

## Spring 2004

### How to Soften a Negative Message

By Dr. Maureen Archer

Often in speaking and writing, we struggle to convey negative messages in a clear and motivating way. The words we choose affect the tone of our message, thus influencing the emotional response of our audience.

The following guidelines will help soften your tone so that your listeners and readers will be more receptive to your message.

**State what you can do instead of what you cannot do.** People will be more likely to respond favorably to your information if you phrase it positively. Try avoiding “not” in your messages.

**Negative:** We cannot meet before May 15.

**Positive:** We can meet after May 15.

**Negative:** We will not process your order until you send payment.

**Positive:** We will process your order as soon as we receive payment.

**Replace words that carry strong negative connotations.** Some words, such as *problems*, *mixed up*, *wrong*, and *lazy*, have negative associations and may cause defensiveness or avoidance. By choosing alternatives to these negative terms, your tone can be more positive.

**Negative:** If you have any problems, please call.

**Positive:** If you have any questions, please call.

(Cont.)

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**Negative:** You sent in the wrong form.

**Positive:** We received Form A but need Form B to complete your transaction. [Notice how this revision also gives information about the correct form.]

**Depersonalize negative statements.** Often we can temper our tone by shifting emphasis away from the person's action and onto the situation, or by shifting the point of view from *you* to *we*.

**Negative:** Your desk is always messy.

**Positive:** Because visitors see your desk when they enter the reception area, please hide all extra papers and cups.

Notice how this revision asks for a specific action and gives a brief reason for it. A few words of explanation can go a long way in motivating others to act.

**Negative:** You will not be entitled to interest because you sent in your deposit after the 10<sup>th</sup> of the month.

**Positive:** Unfortunately, we can pay interest only on deposits made by the 10<sup>th</sup> of the month.

**Use the passive voice occasionally to avoid accusatory *you* statements.** Readers and listeners may perceive "You must..." or "You did..." as finger pointing. Referring instead to an object or situation helps avert such negative perceptions.

**Negative:** You did not send in your application before the deadline.

**Positive:** Your application was received after the deadline.

**Read your writing aloud in varying tones of voice.** When you speak, your tone of voice, facial expression, and gestures all work together to convey your meaning. In writing, all of those facets of oral communication are absent. Writing must rely on word choice, amount of explanation, and punctuation to communicate emotional information.

Try reading the following sentence in different tones of voice: a neutral tone, a sarcastic tone, and a complimentary tone: ***Your proposal is everything we expected.*** Because readers may misinterpret the meaning of such a sentence, it is better to be more specific: ***Your proposal is excellent; it is everything we expected.***

A positive, professional tone is preferable in most situations, even for conveying negative news. Think positive!

(Excerpts from Maryann Piotrowski's Effective Business Writing: A Guide for Those Who Write on the Job. HarperCollins, 1996.)

Dear Dr. A:

How can I proofread my own writing? I often don't see my mistakes. Help!

Manola D.  
Hampton, VA



Dear Manola:

Proofreading one's own writing is one of the most difficult yet important steps in the writing process. It is difficult because we know what we want to communicate, so it is clear in our minds. However, what we type on the page often does not match what is in our heads.

Here are a few techniques that work well:

1) **Read your writing aloud.** Your ear is a much better editor than your eye; it will hear awkward phrasing, as well as repeated or missing words. This is one of the easiest and most important proofreading techniques!

2) **Use a spell checker and grammar checker.** Misspellings and garbled grammar lower your professionalism in the reader's mind. Make it a habit to check any writing (even short email messages). Words like *ths* should never appear in your correspondence.

3) **Ask someone to read your writing.** Give them specific questions: Is the tone consistently positive and professional? Do the sentences make sense and flow well? Is any information missing? Is everything correct?

4) **Read it at least twice before sending.** Read first for the larger issues: information, organization, and tone. After revising for these, read for grammar, spelling, and punctuation. To check for incomplete sentences, try reading (sentence by sentence) from the end to the beginning. It really works!

**Remember: Proofreading helps prevent confusion and embarrassment!**

Please send your communication questions to Dr. Maureen Archer ([archer@allenglishtraining.com](mailto:archer@allenglishtraining.com)).

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