

Be positive

It may sound simple, but being positive is a cardinal rule. The world is full of negative people, but who wants to listen to them? Everything has its light and dark sides. Focus on something positive, or something that could become positive for the receiver.

It takes time to learn to write positive messages, just as it takes time to learn to be positive every morning. It is a good idea to be positive first thing in the morning, because days often resemble their first five minutes. It's tough but it can be learned, and it's worth the effort.

Written communication

Some people can just sit down and start writing. Others get off to a better start if they have prepared properly. This allows them to separate the process of thinking up the message from the process of sending it.

Who am I writing to?

Think of the reader's name, and visualize the person. If you are writing to a lot of people, select one person to represent all of them – if you try to write to everyone, there is a danger that you'll write to no one. Work out the questions the reader will want answered, and in what order. Try asking yourself some standard questions:

- Why am I writing?
- What is the main message?
- What is the reason?
- What can/must the reader do?

Or:

- What is the problem?
- What is the solution?
- Why?

Or:

- What went before?
- What changes are being made now?
- What will it mean for the reader?

Or:

- What are the product's properties?
- What changes are being made now?
- What will this mean for the reader?

Or:

- What subject am I dealing with?
- Why?
- What have other people said about it?
- What method have I chosen?
- How did it work?
- What result did I get?
- What conclusions can be drawn?
- What future is there in this?
- What action do I recommend should be taken?

Sentences

Think about how you build up your sentences and how you handle the amount of information:

- Amount of information: all at once or one thing at a time?
- Structure: a maze or a tight structure?
- Weighting: top-heavy, bottom-heavy or equally balanced?
- Start: heavy or light?
- Tone: is it passive and static, or active and dynamic?
- Coherence: incidental, disconnected or: 'If we say A, we must say B' ?
- Length: are you afraid of including too much detail, or of not including enough?
- Level of abstraction: high or low?

The table on the right gives some examples of 'translations' from heavy to lighter language. The lighter options aren't always suitable, but consider where they might be appropriate. It is a good idea to read your text aloud. A good text makes for easy reading, it rolls off the tongue and doesn't tie the speaker in knots, even if it is written in a traditional style. Try to position your text somewhere between the oral and written traditions. Here are a few examples to give you an idea of what sort of things to look out for:

Word or phrase	More accessible wording
above-mentioned	name of person/thing
achieve	reach, get
acquisition	purchase, buy-out
albeit	although
amalgamation	merger
apply	use
(the) appropriate x	he, she, it or a name
be entitled to	have the right to
credit	transfer, deposit
current	this
debit	charge/take out
dispatch	send
forward	send
funds	money
in accordance with	according to
in addition	and/also
insofar as	as/if
in the event of	if
in respect of	about
major	big
motor vehicle	automobile, truck, pick-up...
occur	happen
person in question	he/she or a name
property	house, office...
publication	booklet, brochure, book, guidelines
regarding	about
request	ask/ask for
requisite	necessary
requisition	order
return	send back
take place	happen
the totality of	all
thus	therefore, as a result
transmit	send
utilize	use
with regard/reference to	about
writing tool	pen, pencil
yield	give or pay



When you have finished

Check the text when you have finished writing it, using this checklist:

- Have you considered who the receiver is?
- Is the central message prominent in your letter?
- Have you explained all the difficult words?
- Have you written short, clear sentences?
- Have you done a Rix analysis on the text?

Rix

Rix is an abbreviation of ‘readability index’, which is a mathematical tool used to measure how difficult a text is to read. The Rix formula examines sentences and words, by counting:

- the number of words
- the number of long words (more than seven letters)
- the number of full stops.

The longer the words, the harder they are for the eye to read. Rix can indicate how difficult your text is to read and tell you whether you should break the sentences up with more full stops.

How to calculate Rix

$$\text{Rix} = \frac{\text{Number of words}}{\text{Number of full stops}} + \frac{\text{Number of long words}}{\text{Number of words}}$$

Rix more than 55 Text is difficult for many adults to read. There are millions of functional illiterates in the world. These are people who have difficulty reading instructions for things they buy or the text on the television when watching a film. Foreign affairs articles in quality newspapers often have a Rix of 50-80.

Rix 45-54 Difficult.

Rix 35-44 Medium. Tabloid newspapers are in this range.

Rix 25-34 Easy.

Rix up to 24 Very easy. Books for children and young people often have a Rix of 2-25. Comic books are in the Rix range 12-15.

There are other ways to assess a text’s readability, of course. The simplest is to use common sense to determine whether the language is fluent and well formulated, and whether it uses too much jargon.

Active voice

Your communication will be better, livelier and more relevant if you use the active rather than the passive voice, which tends to make language impersonal and formal. Instead of writing: ‘This is regarded as...’, write: ‘We/I regard this as...’. Instead of writing: ‘It is recommended...’, write: ‘We recommend...’.

Metaphors

A metaphor is a descriptive term applied to something to which it is not literally applicable, to create mental images or examples of the point you want to make. For example, the expression ‘a heart of gold’ is a metaphor. It is not literally true, but is descriptive.

By using metaphors, you gain access to the minds of other people in ways that generate great energy. Metaphors make the listener create their own images from their own reality. They are also far easier to remember than long explanations and theories.



Try to write in easily understandable language, avoiding long, complex words and sentences with a high Flesch-Kincaid score. Many people simply shut down if the language is too difficult for them. Remember that a letter is exactly the same as a sales conversation, in that you have just 30 seconds to get the person's attention. Lots of letters are put straight into the trash because they don't capture the reader's attention in time.

It is important that the sales letter sounds personal. Customers are tired of 'carpet-bombing' and other forms of direct mail that use gimmicks and smart tricks to grab their attention, so make it personal. You must be clear about why you are writing and what's in it for the customer.

Sales letters

A well-written sales letter is a very important part of the sales process. The sales letter may often be the first contact you have with a new customer. You should write your sales letter using the ABC method:

A = Attention – what sort of a hook should you use for this customer?

B = Benefit – what advantage could the customer gain by agreeing to meet you?

C = Close – what is your next step?

Give the letter 'you-appeal'. Put yourself in the customer's place. Don't write: 'We offer...'. Say instead: 'You will get...'

Try inserting 'you' everywhere you have written 'we'. This will make your letter much more relevant to the receiver.

An example of how a sales letter can be written is shown opposite:

The sales letter

Illustration 27: Write your sales letter using the ABC method.

A = Attention – what sort of a hook should you use for this customer? B = Benefit – what advantage could the customer gain by agreeing to meet you?

C = Close – what is your next step?