

You-Attitude: A Quick Introduction

Video Transcript

Hi, I'm Dr. Grover, the Course Coordinator for English 306B.

During the first week of class, you read and talked about an important concept that can help you distinguish between good and bad writing: the Golden Rule.

The regular Golden Rule holds that you should “Treat others the way you want to be treated,” or, in other words, you should act in other people’s best interests. The Golden Rule of Writing is no different: “Write to others the way you want to be written to.” Or, to put it simply: “Writing is a service to the reader.”

In other words, good writing is that which puts its readers’ needs first; bad writing is that which fails to do this. For example, it’s in your readers’ best interest not to have their time wasted, so being as concise as possible in your writing is good. Also, readers shouldn’t have to reread repeatedly to understand what you’re trying to convey, so revising your writing until it is clear and straightforward almost always is in the best interest of the reader—and therefore in your best interest.

The Golden Rule is a great foundation for understanding generally what separates good writing from bad, but it’s so broad that it can be hard to pin down specifics, and individual situations can create unexpected Golden Rule applications. For example, I just said writing should generally be clear and concise, but what if you’re writing a mystery novel? In this situation, it’s in your readers’ best interest to not get right to the point and reveal who the murderer is—you should hold back that information and put in enough red herrings to make it hard to guess.

As you can see, the Golden Rule can be tricky to implement in real life.

Luckily, our textbook offers help applying the Golden Rule in a business communication setting in the form of a new concept introduced in chapter 3: You-attitude. It defines You-attitude as “a communication style that looks at things from the audience’s point of view, emphasizing what the audience wants or needs to know, respecting the audience’s intelligence, and protecting the audience’s ego” (p. 56).

Let’s use You-attitude to work through a sample situation. Let’s say we’re holding a face-to-face class, and you, the students, don’t particularly want to be there. You’d rather I, the instructor, let class out early so you could go home and binge Netflix or whatever it is you do when you’re not in class.

Let’s imagine that one student feels bold enough to raise his or her hand and make the argument that I should dismiss class early: “Dr. G, you should totally dismiss class right now. I mean, look around—no one’s paying attention. We’re all too sleepy. If we leave now we can beat the traffic home and have a little extra time for some fun. What’s the point of having class if we’re not getting anything out of it anyway?”

Do you think I would be convinced by this argument? Probably not—because it lacks You-attitude entirely. None of the reasons for cancelling class apply to me at all—I’m paying attention. I’m not sleepy. I won’t be leaving campus if class is dismissed, so I won’t be avoiding traffic or having extra fun. Worse, I’ll be extra worried that my students won’t have mastered the key concepts if we don’t

have class. And even worse than that, the implicit criticism that my teaching style is boring, and hopelessly so, is a cutting criticism that offends at best and undermines my self-image at worst.

Let's revisit the argument using You-attitude. The textbook lists five tips to creating You-attitude:

1. Talk about the audience, not about yourself.
2. Refer specifically to the customer's request or order.
3. Don't talk about feelings, except to congratulate or offer sympathy.
4. In positive situations, use *you* more often than *I*. Use *we* when it includes the audience.
5. In negative situations, avoid the word *you*. Protect the audience's ego. Use passive verbs and impersonal expressions to avoid assigning blame.

The first point, to talk about the audience, not about yourself, is the most important in this situation. All the reasons supporting this student's argument detail benefits to the students, none to the instructor. So why would the instructor comply? It's like when my children ask me for junk food on the grounds that they love how it tastes—I know they like it, but I know it's not in their best interest to give it too them too often. Same with my students: I know they don't want to be in class all the time, but they've paid me to keep them there even if they say they don't want to.

Can we think of any reasons that are instructor-specific? How about the idea that, by letting class go early, I could have more time to work on my research, or to grade papers? Or maybe the student could suggest I could use the extra time to pick up some flowers for my wife and surprise her or something? Or perhaps most convincing of all, by dismissing class I could use the time to meet with students one on one to give them extra help while allowing the rest of the students to get a head start on their papers?

Point 2 isn't really relevant here, but point 3, to avoid talking about feelings, is. The lines about being bored and sleepy and the general tone of entitled whininess isn't playing well—but if we cut that stuff, the argument perks up quite a bit.

Point 4 suggests not using the word *we* unless it includes the audience—in this argument, *we* always refers to the students as opposed to the instructor, so that needs to change. Perhaps the student could use *we* to indicate everyone's—the teacher's and students'—collective quest to master the course material. Or at least *we* could be used in a non-adversarial way.

Point 5 recommends protecting the audience's ego—we need to find a way to avoid making the instructor feel at fault.

Let's put all this together and try the argument again. The student raises his or her hand and says, "Dr. Grover? This might seem like an odd request, but I'm wondering if dismissing class early today might be a good thing. We're getting close to the paper being due, and I know many students could benefit by using this classtime to work on their papers rather than just talking about the papers. Also, by letting class go early, those of us who want to talk with you one on one about our papers would get a chance to without having to make an appointment and drag either you or us back to campus later. I for one really value your opinion on my work, and I think we could all benefit from a strategic use of our time today."

What do you think? Do you think the prof will buy it?

Anyway, that's just one example of how you can use You-attitude to apply the Golden Rule to your writing in business communication. The textbook goes into much more detail, and your pre-class assignments have you try it out. Good luck!