Organizational Writing:
Giving Good News and Bad News

Members of organizations (businesses, universities, etc.) write many kinds of documents to clients, customers, and providers. Whether you’re giving good news, breaking bad news, or just providing information, it’s important to remember the basic advice for all good organizational writing:

• Focus on what the reader gets or can do or how he or she benefits
• Address the reader’s request or area of concern specifically
• Don’t presume to know how the reader feels or will react, and don’t share your own feelings or other personal information unless you know the reader is interested
• Protect the reader’s ego, especially when you have to give bad news
• State information as positively as you can: eliminate negative language, turn negatives into positives, and/or omit negative information where possible

(See the handout entitled “Organizational Writing Basics: You-Attitude and Positive Emphasis” to learn more about these principles.)

Good organizational writers present good news and bad news differently. Below are some tips for organizing these different kinds of messages.

Good-News Messages

By “good news messages,” we mean any letter in which the reader finds out benefits to him or her— or even simply a message which gives him or her useful information. Follow this fool-proof organizational pattern for effective good-news messages:

1. Give any good news right away. In a short introductory paragraph, give the good news and summarize the key points in the remainder of the letter.

2. Then give details, clarification, and background. Increase your likelihood of having the reader read the entire letter by using bullets and bold headings to outline key ideas. Put any instructions in clear, declarative sentences with active verbs.

3. Present negative elements clearly but as positively as possible. Do this by appealing to policies or mentioning any benefits to the reader that accrue due to the unfortunate circumstance.

4. Finally, use a goodwill ending: be positive and forward-looking.
Bad-News Messages

Bad-news messages will provide information which will disappoint the reader: rejections, no-thank-yous, and notices of unfortunate policy shifts or other information which will be unwelcome. Organize bad-news messages in this way:

1. Normally begin with a buffer paragraph that offers some neutral or positive information. There are several ways to write a good buffer: you can start with any good news; you can describe a sequence of events or state a fact; you can thank the reader for something he or she has already done; you can state a rule or principle and justify it. The idea is not (only) to “soften the blow”; the idea is to respect the reader enough to empower him or her with information (if possible) and help him or her feel “in the loop.”

Omit the buffer when the news is really important, when there’s a danger that the reader will disregard your message, or otherwise when the reader may passively or actively resist hearing you.

2. Then give the bad news. If you haven’t already done so in the buffer, state the reasons (and often, giving the reasons before stating the actual news is wise). Deemphasize refusals and rejections, if possible, by putting them in the same paragraph as the reasons.

3. Present alternatives or compromises if any exist.

4. Use a goodwill ending.

(Material in this handout is adapted from Kitty O. Locker, Business and Administrative Communication, third ed. Chicago: Irwin, 1995.)