



How can you communicate bad news effectively?



Introduction

Whether it's finding out that you didn't get the job you wanted or the funding you asked for, no one likes to receive bad news. Most writers don't enjoy writing such correspondence either.

Writing a good bad-news document requires a strong command of style, tone, and structure, and recognition of the reader's expectations and needs. In fact, an e-mail or a letter conveying bad news may be the most difficult type of writing you have to do.

In this module, you will learn a structure for conveying bad news in correspondence. You will have an opportunity to evaluate several examples of correspondence conveying bad news and to identify the structure in action. Finally, you will plan and draft a bad-news document.

QUOTE



"When giving bad news in writing, including key elements will help you maintain a good relationship with your reader."

—Program Manager



Learning Objectives

By the end of this module, you will be able to


- Evaluate bad-news correspondence for structure, style, and mechanics.
- Plan and draft a bad-news letter.



Bad-News Documents

Read the **Leave Request** e-mail below. There are several problems with the way the e-mail presents the bad news it delivers. After you have read it once, click the **Show Problems** button to reveal highlighting of some of the areas where improvements could be made. Can you predict the problem identified in each highlighted spot? Finally, click the **Show Comments** button to reveal comments on the problems.

Sample: Leave Request

 **Leave Request** 06/03/20xx 9:01 AM
Sebastion Cayatano to: Sarah Kitonsa

Dear Sarah,

Unfortunately, it will not be possible for you to change the dates of your annual leave from March to June. As you know, June is a very busy time in our office. We will require everyone in attendance from June 1 to at least July 7, when the annual partnership conference will conclude. I hope that you will be able to take on significant responsibility for the final logistics arrangements for this conference. You did an excellent job last year as my assistant in this role, and I am confident you will do an excellent job taking the lead here.

It is unfortunate that you did not make this request earlier. I could have told you then, before you began to make travel plans, that your travel request was impossible this year.

Sebastion Cayatano
World Bank Group
scxxxxxx@worldbank.org
202.473.xxxx (w) | 202.522.xxxx (f)

This subject line is too general. It would be clearer if it read "Your Leave Request."

This is a responsive e-mail, but it lacks the necessary responsive reminder. One result is that it begins immediately with the bad news, which may well be perceived as unkind.

The addition of information on a new role for the reader confuses the message of the e-mail. The reader may not focus on this part of the e-mail.

This paragraph may make the reader feel stupid and possibly angry. A more helpful approach would be to offer a suggestion: "In the future, let's discuss your leave plans before you make your travel arrangements."

Show Problems

Show Comments



A Better Approach

Writing correspondence that conveys bad news will never be a pleasant task, but it can be done in a way that is more useful to the reader and less stressful to the writer.

Read the example below and click on the numbered buttons to see the comments. This e-mail is an example of a piece of correspondence that delivers bad news in a professional, well-organized way, while remaining sensitive to the reader's needs.

Sample: Oral Surgery

10/23/20xx 2:52 PM

Your Oral Surgery
 Simone Bernacott to: Siva

The subject line is clear.

Dear Siva,

2 I have reviewed your question about coverage under the Medical Insurance Plan (MIP) for
 3 the extraction of impacted teeth by an oral surgeon. Regrettably, I must confirm New
 4 York Life's decision that this procedure is covered under the dental portion of our plan
 and not under the Major Medical portion as your dentist suggested.

The provision for "dental extractions" is contained in Personnel Manual Statement No. 3.20, Annex I, page 8, para. 24(b). This provision covers all extractions regardless of where the extraction is performed or who performs it.

5 You mentioned that the person who performed the extraction was an oral surgeon, a
 medical physician. However, most oral surgeons are actually dentists who specialize in
 oral surgery and not general practice physicians licensed to treat illnesses or accidents. In
 any case, the dental plan would still be the place where payments would be made
 irrespective of the medical/dental degree of the person who performed the extraction.

6 I believe your regular dentist and your oral surgeon both felt that the charges should be
 reimbursable under the Major Medical provisions of our plan and that this was the way
 most employers' plans covered surgical extraction. Unfortunately, this is not how our plan
 works. In some other organizations, where the employer does not have a dental
 7 insurance plan, surgical extractions of impacted teeth are often covered under the Major
 Medical portion of the plan. However, when the employer provides a dental plan, as we
 do, such procedures are typically covered under the dental and not the Major Medical
 portion of the plan.

8 In the future, you may want to get a written estimate from your dentist in advance of
 treatment and have Aetna specify how much they would pay.

9 I hope you have fully recovered from the surgery and that no further extractions will be
 necessary. If you need clarification on any of the above points, please let me know.



Five Steps for Bad-News Correspondence

When you must convey bad news in writing, it helps to follow a structure. With a structure in mind, you can focus on saying what needs to be said, without worrying about the correct order for saying it.

Below is a five-step format that works well for communicating bad news.

1. Cushion (introduction)
2. Bad news (main message)
3. Reasons
4. Alternatives, if any
5. Appropriate closing

In the section that follows, you will find some phrases that others have found effective in each of the five steps. Of course, these are just examples. Your own situation in writing bad news will be unique, so make sure the phrases are appropriate before you apply them to your own situation.

Remember, although it may well be a good idea to soften your language when communicating bad news, you must still give the news early in the document. It is the main message. The reader is asking, "Why am I receiving this communication?" or "What are you trying to tell me?" It is not a kindness to make the reader scan the whole document to discover the main message.



Step 1: Cushion (Introduction)

If you are responding to a specific request, use a responsive reminder. If not, start with something else that is pleasant or at least neutral. The cushion introduction will prepare your reader for your main message. Be nice, but keep it brief. Just a sentence or two is usually enough.

Initiative Along with other staff in the unit, you may have been wondering

Responsive I was delighted to hear from you again and hear about

Responsive Our manager has reviewed your suggestion and finds much positive in it. Although we would like to fund this proposal in FY20XX,



Step 2: Bad News (Main Message)

State it gently, but clearly and directly. Put it in the first paragraph or at the beginning of the second.

- Unfortunately, our current budget will not allow this option
- I am sorry to have to tell you
- However, we will not be able to close the accounts by the date you suggest



Step 3: Reasons

Explain them briefly. Usually it's best to include just enough detail to let the reader follow your reasoning. If you include too much detail, the reader tends to get frustrated and may be more likely to pick your points apart and attempt to argue.

- The priorities for FY20XX were set long before we had the opportunity to read your proposal.
- We have three other projects we must finish before we can turn to your accounts; therefore, it will take us another month to get the figures back to you.



Step 4: Alternatives

Make suggestions for other actions or follow-up resources if you can. However, do not give the reader false hope.

- We will review the suggestion at our next meeting to determine how and when it might best be handled.
- We can promise to have the accounts settled by March 15.
- Perhaps you will wish to seek funding through Agency A_____.



Step 5: Appropriate Closing

In your closing, you can suggest another positive action, make reference to the future or the past (whichever is more positive), or simply be cordial. If you are willing to answer additional questions, encourage the reader to get in touch with you, but only if you are sincerely willing to do it.

Suggest positive action:

- Please resubmit the accounts on the enclosed form.
- In the future, submitting your figures by the 15th will ensure that they are ready for you by the 1st of the next month.
- We hope that your suggestion will find the interest it deserves.
- Although we must cancel this contract, our other contract with you will remain in force, and we continue to value this partnership with you.

Make reference to the future or past:

- We look forward to working with you on future projects.
- I enjoyed meeting with you last week.

Be cordial:

- As always, it is a pleasure to work with you.
- If there is some other way I can help, I would be glad to. You can reach me at



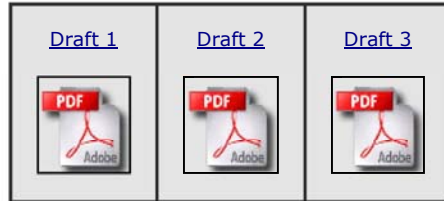
Identify the Pattern

Analyze three drafts of a bad-news letter based on the following scenario. If you were the supervisor, which draft would you prefer?

Scenario. This past year, your unit had a very good intern. You enjoyed working with her. She is now almost ready to graduate and will be looking for a full-time, regular position. At the end of her internship, you were mildly encouraging about her prospects for employment because you expected that two positions were going to fall vacant just about the time of her graduation. One of the positions has already become vacant, as you foresaw, but it is to be abolished because of a budget cut. The other position will not become vacant after all; the person in the position has decided to stay on. Therefore, there is no job for the intern in your unit.

Yesterday you received an e-mail from the former intern, and this morning you asked your supervisor for advice. Your supervisor has asked you to respond by letter, not by e-mail. The supervisor wants to take a look at the letter before it goes out; tomorrow is his last day before he leaves on mission, so you must finish the draft of the letter by then.

Read the three drafts in their original form first, and choose the one you think is most appropriate. Once you have chosen, read the comments on the drafts.



Show Comments

Did you select Draft 3 as the best? If so, you correctly identified the draft that follows the five-step pattern. Move your mouse over the numbered buttons to view the comments. Then click on the buttons below the document to view the other drafts.

Draft 1

Subject: Full-time positions

Dear Vanessa,

- 1 It was absolutely delightful working with you this past summer. As an intern, you truly excelled. You performed well beyond my personal expectations in each of the assignments you undertook, and made a real contribution to the unit. I wish that all of our interns were as good as you, and I know that this must be a very exciting time for you as you near the end of your degree program. Please accept my congratulations.
- 2 Earlier we had spoken about the possibility of a full-time position in our unit. I'm afraid that no position will be available at this time. As you know, when you completed your work this summer, I thought there would be two positions available: the vacant position in research, and the position in policy analysis due to be opened up by a pending retirement. Due to budget constraints, the vacant position has been eliminated. The person who was planning to retire has changed his mind, so that position will not be available either.
- 3 I hope you will look for other opportunities within the Bank Group. I know you would be a valuable addition to our team, and I would be very glad to provide you with a reference.
- 4

Sincerely,
Luis Santiago

Draft 1

Draft 2

Draft 3



Assignment 5: Writing a Bad-News Letter

For this assignment, you will plan, draft, and revise a bad-news letter based on one of the scenarios below. Plan and write the letter using the [five-step pattern](#) you have studied in this module. Remember to place the bad news near the beginning, just as with any other main message; it is the second step of the five-step pattern. Follow the writing process suggested throughout the course to plan the document:

- Complete a Dialogue with the Reader Worksheet ([Initiative](#)) or ([Responsive](#)). (A worksheet is included with each scenario.)
- Draft and revise your letter, paying attention to mechanics and style. Be sure to use the proper format for a letter.
- Use the Document Review Sheet to help you do a review of your writing. (A worksheet is included with each scenario.)

For this assignment, you may choose one of the following scenarios:

- [Optional Scenario #1 – Unsuccessful Candidates](#)
- [Optional Scenario #2 – A Difficult Vendor](#)
- [Optional Scenario #3 – Discontinued Support for Local School](#)
- [Optional Scenario #4 – Your Own Scenario](#)

Note: Whether you use one of the prepared scenarios or a situation from your own experience, this assignment must be written as a letter.

Upload the following documents in [Moodle](#) for this assignment:

- Dialogue with the Reader Worksheet
- Bad-news Letter
- Document Review Sheet

This is your final assignment.



Resources and Documents

Working Documents

- [Dialogue with the Reader Worksheet: Initiative](#)
- [Dialogue with the Reader Worksheet: Responsive](#)
- [Reader Analysis Form](#)
- [Document Review Sheet](#)
- [Five-Step Pattern for Bad-News Correspondence](#)
- [Assignment 5: Optional Scenario #1 — Unsuccessful Candidates](#)
- [Assignment 5: Optional Scenario #2 — A Difficult Vendor](#)
- [Assignment 5: Optional Scenario #3 — Discontinued Support for Local School](#)
- [Assignment 5: Optional Scenario #4 — Your Own Scenario](#)



Summary

When you have to write correspondence that conveys bad news, it helps to follow a five-step structure:

1. Cushion (introduction)
2. Bad news (main message)
3. Reasons
4. Alternatives, if any
5. Appropriate closing

This structure conveys bad news in a professional way while keeping the focus on the reader and the reader's needs.

In addition, writing bad-news correspondence requires you to apply all the knowledge you have gained throughout this course, including effective planning and drafting, as well as correct mechanics and appropriate style.

Maintaining an appropriate tone is crucial. By following all these steps, you will help to maintain a good relationship with your reader.



Completing the Course

The assignment for this module marks the end of your work on this course.

Once you have successfully completed the course, you are eligible for one-on-one tutorials with a writing instructor in the World Bank Group's Communications Skills Program. In tutorials, you will work on applying the course principles to a current document. Each tutorial is a live, one-hour session in which you will connect with the instructor by phone and webinar. Please contact [Elena Gontcharova](#) to sign up for a tutorial.

You may also wish to do further self-study by reviewing the following resources on our website:

- [Self-study modules](#) on English grammar (click on English as a Second Language)
- [Links to external websites](#) containing topics related to grammar and writing (click on English as a Second Language Resources)
- [Tips](#) on communicating more effectively (writing, speaking, and English)

Now, you have two further tasks to complete:

- Fill out a course evaluation on an online survey site. We would like to know what you thought of the course and whether you have any ideas for improving it. The Commonwealth of Learning will direct you to the online survey form.
- Check the next section of this course, called [Next Steps](#). There you will find information about further opportunities for training in writing at the World Bank Group.

You can see the status of your assignments and review past tutor comments at any time in the assignment section of Moodle. The legend for assignment status is on the [Moodle](#) home page.



© 2014 THE WORLD BANK GROUP, ALL RIGHTS RESERVED.