

# Tone in Business Writing

## What is Tone?

"Tone in writing refers to the writer's attitude toward the reader and the subject of the message. The overall tone of a written message affects the reader just as one's tone of voice affects the listener in everyday exchanges" (Ober 88).

Business writers should consider the tone of their message, whether they are writing a memo, letter, report, or any type of business document. Tone is present in all communication

activities. Ultimately, the tone of a message is a reflection of the writer and it does affect how the reader will perceive the message.

### **How can I make sure my messages have the appropriate tone?**

The writer should consider several things when preparing to write. The following questions will help you to determine the appropriate tone for your message.

- Why am I writing this document?
- Who am I writing to and what do I want them to understand?
- What kind of tone should I use?

### **Why am I writing this document?**

You should take time to consider the purpose of your document in order to determine how you should express the message you wish to convey. Obviously, you want the message to reach your audience, and you will probably want the reader to take some action in response to your message.

When you consider the message and how you wish to express it, the tone of your message will become apparent.

#### **For example:**

Suzy is writing a job acceptance letter to an employer but is unsure of the tone she should take in the message. She has decided to accept the position. When she asks herself, "What is my intent upon writing?" she answers, "I want to accept the position, thank the company for the offer, and establish goodwill with my new co-workers." As she writes the letter she quickly assumes a tone that is appreciative for the offer and enthusiastic about beginning a new job.

### **Who am I writing to and what do I want them to understand?**

Who is your audience? Whether it is an employer or a fellow worker, it is essential that you consider your reader before writing any document. Your message will be much more effective if you

tailor the document to reach your specific audience. The message you wish to express must be written in a way that will effectively reach the reader.

The tone that you use to write the document directly affects how the reader will interpret what is said.

**For example:**

Bob is writing a cover letter for a position as a Sales Representative for a newspaper. He is unsure that he will be able to succeed at such a position, and uses phrases such as: "I hope that you will contact me..." "I know that my qualifications are not very impressive, but..."

The reader is likely to interpret these phrases to mean that Bob isn't really qualified for the position or that he doesn't really want the position.

Clearly, Bob is not assuming an appropriate tone. He must consider that:

- He is applying for a position as a Sales Representative.
- He wants the employer to ask him to come in for an interview.
- The employer will look for highly motivated and confident individuals.

If Bob were to consider these things he may rewrite his cover letter to include such phrases as: "You can reach me at 555-2233; I look forward to hearing from you." "My qualifications make me an excellent applicant for this position..."

The tone of the message has changed drastically to sound more confident and self-assured.

**What kind of tone should I use?**

Fortunately, you can use the same kind of tone for most business messages. "The business writer should strive for an overall tone that is confident, courteous, and sincere; that uses emphasis and subordination appropriately; that contains nondiscriminatory

language; that stresses the "you" attitude; and that is written at an appropriate level of difficulty" (Ober 88). The only major exceptions to these guidelines are when you need to write a negative business message, such as when you deny a job offer or a customer request.

Here are some general guidelines to keep in mind when considering what kind of tone to use in your letters and how to present information in that tone:

- Be confident.
- Be courteous and sincere.
- Use appropriate emphasis and subordination.
- Use non-discriminatory language.
- Stress the benefits for the reader.
- Write at an appropriate level of difficulty.

## Be Confident

You can feel confident if you have carefully prepared and are knowledgeable about the material you wish to express. The manner in which you write should assume a confident tone as well. As you prepare business documents, you want the reader to do as you ask or to accept your decision. In order to make the document effective, you must write confidently.

Consequently, a confident tone will have a persuasive effect on your audience. The reader will become more inclined to accept your position, and will notice the confidence that you have. Employers are inclined to hire individuals that appear confident and sure of their abilities.

This does not mean however; that you should appear overconfident. This can easily be interpreted as arrogant or presumptuous.

For example:

**Not:** You must agree that I am qualified for the position.

**But:** My qualifications in the areas of accounting and customer service meet your job requirements.

## Be Courteous and Sincere

A writer builds goodwill for him or herself by using a tone that is polite and sincere. It is important to strive for sincerity in tone because without sincerity, politeness can sound condescending

Consider the words and phrases you use in your document and how your reader will likely receive them. If you are respectful and honest, readers will be more willing to accept your message, even if it is negative.

For example:

**Not:** You didn't read the instructions carefully, thus your system has shut down.

**But:** The system may automatically shut down if any installation errors occur.

## Use Appropriate Emphasis and Subordination

You can help your readers to understand which of your ideas you consider most important by using emphasis and subordination. You can choose from a variety of strategies to emphasize an idea or to subordinate it.

To emphasize an idea, place it in a short sentence. A short and simple sentence will most effectively convey an important idea. You can provide further explanation, sufficient examples, or evidence in following sentences. To subordinate an idea, place it in a compound sentence.

**Emphasis:** Smoking will no longer be permitted in the building. The committee on employee health and safety reached this decision after considering evidence from researchers and physicians on the dangers of second-hand smoke.

**Subordination:** The committee on employee health and safety has finished considering evidence, and they have reached the decision that smoking will no longer be

permitted in the building.

Ideas placed in the first paragraph of a document or message receive the most emphasis, followed by information placed in the last paragraph. You can subordinate an idea by placing it in middle paragraphs of your message because these paragraphs receive the least emphasis.

Use active voice to emphasize the person or thing performing an action and passive voice to emphasize the action that is being performed.

**Active:** Scientists have conducted experiments to test the hypothesis.

**Passive:** Experiments have been conducted to test the hypothesis.

**Note:** In most nonscientific writing situations, active voice is preferable to passive for the majority of your sentences. Even in scientific writing, overuse of passive voice or use of passive voice in long and complicated sentences can cause readers to lose interest or to become confused. Sentences in active voice are generally—though not always—clearer and more direct than those in passive voice. You can recognize passive-voice expressions because the verb phrase will always include a form of be, such as am, is, was, were, are, or been. The presence of a be-verb, however, does not necessarily mean that the sentence is in passive voice. Another way to recognize passive-voice sentences is that they may include a "by the..." phrase after the verb; the agent performing the action, if named, is the object of the preposition in this phrase.

You can also emphasize and subordinate information by letting readers know how you feel about the information.

The amount of space that you devote to an idea will help convey the idea's importance to the reader. Discuss ideas that you want to emphasize in more detail than you do ideas that you want to

subordinate.

The language you use to describe your ideas can also suggest how important that idea is. Use phrases such as "most important," "major," or "primary" when discussing ideas you want to emphasize and phrases such as "a minor point to consider" or "least important" to discuss ideas you want to subordinate.

**Emphasis:** Our primary consideration must be cost.

**Subordination:** A minor point to consider is appearance

Repeating important ideas is good way to emphasize them as well. Be careful not to overuse this strategy; you will lose your readers' interest if they believe you are needlessly repeating information.

Our primary consideration must be cost - cost to purchase, cost to operate, and cost to maintain.

Any information that stands out from the rest of the text will be emphasized. **Bolding**, underlining, CAPITALIZING, indenting, and **highlighting** will convey emphasis to your reader. Do not use this strategy frequently or the design effect will be lost.

### Use Nondiscriminatory Language

Nondiscriminatory language is language that treats all people equally. It does not use any discriminatory words, remarks, or ideas. It is very important that the business writer communicate in a way that expresses equality and respect for all individuals.

Discriminatory language can come between your message and your reader. Make sure your writing is free of sexist language and free of bias based on such factors as race, ethnicity, religion, age, sexual orientation, and disability.

- Use neutral job titles

**Not:** Chairman

**But:** Chairperson

- Avoid demeaning or stereotypical terms

**Not:** After the girls in the office receive an order, our office fills it within 24 hours.

**But:** When orders are received from the office, they are filled within 24 hours.

- Avoid words and phrases that unnecessarily imply gender.

**Not:** Executives and their wives

**But:** Executives and their spouses

- Omit information about group membership.

**Not:** Connie Green performed the job well for her age.

**But:** Connie Green performed the job well.

- If you do not know a reader's gender, use a nonsexist salutation.

**Not:** Dear Gentlemen:

**But:** To Whom it May Concern:

- do not use masculine pronouns.

**Not:** Each student must provide his own lab jacket.

**But:** Students must provide their own lab jackets. Or  
Each student must provide his or her own lab jacket.

**Stress the Benefits For the Reader**

Write from the reader's perspective. Instead of simply writing from



the perspective of what the reader can do for you, write in a way that shows what you can do for the reader. A reader will often read a document wondering "What's in it for me?" It is your job to tailor your document accordingly.

**Not:** I am processing your order tomorrow.

**But:** Your order will be available in two weeks.

Stressing reader benefits will help you to avoid sounding self-centered and uninterested.

### **Write at an Appropriate Level of Difficulty**

It is essential that you write at an appropriate level of difficulty in order to clearly convey your message. Consider your audience and prepare your writing so that the reader will clearly understand what it is that you are saying. In other words, prepare your style of reading to match the reading abilities of your audience. Do not use complex passages or terms that the reader will not understand. Accordingly, do not use simple terms or insufficient examples if the reader is capable of understanding your writing. A competent writer will match the needs and abilities of their reader and find the most effective way to communicate with a particular reader.

### **What kind of tone should I use with a negative message?**

It is especially important to consider tone when you are writing a negative message. In a negative message, such as a document that rejects a job offer or denies a request, be sure to assume a tone that is gracious and sincere. Thank the reader for their input or involvement and carefully state that you cannot comply with their wishes. Follow this response with an explanation as necessary.

It is best not to draw attention to the person performing the action that will likely displease the reader. Therefore, you may want to avoid using active voice when delivering negative messages. You might also avoid stressing the reader benefits unless there are clear benefits to the negative message. It can sound insincere to stress reader benefits in a negative message.

**Not:** Thank you for offering me the position as General Manager at Simon's Inc. Unfortunately, I am unable to accept the position. I did not think that the position you offered me would utilize my communication and customer-service skills to the degree that I wanted. Therefore, I have accepted a position as Assistant Director at a different company

**But:** Thank you for offering me the position as General Manager at Simon's Inc. I appreciate your prompt and generous offer. Unfortunately, I am unable to accept the position. I have accepted a different position that will allow me to utilize my communication and customer-service skills.

In some negative messages, you may need to address faults or issues concerning an individual. When writing messages such as this, maintain a professional tone that does not attack the individual but that makes your position on the issue clear.

For example:

**Not:** I do not understand why you made such discriminatory remarks.

**But:** Discriminatory remarks are not tolerated in this organization.

For more information about tone, see: Ober, Scott. *Contemporary Business Communication*. 2nd Edition. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1995.