for communication—to share good news and relay important information about receiving the award. Next, he reviews the pattern outlined for writing positive and informative messages to determine which elements are relevant to his situation. As he jots down his ideas related to the analysis, he decides that, at least initially, there are no negative elements to receiving the award, unless the recipients are unable to attend the banquet ceremony. Then he makes a list of the information that must appear in the letter; as he brainstorms the letter's contents, he realizes that the challenge of this message will be ensuring readers have all of the



details they need to collect the award (whether or not they can attend the banquet) and how to start arrangements for the winners' internships.

Suddenly Dirk realizes that an important component of this message is to ensure that recipients are motivated to contact him about setting up the internship part of their awards. Although he knows that if he were to win such an award he would be banging on doors to set up his internship, he also recognizes that different personality types might be nervous about contacting the Lilian Fung Collection, so this means he should analyze his readers' needs to determine the most effective means of prompting them to act.



## Exercise 7.3: Motivating Readers to Attend an Awards Event

1. Generate a list of needs that award recipients might have in connection with their education and the winning of an award that would be met by attending the award ceremony and promptly setting up their internships. Here are three to get you started:

- being a successful student
- distinguishing themselves from other students
- earning income

Add at least three or four more needs to this list that you think are relevant to the reader.

2. Expand the three that look most useful to you into two or three sentences of explanation that you might be able to use in a notification letter that will motivate your readers to attend an awards program event. Remember to choose reasons that your readers will find motivating.



## Professional Communication Challenges 7.1

### 1. Congratulations on Winning a Lily's Choice Award

Using the details presented in Figures 7.5 through 7.8, write a draft of Dirk Pelham's letter for Lilian Fung in which you inform one of the winners that they have won a Lily's Choice Award for innovative women's fashion designs. Make sure that your letter includes any information the recipient needs to accept the award, as well as Lilian Fung's feedback about the designs. If necessary, reread the discussion on writing positive and informative messages to review the important aspects of writing this kind of message and for pointers on how to organize and draft your message.

**Audience:** The three recent winners of the Lily's Choice Award

**Purpose:** To inform readers that they have won the award, which includes a cash prize and a six-month internship working at the Lilian Fung Collection, Inc.; to provide details on where and when they will receive the award (and what to do if they cannot attend the awards banquet); and to motivate them to contact Lilian about arranging their internship

**Genre:** Business letter (on company letterhead)



Lilian Fung invites all fourth-year students enrolled full-time in an accredited Canadian school of fashion apparel design program to submit a portfolio of between three and five designs of women's casual or work apparel for consideration for a Lily's Choice Award. The awards include a \$1,000 cash prize, a commemorative brass plaque, and an opportunity to work for six months as a paid intern at the Lilian Fung Collection in its Toronto studio. Deadline for submissions: Nov. 30 (yearly).

**Figure 7.5** Lily's Choice Award description from the website.

Scheduled for May 7, 6:00–8:00 p.m., at Fondini's Bistro, west campus (211 Spadina Rd)

Attendance by representative from the Lilian Fung Collection is now confirmed.

Send name and email address of representative [check this with Lilian?] to Anne Bechaumé, program administrative assistant (fshninfo@ryerson.ca), no later than April 15.

**Figure 7.6** Dirk's notes on details regarding one of the school program awards banquets.

Rashana Develani, Apt. 807, 439 High Tech Rd, Richmond Hill, ON (905-123-4567)

Harcourt Van Sittart, 325 Queen St., Oakville, ON (905-234-5678)

Lami McTier, 22 Littlebottom Cresc., East York, ON (416-345-6789)

**Figure 7.7** Lily's Choice Award recipients.

Rashana: Fascinating use of beading to add upscale elegance to casual weekender design. Textured fabric combination is arresting.

Harcourt: Flamboyant pantsuit design will give the working woman options. Stunning use of merino wool.

Lami: Functional yet elegant approach to basic jeans and t-shirt combination. This combination demonstrates understanding of contemporary women's need for style and comfort.

**Figure 7.8** Lilian Fung's commentary on Lily's Choice Award winners' designs.

## **2. Accepting the award and requesting additional information**

Imagine that you are one of the three recipients of a Lily's Choice Award (Rashana Develani, Harcourt Van Sittart, or Lami McTier), and draft a letter to Lilian Fung, the owner of the Lilian Fung Collection,



thanking her for the award and notifying her of whether you are able to attend the awards banquet on May 7 to receive your award. In your letter, also request further information about the Lilian Fung Collection's internship program, a position that you have been offered as part of the award. Include information about your availability to accept the internship as well as your particular interests and goals for the internship. Use the information in this chapter about writing positive and informative messages to help you structure and draft your letter.

**Audience:** Lilian Fung, the owner of Lilian Fung Collections, Inc., who has just notified you that you have won an award sponsored by her company

**Purpose:** To accept the award and request additional information about the details of the internship that you will receive as part of the award

**Genre:** Positive and informative email message

## INFORMATIVE MESSAGES



*Adapt informative messages to emphasize positive elements and build goodwill*

Figure 7.9 is a sample letter written to inform a client of the details associated with a corporate move. As you read it, attend to how the message is structured, starting with the complete contact information for Cascades Moving & Storage. The message itself establishes a positive first impression by thanking the reader for his business and repeats the agreed-on dates for his move. The writer formats the letter using bold headings and white space to highlight the information of central interest to Dr. Wild: the dates for his move and important details associated with those dates. This formatting allows readers to scan quickly to check the details.



### Exercise 7.4: Analyze a Positive and Informative Message

Analyze the sample letter in Figure 7.10 to answer the following questions:

1. What pattern or organizational structure does this letter use?
2. How effectively does this letter present important details?
3. What suggestions can you make for changes in formatting to improve its presentation of information?
4. What stylistic changes can you make to move important details to positions of emphasis?
5. How could you rewrite the goodwill ending to improve its use of positive emphasis?



Cascades Moving & Storage  
630 Industrial Road  
Full contact information included in letterhead  
Spokane, WA  
Tel.: 123-123-4567  
Fax: 123-123-4568  
Email: move@cascadesmove.com

April 18, 2020

Dr. Robert Wild  
2047 Pelkey Cres.  
Duluth, MN 55802

**Order Number:** 0873004533033

Dear Robert,

Thank you for choosing Cascades Moving & Storage to manage your move. We're pleased that you've entrusted your valuable belongings to us and we look forward to serving you.

Your relocation is confirmed below. If you need to change these dates, please let me know at least one week ahead of time so that we may accommodate your new schedule.

**From** Duluth, MN **to** Corvallis, OR

**Packing:** 2021/05/13

**Loading:** 2021/05/14

**Delivery:** Your household goods will be delivered between 2021/05/21 and 2021/05/26. The exact delivery date will be the choice of York Van Lines. Your driver will advise you of this date 48 hours prior to delivery or, if possible, at loading.

**Unpacking:** Your household goods will be unpacked following delivery.

We appreciate your business and will do everything we can to get you settled quickly. If you have any questions prior to or during your move, please call us toll-free at 1-800-123-4567.

Yours truly,

Phyllis Simms  
Corporate Relocation Coordinator

Goodwill opening identifies topic

Includes negative element as positively as possible

Presents main points

Adds details and includes all necessary information

Ends by building goodwill

Shows reader how he benefits

Figure 7.9 Sample informative letter.



Dear Cardmember,

Welcome to a new world where all those exotic locations on your bucket list seem much closer. You are packed and ready for an adventure that only North American Credit® FlyFreePlus® Titanium Card can offer.

Your new Card membership works like this. For each \$1.00 purchase charged to your Card, you earn 1 FlyFreePlus® Mile. But FlyFreePlus doesn't stop there. Once you have reached \$10,000 in purchases each year, you will start earning 1.25 FlyFreePlus Miles for every additional \$1.00 purchase. If you use this Card for spending every day, you earn FlyFreePlus Rewards more quickly.

But this Card isn't just about earning FlyFreePlus Miles. It also gives you North American Credit's global service, plus the warm welcome of 5,000 fine establishments in the US, Canada and worldwide. Your unique North American Credit benefits include:

- No spending limit
- Travel assistance and insurance protection
- Our exclusive *NoMoreWaiting*® program

With FlyFreePlus, only your imagination can limit your travel options. Visit over 863 destinations in over 149 countries served by our member airlines. Whether it's short domestic flights or your round-the-world dream vacation, North American Credit FlyFreePlus Titanium Card has you covered. And your choices continue to multiply.

Redeem your miles online for hotel rooms, car rentals, or vacation packages. Reward yourself using hundreds of options for merchandise, gift cards, and FlyFreePlus experiences. Whether you pursue the heart-pounding excitement of heli-skiing in the Rockies or the quiet contemplation of an ocean fishing trip, North American Credit cards have something for you. For details on the FlyFreePlus program, please see [flyfreeplus.com](http://flyfreeplus.com).

The enclosed Benefits Brochure will introduce you to all the nuances of your Titanium Card. If you have questions not answered in the brochure, do not hesitate to visit our website at [namericancredit.ca](http://namericancredit.ca) or contact us at 1-800-NAM-CRED.

We appreciate you choosing the North American Credit FlyFreePlus Titanium Card. We strive to give you no less than the best possible service, whether you are in Toronto, Tulsa, or Timbuktu. We do not believe you can find a better business partner than us.

Sincerely,

Devrim Karga  
Director,  
Consumer Card Marketing

**Figure 7.10** Sample positive and informative letter.



**Rhetorical Situation 7.2: Soliciting Customer Feedback**

Filipa Dragovic, the customer relations manager for the Center for Skin Research (CSR), is always looking for ways to improve the services that CSR offers to their clients. The Center has thousands of clients in their database, but most come and go quietly. Most clients are nervous before their appointments and in no mood to complete a survey about their experience at the center afterward. The problem she faces is getting some insight from these clients about their experiences as patients.

Jayson Jacks, an internship student working on a commerce degree, thinks he can help. He is a marketing major, and getting this kind of feedback from clients is something that interests him. He recently received a request that he complete a customer feedback survey after his appointment at a physiotherapy clinic. That letter is short—just four paragraphs. The first paragraph talks about how the physiotherapy clinic is committed to providing the best health care possible. In the second paragraph they request that Jayson complete a two-minute survey as part of improving their services. To encourage him they offer to enter him in a draw for a \$100 gift certificate—something he finds attractive because the odds of winning are much better than any lottery ticket he might buy. They end the letter by thanking him and assuring him that any information he provides will be confidential. He suggests this letter could be a good model for CSR to use in creating their own appeal for feedback from their customers. He notes that the chief physician of the clinic has signed the letter and thinks that maybe Filipa might ask their president, Dr. Mykyta Zelenko, to sign CSR's survey letter.

Jayson brainstorms the following list of items to include in the letter to CSR clients:

- an incentive for completing the survey
- some information about the online survey
- some idea of what the questions are about: info about wait times in the office, courtesy of the staff, cleanliness of facility, parking
- the URL for the survey (<http://www.csr.ca/survey>)

One of the key aspects of the letter from his physiotherapist that Jayson responded to is that it was short. He read the letter in less than one minute, and he could do the survey from his phone while waiting for the bus just by clicking a few buttons. This project seems like something he can handle.

**Professional Communication Challenges 7.2****1. Write a letter to get clients to respond to the survey**

Using the information in Rhetorical Situation 7.2, write a short letter (fewer than 150 words) to the clients of the CSR. Use the structure outlined in the sample letter in Figure 7.10 and described in the letter Jayson received to organize your message.

**Audience:** Clients of the CSR who plan to continue using the Center's services and have an interest in improving the services they receive

**Purpose:** Motivate them to visit the link in the letter and fill out the survey

**Genre:** Informative message sent as an email



## 2. Write questions for the online survey

Write the sample questions that would be included on the survey mentioned in Jayson's letter. Use the issues identified by Jayson in the Rhetorical Situation and add other questions that you think would be useful for the administration of the clinic. Limit the survey to no more than seven questions and include no more than one open-ended question (a question where the respondent has to write out an answer rather than click a box). For more information on writing good survey questions, see Chapter 12.

**Audience:** Clients of the CSR who plan to continue using the Center's services and have an interest in improving the services they receive

**Purpose:** Obtain information that can be used to improve the client experience

**Genre:** Short survey or questionnaire

## CHAPTER SUMMARY

- Decide the best medium for the message that you have to send (email, print memo, letter).
- Analyze a situation to identify how best to pattern your message to accomplish your purpose.
- Organize positive and informative messages so that they present good news, include all necessary information, show readers how they benefit, and build goodwill.
- Motivate readers to respond to the requests made in informative and positive messages.



## CHAPTER 8

# Negative Messages: Writing Letters, Memos, and Emails



### LEARNING OUTCOMES

1. Identify how to structure a negative message
2. Read critically to identify important information and make inferences
3. Develop the ability to write a good buffer to soften negative news
4. Demonstrate how to structure a negative message to recipients who have more or less status within an organization than you do



## GETTING STARTED

We've all received them—the rejection letter, the phone call informing you that you did not get the job, or any one of the many other bad news messages. Nobody likes getting them, but some are clearly easier to deal with than others. Why? There are ways to break bad news that can make the situation easier to handle. In this chapter, we'll explore how to do that.

Negative messages deliver bad news to readers. Your goal in writing a negative message is to manage readers' emotions and responses to your message and to maintain their goodwill toward your organization. In this chapter, you will learn two ways of structuring a negative message to manage your readers' response, including using a buffer to open the message and giving a reason before your refusal. You will also learn how to structure your letter based on your relationship to the recipients, including coworkers, customers, and supervisors. Breaking bad news well can often mean the difference between maintaining clients and losing them, and between building relationships at work and finding yourself out of work. In the Rhetorical Situations in this chapter, you first meet Penelope Stefanopoulos, who must explain to customer Jared LeBlanc, who has improperly used a company product, why Pergola Products cannot refund the purchase price of his new shirt. In the second Rhetorical Situation you assess the quality of a letter to subscriber Fred Keynes from the city newspaper informing him of an upcoming increase in the paper subscription price.

## HOW TO WRITE NEGATIVE MESSAGES



*Identify how to structure a negative message*

Negative messages are ones to which you expect your reader will respond with displeasure: they will be unhappy to hear the news you have to communicate. Figure 8.1 is a sample negative message sent to a school-aged child whose book order is delayed while the book club waits for it to be restocked. Although it is a short message, Figure 8.1 uses the classic pattern for a negative message:

**buffer:** A neutral statement often used to begin a negative message

**goodwill:** A positive disposition that the reader has toward you or your organization

1. **buffer**
2. statement of disappointing news, plus reason
3. an alternative or compromise to soften the disappointment
4. a positive, **goodwill**-building closing



Bookworm Book Clubs  
497 Granville St.  
Vancouver, BC  
V6C 1T1

Dear Reader:

Thank you very much for ordering from Bookworm Book Clubs.

Unfortunately, the item you ordered is temporarily out of stock. It is on order and will be shipped to your teacher as soon as it arrives in our warehouse.

To make waiting a little easier, we've included a free gift for you. It's our way of saying "thanks for understanding."

Happy reading!

Jane Abbott  
Jane Abbott

1. This example uses a buffer: a neutral or positive statement that postpones the negative.

2. Negative information is stated once, clearly.

3. It presents an alternative or compromise, if one is available.

4. It ends with a positive, goodwill-building closing.

**Figure 8.1** This sample negative message uses a standard organizational pattern.

In more complicated situations, you should expand each paragraph to elaborate your points and to manage your reader's response effectively. For example, later in this chapter you will meet Penelope Stefanopoulos, who is writing to a customer of Pergola Products with whom she is not acquainted but whom she would like to preserve as a customer, if possible. She will use a version of the first organizational pattern outlined in Figure 8.1. She has two options for the beginning of her letter (see Figure 8.2):



**Figure 8.2** A flowchart shows the standard organizational pattern for a negative message.



1. She can use a buffer, as Jane Abbott did in her letter in Figure 8.1.
2. She can give a reason before her refusal.

In a case where you do not already know the person you are writing to, try to build as much goodwill as you can. After breaking the bad news, consider offering an alternative or compromise (if possible). End with a goodwill closing.

A primary goal in breaking bad news to readers is to manage their emotions in response to your message. If they are customers, you want them to continue to do business with your company despite your unwelcome message. If they are coworkers, you aim to maintain their cooperation (to follow a new but unpopular policy, for example) or positive attitude toward the organization going forward. Building goodwill and generating a positive (or at least not excessively negative) response to the bad news are important components of writing effective negative messages.

## Buffers



*Develop the ability to write a good buffer to soften negative news*

Good buffers can be hard to write. Figure 8.3 lists a few tips to help you write a good buffer.

When to Use a Buffer	What Makes a Good Buffer?	What Makes a Buffer Good?
<p>When you know your reader values cultural indirectness (many non-North American cultures prefer indirect rather than direct statements)</p> <p>When you need to thank your reader for something</p> <p>When openly stating the negative sounds too abrupt or rude</p>	<p>Start with the positive</p> <p>Thank the reader for something he or she has done (see Figure 8.6)</p> <p>Describe what happened or list facts relating to the situation</p> <p>Refer to an enclosure in the message</p>	<p>It should accomplish these things:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Put the reader in a positive frame of mind</li> <li>■ Not give the bad news, but not suggest a positive response either</li> <li>■ Provide an effective transition to the negative news</li> </ul>

**Figure 8.3** What you need to know about buffers.



**Exercise 8.1: What Is a Good Buffer?**

Evaluate the following sample buffers to determine their effectiveness. Use the information in Figure 8.3 as your criteria to evaluate the degree to which each buffer is effective. Revise where necessary.

1. Dear Mr. Todd,  
Thank you for your letter of May 7 in which you requested a replacement blade to your straight razor after extensive usage caused it to break.
2. Dear Mr. Sauron,  
It is with great regret that I am sending you this replacement ring. We were unable to recover the original, as you requested, because it was recently destroyed after its bearer fell into an active volcano.
3. Dear Ms. Looser,  
Congratulations! You have been selected as fourth runner up in this season's North American Idol contest.
4. Dear Mr. Vassani,  
The members of the selection committee were very impressed with your credentials, your work, and especially your expertise in the area of groundwater contamination solutions, but they decided to offer the position to the other short-listed candidate. We felt the other candidate better suited our needs at this time.
5. Dear Colleague,  
The process of organizing the program for the 2021 Business Communication Association Conference has been completed. With much regret, I am writing to report that your proposal(s) could not be included in the final schedule.

**Rhetorical Situation 8.1: We Regret to Inform You ...**

*Read critically to identify important information and make inferences*

Abdul Akbar rereads the letter that Penelope Stefanopoulos has just handed him (Figure 8.4). He doesn't know where to begin in his explanation about the errors the customer has made with the product. As a chemist in the research and development division of Pergola Products, Abdul is a first line of defense for administrative assistants like Penelope in customer service, who deal extensively with inquiries and complaints from consumers about Pergola's vast array of household products.

Penelope agrees that they can't refund the replacement cost of the shirt, but she also knows that she has to explain to Jared, the customer, why the Bleach'Em Out pen couldn't work when he used it in the way he described. She is wondering if Abdul can tell her anything about the chemistry of mixing together the different products Jared has used on his shirt.

Abdul nods. He says he may have to do some research to find out what is in the GooBGone formula, but the most immediate problem that he can see is that the dryer heat will set an ink stain (which is usually permanent unless it is an erasable formula), so Jared had been starting at a



serious disadvantage. Abdul explains that the products that Jared has used first are all pre-treaters—meant to be done before the shirt goes into the washer the first time. The Bleach'Em Out pen is an on-the-go stain remover. It interacts on a molecular basis with the pre-treaters, so combining the two treatments risks potential discoloration or further setting of the stain.

Jared LeBlanc  
479 Ponderosa Pine Cresc.  
Fort Collins, CO 80524

February 27, 2020

Bonny Brite Bleach  
Pergola Products  
1089 State St. N.  
Denver, CO 80012

Re: Your Bonny Brite Bleach'Em Out Pen Doesn't Work

Two weeks ago, I inadvertently left a marking pen in my new dress shirt pocket when I washed it. Unfortunately, I didn't notice the ink splotches all over the front until the shirt came out of the dryer. Since it's my favorite shirt, I didn't want to throw it away so I went through the products in my mother's laundry closet trying to remove the marks.

First, I soaked it with Spray 'n Wash, which lightened the black ink a little bit. Then I poured detergent directly on the stain and scrubbed away at it for five or ten minutes. This lightened the stains a little bit more, but they were still too dark. You could still see them. Next I tried "GooBGone," a citrus-based stain remover that my mom bought when she was shopping in Denver. It left a greasy stain around the ink, which I had trouble removing, so I applied more detergent directly onto the grease stain. Luckily that came out, but the ink was still there. As a last resort, I bought one of your Bonny Brite Bleach'Em Out stain removal pens, but it was no better than any of the other products that I tried. In fact, after I emptied half of the pen onto the ink stains, they seemed to get a little darker and turn a greenish color.

Needless to say, this outcome is extremely disappointing. Your advertisements show the person just wiping the pen tip over the stain and the mark disappears. This definitely didn't happen in my case, and now my favorite shirt is ruined. I have thought about complaining to the FTC about your deceptive advertising practices but instead, if you are willing to refund me the cost of my \$70.00 Leo Chevalier Wrinkle-Free 100% cotton oxford cloth shirt, I am willing to let the matter rest.

You can send me my reimbursement at the address listed above. I appreciate your prompt attention to this matter.

Sincerely,

*Jared LeBlanc*  
Jared LeBlanc

**Figure 8.4** Letter of complaint for Bleach'Em Out stain removal pen.



The packaging instructions for the Bleach'Em Out pen are clear: they warn customers against using this pen on ink stains. The material safety data sheet of the citrus cleaner, GooBGone, states that its citrus and petroleum base is incompatible with oxidizing materials such as chlorine and strong acids. Abdul notes that the Bleach'Em Out pen contains chlorine bleach, so the interaction of the two substances likely caused the greenish color.

Penelope replies that what Abdul has told her should work well as the basis for the letter. She doesn't think the customer will need the actual chemical formulae—that would be too much detail. She decides to work up a draft of her reply and then see if she needs any more concrete data.

Abdul offers to email Penelope the website for the GooBGone product in case she wants to quote from it. He also suggests that the customer may package up the shirt and send it to him at the lab. He notes that he has a few things to try to remove the stain that Jared will not have access to, as a regular consumer.

Penelope agrees enthusiastically because his suggestion will allow her to offer the customer an alternative. She begins reviewing her options for writing the reply. She remembers that she also has some brochures about cleaning and some samples in her office of new cleaning products that are just coming onto the market. Another option is to send him some of those.



## Professional Communication Challenges 8.1

### 1. We Cannot Refund the Cost of Your Shirt

In the role of Penelope Stefanopoulos, write a reply to Jared LeBlanc in which you refuse to refund the cost of his ruined shirt. Use the information in this chapter to help you organize and draft the negative message. Use the details from the Rhetorical Situation itself and from Figure 8.5 to help you develop the content for the letter. Your main goals are to give Jared the bad news, to have him read, understand, and accept the bad news, and to maintain as much goodwill with him as possible.

**Audience:** Jared LeBlanc, the customer who ruined his shirt

**Purpose:** To convey the bad news that you will not be able to grant his request for reimbursement

**Genre:** Business letter

### 2. Documenting How to Handle Reimbursement Requests

Writing as Abdul Akbar, draft a memo to Penelope Stefanopoulos that outlines the problem from Pergola Products' perspective about why they cannot reimburse the cost of the shirt. Although you have already spoken to Penelope about the problem, this memo will serve as documentation of how the situation was handled internally. Use the discussion in this chapter to help you organize and draft your response to the request for reimbursement. Your main goals in writing this memo are to document the facts of the Rhetorical Situation and the reasons for not being able to agree to reimburse the customer.

**Audience:** Penelope Stefanopoulos, customer service representative at Pergola Products

**Purpose:** To describe the facts of the Rhetorical Situation and explain the reasons for not reimbursing the customer

**Genre:** Memo



**Bonny Brite Bleach'Em Out Stain Removal Pen is not a pre-treater; it is an on-the-go stain remover.**

**DIRECTIONS FOR USE:**

1. Remove excess food from stain.
2. Press the tip of pen onto the stain several times to release stain remover solution.
3. Rub pen tip carefully across the stain to remove it. If necessary, release more liquid onto the stain and continue to massage it in gently.
4. **Please Note:** If treated area comes in direct contact with sunlight, wipe with a damp cloth to remove excess solution from fabric.

**Works Well On:** Tea, wine, grape juice, chocolate, barbecue sauce, ketchup, coffee

**Do Not Use On:** Ink, grease, blood, lemon juice

**Figure 8.5** English instructions on the packaging of Bonny Brite Bleach'Em Out Stain Removal Pen.

## ANALYSIS: ORGANIZATIONAL STATUS AND REFUSING JARED'S REQUEST



*Demonstrate how to structure a negative message to recipients who have more or less status within an organization than you do*

Organize your negative message according to your relationship with the recipient. In Penelope Stefanopoulos's situation in Rhetorical Situation 8.1, she is writing to a customer who is not part of the Pergola Products organization, so she will use the standard negative letter format (see Figure 8.1). In this instance, Penelope has no pre-existing relationship with Jared, but she does want to build as much goodwill with him as she can to retain him as a customer. Consequently, she is likely to offer him an alternative or a compromise following the refusal and then end with a strong, goodwill-building closing. If she were writing to a coworker with similar status to her own, or to a subordinate, Penelope would structure her message differently. She would structure it yet another way if she were writing to her boss.

For example, Figure 8.6 uses a direct approach to communicate bad news, the writer's resignation from a job. It also outlines one pattern to use when drafting a negative message to a superior. The annotations highlight the main attributes of the letter structure:

1. identify and describe the problem
2. give background, if necessary



3. describe options for fixing the problem
4. recommend a solution and offer assistance to solve problem

In cases such as the one in Figure 8.6, it is unlikely that the letter will announce the news; it is more likely that Armando will have spoken to or at least emailed Catherine about this transition. The letter is required for formal reasons, such as unit reviews within the company that look for patterns in people leaving a large organization, for example. The letter also has the effect of smoothing over the transition. The offer to help with the search for a successor, while unlikely to be accepted, shows a concern for the organization and reflects well on the writer.

June 17, 2020

Catherine Nugent  
Western Regional Manager  
Cellular City

Dear Catherine:

As you requested, I am writing to inform you that I have signed the contract for employment at AltaTel effective July 1, 2020, making that appointment official. Consequently, I am writing to formally resign from my position at Cellular City effective June 30, 2020.

I want to thank you for your support during my time at Cellular City. The Western Regional administrative team that you lead provided the training and support that I needed to increase our sales and improve our customer satisfaction ratings. I hope my successor can build on these improvements. I have enjoyed my time as a sales associate and lead product specialist for the Google Pixel XL platform. I have learned an enormous amount through this experience. The team of sales associates are starting to feel more like a group and less like a collection of individuals, and our sales successes continue to grow as I speak.

If I can be of assistance in the search for my successor, please feel free to call on me.

Sincerely,  
Armando Juarez

1. Direct statement or description of the problem. Identifies a problem.
2. Statements that recognize the boss's contributions to the writer's achievements give background to the letter.
3. Lists employee's achievements in the job. Summarizes options for fixing problem (projects for successor to continue).
4. Offers assistance to solve problem (hiring writer's successor).

**Figure 8.6** Sample letter conveys bad news from a subordinate to a boss.

Figure 8.7 is an example of the same bad news (the writer is resigning) conveyed to subordinates. The annotations highlight the organizational structure of the message:

1. describe the problem clearly and briefly
2. supply an alternative or compromise, if possible



3. ask for input or advice, if appropriate

As in the letter to his superior, Armando states the bad news directly. Although this situation offers no possibility of compromise, Armando does introduce an alternative. He notes that he will not be leaving before he arranges the client accounts—a direct concern for his readers who face an uncertain future with his departure from the job. He then invites his employees to take an active role in the search that will appoint his successor.

From: "Armando Juarez" <ajuarez2@cellcity.ca>  
To: "Sales Associates" <salesteam@cellcity.ca>  
Sent: Sunday, June 14, 2020 3:03 PM  
Subject: My future at Cellular City

1. Describe the problem clearly and briefly.

2. Offer a solution.

3. Ask for input.

Late last week I accepted a new job at AltaTel's office here in Alabama Hills to work as an international account executive.

This, of course, means that the end of June will mark the end of my time here at Cellular City. It has been a pleasure to work with all of you; I can only hope that you feel the same way. In the next two weeks we'll need to reorganize our client accounts and make sure that our sales efforts continue smoothly after I depart. I hope that you will take an active part in this process.

I hope to see you around the office soon.

Armando

**Figure 8.7** Sample message conveys bad news to subordinates and peers.





## Rhetorical Situation 8.2: Evaluate the Quality of This Negative Message

Rich Melnyk, publisher of the *Edmonton Moon*, had a problem. To reduce costs, in 2018 the paper had stopped delivering print subscriptions to the outlying areas in northern and central Alberta. They also had cut the size of the paper from 75 pages to 50 pages. Given this string of events, Melnyk had little choice other than to raise the price for subscriptions.

Figure 8.8 shows a sample letter that aims to inform subscribers of an increase in the cost of the *Edmonton Moon* newspaper while maintaining them as customers.

October 1, 2020

0763241

Fred Keynes

8443 90th Ave.

Edmonton, Alberta

Dear Subscriber,

In our booming province, prices are rising for all products, and the *Edmonton Moon* is no exception.

The huge increase in the price of oil, which has benefits for all of us in Alberta, has affected the cost of delivering your newspaper to your home. The price of newsprint has also jumped. We've absorbed these extra expenses as much as we can, but have now reached a point where we must pass some of these increased costs to our customers. Effective November 1, 2020, your subscription to the *Edmonton Moon* will be \$21.50 per month plus applicable taxes. This still represents a saving to you of 10% off our regular price.

While no one likes to hear about increased prices, we hope you will understand this is necessary in order to continue providing you with the exclusive coverage of sports, city news, and popular culture only found in the *Edmonton Moon*.

Our hard-hitting local news commentary and award-winning sports reporting combine to deliver the best value of any newspaper in Edmonton.

As an *Edmonton Moon* subscriber, you will still have free access to our digital edition, a full online version of the newspaper that's yours to read anytime, anywhere.

If you have any questions or comments, please do not hesitate to contact our customer service center at 1-800-492-0000.

Thank you for reading the *Edmonton Moon*.

Rich Melnyk

Publisher, *Edmonton Moon*

1 Strathcona Road, Edmonton, AB T6G 5X7 Canada • 1-800-492-0000

**Figure 8.8** Sample negative message to subscribers.





## Professional Communication Challenges 8.2

**1. The price of your paper is going up**

Read the letter in Figure 8.8 informing subscribers that rates for the newspaper will increase starting November 1. As you read, analyze the structure and strategies used to deliver the bad news and then evaluate the quality of this letter based on the discussion in this chapter.

How effective is this letter at informing readers of the cost increase while maintaining them as subscribers, and why?

What strategies does Melnyk use to manage readers' responses and emotions to the information?

What structure has Melnyk used to organize his negative message?

What makes this structure effective/ineffective for you, as a reader/subscriber?

What revisions would you make to the formatting, strategies, or sentence structure to improve the effectiveness of this negative message?

**Audience:** Course instructor

**Purpose:** Analyze the negative message and explain how it works

**Genre:** Memo from you to the course instructor

**2. Discontinue your paper**

Imagine that you are a subscriber to the *Edmonton Moon* and that you received a copy of this letter. After much consideration, you decide to discontinue your subscription to express your dissatisfaction with the price increase. Write a letter to Rich Melnyk breaking the bad news to him. Use one of the structures for a negative message outlined in this chapter to organize your letter.

**Audience:** Rich Melnyk, Publisher of the *Edmonton Moon*

**Purpose:** To express your dissatisfaction with the price increase and to try to motivate him to consider alternatives so that you could re-subscribe

**Genre:** Business letter



**Exercise 8.2: Evaluate and Revise This Negative Message**

The letter in Figure 8.9 delivers bad news to parents of a class of Grade 7 students who will have to change teachers only a few weeks into the new school year. Read this letter and, using the information outlined in this chapter on writing effective negative messages, analyze and evaluate it. Decide which organizational pattern has been used as the basis for this message. Examine such details as whether the writer has used a buffer, as well as some of the other points from this chapter that create an effective delivery of negative information. Finally, when you complete your analysis, revise the letter to correct or improve any flaws that you noticed in your evaluation.

**St. Xavier Senior School**

October 3, 2020

Dear Parents/Guardians,

As your child may have told you, his/her grade seven math teacher has been absent for a week now. Unfortunately, this week, due to personal reasons, Mr. Jahvinder had to resign. To our students' credit they have expressed great concern for Mr. Jahvinder. Though I must respect Mr. Jahvinder's privacy, I want to assure the students that he felt a great responsibility to each of them, so his decision was truly based on what will be best for the children.

With that said, the focus needs to be on our next steps. Presently, Mrs. Maciaq is the substitute teacher and has been devoting many hours to catching up on the paper grading and planning of lessons. She has been available before and after school, as well as during lunch hour. In the meantime, we have begun the interview process to find the best person for this position. While we want to expedite the process, we will only hire the best qualified to teach Grade 7 mathematics to our children.

We appreciate your patience and understanding during this process. Please let Mrs. Maciaq or me know of any concerns you might have.

Sincerely,

*Hazel Broadview*

Hazel Broadview  
Principal

1459 Carlton St., Omaha, NE 68108 • 123-456-7890

**Figure 8.9** Sample negative message to parents.



## CHAPTER SUMMARY

- The classic pattern for negative messages begins with a buffer, moves to a statement of the bad news, offers an alternative or compromise, and ends with a positive, goodwill-building closing.
- An alternative opening for negative messages begins by giving a reason before the refusal.
- Use buffer statements to soften the bad news; use them when you have an opportunity to thank the reader or to summarize the facts of the case in a neutral manner.
- Structure bad news messages depending on the recipient's status within the organization: use a direct structure and omit the buffer when dealing with people you work with regularly.