

Writing the Bad News Message: Use Restraint

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The so-called "bad news message" is often unpleasant for both the writer and the reader, but it can be written in a professional manner that does not alienate the reader and does not ruin the writer's credibility.

When a "bad news" message pertains to a person's actions (or lack of), the purpose of the communication should be to induce behavior change. And motivating a person to change will require that he or she accept your point of view. The more prudent and sensitive you are, the more likely you are to sway the reader (or listener).

So when you discuss a delicate issue in an email, consider the following tips, some of which also apply to a face-to-face conversation.

- **Maintain a neutral or positive tone, particularly in the opening two sentences.** Being *neutral* means sticking to facts that the reader cannot argue with. You can't alienate the reader in the first paragraph and expect success.

For example, rather than blaming someone in the opening sentence for being late to work, open with "Our office hours are 8:00 to 6:00, and our customers expect us to be available during those hours."

- **Avoid referring to issues that do not need to be mentioned.** If someone suggests something that you know is unrealistic and was not carefully considered, don't point that out. That's embarrassing, and it isn't necessary to draw attention to the fact that she didn't think it through. Instead, try saying, "We need to consider less expensive options now and maybe we can revisit your idea later."
- **Prefer *I* or *we* statements in sensitive situations.** These include a disagreement, a complaint, or a disciplinary matter. *You* often puts the reader on the defensive in sensitive situations because it can sound accusatory. The universal *you* is fine because it applies to everyone, as in *You must pay taxes by April 15.*

- **Use an effective structure for the message.** Arrange the message in this order:
 - Open with something positive or neutral
 - Bring in the bad news
 - Give details behind the decision; explain why
 - Finish on a positive note
 - Provide helpful suggestions to remedy the situation
 - **Be tactful.** People will often decide how to respond to you based not on the content of your message but on your tone. Be courteous, and always treat people with respect. If you need to be firm, make your point but do it diplomatically.
 - **A complaint and criticism are not the same.** A complaint is about something that happened or did not happen; criticism is about the person. Stay focused on the facts of the issue and avoid being deeply hurtful. Always remember, you could be on the receiving end someday.
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Ken O'Quinn is a writing coach who teaches workshops in corporations and PR agencies throughout the world. Writing is the only thing he has wanted to do since eighth grade, so after a journalism career with the Associated Press and newspapers, he started Writing With Clarity. In addition to extensive work with corporate communications and PR specialists, he also helps other staff and managers at all levels to sharpen their professional writing skills. When he is not teaching, he enjoys fitness training, hiking, playing competitive softball, walking the ocean beach near his home, and reading nonfiction and fiction.