

Written Communication:
Major Plans for Letters and Memos

Chapter 9

Bad-News Messages

Bad-News Messages



Bad-News Messages

What are the bad messages?

Bad messages are those messages that a reader finds disappointing or unfavorable or unsolicited negative messages.

There are two broad categories of such messages:

- 1. Negative Replies to Requests**
- 2. Unfavorable Replies to Requests**

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Negative Replies to Requests

- a) Answering Non-Sales-Related Inquiries When the Information is Undesirable
- b) Refusing Adjustments on Claims and Complaints
- c) Refusing Credit Applications
- d) Acknowledging Orders You Cannot Fill Now or at All
- e) Declining Invitations and Requests for Favors

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Unfavorable Unsolicited Messages

- 1) Announcing Bad News About Price or Services
- 2) Penalizing for Nonconformity to Rules or Procedures
- 3) Conveying other Bad News (admitting mistake/errors, resignations, etc.)

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Essentials of Preparing a Bad-News Message

1. The Right Attitude

In negative messages, your tone will help determine your effectiveness. The right attitude will improve the tone and thus the effectiveness of the message.

In order to maintain right attitude, following suggestions are to be kept in mind for writing bad-news letters and memos:

- Put yourself in readers message
- Avoid using company rules or policies with no further explanations
- Assume that customer wants to do the right thing even though he or she may be mistaken.
- Single people out when you praise them; put them in a group when you criticize.
- Be courteous and shield the reader's pride
- Talk with, not down to, reader

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Plans for Bad-News Messages

Whenever you write bad-news messages, whether you are replying to a request or initiating an unsolicited message, you have two choices:

1. Indirect Organization Format: Buffer, explanation, decision, positive close
2. Indirect Organization Format: Buffer, short explanation, decision, longer explanation, positive close.

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Indirect Plan

Buffer: The buffer should be pleasant, relevant, neutral in tone; avoid misleading the reader into thinking the news is good

The following are the ways to begin bad-news letters:

- a) **Agreement:** Agree with your reader on something, if possible (perhaps business conditions, costs, or any other pertinent item)
- b) **Appreciation:** Thank the reader (for check, information, application, request, inquiry, cooperation, or whatever applies)
- c) **Assurance:** Assure the reader of your careful consideration and honest explanation of all available facts about problem.
- d) **Compliment:** Try to compliment the reader on something good about his or her past record or request (sincerity, careful listing of facts, or other)

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- e) **Cooperation:** Show a sincere desire to be helpful as possible.
- f) **Good News:** If you can grant any part of a request, and you think your reader will be pleased, begin with that good news.
- g) **Neutral Courtesy:** Keep your opening paragraphs non-committal. For instance if you must announce a price increase or service decrease, use a neutral word such as “change.”
- h) **Understanding:** Show you understand or sympathize with the reader’s problem.

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2. **Explanation and Analysis:** Includes honest, convincing reasons why the matter must be handled differently from the way reader wants it. The explanation can also be given after the bad-news.

Important points to remember while writing giving explanation are:

- a) Try to convince reader you are acting in his or her best interests in the long run or according to the policy enforced equally for all. Also avoid reasons that suggest benefit only to your firm.
- b) Explain courteously all relevant facts behind your decision. Mention first the favorable factors, then the less favorable ones.
- c) Show that the request has been carefully considered for reader's benefit as well as your company's.

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3. **Decision, Implied, or Expressed, with Resale and/or Helpful**

Suggestions: To make decision clear, positive, and concise, you have these alternatives:

- a) If the reasons are so clear that your reader will conclude you must refuse the request, you can omit negatives entirely and make the bad-news decision clear by implication.
- a) If an implied decision might be misunderstood, express your decision clearly near the end of the explanation. Be careful not to mislead or otherwise cause uncertainty regarding your decision.
- a) If you can offer a constructive suggestion, counterproposal, compromise, or alternative course of action. By emphasizing what can be done, you may clearly imply what cannot be done without actually using the negative language.
- a) If desirable, resell the reader on your company's services or policies.

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Friendly Positive Close: Ending should be positive, with reader-friendly requests, assurances, and reader friendly benefits.

- a) Offer assurances that you appreciate the reader as a customer (or as an interested inquirer and possible future customer)
- a) Invite future patronage, cooperation, suggestions, or compliance with the decision. Include mild, no-pressure sales promotional material if you think reader would respond favorably.
- a) Make clear whatever action is required, when do it, and how to do it easily if you need reader's approval or if the reader must take action.
- a) Express continued interest, services, and reader benefit, or sincere wishes for the reader's success with alternatives.

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Direct Plan

Although indirect bad-news plans are most commonly used for sending unfavorable messages, certain situations may warrant the direct approach. The writer's choice depends on context and on particular circumstances.

The direct approach may be effective in the following situations:

A routine matter on which reader is likely not to be seriously disappointed or emotionally involved, especially a message between the employees of two business firms or within the same firms.

A reader who knows to prefer reading the bad-news in the first paragraph.

As urgent message that should be called to reader's attention forcefully, as in the late stage of a collection procedure.

If writer decides to use direct approach, the pattern is same as the direct good-news plan, except that the opening contains bad instead of good news.

- Bad-news decision (with or without brief buffer)
- Explanation
- Appropriate, courteous ending.

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END OF
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