

Positive and Negative Messages Intro

Video Transcript

This week we're going to learn how to compose two very common genres of professional communication: positive and negative messages.

Last week we learned about three common forms used in business: letters, memos, and emails. But it's important to recognize that these aren't genres in and of themselves—they are just forms. Genre conventions usually include guidelines about what forms, or formats, are acceptable for that genre, but they also include guidelines about what kind of content is acceptable as well.

In the reading you'll do for class this week, you'll be given a ton of detail about the content guidelines for positive and negative messages, and you can combine this with any of the forms we've learned about to create solid business communication. For example, if you need to send good news to someone outside of your organization, a positive message letter or email would work well. If, on the other hand, you need to announce bad news to a bunch of people within your organization, a negative message memo might be the right approach.

Let me take a minute and remind you of how the week has been planned out to maximize your learning.

1. The “First Encounter” activity is meant to introduce the week's concepts in a basic way, which is what this short video is doing right now.
2. Once you've watched this video, you can complete the “Try It Out” activities. Remember, these are graded a Pass or Fail based not on whether you do everything right but on putting in a solid effort.

Of course you won't be able to write perfect positive and negative messages at this point—you haven't done the reading or gone to class yet to learn it, so why would we penalize you for not being good at it yet?

Instead, the point of these assignments is to get you familiar with what's to come, to help you formulate in your mind the questions you have by trying and struggling, not by trying and succeeding. So as you're working on these, maybe jot down some questions about what you think you still need to know.

3. After completing these assignments, then you'll be ready to “Dig Deeper” by reading the assigned chapters in the textbook. Why not read those first? Well, the truth is that the book isn't all that readable. It has so much advice about positive and negative message writing that you'll quickly get overwhelmed and only absorb a small fraction of what it conveys.

But if, on the other hand, you've already tried your hand at writing positive and negative messages and therefore have specific questions in mind that you want answers for, then you'll be reading for those answers. The reading will be easier, and you'll retain a lot more of it.

The most helpful thing you can do at this stage for your teacher and peers is to post to Slack the questions you have and maybe even quote useful passages from the reading. Maybe your classmates will have answers for you, or maybe your posts will answer their questions. And you instructor can use this information to design a better lesson for the class meeting.

4. All the Pre-Class activities done, you're now ready for class, where you'll revisit positive and negative messages yet again. And you'll have specific questions and observations in mind, so you'll be able to make class better with your active participation.
5. After class, you have a few days to use your new skills to work up a first draft of your Unit 1 Project, which consists of an introductory letter, a positive message memo, and a negative message email. Then you'll post your work to Slack for a peer review that you'll be completing next week.

Okay, now that you understand the logic of how the class is set up this week, let's talk just a bit about positive and negative message genre conventions. As I pointed out above, you'll be reading a lot about these in the textbook, so let me just give you to big picture.

Effective positive and negative messages have basically the same three goals in mind:

- Be clear
- Be concise
- Preserve goodwill

If you're delivering good news, you want the most credit you can get for it. In other words, you want to maximize goodwill. How do you do that? Think about You-attitude—what about this good news will the reader respond best to, and how can you phrase it in a way that they can most easily see how great it is? Clarity and conciseness go right along with this—you want to state the good news clearly and directly so that they cannot miss it, and you don't want to use a bunch of fluff because the more unneeded words you throw at the reader, the more you dilute the message.

Blowing it on clarity or conciseness can damage the goodwill you generate too. For example, if you aren't clear, your writing might lead the reader to mistake what it is you are telling them. They could think that you're giving more good news that you actually are, and then when you have to correct them by scaling back, the good news turns bad.

If you're delivering bad news, the same things apply but in a different way. Here, you can't really maximize goodwill, but you can minimize ill will or preserve what goodwill already existed in your relationship. How do you do this? Again, think of You-attitude. How do you like to be told bad news? You probably don't like to be made to feel at fault, and you probably prefer to get the news more or less directly without a lot of hedging or prevaricating.

Clarity and conciseness again go right along with this. By clearly stating the bad news once (and only once), you do minimal damage, like a doctor who must make an incision. If you are so busy trying to talk around the bad news and soften the blow, you run the risk of stretching out the pain unnecessarily or worse, having your reader not understand what they've been told, necessitating another exchange to clarify that no, they didn't get the job or no, you won't be waiving that fee.

With bad news, it's okay to let the message be slightly longer than it technically has to be so that you can move on from the bad and focus on the good.

Okay, that's all you need to know right now: think about the situation, the reader, and You-attitude to figure out how to preserve or maximize goodwill, and then try to be as clear and concise as you can, within reason, to get your message across.

Good luck on the practice assignments, and we look forward to seeing you in class.