

8: Positive and Negative Messages

Chapter Objectives

The purpose of this chapter is to:

- Present different types of routine messages
- Explain the difference between complaints and claims
- Identify parts of an adjustment message
- Explain the significance of apology
- Present different types of positive (goodwill) messages
- Discuss organization and impact of negative messages

Positive and Routine Messages

The vast majority of business messages sent every day are short messages of a routine nature such as asking for and sharing information, requesting action, or thanking someone for something given. Most of the time these are positive or neutral messages even when they involve small complaints or claims where you request that an error be corrected. These are all **direct approach messages**, in which the main idea comes right upfront and details follow. Occasionally, you must communicate bad news in writing, which requires a more careful, indirect approach. All of these situations involve conventions that business professionals follow to minimize miscommunication and its fallout, and thus keep their operation running smoothly.

Positive (Goodwill) Messages

Goodwill messages are as essential to healthy professional relationships as they are to personal ones. Thank-you, congratulatory, and sympathy notes add an important, feel-good human touch in a world that continues to embrace technology that isolates people while being marketed as a means of connecting them. The goodwill that such messages promote makes both the sender and receiver feel better about each other and themselves. In putting smiles on faces, such notes are effective especially because many people don't send them--either because they feel that they are too difficult to write or because it does not even occur to them to do so. Since praise for someone can be harder to think of and write than criticism, a brief guide on how to do it right may be of help.

Type of Message	Characteristics
Thank-You Notes	Such messages should be short and simple as well as quick and easy to write. For that reason, not sending them when someone does something nice for you appears ungrateful, rude, and inconsiderate. In fact, sending a thank-you note within 24 hours of interviewing for a job, for example, is not just extra thoughtful but close to being an expected formality. In most situations, email or text is an appropriate medium for sending thank-you messages.
Congratulatory Messages	Celebrating the successes of your professional peers shows class and tact. Such messages create positive energy in the workplace and should be all about the person you are congratulating.
Expressions of Sympathy	Few situations require such sincerity and care with words as expressions of sympathy. Misfortune comes upon us all, and tough times are just a little more tolerable with the support of our friends, family, and community--including those we work with. When the loved-one of a close associate dies, for instance, expressing sympathy for their loss is customary, often with a card, rather than an email or text, signed by everyone in the workplace who knows the bereaved. You can't appreciate email messages the same way you can a collection of cards from people showing they care. Remember that these messages should be selfless. Offering your condolences in the most respectful, sensitive manner possible is the right thing to do.

Information Shares

Perhaps the simplest and most common routine message type is where the sender offers up information that helps the receiver.

Information Share Email

To: smitha@gmail.com

Subject: CFP info you might find interesting

Hi Karin,

I just saw a CFP for a new funding opportunity you can apply for via the Department of Agriculture.

Find it on the Greenbelt Fund's Local Food Literacy Grant Stream page. If you haven't already been doing this, you should also check out the Department of Agriculture's general page on Funding Programs and Support to connect with any other grants etc. relevant to the good work you do.

It looks like the deadline for proposals is at the end of the week, though, so you might want to get on it right away.

Good luck!

Rima

Replies to such information shares involve either a quick and concise thank-you message or carry the conversation on if it's part of an ongoing project, initiative, or conversation. If you are using email, remember to change the subject line as the topic evolves. Information shares to a larger group, such as a departmental memo to 60 employees, don't usually require acknowledgment and would be slightly more formal in tone. If everyone wrote the sender just to say thanks, the barrage of reply notifications would frustrate them as they try to carry on their work while sorting out replies with valuable information from mere acknowledgments. Only respond if you have valuable information to share with all the recipients or just the sender. Pay attention whether you need to Reply All or whether it is sufficient to reply just to the sender. Do not burden others with messages not directly relevant to them.

Information or Action Requests

Managers, clients, and coworkers alike send and receive requests for information and action all day. Because these provide the recipient with direction on what to do, the information that comes back or action that results from such request can only be as good as the instructions given. Such messages must be well organized and clear about expectations, opening directly with a clearly stated general request (unless you anticipate resistance to the request) and proceeding with background and more detailed instructions if necessary. Figure 1 below provides an example of a request email.



Figure 1: Request Email, [Communication @ Work](#)

Note that, because we expect action to come of the request rather than a yes or no answer, the opening question does not require a question mark. Never forget, however, the importance of saying "please" when asking someone to do something. Notice also that

the list in the message body helps break up dense detail, so the request message is more reader friendly. All of the effort that the writer of the above message made to deliver a **reader-centered message** will pay off when the recipient performs the requested procedure exactly according to these clearly worded expectations.

If you expect resistance to your request, an **indirect approach** is more effective. Ideally, you'll make such persuasive pitches in person or on the phone so that you can use a full range of verbal and non-verbal cues. When it's important to present your argument in writing, however, such requests should be clear and easy to spot but buffered by goodwill statements and reasonable justifications.

When responding to information or action requests, simply deliver the needed information or confirm that the action has been or will be completed unless you have good reasons for refusing. Ensure the accuracy of all details and utilize the "you-attitude." Note that sometimes manager approval may be necessary before providing the information. Organizationally, a positive response to an information request delivers the main answer in the opening, proceeds to give more detail in the body if necessary, and ends politely with appreciation and goodwill statements.

Complaints and Claims

Business doesn't always go smoothly and bad customer experience can have long-lasting consequences. Customers can be disappointed with a faulty product or poor service; shipments might get damaged, lost, or arrive late; or one business might infringe on the rights and freedoms of another. In all such cases, customers or clients are likely to make your company aware of what went wrong and what they want to be done about it. Indeed, it's their consumer right to do so and the business or organization receiving such a message should take it as valuable intelligence on customer expectations that must be met for the business to be viable.

A **claim** explains what went wrong and demands compensation from the offending party while a complaint explains what went wrong and merely demands correction or apology. Minor complaints are best communicated in person, on the phone, or by email (if it's important to have them in writing) so they can be dealt with quickly. More serious complaints or claims are delivered as formal letters to lay down a paper trail in case they need to be used as evidence in a lawsuit.

When customers are reasonable about communicating a problem with a situation or business transaction, the customer service representative or manager dealing with the matter is more likely to respond positively and meet the needs of the client. However, ineffective complaints or claims often merely vent frustrations, issue threats, don't say what they want or only vaguely imply it, or demand completely unreasonable compensation. Assume that a business will take your complaint or claim seriously if it's done right because, no matter the industry, companies are rightfully afraid of losing business to negative online reviews. In this day of social media, good customer service is crucial to business survivability. A complaint provides a business with both valuable information about customer expectations and an opportunity to win back a customer--as well as their social network if a good endorsement comes of it from the now-satisfied customer--or else risk losing much more than just the one customer.

Effective complaints or claims are politely worded and motivated by a desire to right wrongs and save the business relationship. They are best if they remind the business that you have been a loyal customer (if that's true) and really want to keep coming back, but you need them to prove that they value your business after whatever setback prompted the complaint. If the writer of such message strikes the right tone, they can end up getting more than they originally bargained for.

Complaints and claims take the direct approach of message organization even though they arise from dissatisfaction. They follow the usual three-part message organization.

Complaint/Claim Organization

1. **Opening** - To be effective at writing a complaint or claim, be clear, precise, and polite about what you want in the opening. If you want financial compensation or a replacement product in the case of a claim, be clear about the amount or model. You could also suggest equivalent or alternative compensation if you stand a poor chance of getting exactly what you want. If you want an error corrected or an apology in response to your complaint, be upfront about it.
2. **Body** - The message body justifies the request with a narrative account of what should have happened versus what actually happened instead. Be objective in writing the account because an angry tone coming through in negative words, accusations, and exaggerations will only undermine the validity of your complaint or claim. Be precise in such details as names, dates and times, locations (addresses), and product names and numbers. Whenever possible, provide and refer to evidence. For instance, you may include copies (definitely not originals) of documentation such as receipts, invoices, work orders, bills of lading, emails (printed), phone records, photographic evidence, and even video (e.g., of a malfunctioning product).

3. **Closing** - No matter what prompted the complaint or claim, the closing must be politely worded with action requests (e.g., a deadline) and goodwill statements. Nasty parting shots, even if merely passive-aggressive, may lower your chances of getting what you are asking for. By complimenting the recipient's company, however, you increase your chances of getting not only what you wanted, but perhaps a little extra. In damage-control mode, the business wants you to feel compelled to tell your friends that the company really turned it around.

Claim Email

To: customerservice@FScomputers.com

Subject: Refund for unwanted warranty purchase

Hello,

please refund me for the \$89.99 extended warranty that was charged to my Visa despite being declined at the point of sale.

This past Tuesday (June 15, 2021), I purchased a Dell laptop at the Belleville location of Future Shock Computers and was asked by the sales rep if I would like to add a 3-year extended warranty to the purchase. I declined and we proceeded with the sale, which included some other accessories. When I got home and reviewed the receipt (the PDF scan of the receipt is attached), I noticed the warranty that I had declined was added to the bill after all.

Please apply the cost of the warranty to the Visa account associated with the purchase by the end of the week and let me know when you've done so. I have enjoyed shopping at Future Shock for the great prices and friendly customer service. I would sincerely like to return to purchase a printer soon.

I appreciate your assistance in this matter,

Samantha Nguyen

Adjustment Letters

If a company grants what the customer has asked for, communicating this is called an **adjustment** message. An adjustment letter or email is heavy on courtesy in letting the disappointed customer know that they are valued and will be (or have already been) awarded what they were asking for, and possibly even a little extra. In the case of coupons for discounts on future purchases, the little extras help smooth things over and win back the customer's confidence, hopefully so they will tell their friends that the store or company is worthy of their business after all.

An adjustment message takes the **direct approach** by immediately delivering the **good news** about granting the customer's request. You may start with an apology, but starting on a purely positive note is more effective, especially in a written message. Tone is also important here; resist the urge to shame the customer—even if they are partly to blame or if part of you still suspects that the claim is fraudulent. If you are going to grant the claim, write it whole-heartedly as if others will be able to see it and judge whether your company has good customer service or if you are going to be difficult about it.

Though a routine adjustment letter might skip a message body, a more serious one may need to go into more detail about how you are complying with the request or take the time to explain what your company is doing to prevent the error again. Doing this makes the reader feel as though making the effort to write will have made a positive impact in the world, however small, because it will benefit not only them but also everyone else who will not have to go through what they did. Do not make empty promises, though.

An **apology** might also be appropriate in the body of the message, but be aware that apologizing is tricky. It is essential to winning back customer confidence in some situations, but it also leaves you or your company open to legal action in others. For minor matters, admitting fault with an apology usually helps vindicate or validate the customer. In more serious matters, especially involving injury or damage to property or even someone's reputation (and thus their earning potential), a written apology might be read as admitting fault and be used as evidence in court. For this reason, it is best to ask a manager or legal department for guidance on apologizing to a customer or other stakeholder in writing.

If apologizing is appropriate because you genuinely erred, no legal repercussions are expected, and it is the right thing to do when trying to calm an angry response and mend a damaged business relationship, ensure that the apology has the following characteristics:

- **Sincere** - Saying "We are genuinely sorry that you were disappointed with the customer service experience" is a good first step, but it requires some additional assurances to prove it.

- **Responsible** - Own the error by admitting fault (again, only if you are at fault and it does not open you to litigation). Say what should have happened versus what actually happened and acknowledge that you were wrong.
- **Specific** - To be sincere, an apology must refer to a specific error by briefly describing it, possibly including dates, locations, and the names of product or service. The worst apologies are blanket, generic statements such as "We are sorry if anyone was offended by our actions." On the other hand, it is unprofessional to throw your employees under the bus or to vent about the situation in your company that might have contributed to the problem. These issues should be dealt with within the business.
- **Improvement-focused** - An apology is useless unless it includes some assurances that you will make every effort for the error to not happen again. Simply saying it won't happen again is not convincing and might sound as an empty promise. Instead, describe what will be done to ensure improvement. When Starbucks apologized for a racist incident at one of its locations in 2018, for instance, it followed through on a plan for improving customer service by shutting down all of its stores for a half-day racial sensitivity training for employees.

Adjustment Email

To: snguyen@gmail.com

Subject: Refund for unwanted warranty purchase

Hello Samantha,

absolutely, we would be happy to refund you for the \$89.99 warranty mistakenly charged along with your purchase of the Dell laptop. For your inconvenience, we will also offer you a \$20 gift card for future purchases at our store.

To receive your refund and gift card, please return to our Belleville location with your receipt and the credit card that was charged so that we can credit the same card (For consumer protection reasons, we are unable to complete any transactions without the card.)

We are sorry for inconveniencing you and will speak with all sales staff about the importance of carefully checking the accuracy of any bill of sale before sending the order for payment.

We appreciate your choosing Future Shock for your personal electronics and look forward to seeing you soon to credit your Visa card and provide you with the best deal in town on the printer you were looking to purchase.

Have a great day,

Melissa

Negative Messages

Just as in life, the workplace is not always sunny. Sometimes things do not go according to plan, and it is your job to communicate about them in a way that does not ruin your relationships with customers, coworkers, managers, the public, and other stakeholders. When doing damage control, bad-news messages required care, diplomacy, and skillful language because your main point will meet resistance. Rarely are people okay being told they are laid off, their application has been rejected, their shipment got lost, prices or rates are increasing, their appointment has to be moved back several months, or they are losing their benefits. Though some people prefer that the messenger be blunt about it, in most cases you can assume that the receiver will appreciate or even benefit from a more tactful, indirect approach. The list below provides several tips for delivering bad news in person or in writing:

- Be clear and concise to avoid being asked for additional clarification.
- Help the receiver understand and accept the news.
- Reduce the anxiety associated with the bad news as much as possible by expressing sympathy or empathy.
- Maintain trust and respect between you and your audience to ensure the possibility of good future relations.
- Deliver the bad news in a timely fashion through the appropriate medium.
- Avoid the legal liability that comes with admitting negligence or guilt.
- Achieve the designated business outcome.

For more information on delivering unwelcome news effectively, watch Don R. Crawley, IT Customer Service Speaker, in this video: [How to Deliver Bad News: Customer Service Training 101](#), which provides five strategies for delivering bad news. Your ability to manage, clarify, and guide understanding is crucial to addressing challenging situations while maintaining trust and integrity.

Key to helping the receiver understand and accept information they don't want to hear or read is organizing the message using the **indirect approach**. For example, this is effective when you need to refuse a claim because the customer's complaint is not justified. If you tactlessly provide your audience with really bad news, you run the risk of them rejecting or misunderstanding it because they may be reeling from the blow and be too distracted with anger or sadness to rationally process the explanation or instructions for what to do about the bad news. To avoid misunderstandings when delivering bad news, follow this organization.

Bad News Message Organization

1. **Buffer (Acknowledgment of the Claim)** - Begin with a neutral or positive statements that set a goodwill tone and serve as a buffer for the information to come. A buffer softens the blow of bad news. The idea here is not to fool the audience into thinking that only good news is coming but to put them in a receptive frame of mind for understanding the explanation that follows. Note that if you raise the expectation that they are going to hear the good news that they are getting what they want, only to let them down near the end, they are going to be even more disappointed for being led on. For that reason, be careful not to create false hope.
2. **Justification (Explanation)** - The justification explains the background or context for the bad news before delivering the bad news itself. Let's say that you must reject an application, claim for a refund, or request for information. In such cases, the explanation could describe the strict acceptance criteria and high quality of applications received in the competition, the company policy on refunds, or its policy on allowable disclosures and the legalities of contractually obligated confidentiality. Your goal with the explanation is to be convincing so that the reader thinks, "That sounds reasonable" or "I understand their point" and accepts the bad news as inevitable given the situation you describe. If you make the bad news seem like mysterious or arbitrary decision making, your audience will most likely feel like they've been treated unfairly. Such situations usually escalate further, which we always try to avoid. While an explanation is ethically necessary, never admit or imply responsibility without written authorization from your company cleared by legal counsel if there is any indication that the justification might be seen as actionable.
3. **Bad News** - We usually use the indirect approach to delay the bad-news message so that it can be properly understood and its negative impact minimized. Be clear while also being sensitive to your reader's feelings. Consider using passive voice when delivering this news.
4. **Redirection (Alternative)** - This is keBay to bad news' effectiveness because it quickly shifts the reader's attention to an alternative to what they are seeking. Some kind of consolation prize (e.g., a coupon or store credit) helps soothe the pain and will be appreciated as being better than nothing, at least. Even if you are not able to offer the reading anything of value, you could at least say something nice or provide some useful information. If your redirection involves some alternative, remember to also offer some follow-up details. For example, if you are offering coupon or store credit, explain how the customer should redeem this offer.
5. **Positive Closing** - The goal of the closing is to leave on a positive note. You need to ensure that the reader understands the bad news without rehashing it. Remain courteous, positive, and forward looking. End the conversation in such a way that you do not invite further communication unless it is necessary with respect to the alternative that you have offered.

Bad News Message Outline and Example

Part	Example Message
1. Buffer	Thank you for your order. We appreciate your interest in our product and are confident you will love it.
2. Explanation	We are writing to let you know that this product has been unexpectedly popular with over 10,000 orders submitted on the day you placed yours.
3. Bad news + redirect	This unexpected increase in demand has resulted in a temporary out-of-stock/backorder situation. Despite a delay of 2-3 weeks, we will definitely fulfill your order as it was received at 11:57 p.m. on October 9, 2018, as well as gift you a \$5 coupon towards your next purchase.
4. Positive action closing	While you wait for your product to ship, we encourage you to use the enclosed \$5 coupon toward the purchase of any product in our online catalog. We appreciate your continued business and want you to know that our highest priority is your satisfaction.

Although it is usually preferable to deliver negative messages using the indirect approach, there are several occasions when you can or should be upfront about the bad news:

- When the bad news does not have a high emotional impact
- When you know that the recipient prefers or requires the direct approach
- When the reader may miss the bad news (e.g., if your reader doesn't have a strong command of English, they may not pick up on the buried bad news past the midpoint of a challenging message)
- When you are short on time or space
- When the indirect approach has not worked.

Delivering bad news can be dangerous if it angers the reader so much that they are motivated to fight back. If you are not careful with what you say and how you say it, that message can be used as evidence in a court case that, when read by a judge or jury, could compromise your position. You can lower the risk of being litigated by following general principles given below when delivering bad news.

- **Avoid negative or abusive language** - sarcasm, profanity, harsh accusations, and abusive or insulting language may feel good to write in a fit of anger but, in the end, make everyone's lives more difficult. When someone sends an inflammatory message and it's interpreted by the reader as harmful to their reputation, it could legally qualify as libel that is legitimately actionable. Even if you write critically about a rival company's product or service by stating (as if factually) that it's dangerous, whereas your version of the product or service is safer and better, this can be considered defamation or libel. If said aloud and recorded, perhaps on a smart phone's voice recorder, it is slander and can likewise be litigated. It is much better to always write courteously and maturely, even under difficult circumstances, to avoid fallout that involves expensive court proceedings.
- **Avoid oversharing but tell the truth** - When your job is provide a convincing rationale that might make the recipient of bad news accept it as reasonable, be careful with what details you disclose. When rejecting a job applicant, for instance, you must be especially careful not to share the scoring sheets of the winning and rejected candidates, nor even summarize them. Though that would give them full picture, it would open you up to a flood of complaints and legal challenges. Instead, you should simply wish the rejected candidate luck in their ongoing job search. When you must provide detail, avoid saying anything bad about anyone so that you can't be accused of libel and taken to court for it. Provide only as much information as necessary to provide a convincing rationale. At the same time, it is important to tell the truth. If you are inconsistent or contradictory in your explanation, it may invite scrutiny and accusations of lying. Even making false claims by exaggerating may give the reader the wrong impression, which can lead to serious consequences. Though some might say that omitting the truth is a form of lying, telling the truth selectively is the necessary compromise of a professional constrained by competing obligations to both the organization they represent and the reader whom they don't want to anger or severely disappoint.
- **Respect the recipient's privacy** - criticizing an employee in a group email or memo—even if the criticism is fair—is extremely unprofessional. People who call out others in front of a group create a chilly climate in the workplace, one that leads to fear, loathing, and a loss of productivity among employees. Always maintain respect and privacy when communicating bad news as a matter of workplace professionalism.

General Positive and Negative Messages Tips

- Follow best practices when sharing information, requesting information or action, and replying to such messages.
- Be courteous both when complaining and responding to complaints and claims.
- Write carefully when addressing negative situations, such as delivering bad news, usually by using the indirect approach.

All links live as of June 2021.

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