Writing Positive and Negative Messages

Objectives:

Through the discussions and readings for these two related Units, you should be familiar with the following topics:

- The basic rhetorical principles underlying the drafting of informative, positive, and negative messages
- The formatting of letter, memorandum, and email messages
- The basic principles applicable to trying to take an essentially 'negative' message and give it a 'positive' spin
- An analysis of a case: 'Statstar' (link to pdf on Lectures page)

Read: **Locker/Findlay, Chapters 7 and 8, and "Statstar" (pdf on 'Lectures' page);** *Assignment Case for Assignment 1*: **"Globe" (in Create coursepack)**

Assignment #1: Negative Message with positive emphasis; up to 1000 words/ 20% due midnight Friday Week 6

Discussion Topic: As discussed in the Unit 4 lecture, assume that in the 'Globe' scenario you are instructed to write a purely 'negative' message to Lyn Smith, turning down all her requests. What kind of intangible but positive 'alternative' ('reader benefit'), that might override her obvious anticipated negative response to the main message, can you come up with? Your answer will be contingent in large part on your analysis of her as your 'primary' audience.

Overview of Units 4 and 5

In these two related units we will first glance back to the notion, introduced in Unit 1, that when writing in business/professional/administrative contexts one is always, in some significant sense, trying to write 'persuasively.' We will then look generally at some specific rhetorical principles applicable to writing 'informative and positive' (Unit 4) and 'negative' (Unit 5) messages, as defined in Locker/Findlay Chapters 7 and 8 respectively. Following this discussion, we will turn (Unit 5) to a discussion of the 'Statstar' case study in order to further develop our understanding of these principles.

'Everything's An Argument!'

Well, that's perhaps overstating things just a little, but nevertheless this is a good general principle to keep in mind in the context for our course! The point, of course, is this: whenever we write something intended to convey a message to a reader, we are at least in part, even if only tacitly, seeking to persuade our reader(s) about something. That persuasive objective might be as straightforward as simply having a reader 'accept' a piece of information, or as complex as having a reader 'accept' a negative message (from her point of view) while still being persuaded that she has good reasons to continue to have a relationship with our organization ('goodwill'); that indeed is your object in Assignment #1! To return to the language of Unit 1, we are always appealing, to some extent, to our reader's rational and emotional responses, and to our own credibility, though the balance between the three will vary according to the writing context, our purpose, and the subject matter.

Let's return to 'Globe' for a moment; supposing you were instructed to write a purely 'negative' message to Lyn Smith, turning down all her requests, you would still have at least two persuasive goals:

- To have her 'accept' your message, and so put an end to any further (time consuming) correspondence on the matter, while
- at least keeping open the possibility that she/her husband might one day, once again 'fly with Globe' ('goodwill')

Accomplishing this is very difficult, and involves finding some way of making what is effectively an emotional appeal to the reader through the positing of some kind of intangible but positive 'alternative' ('reader benefit') that might override her obvious anticipated negative response to the main message – in other words, in the language of our text, dealing with the problem of 'psychological reactance' by trying to create "you-emphasis" in an immediate rhetorical context which would not seem conducive to such an emphasis.

You face (more on this below) this rhetorical challenge in Assignment #1, where you almost certainly have to expect – initially at least – a negative response from Lyn Smith. Putting this another way, you will be saying: "you can't have *x* and *y*, for these reasons, *but* you should continue with us anyway because *z*." The question, of course, is 'what kinds of writing strategies can I/we use effectively to make this kind of case?'

That's why I suggest above that you (briefly!) glance over the first few pages of Chapter 9 in our text before turning to a more intensive reading of Chapters 7 and 8. Keep those general 'persuasive' principles in mind as you work through the following material.

Writing Informative and Positive Messages (Locker/Findlay Chapter 7)

You might have noticed from the above section that we seem always to be returning to the question of (anticipated) reader response; and so we are! The interaction between subject, writer, and reader – all taking place within a rhetorical context – conditioned by our purpose for

writing, determines the kinds of rhetorical choices we make: what to say, what not to say; what to emphasize, de-emphasize; tone, and so forth.

In the case of 'informative' and 'positive' messages, you will notice that Chapter 7 in effect defines these kinds of messages in precisely these terms. An 'informative' message simply is one to which we expect a *neutral* response from the reader. A 'positive' message is one to which we expect a *positive* response. The two kinds of message are linked further by the fact that, in both cases, we are not asking the reader *to do anything* except of course in the sense that we want the reader to *accept* and, ideally, pay attention to whatever is the subject of the message. This translates into the schematization of **primary** and **secondary** purposes on pages 145 -146.

To some extent this may seem self-evident, and indeed it is true that there is little need for extended comment. There are, however, some significant points to keep in mind when thinking about and drafting what we might call 'routine correspondence.' A few words about these points, then we'll look at some specific examples of 'well' and 'badly-drafted' routine messages.

Once we've made the initial decision as to the 'channel' for the message (memorandum for documents *internal* to an organization, or letter for *external* audiences [and corresponding email formats, if applicable]), and provided that we follow formatting conventions for each (Locker/Findlay Chapter 7 provides you with very clear examples of formatting conventions for each, drawn from contemporary practice), our substantive decisions really have more to do with questions of internal organization and content. In general, the rhetorical pattern for informative/positive messages has long since stabilized on an arrangement often referred to as the 'good news' pattern. Perhaps the better descriptive term (preferred in these notes) is 'direct pattern.' Looking at the order of presentation from opening to close, this pattern looks like this:

- Immediately give the 'good news' if applicable (*positive message)* and summarize the main points (*informative and positive messages)*
- Give any required details, background, clarification, explanation
- Present any *negative elements* – as positively 'spun' as possible
- Close with a 'goodwill ending': positive and personal in tone, and 'forward looking'

Additionally, the content items described above will be conditioned by the explicit inclusion (where applicable) of 'reader benefits' – i.e. a concentration on pointing out something in the message that is positive from the reader's point of view. As Locker/Findlay note (page 154), in most informative, and in many 'positive' messages there is often no need to state reader benefits. If presenting purely factual information (e.g. an 'fyi' internal message), there's no need, and similarly where the reader's attitude is irrelevant. More subtly, don't 'spell out' reader benefits if doing so is to 'state the obvious' or (worse) makes it sound as though in your view the reader

is *only* interested in whether or not there's 'something in it' for her/him. These are matters of tone!

Conversely (and back to our opening point in this Unit!) you probably will need to point out 'reader benefits' – which may be intangible or tangible – when you are presenting policies and/or when you are concerned to "shape readers' attitudes toward the information or toward your organization," where doing so presents you 'as writer' in a positive light (internal and/or external good will), or where there may be benefits for a reader which would not be immediately apparent. Notice here, as you think about this, how the 'persuasive' element does indeed creep back into even purely informative/positive messages.

There is one further point to keep in mind when drafting direct-pattern messages, and that is the question of subject-line. Again summarizing briefly the points in your text, subject-lines **are** significant, primarily because they function both as an informative device and as the 'title' of the document. In general, your subject-line should be adapted to the kind of message being transmitted, and so for informative or positive messages, where possible it should:

- Highlight any 'good news' and summarize the information
- Be as specific as possible
- Be as short as possible (ideally, 10 or fewer words)
- Be specific, where it can't be both short and specific!

The discussions in Chapter 7 go through the various points in some detail. Let's now explore them further by looking at Exercise 7.1 in your text (pages 163-164). The hypothetical sets out the background clearly, and we are then invited to comment on the various solutions using the principles articulated in the chapter. Think about each of the three drafts, and note down *your* comments on each, then look at my comments below, and see what you think: agree, disagree? Why?

1.   I would suggest that in general this draft is not particularly effective, for a number of reasons. First, there is the question of language and tone. Here, quite apart from implicit bias in the second sentence, the language works against *positive emphasis* because it frames and discusses the proposed program in negative terms, both explicitly and implicitly. For example, we are told that 'supervisory personnel' are excluded, which shifts the focus of the message away from who is *included*. Those included are also defined in exclusionary terms: "only employees …". This linguistic feature, coupled with the writer's tendency to use simple declarative sentences with modal verbs (e.g. "Operation *will* begin November 1…a designate of SU *will* collect … *will* evaluate and judge the proposed changes") cumulatively creates a rather 'cold', overly-formal tone – one of 'management' (us) speaking to 'workers' (them). This tone is pervasive right through the memo, to the close: "Your questions *should* be channeled to my office."

Beginning with the subject-line, the writer fails to give complete, and specific, information. We are told that suggestions will be chosen by the 'SU Committee', but we are not told what that is or how (and from whom) it is chosen. The information about the awards themselves is incomplete, and the writer also fails to use examples to (helpfully) suggest what kinds of suggestions might be valued. Finally, partly as a result of this lack of specifics, the writer really doesn't define/emphasize tangible reader benefits, apart from the 'awards of $50,' which substantially reduces the chance of the employees to whom the program is directed taking it seriously and participating in it. 'You-attitude', we might say, is almost completely absent!

2.   The second draft is somewhat better in this respect, and certainly substantially better tonally. Looking at the improvements first, while the subject-line is still not particularly good, the writer does at least go on to give much more information than in the first version: this one indicates that suggestions are to be made on a certain form, tells readers how to fill out that form, and how to submit it. Further, the writer mentions that suggestions that work to improve company morale and/or save the company money will be welcomed. This specificity does lead to the presentation of reader-benefits; the problem is that in this version the focus/emphasis in on the potential *benefits to the 'company'*. In that sense, you-attitude though better than in the first still leaves a lot to be desired.

The other problem with version #2 is its 'wordiness' generally. The writer needs to revise extensively for concise expression, and to eliminate obvious errors that have gone undetected, probably as a result of inattention to revision. Just one example: the first line of the last paragraph. Why "It is hoped that we will have …" rather than simply "We hope to have …"? And, "…a good initial and *continuous"* conjures up an odd image: a never-ending, unbroken ('continuous') stream of suggestion forms being filled in/submitted 24/7! The writer means, of course, 'continual'.

3.   No surprise, the third draft rather more successfully meets the criteria for informative/positive messages. You will have noticed that it follows the 'direct' pattern of organization precisely, from a descriptive subject-line to announcement (with reader-benefits emphasized right from the outset) of the program in the first paragraph, followed by details and examples, explaining reader-benefits, and ending with a positive, forward-looking close. Throughout, the tone is one that generates goodwill. Further, in the language of our text, the writer uses both *internal and external motivators* to try to get employees to participate, and gives, so far as we can tell, complete information about the program.

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