**Handout 3: Writing tips and practice**

**Adapting the message to your audience**

1. Prewriting

**Adapt**

• What techniques can you use to adapt your message to its audience?

• How can you promote feedback?

• What can you do to ensure positive, conversational, and courteous language?

1. Drafting

**Research**

• Gather data to provide facts.

• Review previous correspondence. Search company files for background information.

• Talk with the boss and colleagues.

• Search the Internet.

• What do you need to know to write this message?

**Organize**

* Organize direct messages with the big idea first, followed by an explanation in the body and an action request in the closing.
* For persuasive or negative messages, use an indirect problem-solving strategy.

**Draft**

* Focus on short, clear sentences using the active voice.
* Prepare a first draft, usually writing quickly.
* Build paragraph coherence by repeating key ideas, using pronouns, and incorporating appropriate transitional expressions.

1. Revising

**Edit**

* Edit your message to be sure it is clear, concise, conversational, and readable.
* Revise to eliminate wordy fillers, long lead-ins, redundancies, and trite business phrases.
* Consider using headings and numbered and bulleted lists for quick reading.

**Proofread**

* Take the time to read the message carefully.
* Look for errors in spelling, grammar, punctuation, names, and numbers.
* Check to be sure the format is consistent.

**Evaluate**

* Will this message achieve its purpose?
* Does the tone sound pleasant and friendly rather than curt?
* Have you thought enough about the audience to be sure this message is appealing?
* Did you encourage feedback?

**Improving the Tone and Clarity of a Message**

1. **Being Positive Rather Than Negative**

One of the best ways to improve the tone of a message is to use positive rather than negative language. Positive language generally conveys more information than negative language does. Moreover, positive messages are uplifting and pleasant to read.

Positive wording tells what is and what can be done rather than what isn’t and what can’t be done.

**Example:**

N: Our request for a fitness center will never be approved without senior management support.

P: Our request for a fitness center could be approved if we obtain senior management support.

N: You failed to include your credit card number, so we can’t mail your order.

P: We look forward to completing your order as soon as we receive your credit card number.

N: Your letter of February 2 claims that you returned a defective headset.

P: Your February 2 letter describes a headset you returned.

Employees cannot park in Lot B until June 1.

Employees may park in Lot B starting June 1.

1. **Expressing Courtesy:**

Maintaining a courteous tone involves not just guarding against rudeness but also avoiding words that sound demanding or preachy. Expressions such as you should, you must, and you have to cause people to instinctively react with Oh, yeah? One remedy is to turn these demands into rhetorical questions that begin with Will you please. . . . Giving reasons for a request also softens the tone.

Less Courteous: Can’t you people get anything right?

This is the second time I’ve written!

More Courteous: Please credit my account for $340. My latest statement shows that the error noted in my letter of May 15 has not yet been corrected.

Less courteous: Jeremy, you must complete all performance reviews by Friday.

More courteous: Jeremy, will you please complete all performance reviews by Friday.

Less Courteous: Am I the only one who can read the operating manual?

More Courteous: Let’s review the operating manual together so that you can get your documents to print correctly next time.

1. **Applying Bias Free Language:**

In adapting a message to its audience, be sure your language is sensitive and bias free. Few writers set out to be offensive. Sometimes, though, we all say things that we never thought could be hurtful. The real problem is that we don’t think about words and phrases that stereotype groups of people, such as the boys in the mail

room or the girls in the front office. Be cautious about expressions that might be biased in terms of gender, race, ethnicity, age, and disability.

Generally, you can avoid gender-biased language by choosing alternate language for words involving man or woman, by using plural nouns and pronouns, or by changing to a gender-free word (person or representative). Avoid the his or her option whenever possible. It’s wordy and conspicuous. With a little effort, you can

usually find a construction that is graceful, grammatical, and unself-conscious.

Specify age only if it is relevant, and avoid expressions that are demeaning or subjective (such as spry old codger). To avoid disability bias, do not refer to an individual’s disability unless it is relevant. When necessary, use terms that do not stigmatize people with disabilities.

1. **Preferring Plain Language and Familiar Words**

In adapting your message to your audience, use plain language and familiar words that you think audience members will recognize. Don’t, however, avoid a big word that conveys your idea efficiently and is appropriate for the audience. Your goal is to shun pompous and pretentious language. If you mean begin, don’t say commence or initiate.

If you mean pay, don’t write compensate. By substituting everyday, familiar words for unfamiliar ones, as shown here, you help your audience comprehend your ideas quickly.

1. **Using Precise, Vigorous Words**

Strong verbs and concrete nouns give receivers more information and keep them interested. Don’t overlook the thesaurus (available in print, online, and on your computer) for expanding your word choices and vocabulary. Whenever possible, use precise, specific words, as shown here:

**Imprecise , Dull More Precise**

a change in profits a 25 percent hike in profits

a 10 percent plunge in profits

to say to promise, confess, understand

to allege, assert, assume, judge

to think about to identify, diagnose, analyze

to probe, examine, inspect

**Radical Rewrite: Rescue an Unprofessional Email**

The following message from Daisy Miller, the vice president of human relations, seeks to help supervisors and managers write safe and helpful performance reviews.

**Your Task:** Analyze the vice president’s message. List at least five weaknesses. Pay special attention to its tone.

Rewrite the email with appropriate corrections. Feel free to add additional information where you deem fit.

How can you make this e-mail more courteous, positive, concise, precise, and audience oriented?

To: All Supervisors and Departmental Managers

From: Daisy Miller<dmiller@sapper.com>

Subject: Dangerous Employee Performance Evaluations

All,

This is something I hate to do, but I must warn you that recently one of our employees filed a lawsuit against the company because of comments a supervisor made during a performance evaluation. This did not have to happen. Look, people, you must do better!

Because none of you are dense, here are suggestions you must observe when making evaluations of employees:

You cannot accurately evaluate an employee’s performance unless you have a system to measure that performance. That’s why the obvious very first step is developing performance standards and goals for each employee. To be effective, these standards and goals must be shared with the employee. However, don’t do it orally. Do it in writing.

The performance of each employee must be monitored throughout the year. Keep a log for each worker. Note memorable incidents or projects in which he was involved. But don’t just keep favorable comments. I know that many of you are understandably averse to placing negative comments in an employee’s file. However, MAN UP! Even negative comments must be included as part of the evaluation process.

Once a year each employee must be formally evaluated in a written performance appraisal—yes, I do mean written! In a face to- face meeting, let the employee know what you think they did well and what areas the employee may be able to improve. Be specific, give deadlines, be honest, and be realistic.

Giving evaluations can be difficult. With careful preparation, however, the process can be smooth and safe. Don’t allow yourself or the company to get involved in any more legal ramifications.

Daisy Miller

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