

# **TONE IN BUSINESS WRITING**

## **What is Tone?**

"Tone in writing refers to the writer's attitude toward the reader and the subject of the message. The overall tone of a written message affects the reader just as one's tone of voice affects the listener in everyday exchanges" (Ober 88).

Business writers should consider the tone of their message, whether they are writing a memo, letter, report, or any type of business document. Tone is present in all communication activities. Ultimately, the tone of a message is a reflection of the writer and it does affect how the reader will perceive the message.

## **How can I make sure my messages have the appropriate tone?**

In order to employ the proper tone in a document, you need to assess a few defining factors. Here are some of elements that define the type of tone your writing takes:

### ***1. Audience***

The audience is always the most important aspect of business writing. Whether it is an employer or a fellow worker, it is essential that you consider your reader before writing any document. Your message will be much more effective if you tailor the document to reach your specific audience. The message you wish to express must be written in a way that will effectively reach the reader. The writer needs to have a clear understanding of who will be reading the document in order to write it to their tastes. The text has to be tailored to their knowledge, needs, and preferences. The tone that you use to write the document directly affects how the reader will interpret what is said.

#### **Example-1**

For example, a proposal written with a light-hearted, familiar tone may be suitable for a long-term, domestic client but inappropriate for another new, international client.

## **Example-2**

Bob is writing a cover letter for a position as a Sales Representative for a newspaper. He is unsure that he will be able to succeed at such a position, and uses phrases such as: "I hope that you will contact me..." "I know that my qualifications are not very impressive, but..."

The reader is likely to interpret these phrases to mean that Bob isn't really qualified for the position or that he doesn't really want the position.

Clearly, Bob is not assuming an appropriate tone. He must consider that:

- He is applying for a position as a Sales Representative.
- He wants the employer to ask him to come in for an interview.
- The employer will look for highly motivated and confident individuals.

If Bob were to consider these things he may rewrite his cover letter to include such phrases as: "You can reach me at 555-2233; I look forward to hearing from you." "My qualifications make me an excellent applicant for this position..."

The tone of the message has changed drastically to sound more confident and self- assured.

## **2. Purpose**

The tone must match the document's goal. Each document is built to serve a specific purpose and language choice supports this purpose.

A user manual is meant to instruct and so takes on a direct, neutral tone. A proposal is meant to win business and uses persuasive language to convince the reader. In order to apply the right tone, you need to have a clear concept of the purpose.

### **For example:**

Suzy is writing a job acceptance letter to an employer but is unsure of the tone she should take in the message. She has decided to accept the position. When she asks herself, "What is my intent upon writing?" she answers, "I want to accept the position, thank the company for the offer, and establish goodwill with my new co- workers." As she writes the letter she quickly assumes a tone that is appreciative for the offer and enthusiastic about beginning a new job.

### **3. Medium**

Tone varies with the document format. An email uses a different tone than a financial report or an office memo. The way the document will be sent, prepared, or consumed modifies the language used. In an era of short attention spans and long internet record-keeping, words must be phrased in ways that suit their medium.

### **4. Brand Personality**

Finally, each company has their own style. Your brand may be hip and fun or serious and steady. Writing should match the overall quality, while still conceding to the previously mentioned factors.

For consistency, brand or marketing managers may provide a style guide for use in preparing business documents.

## **Tips for Using the Appropriate Tone in Business Writing:**

### **1. Confidence**

Confidence is appealing. Firms want to do deals with people who are confident in their business, their product and themselves.

Use the active voice. The passive voice is more difficult for readers to understand and less persuasive.

#### ***Example:***

Passive: Quick and efficient delivery will be carried out by our trained drivers.

Active: Our trained drivers will carry out quick and efficient delivery.

Avoid long sentences with the phrase “, and.” A comma followed by the word “and” is rated in readability studies as pleading rather than confident.

#### ***Example:***

Unconfident: Write with more confidence and learn to project executive tone and find all errors.

Confident: Write with more confidence. Learn to project executive tone. Find all errors.

## **2. Sincerity**

To build a sense of trustworthiness, business writing should be sincere. As it can be difficult to convey through text alone, it can be proven with evidence of past success.

Use numbers. Numbers provide clear and specific statements that are compelling to the reader. It is difficult to debate numbers so readers receive genuine information. The text reads as sincere.

*Example:*

No numbers: We have helped many customers reach their social media goals.

With numbers: We have helped 55 customers reach over 22,000 new customers through social media.

## **3. Positivity**

Positive tone is appealing to the reader. People are often motivated and attracted to a positive take. Positive output or benefits are appealing to the reader.

Phrase text in a positive way. Include phrases that are encouraging and enticing. Negative phrasing should be avoided.

*Example:*

Negative: Please accept the contract by Thursday at midnight. If not, we will be too busy to process your order and it may not be completed.

Positive: To guarantee delivery and top-quality service, please accept the contract by Thursday at midnight.

## **4. Respectful**

Business documents are read by a wide audience and should be inclusive. Speaking for and within a company demands that the writer show respect to the reader.

Stay neutral. Specifically, avoid gendered pronouns. Using gendered pronouns can show inadvertent bias and be read as discriminatory by the audience. Use gender- neutral terms to avoid these issues.

***Example:***

Gendered: The chairman will be present to oversee the meeting administration.

Neutral: The chair will be present to oversee the meeting administration.

‘They’ as a neutral pronoun is becoming more popular. However, simply avoiding gender in writing may be a better choice.

## **5. Accessible**

Business writing should be easy for the reader to grasp. A common mistake is when the writer tries to draft text in a highly sophisticated way. This word choice makes the writing less accessible to the reader, and therefore less successful in transferring the message. The goal is to communicate the content, not to flaunt fancy vocabulary.

Keep it simple. Short sentence structure and simple words ensure the document is accessible. Avoid using jargon. Simple does not mean condescending, but written in a way that makes it as easy as possible for the audience to understand.

***Example:***

Complex: The offline engagement process will ensure all stakeholders can provide feedback on the retail expansion project.

Simple: A public meeting will be held with local residents to hear concerns over the rezoning application.

## **6. Persuasive**

Certain documents, such as proposals or bids, call for persuasive language. This tone invites the reader to be convinced of a company’s qualities. Decisions rely partly on how persuasive the tone is within a document.

Use imperative for recommendations. By employing this verb form your writing is direct and instructive. It doesn’t leave space for questioning. It leaves the reader with a clear understanding of how you envision a solution.

***Example:***

Present: We suggest continuing with the next phase of HR expansion.

Imperative: Continue with the next phase of HR expansion.

## **7. Avoid qualifiers**

Introducing qualifiers weakens the presented argument. While factors influencing success need to be indicated, they should not detract from the core message. Consider including qualifiers in a separate statement or section, if appropriate.

***Example:***

With Qualifiers: *If at all possible*, incorporating financial monitoring will *likely* improve quarterly results.

Without Qualifiers: Incorporating financial monitoring will improve quarterly results.

## **8. Negative Messages**

Delivering bad or sensitive news is difficult. Finding the right tone is important to ensure the message is clear but compassionate.

Avoid the tendency to hide or soften bad news by burying it. The information must be clear to the reader so they don't feel sideswiped or manipulated. Be sincere — the reader will appreciate it.

Use a relevant buffer. If bad news is expected or won't cause an emotional response, include the negative information at the top of the document. Incorporate an explanation to clarify and finalize the decision to the reader.

If the bad news is unexpected or may cause an emotional response, use an indirect buffer. Keeping the buffer relevant to the topic will allow the reader more time to react.

***Example:***

Insincere: Your experience is impressive and we enjoyed the conversation during the interview. However, we have decided to hire another applicant for this position.

Sincere: After a number of impressive interviews, we have decided to hire another applicant for this position.

## ***9. Always use appropriate language***

Using appropriate language in the workplace is part of being a professional. In your business writing, you should refrain from using slang, bad grammar, or sloppy sentence constructions, and you should use correct punctuation and capitalization. You must also avoid discriminatory or derogatory language.

## ***10. Avoid flowery or verbose language***

Don't be wordy in a misguided attempt to be diplomatic or to sound more eloquent or educated. Rather, use clear, concise, simple language without talking down to your readers. For more information on these topics, see the articles "[Clarity](#)" and "[Conciseness](#)".

## ***11. Take the time to write well***

Understand that a report to the members of your board is not the same as an e-mail you dash off to your old high school friend; the former requires a great deal more thought and care. When necessary, do research so that you are knowledgeable on the subject about which you are writing and can adequately express your ideas. This too will help you to convey the appropriate tone by allowing you to write with clarity and confidence.

## ***12. Use Non-discriminatory Language***

Non-discriminatory language is language that treats all people equally. It does not use any discriminatory words, remarks, or ideas. It is very important that the business writer communicate in a way that expresses equality and respect for all individuals. Discriminatory language can come between your message and your reader. Make sure your writing is free of sexist language and free of bias based on such factors as race, ethnicity, religion, age, sexual orientation, and disability.

- Use neutral job titles

**Not:** Chairman

**But:** Chairperson

- Avoid demeaning or stereotypical terms

**Not:** After the girls in the office receive an order, our office fills it within 24 hours.

**But:** When orders are received from the office, they are filled within 24 hours.

- Avoid words and phrases that unnecessarily imply gender.

**Not:** Executives and their wives

**But:** Executives and their spouses

- Omit information about group membership.

**Not:** Connie Green performed the job well for her age.

**But:** Connie Green performed the job well.

- If you do not know a reader's gender, use a nonsexist salutation.

**Not:** Dear Gentlemen:

**But:** To Whom it May Concern:

- Do not use masculine pronouns.

**Not:** Each student must provide his own lab jacket.

**But:** Students must provide their own lab jackets. Or Each student must provide his or her own lab jacket.

### ***13. Stress the Benefits for the Reader***

Write from the reader's perspective. Instead of simply writing from the perspective of what the reader can do for you, write in a way that shows what you can do for the reader. A reader will often read a document wondering "What's in it for me?" It is your job to tailor your document accordingly.

**Not:** I am processing your order tomorrow.

**But:** Your order will be available in two weeks.

Stressing reader benefits will help you to avoid sounding self-centered and uninterested.

### ***14. Write at an Appropriate Level of Difficulty***

It is essential that you write at an appropriate level of difficulty in order to clearly convey your message. Consider your audience and prepare your writing so that the reader will clearly understand what it is that you are saying. In other words, prepare your style of reading to match the reading abilities of your audience. Do not use complex passages or terms that the reader will not understand.

Accordingly, do not use simple terms or insufficient examples if the reader is capable of understanding your writing. A competent writer will match the needs and abilities of their reader and find the most effective way to communicate with a particular reader.



## **Additional information**

### ***Adapting Tone for Specific Types of Business Writing***

In addition to the general guidelines outlined above, it is important to point out that we use a slightly different tone depending on the type of business correspondence we are writing. Below are some examples of the appropriate tone to use in particular kinds of business writing.

- Awarding a promotion—appreciative, enthusiastic
- Applying for a job position—enthusiastic, confident
- Denying a request—regretful, courteous
- Rejecting a job applicant—thankful, regretful
- Declining a job offer—appreciative, regretful
- Apologizing to a customer for a mistake—humble, appreciative to the person for being a client, confident that the mistake will be remedied
- Apologizing to a customer; unable to correct the mistake—humble, appreciative, regretful that the mistake cannot be remedied
- Reprimanding an employee—firm but courteous (address the issue; don't attack the individual)

### **Conclusion**

The guidelines above can help you to use the appropriate tone in business writing. As you craft your business correspondence, it is important to realize, also, that tone is somewhat subjective: what sounds efficient to one reader may sound brusque or even curt to another and what sounds courteous to one might sound flowery to another. For this reason, it is always a good idea to have someone else read over your document for you to make sure that you are indeed conveying the appropriate tone.

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