Choose the Right Tone

Step 6

Overview

Select words and phrases that convey respect.

Empathize when saying no or delivering bad news.

Control your frustration and offer constructive feedback.

Always respond civilly, even to offensive emails.

Tailor the tone to your reader.

On a recent visit to the Chester (New York) Public Library near my home, I was met by this sign on the door: “Food and drinks may be enjoyed outside on our benches.” Wow, I thought, what a positive way to explain a rule while welcoming them into the library! The sign could’ve come across with the typical harsh warning, like, “Food and drinks are strictly prohibited in our library!” But that could’ve elicited a negative feeling among those entering.

The language you choose in your business communications establishes a tone that helps determine how positively or negatively your readers react and whether they’ll take your desired actions. You’ve probably been on the receiving end of many nasty emails or texts and can recall how you felt about the sender. You may have thought, “Who do you think you are? If you want my help, forget about it!” (unless it’s from your supervisor, in which case your opinion of them might drop considerably).

Let’s turn the tables. You may have sent an email that at first appeared perfectly fine, only to be confronted by one reader with a response such as, “Are you upset with us? Did we do something wrong?” Then, bewildered, you review the language in your message and realize how it could’ve been perceived as offensive. And if one of the readers felt insulted, it’s a good bet that many others did too. This is because it’s typically more difficult to control your tone in writing than when speaking. The reader can’t see your facial expressions or hear fluctuations in your voice.

So think before you write—or at least before hitting send. Recognize that amid the stress of day-to-day work—when others often annoy us—you have a choice. Say your co-worker sends you an email asking for information, which you’ve already told him twice is unavailable. When replying, one option is to let him have it and make him feel foolish. While you may get five minutes of satisfaction, don’t count on his support down the road. Your other choice is to explain, in a civil tone, why this information is unavailable and suggest some potential next steps. And if you believe this individual is not carrying his weight as an employee, then confront him in person or notify the human resource department. In most cases, it’s better to resolve highly sensitive or critical issues through oral conversations rather than emails or text messages.

Select the Right Language

In many situations, you’ll want to choose words or phrases that soften the impact of your message. When the point you must make might sting the reader, choose more civil words to convey the same information. See Tool 6-1 for some examples.

Tool 6-1

Words and Phrases That Soften the Impact

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Stings | Softer Approach |
| This is unacceptable. | This is unsuitable. |
| This is unimportant (or not important). | This is minor. |
| Your presentation was dull. | Your presentation could have been a bit more engaging. |
| Your proposal missed some vital points. | Your proposal should have included some key points. |
| You never returned my call. | I haven’t been able to reach you. |
| I don’t like your idea. | I have some concerns about your idea. |
| Your email confused me. | I wasn’t sure how to interpret your email. |
| Your plan failed. | We had some difficulty implementing your plan. |
| You left 25 employees off the registration list. | For some reason, 25 employees were left off the registration list. |
| You screwed up the report, just like last month. | The errors you made on this report are the same ones you made on last month’s report. |
| I may be missing something. | Please clarify a few points. |

On top of selecting the best words and phrases, you need to look at how the entire message comes across to ensure that your tone is appropriate. Let’s look at a few common workplace scenarios and strategies for using supportive rather than offensive language.

Respectfully Ask for Clarification

If your co-worker emails you a draft of an industry report with many confusing sections, you may be frustrated by his poor effort and be tempted to reply with this opening sentence: Your industry report totally baffled me!

While you’re giving an honest response, your co-worker, who feels put down, may interpret this sentence as: You’re an idiot! You can’t write a decent industry report!

At the same time, he may view you as arrogant and unprofessional. Here’s a softer and more productive way to get your point across: Please clarify a few points about your industry report (specifying where clarification is needed).

Contain Your Frustration

It can be extremely annoying when a co-worker requests information that you’ve already sent. But if you want to maintain an amicable relationship with her, don’t convey your annoyance—and belittle her—for what could’ve been an honest mistake. Consider this example:

Why did you again request last quarter’s social media analysis for LZY Industries? This was included in the email sent April 21. Here it is—again.

A better approach is to simply resend the analysis with a subtle mention (in parentheses) that the information was already emailed:

Please see last quarter’s social media analysis for LZY Industries (from April 21 email).

Then, if the co-worker continues to ask for information you’ve already provided, consider asking the person what you could do, such as using a particular subject line, to ensure that they open the email.

Offer Constructive and Thoughtful Comments

Say you received a proposal for a training program that’s inadequate for achieving the stated objectives. Don’t respond with this type of harsh, condescending email:

I don’t get your recommendation for one-hour training on capital budgeting analysis. There’s no way 60 minutes is enough time. Remember, this program must cover complex issues like discounted cash flow and risk identification. For us to properly train these individuals, we must allot six hours—at a minimum. Otherwise, we’re just wasting our time and won’t achieve the desired results. If you want to do this right, contact me.

Notice the hidden insults that may offend the reader: I don’t get, There’s no way, Remember, For us to properly train, we’re just wasting our time, If you want to do this right.

Pointer

Don’t be condescending when reacting to others’ ideas.

Instead, write your reply in a way that supports the individual’s efforts to improve the proposal:

You may want to rethink the proposed one-hour duration for the capital budgeting analysis training. Given the complexities of discounted cash flow and risk identification, I suggest that we extend the program to at least six hours so we can achieve the desired outcomes. Please contact me if you’d like to review the objectives and strategies.

Say “No” Tactfully

Sometimes you need to turn others down—for jobs, promotions, or other requests. But in the process, you don’t need to disparage individuals with obvious or subtle put-downs, as with this email:

Thanks for reaching out to us to request support service for your office in Memphis. Unfortunately, we cannot meet your request for the following reasons.

First, you need to better understand our policies. If you don’t put your expenses into proper categories, we simply cannot authorize them. At our company, we stress organization. Moreover, our experience has shown us that working with unorganized affiliates can seriously compromise our productivity.

Second, which people would be working on which projects? Unless I missed something, I could not find this mentioned anywhere in your request. As we’ve indicated several times in our emails to your office, allocation of responsibilities in advance is crucial for us to authorize support services.

Once again, we appreciate the request. Please keep in mind these guidelines should you decide to again ask for support services.

Consider all the condescending language and the potential hidden meaning:

You need to better understand our policies (because you’re ignorant).

At our company, we stress organization (not like your totally disorganized office).

Working with unorganized affiliates can seriously compromise our productivity (you’re not good enough to work with us).

Unless I missed something, I could not find this mentioned anywhere in your request (I can’t believe you left this out).

As we’ve indicated several times in our correspondence with your office (you just don’t pay attention).

Let’s try again with a supportive, matter-of-fact approach without the offensive language:

Thanks for reaching out to us for support service for your Memphis office. We cannot meet your request for two reasons. We require that the request be organized into proper categories and that allocation of responsibilities be given in advance.

Please feel free to resubmit this request when these requirements have been met, and call us if you have any questions.

Empathize When Delivering Bad News

At one time or another, you’ve been a customer who has contacted a company to request a refund, rebate, discount, or another perk you believe is owed to you. When it doesn’t turn out in your favor, you’re annoyed, often with good reason.

Pointer

Empathize with the customer when turning down a request.

Now put yourself at the other end of the message, as a representative of the company who needs to send an email explaining to the customer why they aren’t getting what they want. Good luck! First, recognize that you can’t make the person’s irritation and displeasure with your company disappear. Then figure out how to temper your bad-news message to show that you understand the individual’s concerns.

Following are examples of ineffective and effective ways to tell small business owner Marina Bowman that her HD projector is no longer under warranty and will cost $300 to repair. The projector malfunctioned just hours before an out-of-town new business presentation, forcing her to rent a projector at the last moment. Marina has sent an email, expressing her dissatisfaction that the product had failed just 15 months after she purchased it and has requested that the manufacturer cover the cost of the repair or send her a new projector.

Dear Marina,

With regret, I must tell you that your HD projector is no longer under warranty and we cannot repair the switch malfunction you reported. The projector is guaranteed for 12 months, and your problem occurred 15 months after the purchase date.

We did offer an extended warranty for $39.99 that would have covered the machine for an additional 24 months, but you declined that offer.

Our company apologizes for any inconvenience or unanticipated expense as a result of the machine’s malfunction. We have many new HD projector models available on our website, and I’d be happy to have one of our sales reps contact you to discuss which is best for your needs and to review the extended warranty.

Sincerely,

Brian Oliver

Customer Service Manager

This impersonal email blames Marina for not purchasing the extended warranty and attempts to get her to spend more money—not the best way to build customer loyalty. Let’s see how this compares with a more empathetic and genuine response.

Dear Marina,

What an inopportune time for your HD projector to break down. I hope your presentation with the rented machine was successful—and that you turned the prospect into a client.

We do our best to build high-quality machines, but sometimes make mistakes in the process. Unfortunately, we can’t bend the rules on warranties. I wish we could.

What I’d like to do is research other models in our inventory and offer you the best discounts available—those usually reserved for our large corporate customers who purchase 25 or more machines a year. I’ll also offer the extended warranty for no additional charge, a $39.99 value.

Give me a week and I’ll call you to let you know what’s available and give you details on the discounts.

Please call me if you have questions.

Sincerely,

Brian Oliver

Customer Service Manager

This email empathizes with Marina’s circumstances as a businesswoman, expresses interest in her success, and commits the writer to an active role in solving the problem in a way that may satisfy all parties. Plus, it sets a much warmer tone. Notice that Brian does not get to the point right away. Instead, he begins by putting himself in the customer’s shoes. While Marina still may not be thrilled, she sees that Brian and others at the company care about the people who use its products. For additional guidelines and an example of how to send bad-news correspondence to clients, see Appendix B.

Respond Civilly to Offensive Emails

When you receive a rude or condescending email, your first instinct may be to immediately respond with an even nastier email. You’re thinking, “I can’t let her get away with that. Let’s see how she likes being insulted!”

Resist the urge to strike back harder—regardless of how much the incoming email infuriated you—because you may soon regret such an impulsive action. If you need to let off steam, type out your counter-punch reply—but be sure to hit the Draft key. Or better yet, compose the text in a Word file to avoid accidentally hitting send.

Then give yourself time—at least 30 minutes—before rereading your potentially offensive email so you can reconsider the consequences and transform it into a more-civil and productive message. Take a look at this harsh and condescending incoming email and compare the two types of replies:

You need to email me the January figures on sales volume and accounts opened and closed by tomorrow at 10 a.m. so I can begin my analysis. I assume that you're aware of the critical importance of this analysis!

Inflammatory reply: Are you serious? How about a little more notice? There's no way I can get you these figures before Monday. I haven't even received all the data! Don’t you believe in planning projects ahead of time?

Productive reply: I appreciate your need to complete the analysis as soon as possible, but I haven't received all the January data. What I could do is email you the figures through January 24 by tomorrow so you can begin your analysis. Then you can make minor edits when I submit the rest of the figures on Monday. Please let me know if this would work for you.

Know Your Reader

While documents and emails to all your readers should come across professionally and respectfully, the more you know about each person or a group of people (for example, your direct reports or others on your team), the better you can tailor your language to produce the desired results.

You can differentiate readers through two primary criteria:

how they’ll receive your message

your relationship with them.

Readers may perceive your email or text message in different ways based on whether they’re open, indifferent, or hostile (or a combination of these) to you. The more you can predict into which category a single or group of readers fall, the better you can customize your language. Here are some strategies:

For readers open to your message, be natural and conversational: For close colleagues or others with whom you feel comfortable, a warm and friendly tone works best. Here’s an example:

You and I know our mobile advertising plan needs a major overhaul. Let’s work on getting the marketing director to see things our way.

For readers indifferent to your message, tap their “hot buttons”: With individuals who don’t know you that well or who have no stake in whether your ideas are well received, address hot-button topics or WIIFM (What’s in it for me?; see step 5). Consider the following example, which can be aimed at a CEO, division head, or other decision maker:

We should invest in this new software program because it will improve productivity by 15 percent and free the sales force to generate more leads.

For readers hostile to your message, find common ground between your message and their needs: To get through to a hostile reader (like a customer dissatisfied with your product or service), acknowledge and empathize with their concern and explain your solution. Here’s an example:

I agree that my team’s service has declined due to a lack of technical knowledge among our account reps. Starting tomorrow, all reps will attend a 20-hour online training course that will help them identify customers’ technical needs and direct inquiries to the proper department more quickly.

You can also adjust your tone based on your relationship with the reader in an organization, which can be categorized in several ways. We’ll address the two most common: supervisor and direct report.

Writing to Supervisors

Through effective written communication to your supervisor, you can validate your competencies—such as your knowledge, analytical skills, and leadership abilities—and demonstrate the value you bring to them and to the organization.

Pointer

Write explicit text to convey your confidence to supervisors.

First select the appropriate style (formal or informal) based on your supervisor’s preference, which you can usually determine by reviewing their messages to you. And if you’re not sure, ask. Always use respectful language, and, where appropriate, speak to what your boss cares about (see step 5 on satisfying the WIIFM). This could include exceeding sales goals, staying within the budget, or easing pressure from higher-ups. It also helps to know your boss’s outside interests and whether they have a sense of humor.

Let’s take a scenario in which you need to choose words carefully to establish the right tone: Your supervisor is unhappy with your team’s drop in production, which you attribute to the layoffs of two employees in the previous quarter of last year. She has asked for an email explaining the decline and your plan to bring production back up to last year’s level. Your email should:

Empathize with her dissatisfaction with production.

Allude to the reduction in staff without making it an excuse.

Exude confidence in your ability to increase production.

Outline one or more steps for achieving this goal.

Here’s how the message to your supervisor might read:

Karen,

As you pointed out, production must improve to at least last year’s level—and we probably can do even better. The months following the layoffs of Olga and Rick have been challenging, but the team has begun to develop new strategies for increasing production. These include an advanced lead-generation system.

Please review the details below. I’m excited about moving forward with this new system, assuming you approve it.

Thanks,

Miguel

Let’s review what parts of that email delivered the appropriate tone:

Conveys that you understand why the boss is upset: I agree that production must improve to at least the level of last year—and we probably can do even better.

Reminds her of the reduction in staff, without making it an excuse: The months following the layoffs of Olga and Rick have been challenging.

Exudes confidence in your ability to motivate your people: the team has begun to develop new strategies for increasing production.

Outlines one step for achieving this goal: an advanced lead-generation system (additional steps may follow).

Writing to Direct Reports

Your communication to those who report to you plays a critical role in building your relationship with them and enhancing performance. Every email and text message to these individuals is a chance to demonstrate support, motivate, and enhance morale. Yet many managers fail to take advantage of this opportunity—and sometimes send messages with a negative tone that damage relationships with direct reports and ultimately lower productivity.

Often this negative tone comes across when assigning work. Many supervisors who complete my writing workshops or coaching have shared that they’re “too blunt” with these types of messages. Compare the openings of these two emails from a supervisor to a direct report about completing a project:

Blunt and bossy: The XB project is critical, so you need to complete several tasks no later than January 30!! The XB project is even more important than the ZD project you completed in December.

Appreciative and inspiring: Thanks again for your hard work on the ZD project in December. Now we have the more-important XB project, so I could use your help completing these tasks by January 30.

Another all-too-common challenge for supervisors is addressing mistakes by one or more direct reports. How you describe the situation and communicate your wishes can play an important role in their performance and job satisfaction. Compare these two emails:

Negative, critical tone: I’m appalled by the number of payroll errors you’ve made on the XW Partners’ account. This client is vital to our company, and we can’t tolerate such a lack of attention to detail. Each of you must attend a meeting this Thursday at 8:30 a.m. to review procedures so we can eliminate these mistakes! This is a mandatory meeting!

Most employees reading this email will react with anger, frustration, or other negative emotion that probably will make them less productive (at least for the rest of that day) and less committed to supporting their boss. Here’s a better way:

Productive tone: Several serious errors have been made on the payroll for XW Partners, a vital account to our company. Each of you needs to be more careful. Please mark your calendars for this Thursday at 8:30 a.m. for a meeting to review procedures and develop methods to help eliminate errors.

Let’s look more closely at strategies for criticizing—and praising—direct reports in emails.

Be Specific With Your Criticism

When you need to point out shortcomings in those who report to you, address specific mistakes instead of broad personality traits (which probably should be addressed in a face-to-face meeting). Then clearly define the steps they should take to correct the problem. Compare these two versions of an email criticizing an employee’s lack of attention to customer service:

Vague criticism and recommendation: Anna Novak of ZX Enterprises says that you haven’t been paying enough attention to her requests. We’ll lose this client if you continue to be so nonresponsive! Your service skills must begin to improve immediately.

Specific criticism and recommendation: Anna Novak of ZX Enterprises is upset that you haven’t returned two of her emails over the past five days. Some of her staff hasn’t been able to access the application we installed last week. Remember that our policy is to always return client emails within 24 hours. ZX Enterprises is one of our most valued clients, and we can’t afford to lose them. Email her by 10 a.m. to set up a call to discuss how to resolve this issue.

Pointer

Be specific when you point out direct reports’ mistakes.<end>

Temper Your Criticism When Necessary

In some cases, you’ll want to soften your negative comments to those who report to you. One way is to label one’s mistake as an example of a department-wide problem. And, if appropriate, you can remind this individual that they are an asset to the company, despite the error. Here’s an example:

Justin,

Your high-caliber work on the ZYZ Railways project over the past two months has helped us increase productivity, including freeing up my time for other important projects. But you need to be more careful with the monthly client activity reports. In September, the report erroneously stated that ZYZ was two months behind in its payment, which upset several of the firm’s senior managers.

I recognize that these reports are often copied and pasted from prior reports and that mistakes happen. In fact, many others on our team have made similar errors over the past six months. We need to put a stop to it.

Tomorrow I’m sending an email to the entire team explaining the new protocol where every client report must be carefully proofed by at least two other people.

Thanks,

Marc

Give Broad and Specific Praise When Merited

Although flattering others can elevate their self-esteem and boost their morale, it can backfire when perceived as insincere or patronizing. If you praise an employee every time they do something right with statements like Thanks for being a true team player! or Great job! your message quickly will come across as phony and lose its impact. Then, when they achieve a feat that truly deserves a compliment, your kudos will seem disingenuous.

When a direct report (or a co-worker) has completed a project that deserves a compliment, include both a broad stroke on that person’s value to the company and praise for the specific efforts that have paid dividends. Here’s an example:

Lorraine,

Your projected budget forecast was well written, superbly organized, and comprehensive. You anticipated several expense categories I might have overlooked. Thanks for always coming through for our team!

Your Turn

Crafting the right tone is difficult in the stress of day-to-day work, especially when others annoy you or when writing to those who are upset with your company. These exercises will help hone your skills in writing with an appropriate tone in different situations.

Rewrite this email so it’s respectful, rather than condescending, to the reader:

I don’t really understand your request for specifications from a project completed four years ago. There’s absolutely no value in going back more than two years, given how fast our industry changes. If you, however, really need these old specs, I’ll see what I can do. Let’s be sure we don’t waste time here.

You just received a letter from a customer who’s angry that his snow blower broke when he tried clearing an 18-inch snowfall from his driveway. As a result of the machine’s failure, the customer was forced to spend $150 on a plowing service. He wants the company to pay for the $700 snow blower repair, although the warranty expired three months ago. The customer also wants your company to reimburse him for the plowing expense. Write a letter explaining that the company can’t pay for either expense, but do it in a way that conveys your empathy with his situation.

Your new client has sent you an email requesting a project for a fee far less than your company can offer. Revise this harsh and condescending reply in a way that helps build a relationship with the client—without agreeing to this fee:

I’m puzzled by your request. There’s no way we can offer your division all these services for just $25,000. Remember that we’ve got to incur quite a few costs, including labor, research, and travel. We need to set up a call and figure out how to raise this fee to a more reasonable level.

The Next Step

In addition to carefully choosing a tone that expresses empathy and produces the results you want, you need to exhibit your professionalism in the way you compose your text. That requires, among other skills, a sound command of grammar. We’ll address that topic in step 7 (Put Your Best Grammar on the Page).