

## 2.4.5: Planning Business Messages

### Learning Objectives

- Discuss the importance of the planning stage in the writing process

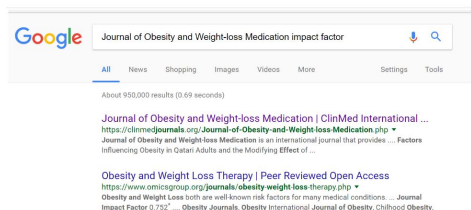


While this whole module is about writing, most of the *thinking* about what you are going to write happens before you compose a single sentence. Planning and outlining is where your analysis and organization get done, so that when you're ready to write, all you have to worry about is sentence structure, word choice, and tone—which is more than enough!

Remember those school days when teachers required outlines before you could start writing your paper? They may have referred to it as part of a “pre-writing” phase. It turns out those outlines are life skills, not just busy work. As adult business communicators, you should still commit to outlining. An outline serves as a road map for what you're going to write, *and* it aids in breaking weak writing habits. Outlines set a writer up for success. Unlike in school, they do not need to be formally typed and numbered; they can exist on a notepad or scrap to the side of the keyboard. That said, using your word processor's outlining function is a great way to keep your outline tidy, and cutting and pasting makes it easy to rearrange your order.

First, determine how the receiver of this communication likely feels about the communication: positive, neutral or negative. Focus on what the receiver feels based on the receiver's situation. Do not factor in “How I'd like to hear this news.” The receiver has not researched this message, might not have heard parts of the topic before, or has the background you have. The receiver may have a different work responsibility and may need background to fully appreciate the communication. Factor all of that into the audience analysis. This is you-view planning.

The *you-view* thinks about what the **receiver** wants and needs to understand. Do not factor in your own feelings.



Planning is the key first step in the writing process because it enables the writer to begin thinking about how the final product will be created and evaluated. It is the first step in establishing your accountability and reliability as a writer. Remember that when you are writing for a corporation or organization, your writing lives on as legal documentation and reference. Writers are no less responsible for accountability for their work than are lawyers and medical personnel. Solid planning leads to reliable final documents.

Skipping the pre-writing stage is like taking a vacation without first choosing a destination: If you don't know where you're going, how will you get there? Fortunately, pre-writing can take many forms, and there are strategies that suit every type of writer.

The strategies and processes used in the pre-writing stage not only help the writer formulate a topic and solidify ideas, they also serve as a kind of rehearsal for the rest of the writing process. As the writer uses the vocabulary associated with a particular topic,

he or she becomes well-versed in the subject and is able to express ideas with more confidence, organization, and clarity. All of this brings to mind the old joke, “How do you get to Carnegie Hall?” The answer, of course: “Practice. Practice. Practice.”

Just as a musician must practice their instrument in order to achieve their goal, the practice undertaken during the pre-writing stage guides the writer toward a specific goal. That goal is to develop a well-defined topic that will eventually be couched in the language of a succinct thesis or hypothesis.

Planning starts with audience reaction, which maps to an organizational structure for the document.

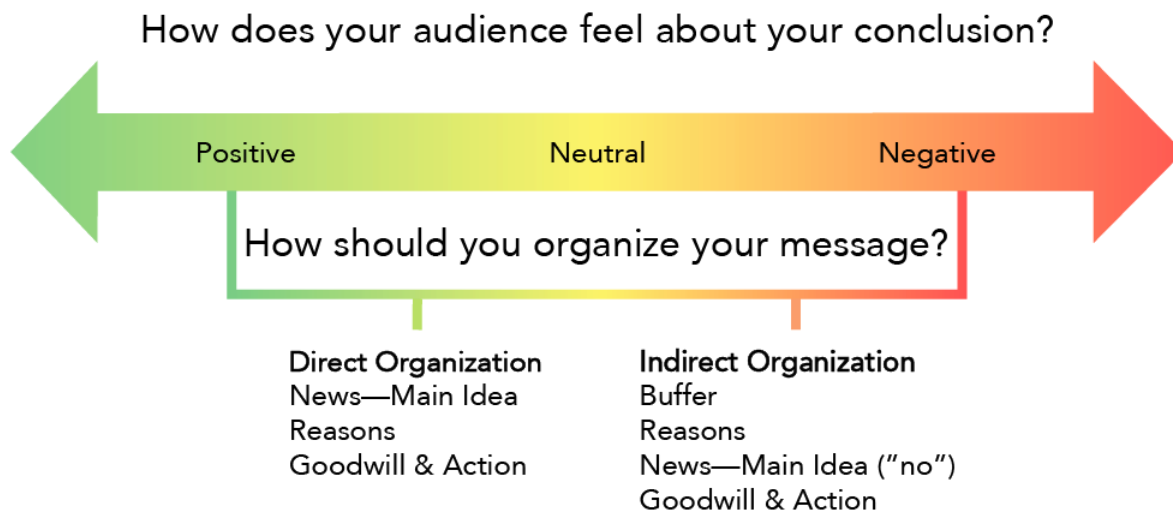
Earlier in this module, three audience types were introduced: positive, neutral, and negative. These audiences may receive positive, negative, or persuasive messages:

- Positive messages are routine or good news. The receiver is likely to react positively or neutrally.
- Negative messages are bad news. The receiver is likely to react negatively.
- The overlapping category is persuasive messages. The audience is expected to need encouragement to act as the sender desires. In some cases, the receiver is more like a positive audience. In other cases, the receiver is more like a negative audience.

All messages contain three or four blocks:

1. **News:** Whether good news or bad news, the message states its point clearly. The receiver should clearly understand the news unambiguously.
2. **Reasons:** The reasons section supports or explains the news. This is the needed detail to aid the receiver’s understanding or action.
3. **Goodwill and Action:** This is the closing paragraph where the sender provides a brief, sincere remark designed to continue the working relationship. The closing paragraph is not finished without some detail or reminder related to the purpose of the communication, or call to action.
4. **Buffer.** This is usually only found in negative and some persuasive messages. A buffer starts a message where the reader is likely to be on the negative side of the continuum by warming the reader to the topic, but not laying out the entire outcome of the message.

Depending on your audience reaction, you will place these blocks in a different order:



### Positive Message Outline

The basic organizational outline for a positive message uses the blocks introduced above in that same order: news, reasons, and goodwill and action. Remember, this is the outline for writing the entire message (the second step in the writing process). The blocks are the labels of the outline section where the writer collects notes and thoughts on that part or paragraph. With these notes, the writer can write the entire message without stopping to look for detail.

In this example of a positive message, assume the sender is confirming the receipt of a duplicate shipment and has agreed to provide credit.

Organization Block	Purpose	Notes for the Message
News	With a positively inclined receiver, the main idea is in the first paragraph, first sentence. The reader wants to know some and is receptive, so the writer should just say it:	<b><i>credit due 3/31</i></b>
Reasons	This is the body of the message that contains the detail supporting the news	<b><i>“The Leadership Experience” duplicate received. Invoice attached. Credit processed against acct 234-2345</i></b>
Goodwill and Action	Acknowledge and effort or relationship with the receiver. Confirm any commitments.	<b><i>She sent clear detail. Should see on April statement.</i></b>

## Negative Message Outline

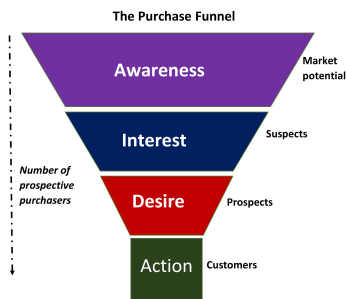
The generic organizational outline for a negative message uses the three blocks news, reasons, and goodwill and action. It uses these organizational blocks in a different order and also adds the buffer block. Remember this is the outline for writing the entire message (step 2 in the writing process). With these notes, the writer can write the entire message without stopping to look for detail.

In this example of a negative message, assume the sender is delivering the bad news about a delay in the promised ship date of a book. The receiver needs this to prepare for a two week training conference but didn't order it early enough.

Organization Section	Purpose	Notes to write message from....
Buffer	Starts the message by being on topic, but not clearly laying out the news. It is important to start neutrally so as to avoid getting the reader's expectations set to high.	<b><i>Been a customer for many years.</i></b>

Organization Section	Purpose	Notes to write message from....
Reasons	<p>This is the body of the message that contains the detail supporting the news. Reasons must have the you-view. Avoid mentioning policy or rules as this just encourages the reader to escalate to a higher level of management.</p>	<p><b><i>Very popular title. good quality takes time.</i></b></p>
News	<p>The bad news is stated directly, yet gently. Offer any offsetting news, if possible. Avoid apologizing. It can bring on legal guilt in extreme situations. In many cases, the sender's company did nothing wrong. If truly necessary and in alignment with company policy, then apologize.</p>	<p><b><i>book delayed by 7 days. focus on her receipt added free shipping.</i></b></p>
Goodwill and Action	<p>Avoid sounding trite but express interest in continuing the good relationship. Confirm the delivery date.</p>	<p><b><i>past good experiences. delivery april 5</i></b>            Notice there is missing punctuation and capitalization. These are only notes, so those issues will be cleaned up in the following steps.</p>

## Persuasive Message Outline



The simplest understanding and approach to persuasive messages is to determine how likely the receiver is to comply with the sender's wishes. If the audience is positive, then follow that outline. For negative audiences you need to use a different approach.

It is helpful to overlay these structures with the marketing concept of Awareness, Interest, Desire, and Action (AIDA).

This strategy starts with the opening of a positive or negative message. The opening should include an attention grabbing opening, such as a fact, question, or something to catch the receiver's interest. Next, direct your writing to discuss more details to interest the receiver in this situation. The desire is about how the receiver's help or action matters. Finally, the closing includes the specific action requested of the receiver.

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