Writing Tasks: Convey Good News and Bad News

Organizational Strategies for Business Letters

This lesson will show you how to be sensitive to your reader's needs by using a little psychology. While everyone enjoys getting good news, no one wants to deliver bad news. However, you may have to do a considerable amount of both in your professional career. The trick, as with any other type of writing, is to carefully consider what the reader needs to know.

No matter what your writing purpose is, you want your audience to understand and accept the information you're conveying. You'll want to put your audience in a good frame of mind to make them receptive to your information, especially if the news is bad. Letter writing is a visual medium, and the placement of information has a bearing on how the reader will view both the information and its writer. Therefore, business writers use organizational strategies to make their writing sensitive and meaningful. The following table gives an overview of the strategies we will present in the next three lessons:

Audience Reaction	Organizational Plan	Opening	Body	Close
Eager or interested	Requests	Begin with request of main idea.	Provide details.	Close cordially, stating action to be performed.
Pleased or neutral	Informative or good news	Begin with the main idea or good news.	Provide details.	Close with a cordial comment, a reference to the good news, or a look toward the future.
Displeased	Bad news messages; rejection letters	Begin with a positive but relevant statement that allows for a transition into the bad news.	Give reasons for the negative answer. Give the bad news in a positive light.	Close cordially.
Uninterested of unwilling	Persuasive (collection, sales letters)	Begin with a statement or question that captures attention.	Arouse the audience's interest in the subject. Build the audience's desire to comply.	Request action.

The organizational strategy for information that interests or pleases the reader is fairly simple; just state the good news up front and develop reasons in the body of the letter. For situations in which the reader may be indifferent or even hostile toward the message, more effort is made to secure goodwill.

The "Yes" or Good News Letter

The good news letter is usually the easiest to write. It provides positive news, such as awarded contracts and grants, job offers, information, and other requests.

In a good news letter, you want to relate the news with high emphasis, which means as soon as you possibly can. In such a letter, you should:

- Open politely and positively
- Move directly to your main point and make it
- Outline the terms (if applicable)
- Reiterate your main point
- Close politely and positively

Example:

"I am delighted to inform you that we have accepted your proposal for a grant from the Foundation. The Foundation is always eager to support much-needed charities such as yours.

Enclosed you will find a sheet detailing the terms of your grant, including the total amount, accounting procedures, and how we will assess your progress. Please photocopy the sheet, then sign, date, and return it by the end of June.

Congratulations on being chosen for the grant. We look forward to working with you in the near future."

Congratulatory Letters

Another type of "good news" letter is the note of congratulation. Such letters are often used to build or maintain business relationships. For example, a home improvement company might send a congratulatory letter to a new homeowner, or a manager might send a congratulatory note to an employee who's gone above and beyond the call of duty. For example:

Thanks for your hard work in developing the database of our sales and marketing efforts. You understood the goals of the project and our department from the very beginning, and it shows. I especially liked the supporting documentation you prepared for the final product; it was relevant, thorough, and makes the project that much more useful. You've ensured a useful, stable product that will be a solid foundation for years to come.

Your talents in conceiving, developing, and delivering this project have been a great asset to our division and company.

A letter such as this would not only encourage and reward an employee, it could be used by that employee in support of requests for promotions and pay raises. A congratulatory note sent to a potential customer can help keep the company's name fresh in the customer's mind. Never underestimate the power of congratulatory letters.

The "No" or Bad News Letter

Constructing the bad news letter is a bit trickier. While you want to convey the information as quickly as possible, you also want to be sensitive to the needs of your readers. The way you present negative information can have a substantial impact on how the reader views the information and your role in presenting it. Consider the following examples:

Sample 1

Dear Mr. Freemont:

Your position will be phased out over the next six months. Company needs change and people have to change with them. We will see whether something is available for you by that time. I want to encourage you and let you know that we value your work and presence in the company.

Sample 2

Hello Jim,

I want to encourage you and let you know that we value your work and presence in the company. Company needs change and people have to change with them. Your position will be phased out over the next six months. We will see whether something is available for you by that time.

Sample 3

Hello Jim,

I want to encourage you and let you know that we value your work and presence in the company. We will always find a place for you in the company if anything is available. However, company needs change and people have to change with them. Your position will be phased out over the next six months. But we will find a place for you if anything is available.

All three letters present the same information, yet differ substantially in how they present it. You undoubtedly would prefer the third. The second is better than the first, which is just lousy. Notice that the only difference between the first and second is the order of sentences. The third only changes the way the content is worded; the idea is the same.

The main idea here is that, unlike in good news letters, you want to embed the negative information in secondary positions: in the center of paragraphs, letters, and, if possible, sentences.

In the first example, the reader is told upfront that his position is being phased out, which may lead him to conclude that his efforts are not good enough. But the third (and to a lesser extent, the second) letter praises the employee before breaking the news. Placing positive information in front of negative information is called a buffer. Including a buffer is a sign that you're giving the reader all the respect and consideration he or she deserves.

Also note that the third letter is less abrupt than the others: it assures the reader that everything is being done to secure his future with the company and that he's getting the attention he deserves.

Your goals in writing a bad news letter should be threefold:

- Convey your message so that your audience understands a firm decision has been made.
- Help your audience understand that your decision was fair and just, and that all information was duly considered.
- Allow your audience to remain well disposed toward your business, division, and hopefully, you.

Follow these guidelines when writing the bad news letter:

- Open politely and professionally, always with an eye toward the reader's hopes and feelings.
- Outline the details of the issue.
- State the decision or news.
- Explain the reasons behind the decision and why it's important to the reader.
- Close politely and professionally.

The bad news should be placed in the middle of the letter, after the buffer. It should also be deemphasized visually and grammatically. You can do this by:

- Minimizing the space and time devoted to it.
- Subordinating it in a complex or compound sentence ("We always enjoy discussing opportunities with qualified candidates, and while we would like to hire everyone we talk to, circumstances prohibit us from doing so.")
- Embed it in the middle of the paragraph.

A tactfully written rejection letter might be written like this:

Since our systems analyst positions are exceptionally demanding, our human relations department has researched the qualifications needed to succeed in them. Their findings indicate that the two most important qualifications are a BA in business administration and two years of direct experience. While those who do not meet these qualifications often make great systems analysts, we can only hire those who best meet our current qualifications.

This paragraph accomplishes the following:

- It provides enough detail to make the refusal acceptable.
- It implies not that the applicant was rejected but that the position is not a proper "fit."

- It offers no direct apology.
- It makes no negative personal statements.

Refusing Adjustments of Claims and Complaints

Almost every customer who writes asking for an adjustment or refund has an emotional tie to their request. Therefore, your best bet in writing refusal letters is to use an indirect approach. Consider this letter:

Dear Mr. Smith:

Thank you for your letter describing the problem you had with your Palm Vx organizer. We believe, as you do, that electronic equipment should be built to last. While Palm organizers are highly reliable, occasionally units do fail for a number of reasons.

Although we cannot provide you with a replacement since it is now past the 30-day return period, we can provide you with information to get your unit repaired. You will need to call Palm technical support at (xxx)xxx-xxxx. They will provide you with instructions on how to package and return your unit for repair.

Alternatively, you may purchase a new unit from us. We have several of the Vx units in stock and have recently dropped the price to \$199. We also have plenty of the new m500 and m505 units in stock.

Whatever route you choose, feel free to visit us anytime for a product demonstration. We're glad to serve you and will continue to do so in the future.

Sincerely,

Mark Davis

This letter provides all the information the reader needs to resolve the issue. Although the writer of the letter cannot address the reader's problem directly, he does attempt to maintain goodwill and support the customer. Follow these guidelines when writing letters that refuse adjustment of claims:

- Provide accurate information and stick with the facts.
- Don't let anger of malice tinge anything you say.
- Consult your company's legal department if necessary.
- Be honest but sensitive to the reader's needs.
- Treat your reader as you would wish to be treated.