



The You Attitude and Reader-Centered Writing

- 1.1 The You Attitude looks at things from the READER's point of view
- 1.2 The You-Attitude emphasizes reader benefit
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- 1.4 The You Attitude protects the reader's ego
- 1.5 The You-Attitude expresses appreciation for, not annoyance with, your readers
- 1.6 The You Attitude understands human nature
- 1.7 The You-Attitude avoids condescension by eliminating unnecessary imperatives

The You-Attitude = Reader-Centered Writing

Effective writers make the audience believe that the most important person in their correspondence - in their business relationship - is "you," the reader.

In most business situations, the reader and writer have something to gain or lose. Focusing on reader benefit shows you've considered the situation from the reader's point of view. Our readers feel less threatened and respond better if they feel we as writers understand their needs.

The key to successful communications is to make the reader feel – in every memo, in every letter, in every email, in every phone call, in all contact – that the most important person in our business relationship is YOU, the READER, not me/I, the writer.

And when you think about it, it's true, isn't it? Without our co-workers helping us with projects or working with us to accomplish our goals, we wouldn't be able to get all our work done properly. And where would we be without our customers, the ones who buy our goods and services? Without them, we wouldn't have a job or the money to take care of ourselves and our families. Did you know that a happy customer tells 5 friends, but an unhappy customer tells 10? The You-Attitude helps to keep the customer happy.

The You Attitude is a style of writing which

- ❑ Looks at things from the READER'S POINT OF VIEW

- ❑ Shows READER BENEFIT and emphasizes what the reader wants to know
- ❑ Focuses on the POSITIVE
- ❑ Protects the reader's ego
- ❑ Expresses APPRECIATION for your readers
- ❑ Applies psychology to HUMANIZE our messages
- ❑ Uses CORRECT ETIQUETTE in all communication media

The You-Attitude, then, is more than using the "you" pronoun. It is truly an *attitude* that we believe, and, as a result, we make our readers believe: *that the most important person in our business relationship is you: my reader, my co-worker, my customer*. The goal of communication in business is to get our readers to do what we want them to do, **so then we have to them believe that they are valued and appreciated.**

1.1 The You Attitude looks at things from the READER's point of view

1. Focus on what the reader receives or can do, not on what we've done. Don't completely avoid "I" or "we," just de-emphasize it.

Our reader is more interested in himself/herself than in our organization. And that's not a bad thing; it actually makes a lot of sense. Think about it: when you receive a letter from a store, for example, do you think about how your money will help the store increase its attractiveness to its stockholders? Of course not. As a store customer, *you* want to know how the store's products and services can help *you* reach **your** goals.

- | | |
|------|--|
| Not: | Since we haven't written you for some time, please help us bring our records up-to-date by filling in and returning the other half of this card. Please fill out and return the card... (notice how this sentence focuses on the writer's needs, NOT on the reader's benefits) |
| But: | <u>So that dividend checks, premium notices and other messages of importance may reach you promptly</u> , please fill out and return the other half of this card. (this focuses on what the reader will get out of responding) |
| Not: | We shipped your order today. |
| But: | <u>Your order will arrive</u> on Thursday. AND <u>You will receive</u> your order on Thursday. |

2. Avoid starting your memos and letters with "I" or "We."

One big way you can get your letters and memos off to a You-Attitude start is by avoiding "I" as the first word. When you begin your correspondence with "I," from the very first word you are telling your readers who the most important persons in the correspondence are, and it isn't them.

- | | |
|------|--|
| Not: | Dear Mr .Jones,
I am happy to inform you that we have approved your loan. |
| But: | Dear Mr .Jones,
Congratulations! Your loan is approved. |

1.2 The You-Attitude emphasizes reader benefit (what the reader will get out of doing business with us)

Emphasizing reader benefit can help convince our readers to do whatever it is we're asking them to do. *Reader benefit tells our readers how they will be positively affected (financially, emotionally, psychologically, physically, spiritually)* by doing business with us. The sentences below illustrate how we might focus away from us and on reader benefit.

Figure: Features vs. Benefits

Feature	Benefit to the Customer
No money down, no interest payments for 24 months.	<i>You can buy</i> what you want right now at no additional costs.
This printer prints 17 pages per minute.	This printer <i>can turn out one of your 100-page proposals</i> in six minutes.
Our shelter provides 100 adults' beds and 50 children's beds for the needy.	Your donation <i>will provide</i> temporary housing for 100 women who don't want to return to abusive households.
Your corporate sponsorship of the seminar will pay for the keynote speaker's travel and lodging.	Your corporate sponsorship of the seminar <i>will allow your site manager</i> a five-minute introduction at the beginning of the program to summarize your services.
We want all newly hired employees to use our carpooling program for at least three months.	As a new employee, <i>you won't have to drive</i> to work in rush hour traffic for the first three months using our carpooling program.
We have invested a lot of money to build the biggest inventory in town.	<i>You can choose</i> from the largest selection of gifts in town, thanks to Robinson's large inventory.

1. Emphasize what the reader wants to know. Respect the reader's intelligence by using conversational speech. Check out this real-life letter from a local mortgage company. Notice the many instances of "we" and the difficult to understand language

<next page>

Figure: Poor Letter to Customer

notice how
the letter is
off to a poor
start with
"we"

Dear Customer:

the language is difficult
and confusing

We are writing this **in accordance** with instructions received by **us** from the Department of Housing and Urban Development. **We hereby advise** you that information concerning the FHA insured loan which you have with our Company is readily available to you.

We assure you that you may **obtain prompt responses to any inquiries** concerning your loan, either by writing to **us** or by calling **us** and **stating the nature of your inquiry** to our telephone operators. **Our** telephone operators are experienced and can **refer your inquiry to the proper person**. Since **we** maintain our office in the area in which your mortgaged property is situated, **we** are not obligated to accept collect long distance calls.

If at any time you feel that your inquiry has not been promptly and courteously dealt with, **we** shall very much appreciate your **advising the undersigned in writing**.

H. Kawasaki
Vice President & Treasurer

right alignment gives boxy
look and is more difficult
for most audience to read

What does the mortgage company want us to do? Can't figure it out? That's because this letter wasn't written to be read and acted upon correctly the first time by the customer. It was written from the company -- we/I-- point of view. You don't need a college education to have a mortgage, but you would need one to make sense of the letter.

- ❑ **The language is stiff** and legalistic: in accordance with, please be advised, obtain prompt responses, the proper person, advise the undersigned
- ❑ **The tone is selfish**. The letter is written from the writer's point of view, so there are no obvious benefits for the reader:
- ❑ **The main point is buried** in the second paragraph. The middle is the least emphatic part of a letter.
- ❑ **The ending is weak and negative**. Instead of a positive, polite closure, the ending predicts that the will not be happy.
- ❑ **The right alignment is hard to read**. Ragged right margins are much easier for most audiences.

So what does the company want us to do? The key sentence (which appears buried in the middle of the letter rather than up front in the beginning where we can see it) is:

We Attitude: We assure you that you may obtain prompt responses to any inquiries concerning your loan.

You Attitude: If you have any questions about your loan, please call or write us.

2. Don't talk about feelings except for condolence or congratulatory messages.

We may think we're being personal and polite, but we're still focusing on us and our feelings and not on our reader.

- Not: We are happy to give you a credit line of \$2000. (this focuses on us)
But: You now have a credit line of \$2000 with American Express. (this focuses on our reader)
Not: You will be happy to learn that your vacation request has been approved.
But: Your vacation request has been sported.

Condolence: I was sorry to hear of the passing of your father.
Congratulatory: I'm delighted that you'll be our new sales manager.

1.3 The You Attitude is positive

Positive emphasis is a style writing which focuses on what CAN be done and not on what can't be done. *When we emphasize the positive, we convince the reader we know what we're doing and are goal-oriented. When we emphasize the negative, we sound unsure and indecisive.*

1. Focus on the what CAN be done. Here are some negative emphasis sentences from students' course goal memos. Notice how the negativity makes the students sound lost or confused.

- Not: I will try to do my best.
But: I **will do** my best.
- Not: I can't graduate until I take this class.
But: I **will graduate** after I take this class.
- Not: I don't know when I'll graduate.
But: I **plan to graduate** within the next two years.
- Not: Writing is not my best subject.
But: Accounting **is my best** subject.
- Not: I hope (or I trust) you find this information on the 7 C's helpful.
But: The 7 C's **are useful**.
- Not: Don't hesitate to call me.
But: **Please call** me.

Here are more examples of what can't be done (negative emphasis) vs. what CAN be done (positive, you attitude!)

- Not: It will be impossible to open an account for you until you send us your signature card.
But: Your account **will be open** as soon as you send us your signature card.
- Not: Employees should not use the administrative and customer parking lot.
But: A special parking lot for employees **is provided** at the east wing of the administrative building.
- Not: To avoid the loss of your good credit...
But: To **maintain** your good credit rating...
- Not: Thank you for your trouble.
But: Thank you for **your help**.
- Not: You won't be sorry you did this.
But: You **will be glad** you did this.
- Not: Never fail to back up your disks (this says what you should NOT do)
But: Always **back up** your disks. (this says what you SHOULD do)

2. When a negative is necessary, use the least negative, most tactful term.

- Not: Because you failed to pay your bill, your account is delinquent.
But: Your account is past due. (this says the same thing but is less accusatory)

3. Focus on options that remain. When giving negative information, always give an alternative if possible.

- Not: You cannot get a loan because you owe so much on your credit cards.
But: You **can get a loan if someone co-signs the loan with you**. (this is positive and focuses on how the reader can accomplish his/her goals)

4. Bury the negative and present it compactly.

- Not: You cannot use your Cop-ez card unless you find a copy machine that accepts Cop-ez cards. The main library and some classroom buildings have these machines, but the following buildings DO NOT accept Cop-ez cards: Wendell Phillips Hall, Covell Commons, and Knoles Hall.
But: You **can** use your Cop-ez card in any machine that accepts the card. You will find these machines in some classroom buildings and in the main library.
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1.4 The You Attitude protects the reader's ego

1. Avoid "you" when it criticizes the reader. Instead, use an impersonal expression or a passive verb to avoid assigning blame. Don't focus on the problem; focus on solving the problem.

Not: You failed to sign your check.
But: Your check arrived without a signature. AND
Your check was not signed. AND
Please stop by today to sign your check.

2. Avoid "you" when it limits the reader's freedom. Instead, talk about the group to which the reader belongs.

Not: You must get approval from the Director. (this sounds like we're picking on the reader)
But: All personnel must get approval from the Director. (this assures the reader that everyone -- not just reader -- must follow company policy)

1.5 The You-Attitude expresses appreciation for -- not annoyance with -- your readers

Communicators in all career areas run the risk of angering receivers by using certain expressions that have hidden meanings. Here are techniques and expressions to avoid because they are guaranteed to offend your audience.

1. Avoid calling your readers stupid (even if done unintentionally)

If you had read the instruction booklet... – AND – **You are probably ignorant** of the fact that...

2. Avoid suggesting that they are lying (even if you don't say so directly)

You **claim** that you returned the item. – AND – **According to you**, the item stopped working.

3. Avoid indicating that they are complainers.

You complain that.... – AND – We have received **your complaint** describing...

4. Avoid blaming them

Obviously **you overlooked**... – AND – **You forgot** to... – AND – **You failed** to... – AND – **You neglected** to...

5. Avoid issuing ultimatums

This will be the last memo sent on this subject. Anyone dressing inappropriately faces immediate disciplinary action! – AND – either comply with the regulations or face the consequences!

1.6 The You Attitude understands human nature

Professor J. Larsen of North Carolina State University likes to begin her classes with the following quote:

**You can buy in your own language,
but you have to sell in the language of the customer.**

This simple sentence says what we focus on all semester: that *to get our readers to do what we want them to do, we have to talk in their language, in a way they understand, to make them see the benefits for doing what we want.*

Understanding some basic truths about human nature helps us humanize our business messages. These truths are:

1. People are self-centered.
2. People are defensive.
3. People are not perfect.
4. People need specific goals.
5. People expect courtesy.
6. People need to feel appreciated for their efforts.
7. People do the best they can.

1. People are self-centered.

Being self-centered doesn't mean egotistic and conceited. It means that people want to know what good they will get out of doing business with us. When a business executive receives mail, s/he asks two questions: what's this and why me. *Effective writers tell their readers how they will benefit from doing whatever it is we're asking them to do.*

2. People are defensive.

Put another way, it's human nature to be suspicious of promises and to resist (at least initially) even the most well-meaning criticism. Constructive criticism can be seen as a personal attack. I'm always surprised when students take my helpful comments on their tasks to somehow mean that they're dumb and that I don't like them, and, of course, that's just not true. *Since it's normal for people to take what we say at face value, we need to be careful with the things we say and the way we say them.*

3. People aren't perfect.

Error is a part of life, but no one likes having mistakes pointed out. Effective writers focus on solving the problem. A well-known national chain grocery store is way across Mililani from me, so I don't go there very often. But I do like their bakery goods and their fresh fruit. The last time I was there, an incident happened. I had paid for my groceries --about \$15 worth -- with a check. The next morning I received a phone call.

Me: Hello?

Them: Is this Ms. Hurley?
Me: Yes, it is. May I help you?
Them: This is the accountant at xYZ Store. You were in our store yesterday?
Me: [wondering what the urgency in his voice meant] Yes, I was.
Them: You have to come to our store right away. Today!
Me: [I "have to?"] Excuse me?
Them: Yes, you have to come in right away. You failed to sign your check.
Me: [I "failed?" I NEGLECTED. I SCREWED UP. Silence]
Them: Yes, because of your mistake, we can't close our books.
Me: [MY "mistake?" Silence]
Them: Can you come in now?
Me: [I've been insulted here. and he wants me to drop everything] Sure, I'll be in soon.

I waited a week before going in. And why not? His message was quite rude. It focused on the negative and not on solving the problem. I really felt bad, like he was accusing me of stealing, or at least of being careless. It was such a simple mistake on my part, yet he used the word "failed. " How would you like it if someone says you FAILED at something? And you'll notice that I didn't point out that the cashier FAILED to notice the missing signature. How could this situation been better handled? Try this:

Me: Hello?
Them: Is this Ms. Hurley?
Me: Yes, it is. May I help you?
Them: This is the accountant at XYZ Store. Yesterday after you left our store, we noticed your signature was missing on your check.
Me: Oh my gosh. I'm sorry .
Them: Would you be able to come in sometime today, perhaps, to sign the check?
Me: [appreciating their courtesy] Yes! I work until 2:00. Can I come in then?

By not focusing on the mistake and instead focusing on the positive, the customer is happy, and we accomplish our goals.

4. People need specific goals.

My husband, Tim, likes to ride his Harley. He takes it in for regular servicing to keep it looking great and running in top condition. Sometimes he orders a part or an accessory from the main land. If the phone operator tells him that he'll receive his order "soon," you can bet that Tim is on the phone to them the very next day demanding to know what's happening with his order. To Tim, "soon" means yesterday when it comes to his bike.

It's human nature to want to know exactly what's going to happen and when. Look at this course. I've tried to anticipate every question, to provide samples, and to organize the course carefully. Even the course outline is really long. But that's because you want the information. In addition to wanting to learn to be a better business writer, you probably want to do well. But how can you do well if you don't know what's expected of you? People need specific information, and effective

writers tell their readers what they need to know. ***Our readers want to know what to expect. Effective writers tell people what will happen next, when, and how.***

5. People expect and deserve courtesy.

This is very obvious, isn't it? Think about the kind of service you want, that we all want. When we go into a store, we want the sales clerk to pay attention to us, to make us feel that our business is important. When we call or email someone, we want that person to return our messages promptly. ***It's human nature to expect courtesy, so effective writers are courteous to our readers. As we have seen time after time, courtesy pays off.***

6. People need to feel appreciated for their efforts.

Those of us who work know what it's like to go in day after day. We do the best we can and put in a long day's work. It often seems like the only time we hear anything is when we do something wrong. And all those other times of putting in long hours and working extra hard aren't acknowledged.

For example, as residents of Mililani, we live in a planned community Mililani is governed by an association, and as members of the association, we agree to abide by certain rules. For example, our houses can only be certain colors, and our driveways have to be free of junk. Our curb sides have to be weeded, and the grass cut. These rules make Mililani the beautiful place that it is. A few years ago, when Tim's dad was sick, our attention was on taking care of him and on raising our young children and not on doing the yard. After not hearing anything from the association for 9 years, we got a letter in the mail telling us to weed the curb side (and in truth, it did look pretty bad), so we did. I guess the thing that bothered us was that the one time we forget to do something is the only time we hear from the association, and never mind all the many years of following the rules faithfully.

We all need to feel that people notice and appreciate our good efforts. When you receive especially good service, let the person know that you appreciate him/her. And let the person's supervisor know, too.

7. People do the best they can. Effective writers assume their readers are acting honestly, fairly, and intelligently.

When I was in college, I worked a number of different jobs to help put myself through school. One of the jobs I had was as a part-timer at Sherwood Jewelers, a father-son operation with 5 employees and a small store in the modern mall near the university. To encourage more business, the store had a layaway plan. Old Mr. Sherwood would grumble any time a customer was even a day late with a payment. He'd pace the back office, mumbling to himself about how he should send collection letters to these "dead beats."

I understood why he'd be mad. In a small operation like his, every purchase is important. After all, Mr. Sherwood had employees and bills to pay, too. Yet threatening to break somebody's knee caps for being a little late does seem drastic. Isn't it better to believe in the innate goodness of people rather than being like Old Man Sherwood, who saw everybody as crooks waiting for any opportunity to rip him off? There might have been a darn good reason for a late payment. Maybe

there was a death in the family (and if you've ever lost a loved one, you know how your whole life gets turned upside down). Or maybe the customer has been ill, or trying to deal with a difficult child, or going through a divorce. It isn't always easy, but why not be willing to forgive the dumb things that people say or do because one day, we're going to need to be forgiven, too? Or maybe the error is ours – we didn't credit a payment the customer did send in. Why not work under the assumption that our readers are as honest and fair-minded as we are?

1.7 The You-Attitude avoids condescension by eliminating unnecessary imperatives (commands)

Condescension means “talking down” to your reader. One routine way ineffective writers talk down is by using commands unnecessarily

Memo reports, which we'll write later in the term, are one of the most common documents you'll write on the job. The biggest danger with memo reports is using language that talks down to your reader. You can avoid insulting your reader by avoiding YOU in the body of the memo and by avoiding

1. Avoid the “pronoun” you within the body of the memo

The word literally means you, the reader, the name in the to-line. In the body, using the word “you” often results in sentences that irritate or insult the reader. Use the pronoun “you” in the introduction and the conclusion only to help build goodwill and make a positive impression on the reader, but avoid it in the body.

2. Avoid imperatives within the body of the memo

Imperatives have “you” as their subjects. They are used to give commands:

Sit down, open your book and be quiet.

This sentence is a command that consists of three imperatives: sit, open, be. Their subject is “you” – literally, the reader. There is no doubt that these verbs are meant to tell the reader what to do: to sit down, open the book, and be quiet.

The problem with imperatives is that they give advice, and the purpose of the memo report is to give information, not advice.

Example: Student's Memo. Here's a memo by an Eng 209W student. This memo is ineffective because it is condescending. It “talks down” to the reader as if she (the company president!) were an idiot. It also has vague and sexist language. Here's the memo with the errors highlighted:

<next page>

Figure: Weak Memo Full of Imperatives:

20 November 2xxx

Your reader takes what you say LITERALLY, at face value. The reader is not your friend and will not forgive dumb things you might say

TO: Anita Chan, President

FROM: Steve Saiki, Management Information System Manager

SUBJECT: E-mail

Outdated and unfriendly. Sounding “business-like” means trying to impress the reader instead of focusing on accomplishing the goal of communication

Introduction

Pursuant to your request, this memo is on writing good business email messages which will make **you** an effective business writer.

these lines insult the reader – the President! – by implying she's a poor business writer and so dumb that she needs to be corrected by her subordinate!

Tips for writing business email

So that you don't lose business, follow these guidelines when writing:

These are imperatives. They have "you" – literally Ms. Chan – as their subject. See how this memo talks down to her, as if she is rude, sloppy and stupid.

- **Answer your** mail promptly. **Don't be rude** by not replying quickly
- **Keep** to the point. When you write big blocks of "chatty" text, you waste your reader's time
- **Correct** your typos and spelling mistakes immediately. **Don't be sloppy and careless.**
- **Keep** lines short. **Don't make** people scroll to read **your** messages.
- Nobody should *ever* have to ask you for your URL by email. If **you** have a URL, **put** it in **your** signature. **You must be professional.**

This long list of instructions tells the reader what she's supposed to do. How rude to be told "Don't be rude," "Answer your mail," and "Keep to the point," as if she's unprofessional! This does NOT build goodwill!

Another insult! This says the reader is dumber than a child and that she needs these instructions because she's such a loser. Ouch.

Conclusion

Email is so easy to access that **even a child can teach you how to do it**. These tips will help you in for marketing research and promoting **your** products. **If there are any questions, you may reach me by telephone** or please **feel free to contact** me by email.

unfriendly – sounds like granting permission

not polite - doesn't provide email address or phone number

wordy and empty phrases

"if there are any" isn't the same as the friendly "if you have any"

Now here's the memo rewritten to give information (and not instructions) and to build goodwill:

Figure: Rewritten Memo:

20 November 2xxx

TO: Anita Chan, President

FROM: Steve Saiki, Management Information System Manager

SUBJECT: **Writing Effective E-mail Messages**

Introduction

**The language is conversational and friendly
without being silly**

Here's the memo you wanted on writing email messages. These principles result in more professional-looking email.

**All imperative verbs and "you's" are gone. This list focuses on
what effective writers (not YOU) do. This is news, not instructions.**

Tips for writing business email

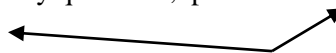
Effective business writers follow these guidelines:

- **Answering** mail promptly.
- **Keeping** to the point and avoiding big blocks of "chatty" text that waste the reader's time
- **Eliminating** typos and spelling mistakes that label us as sloppy and careless.
- **Preserving** format by sending email as plain text and not as HTML in browser-based mail programs.
- **Keeping** line length short to avoid scrolling from left to right to read messages.
- **Ending** the message with a signature block consisting of name, title, extension number and URL.

Conclusion

Focusing on "us" instead of "you" doesn't single the reader out

Email is an essential tool. Following these tips can help us for marketing research and promoting our products. If you have any questions, please call me at ext. 123 or email me at go@hawaii.edu.



**Saying "please" and giving specific phone
numbers and email addresses is polite, precise and
concise**

The rewritten memo avoids the condescending, insulting tone of the original. Instead of telling the reader what to do, this memo gives information on what email is. Instead of implying that the reader is incompetent, this memo gives news. Memo reports really are easy to write, thanks to these guiding principles.