

Thank you for considering SecurCo Company for your insurance needs. We will be glad to process another application for you that will provide you temporary coverage. Please contact your agent to assist you with another application.

Sincerely yours,

Jane Doe

Health Underwriting Department

Worksheet: Responding to Tone

I found Example _____ to have the most effective tone for the occasion and reader.

My reasons were:

COMMENTARY: RESPONDING TO TONE

Most people have found Example 2 to be more tonally effective for the reader and occasion. Here are some of the reasons they gave.

- Example 2 states the key message clearly in the first paragraph. The opening of Example 1 would confuse the reader. From his point of view, he did more than “consider” SecurCo: he sent the company a check for \$600 and a blood sample.
- Example 2 explains what the reader must do to ensure that he has temporary coverage. It also gives him the “benefit of the doubt” that perhaps he did submit the blood sample: “If you have submitted your blood test, please contact your agent right away and tell him to notify me.” Example 1 assumes that the test was not submitted and seems to offer the customer no way of rectifying his error, beyond the vague statement: “If you are still interested in coverage, please contact your agent.”
- Example 2 offers to process another application to ensure temporary coverage. Example 1 washes its hands of the customer: “We suggest you discuss any questions with your agent who is in a position to assist you.”
- Example 2 says the customer will get a refund in a few days. Example 1 says the refund is enclosed, then scribbles a hasty footnote at the bottom: “Refund to follow.”

STATING BAD NEWS TACTFULLY

Sometimes you must refuse or disappoint someone in the business world. Some typical situations are

- Denying a request
- Stating a negative decision
- Turning down a person’s application for a job

Professionals seek to maintain the goodwill of customers and associates as much as possible. It is precisely when you must disappoint someone that maintaining goodwill is most difficult.

Delivering bad news requires an understanding of human psychology. You know that when you refuse people something they consider their due, they will be disappointed and frustrated unless you give justifying reasons. Given human nature, however, if you begin with the refusal, the person will be disappointed at the least and may even be angered. **An angry person is not a logical person.** Thus even if your reasons for the refusal are good, they may fall on deaf ears.

In the case of a letter written this way, a reader may even stop reading after the first paragraph and throw the letter away. In such cases, the reasons for the refusal are never heard.

However, if you **start the letter off pleasantly and give justifying reasons before stating the refusal**, your reader is more likely to accept the bad news because you have shown the logic behind it. This is commonsensical psychology that we use in our dealings with people every day.

Organization of a bad news letter can be described simply. You begin by **cushioning the blow** of the refusal by opening with a fact (pleasant, if possible) about the situation on which both reader and writer can agree. This is commonly called a "buffer." In it, you set the stage for a review of the facts of the case. You also try to establish, through your tone, that you are a reasonable and friendly person.

After you establish compatibility in the opening paragraph, if you can, give the reasons that you cannot do what the reader wants or expects. These reasons should be stated **carefully and factually**. In some cases, such as turning down a person's job application, you cannot always reveal the reasons—perhaps the selection was made by committee and someone on the committee disliked the applicant, some other applicant had an "inside track," etc.

After presenting your case thoroughly and tactfully, you reveal the bad news. It **should be minimally but clearly stated**. Finally, you should, if possible, end on a note of interest to your reader that demonstrates your and your company's goodwill. In some situations you may be able to offer readers something else in lieu of what they wanted; this is called a counterproposal.

Exercise: Tonal Components of Bad News Letters

To get a sense of this form in action, look at the "classic" letter of this type: the letter refusing a job application.

After you've read the two examples, list the components of tone that you found were successful or unsuccessful in each. Write your observations on the worksheet provided.

Example 1 Bad News Letter

Dear Mr. Jones:

The selection committee has carefully reviewed the material submitted by all the applicants for the position of Accounting Director of the Finance Division at SYZ Insurance Company. Three outstanding finalists have been selected for this position. This letter is to inform you that you will not be considered for this position.

It is unfortunate that we have only one position to fill, for we had 100 highly qualified people apply for this job. The large number of qualified applicants made the selection of finalists especially difficult.

We appreciate your interest in SYZ Insurance Company and extend our best wishes for your continued success.

Sincerely,

Charlene Walters

Example 2 Bad News Letter

Dear Mr. Smith:

Thank you for participating in the final interviews with members of our Board of Directors for the position of Executive Director of the Philadelphia branch of American Insurers Association. We appreciated your candid and clear responses to our many inquiries.

I regret to inform you that we have chosen another applicant for the position. It is unfortunate that I have only one position to fill at the Association at this time. Your presentation to the members of the Board showed me that you would be a most valued colleague in our work. Should the occasion arise when I may need to call on you for some special projects for the Association, I would hope that you would be available.

We are part of an intricate network in the insurance community because our programs are so broadly based in Philadelphia and the surrounding areas. If you would agree, I would like to pass your resume and materials to people I think would benefit from your expertise and in whose programs you would be an asset.

I wish you all the best and success in your career.

Sincerely,

Harriett Plains

Worksheet: Tonal Components of Bad News Letters

Example 1

Tonal Successes

Tonal Failures

Example 2

Tonal Successes

Tonal Failures

**COMMENTARY: TONAL COMPONENTS
OF BAD NEWS LETTERS**

Example 1

Tonal Successes

Tonal Failures

Ends on a friendly note

Sets the reader up for a positive message and then lets him down (see first paragraph).
Does not make clear whether the reader was one of the "100 highly qualified applicants."

The first letter could have been retrieved simply by **thanking the reader for the application and giving the reasons for the refusal before the bad news.** Given the opening paragraph, however, many readers would not read on to hear the reasonableness and politeness of the second and third paragraphs. Such letters can leave a lasting negative impression of the company represented by the letter.

Example 2

Tonal Successes

Tonal Failures

Thanks the reader for his application (neutral opening). States the refusal clearly, but minimally

Does not explain why the reader did not get the job. (Note that in rejection letters, writers may be unable to explain the reasons for rejection. What if the applicant was not hired because

Encourages the reader by assuring him that he was qualified for the job, even though he did not get it.
Offers a concrete counterproposal.

someone else had an inside track or didn't like the applicant? These kinds of reasons could not be shared with the applicant.)

The second letter, although unable to explain the reasons that the person did not get the job, is exceedingly **diplomatic and personal.** The writer gives the clear impression that she thought highly of the candidate. In addition, the counterproposal of sending the candidate's resume to other organizations would undoubtedly **ease the disappointment of the refusal.**

Exercise: Revising a Bad News Letter

The examples you just saw are fairly dramatic. It's easy to see how a writer refusing a person's job application should take care to show sensitivity to the reader's feelings. It's more difficult to take the time to use the bad news strategy in routine refusal situations where it's standard practice to handle the recipient of the letter in a somewhat heavy-handed way.

The letter that follows is a standard letter refusing a customer's claim for disability benefits. Using the worksheet provided, revise this letter into bad news form. Make the tone more personal and tactful.

Sample Letter

Dear Mr. James:

After thoroughly reviewing your claim for Short-Term Disability (STD) benefits, we regret to advise you that at this time we cannot approve your claim for the period of 10/28/10 through 11/6/10.

Unfortunately, based on the information received, we are unable to approve your claim due to insufficient medical substantiation of total disability beginning on 10/28/10. Your doctor did not indicate the health reasons or diagnosis involved in causing you to stop work on the above date.

In order for your claim for STD benefits to be reconsidered, you must submit the required medical verification on your Statement of Claim form. To do this, please complete Section A and have your doctor complete Section B of the enclosed claim form. The completed form should be returned directly to my attention in the enclosed self-addressed envelope.

If we do not hear from you within 10 working days, your office will be advised to process a Personal Leave of Absence without salary for the period of 10/28/10 through 11/6/10.

Your prompt attention to this matter would be appreciated and if you have any questions, please call me at 212-523-8888.

Worksheet: Revising a Bad News Letter

SAMPLE REVISION: BAD NEWS LETTER

Notice in the sample revision how the writer uses all of the elements of the bad news strategy: buffer, reasons, minimally stated bad news message, counterproposal, and friendly ending.

Dear Mr. James:

We have reviewed your claim for Short-Term Disability (STD) benefits.

To date, we have received insufficient medical substantiation that your total disability began on 10/28/10. Your doctor did not indicate on the claim form what the diagnosis or health reasons were that caused you to stop work on that date. We are therefore unable to approve your claim.

We will have to advise your office to process a Personal Leave of Absence without salary for the period of 10/28/10 through 11/6/10 unless you submit the required medical verification within 10 working days. To help you resubmit your claim quickly, I have enclosed another claim form. Please complete Section A yourself and then have your doctor complete Section B. Return the form directly to me in the enclosed self-addressed envelope.

If you have any questions, please call me at 212-523-8888.