

# Quick Learning Guide

*Business Communication Essentials, 6th Edition*

## Chapter 8

### Writing Negative Messages

#### SUMMARY OF LEARNING OBJECTIVES

- 1 Apply the three-step writing process to negative messages.** Because the way you say no can be even more damaging than the fact that you're saying it, planning negative messages is crucial. Make sure your purpose is specific and use an appropriate medium to fit the message. Collect all the facts necessary to support your negative decision, adapt your tone to the situation, and choose the optimum approach. Use positive words to construct diplomatic sentences and pay close attention to quality.
- 2 Explain how to use the direct approach effectively when conveying negative news.** The direct approach puts the bad news up front, follows with the reasons, and closes with a positive statement. Even though it is direct, however, don't use the direct approach as a license to be rude or overly blunt.
- 3 Explain how to use the indirect approach effectively when conveying negative news, and explain how to avoid ethical problems when using this approach.** The indirect approach begins with a buffer, explains the reasons, clearly states the negative news, and closes with a positive statement. If the bad news is not unexpected, the direct approach is usually fine, but if the news is shocking or painful, the indirect approach is better. When using the indirect approach, pay careful attention to avoid obscuring the bad news, trivializing the audience's concerns, or even misleading your audience into thinking you're actually delivering good news. Remember that the purpose of the indirect approach is to cushion the blow, not to avoid delivering it.
- 4 Describe successful strategies for sending negative messages on routine business matters.** For making negative announcements on routine business matters, the indirect approach is usually preferred, unless the news has minor consequences for the audience. For rejecting suggestions or proposals when you requested input or it came from someone with whom you have an established relationship, the indirect approach is the right choice because it allows you to gently reset the other party's expectations.

For refusing routine requests, the direct approach is usually sufficient, except when the matter at hand is significant, you or your company have an established relationship with the person making the request, or you're forced to decline a request that you might have accepted in the past.

When conveying bad news about transactions, you need to modify the customer's expectations, explain how you plan to resolve the situation, and repair whatever damage might have been done to the business relationship. Whether or not you should apologize depends in part on the magnitude of the situation and whether you previously established specific expectations about the transaction.

When refusing a claim or a request for adjustment, the indirect approach is usually preferred because the other party is emotionally involved and expects you to respond positively. Demonstrate that you understand and have considered the complaint carefully and then rationally and calmly explain why you are refusing the request.
- 5 Describe successful strategies for sending negative employment-related messages.** The indirect approach is usually the better choice for negative employment messages because the recipient is always emotionally involved, and the decisions are usually significant. When refusing requests from other employers for performance-related information about past employees, your message can be brief and direct. Simply provide whatever information your company allows to be shared in these situations. Refusing a recommendation request directly from a former employee feels much more personal for the recipient, however, so the indirect approach is better.

You have some flexibility when responding to requests for recommendations or endorsements on social networks. You can choose to ignore the request if you don't know the person, you can decline the request as a matter of personal policy, you can write a full recommendation if that matches your assessment of the person, or you can write a limited recommendation on just one or a few aspects of the person's capabilities.

Messages rejecting job applicants raise a number of emotional and legal issues and therefore must be approached with great care. Experts vary in their advice about how much information to include in these messages. However, the safest strategy is a brief message that opens with an expression of appreciation for being considered (which functions like a buffer in an indirect message), continues with a statement to the effect that the applicant was not chosen for the position applied for, and closes courteously without providing reasons for the rejection or making promises about future consideration.

Negative performance reviews should take care to document the performance problems, be sure that all employees are being evaluated consistently, be written in a calm and objective voice, and focus on opportunities for improvement. Moreover, they must be written with reference to accurate, current job descriptions that provide the basis for measuring employee performance.

Termination messages are the most challenging employment messages of all. They should clearly present the reasons for the decision, present the reasons in a way that cannot be construed as unfair or discriminatory, follow company policy and any relevant legal guidelines, and avoid personal attacks or insults of any kind. Asking a manager not directly involved in the situation to review your message can help you avoid troublesome wording or faulty reasoning. Finally, try to deliver the written message in person if possible.
- 6 List the important points to consider when conveying negative organizational news.** When communicating negative organizational news, (1) match your approach to the situation, (2) consider the unique needs of each group, (3) minimize the element of surprise whenever possible so that affected groups have time to prepare and respond, (4) give yourself as much time as possible to plan and manage a response, (5) look for positive angles but don't exude false optimism, (6) seek expert advice, (7) use multiple media to reach out to affected audiences, and (8) be open and transparent.
- 7 Describe an effective strategy for responding to negative information in a social media environment.** First, be sure you are engaged with important stakeholders before negative situations appear. Second, monitor the conversations taking place about your company and its products. Third, when you see negative messages, evaluate them before responding. Fourth, after evaluating negative messages, take the appropriate response based on an overall public relations plan. Some messages are better ignored, whereas others should be addressed immediately with corrective information.

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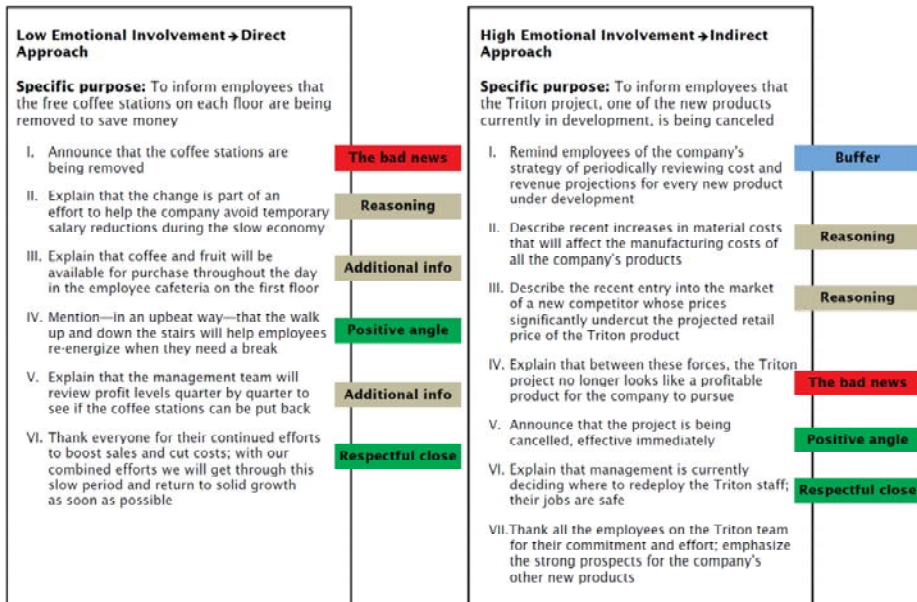
#### KEY TERMS

**buffer** A neutral, noncontroversial statement that establishes common ground with the reader

**defamation** A false statement that damages someone's reputation

**performance reviews** Employee evaluation procedures giving feedback on performance and guidelines for future efforts

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**Figure 8.1** (page 193)  
**Comparing the Direct and Indirect Approaches for Negative Messages**  
 The direct and indirect approaches differ in two important ways: the position of the bad news within the sequence of message points and the use of a buffer in the indirect approach. ("Using the Indirect Approach for Negative Messages" on page 196 explains the use of a buffer.) Both these messages deal with changes made in response to negative financial developments, but the second example represents a much higher emotional impact for readers, so the indirect approach is called for in that case. Figure 8.2 explains how to choose the right approach for each situation.

## CHAPTER OUTLINE

### Using the Three-Step Writing Process for Negative Messages

- Step 1: Planning Negative Messages
- Step 2: Writing Negative Messages
- Step 3: Completing Negative Messages

### Using the Direct Approach for Negative Messages

- Opening with a Clear Statement of the Bad News
- Providing Reasons and Additional Information
- Closing on a Respectful Note

### Using the Indirect Approach for Negative Messages

- Opening with a Buffer
- Providing Reasons and Additional Information
- Continuing with a Clear Statement of the Bad News
- Closing on a Respectful Note

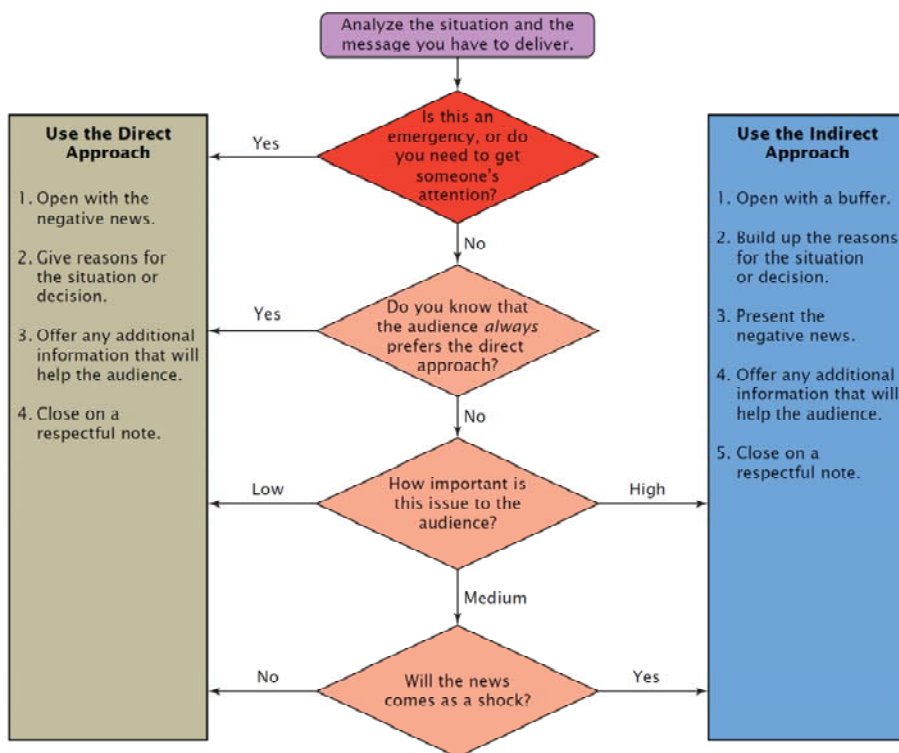
### Sending Negative Messages on Routine Business Matters

- Making Negative Announcements on Routine Business Matters
- Rejecting Suggestions and Proposals
- Refusing Routine Requests
- Handling Bad News About Transactions
- Refusing Claims and Requests for Adjustment

### Sending Negative Employment Messages

- Refusing Requests for Recommendation Letters
- Refusing Social Networking Recommendation Requests
- Rejecting Job Applications
- Giving Negative Performance Reviews
- Terminating Employment

### Sending Negative Organizational News Responding to Negative Information in a Social Media Environment



**Figure 8.2** (page 194)  
**Choosing the Direct or Indirect Approach**  
 Following this decision tree will help you decide whether the direct or indirect approach is better in a given situation. Of course, use your best judgment as well. Your relationship with the audience could affect your choice of approaches, for example.