

CHAPTER 2

Components of an effective letter

Planning by itself is not enough to assure you of a positive response from your reader. There are, however, essential components of any letter that can multiply the chances of its effectiveness.

Before you begin to worry about the basic mechanics of a letter (structure, appearance, and grammar), think seriously about the attitude you wish to convey. Your attitude is conveyed through your choice of language, tone, and focus of attention. Each of these individual components is as important as anything else that goes into making up a successful letter.

The attitude conveyed in your letter can make the difference between a letter that is tossed aside and one that is read, understood, and reacted to favorably. It's basically very simple to convey a reader-oriented attitude. Remember as you write your letters that you are addressing a specific reader. Your language, tone, and focus of attention must capture the reader's interest for your letter to be successful.

Language—Clarity Versus Ambiguity

Language is a means of communication. This may seem like a foolishly simple observation to make, but remember that for communication to be completed successfully, a sender must convey his or her message so that the receiver not only receives, but also understands, the message. If language is not used clearly and accurately, the communication process cannot be successfully completed.

A simple rule to remember is that the English you use in your everyday business should be the same good English used by people in all walks of life. Granted, there may be specialized terms intrinsic to your industry, but there isn't a special type of "business English" to be learned and used when writing business letters. Good English is good English.

Be clear and straightforward in your letters. Write what you mean. Don't write in circles, making your reader guess what you mean.

Take the following example of a writer who wants to tell a customer about an important organization:

My correspondence was initiated to inform you of the high caliber of programs and activities of an organization in which I have enjoyed being involved over the past few years. The County Business Association has served to keep me informed of, and actively involved in, the current political and economic issues affecting small businesses through its monthly breakfast meetings with interesting and impressive speakers, its newsletter on legislative activities in Washington, and several other programs outlined in the attached letter.

There are many problems with this example. Let's start by examining the clarity and directness of the statement. Since the writer of the letters wants to inform the reader about an important organization, why didn't the writer come right out and do so by writing:

I am writing to you about the high-caliber programs and activities offered by the County Business Association, an organization in which I have been involved for the past few years.

In the writer's version of the letter, it is not until the second sentence of the paragraph that we even learn the name of the important organization. If you are writing about a particular subject, and that subject happens to be an organization, why not get its name right up front so the reader might enjoy learning about it throughout the rest of the letter instead of being left in suspense?

Instead of using many words ("My correspondence was initiated to inform you of..."), why not say simply, "I am writing to you about..."? If you come right out and say what you mean instead of beating around the bush, not only are you going to grab your reader's attention right away, but you also stand a stronger chance of convincing your reader that he or she should go on reading to find out more about what you have to say.

Be as direct as possible in your letter writing. If you can convey your message in five words instead of ten, do so.

You don't have a great deal of space in a letter to convey your thoughts. Be succinct. You're not writing a novel or a treatise on the economy. The idea is to get your message across clearly and directly.

Avoid the use of pompous or inflated language in your letters. It may sound lofty to write, "My correspondence was initiated to inform you of..." but you are not writing to see how you can turn a catchy phrase on the page (and there's nothing "catchy" about that opener). You are writing to communicate with your reader, and if you mean, "I am writing to you about..." then that's what you should write.

Be clear, direct, and unambiguous in your letter writing. Sometimes when you think you are communicating clearly in a letter, the reader receives a different message from the one you intended. If such ambiguity is present in your letters, you can't be sure that the reader will

understand your message. Ambiguous language is another problem with the example paragraph above. The writer wrote:

The County Business Association has served to keep me informed of, and actively involved in, the current political and economic issues affecting small businesses through its monthly breakfast meetings with interesting and impressive speakers, its newsletter on legislative activities in Washington, and several other programs outlined in the attached letter.

The writer did not mean to suggest that the current political and economic issues were affecting small businesses as a result of the County Business Association's monthly breakfast meetings. Because of careless wording, however, the sentence could be read to mean exactly that. The writer may be defensive and say, "Well, you knew what I meant," and in this case would certainly be correct. But if we have to read something twice to make sure of its meaning, then the chances are that it was not written clearly in the first place. The writer could have written:

Through monthly breakfast meetings with interesting speakers, a newsletter on legislative activities in Washington, and several other programs, the County Business Association has kept me informed of and involved in the current political and economic issues affecting small businesses.

This version leaves little doubt in the reader's mind about the writer's intended meaning. It also removes the unnecessary adjective "impressive" from the text of the letter.

The meaning of an ambiguous passage often cannot be detected as easily as in the above example. A classic example is the following:

The loan officer approved the loan for David Marshall because he was obviously of superior moral fiber.

From what is written above we cannot tell who is of superior moral fiber, the loan officer or Mr. Marshall. The pronoun "he" can refer to either the loan officer or Mr. Marshall. To avoid ambiguity, the sentence could be written:

Because David Marshall was obviously of superior moral fiber, the loan officer approved the loan.

Or:

Because the loan officer was of superior moral fiber, he approved the loan for David Marshall.

Tone—Personality

The tone or personality of a letter can help you get a positive reaction from a reader. The tone should be set at the very start of a letter and maintained throughout. The tone of any business letter should be courteous and friendly, and written as if you were talking with the reader. You don't want to get too technical in a letter. Write in language that the reader will understand.

The tone should help to show that someone with a personality—a human being—is writing the letter. If the reader believes that you are genuinely concerned about how the letter affects him or her, a positive response is more likely.

Consider Sample Letter 2.1. The letter sets a tone emphasizing efficiency and personal response to the reader from the beginning by addressing both the writer's past involvement with the customer and the customer's needs. Credit manager Nilges comes directly to the point by announcing that his letter contains a credit proposal for his customer's company.

In the first paragraph, the writer establishes the tone of the letter:

We are proud to have you as a customer.

Sample Letter 2.1 is written with a positive tone directed toward its reader, which is maintained throughout the letter. If the reader is convinced that he is receiving a fair proposal from an official who is committed to helping the reader's company, then chances are the letter will be successful. A positive tone increases the likelihood of a positive response.

Sample Letter 2.1. Business letter with effective and personal tone.

[date]

Mr. Bertrand R. Levine
Levine's Lumber Land
P.O. Box 567
Richmond, SD 57001

Dear Mr. Levine:

Welcome! Your account at Nilges Wood Supply has been approved. We are proud to have you as a customer.

As you may know, Nilges Wood Supply is a 50-year-old company, with 85 stores in nine Midwestern states. We supply a complete line of building products to our customers, including millwork, plumbing, electrical, paint, kitchen supplies, bath supplies, hardware, and tools. As a leader in this industry, we strive to provide the best service possible to our customers. Our goal is to be your most valuable supplier. Customer satisfaction is our number-one priority.

Your approved credit line is \$2,000, with billing terms of net 10. Monthly statements are mailed on the first or second working day each month. A service charge is added to past-due balances that are not paid by the twenty-fifth day of the billing month.

We at Nilges Wood Supply welcome the opportunity to serve you and look forward to a long and prosperous relationship.

Your branch manager is Sheila McGulicuty. Her telephone number is 890-555-8765.

Yours very truly,

Larry E. Nilges
Vice President—Credit Sales

len/jls

Focus of Attention—The “You Attitude”

An important concept in letter writing is something called the “you attitude.” The “you attitude” insists that the focus of attention in your letters be directed toward the reader, the “you” to whom you are writing.

Directing a letter toward a reader may seem very simple, but a letter writer too often incorrectly assumes that his or her interests and knowledge are the same as the reader’s. Some legwork needs to be done when you are deciding how to make a letter reader-oriented. This legwork may come at the planning stage of your letter, discussed in Chapter 1.

What you need to know are answers to basic questions, such as:

- What will motivate this reader to react favorably to my letter?
- What interests this reader?
- What’s this reader’s viewpoint on the issues I am addressing in my letter?

Sometimes you won’t know the answers to these questions. If you sit down, however, and think clearly about what will convince your reader that what you are writing is beneficial to him or her, you’ve attempted to direct the focus of attention of your letter to the reader, the “you” receiving the message.

The reader of your letter must be convinced that what you are trying to get him or her to do or react to is something of some personal value. If you are responding to someone about the lack of job openings at your bank, you don’t want to scare off a potential employee by sending a cold form letter. Nothing overly elaborate is necessary, of course, but a cordial negative response to a potential employee now may pay off in the future when your bank does need someone with his or her expertise.

Sample Letter 2.2, acknowledging an employment application—even when no jobs are

available—is courteous and considerate. Ms. Kenney has written a letter that reflects a sincere interest in Mr. Krauss. By writing, “We are complimented that you would consider the Bethany Bagel Company as a place of employment,” she has flattered Mr. Krauss. This might cause him to react positively to Ms. Kenney’s letter. If he does react positively now, and jobs should open up at a later date for which he is qualified, then Ms. Kenney’s letter has served a good purpose by keeping a positive relationship with a prospective employee.

Ms. Kenney has not gotten caught up in the need to use only the personal pronoun “you” in her letter. That is certainly important in focusing attention on a reader, but part of the whole idea of creating a personality or tone in a letter is to let the reader know that a living person—an “I”—has indeed written the letter, as Ms. Kenney did when she wrote:

I would appreciate it if you would notify me if you wish to cancel your application for any reason.

Sample Letter 2.2. Form response letter reflecting use of the “you attitude.”

[date]

Mr. Michael Krauss
69 Camran Terrace
Norristown, PA 19403

APPLICATION FOR EMPLOYMENT

Mr. Krauss, thank you for your recent employment application. We are complimented that you would consider the Bethany Bagel Company as a place of employment.

Your application will be retained in our open files. Currently, we do not have any openings, but should one occur you may be contacted for an interview.

I would appreciate it if you would notify me if you wish to cancel your application for any reason.

JOAN KENNEY—VICE PRESIDENT
HUMAN RESOURCES

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If Ms. Kenney had used a passive voice here and had written, “It would be appreciated,” instead of “I would appreciate,” she would have risked taking the personality out of her letter, almost as if she were reluctant to admit her involvement in the process.

A writer must focus the attention of a letter on the reader. If you choose the language and tone for your letter to convey an attitude of commitment to and interest in your reader, you will find that your letters will be more successful in grasping your reader’s attention and encouraging them to respond favorably.

Length

The length of any letter or email affects its appearance. Professionals or customers who receive a lot of correspondence every day are not going to react favorably to three-page letters that could have been written in one page or emails that have the reader scrolling more than necessary.

Come right to the point in your letters and emails. They should be concise and limited to one page if possible.

Begin discussing the main topic or topics of your letter in the first paragraph. If you do, your reader will know what to expect as soon as he or she begins to read.

Planning your ideas and clarity in your writing will help to limit the length of your letter. Paragraphs should not be too long and difficult to follow. You should not, however, use a string of one-sentence paragraphs, which can result in a staccato-like reading. A concise paragraph with a few sentences that come right to the point should keep the length of your letters manageable.