# Elements of Effective Written Messages

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Communication in all its forms – verbal and non-verbal – is one thread that binds a community together, and we rely on it to convey information for practical purposes. Communication is fundamental to our social nature and as such, we use nuances in our language and delivery to signal more than just the literal meaning of specific words. Stripped of complicating elements, communication is a transaction consisting of sender, receiver, message, and medium. To be effective, one must share the right message using the right modality to the right individual at the right time. Missteps in any aspect of this result in a far less effective outcome or even a result that is in direct opposition to intentions. The potential for disconnect increases dramatically with the number of recipients.

Effective communication is a productive transaction when there is high fidelity between sender purpose and recipient interpretation. There are a small number of concepts that are endemic to effective messaging.

- Opportunity
- Purpose
- Audience
- Structure
- Tone

Incorporation of specific elements or review for special qualities vastly improve the quality of result. When a successful exchange occurs, the outcome is progress and goodwill is generated.

## Opportunity

We communicate in writing for many different reasons, and in a professional setting, we typically write to quickly share or acquire specific information. This is closely tied to day-to-day functioning and is a well-worn, familiar path. When an occasion arises that is outside of this scope, the process requires more planning and this, unfortunately, may deter some from communicating. As a general rule of thumb, by the time it occurs to you to possibly communicate, then you are likely past the point where you should have already done so. It is often much worse to defer than to over communicate. This holds true especially for IT incidents, where we need to reach out directly to those impacted. This can be a difficult message during assessment when information is incomplete and senders might feel vulnerable to criticism from recipients. The small amount of backlash that may occur, however, is dwarfed by community recognition of and appreciation for transparency. New services, changes to existing services, useful and timely information, requests for review and feedback, and anything that effectively advances transparency with the community are all good opportunities to communicate.

## Purpose

Every exchange, even a simple thank you note, serves a purpose and effective written messages are surely purpose-driven. The expressed goal of the message should be recipient centric and the execution should reflect this. You should thoroughly understand this goal before writing a message. In simple

terms, you should be able to succinctly delineate what you intend to accomplish and what success would look like. If the primary goal of a message is not to benefit the reader, then the message technically has no proper purpose. An explicit and narrowly defined purpose is the proper foundation to build on. It provides the writer the best practical framework to narrow content to only that material which effectively advances stated goals. Removing extraneous content simplifies a message, and this makes it much more accessible to the reader.

## Audience

Technology centric systems, services, and capabilities have their own version of complexity. Sometimes it is easy to make this clear to readers, but it can also be quite hard. Jargon filled writing may demonstrate mastery of a topic and firmly establish technical bonafides, but this will likely make a message indecipherable to some portion of the community. No message can be successful if readers are unlikely to understand the details. A key component of the planning process is an assessment of the recipients for the message. This allows you to tailor the content to them based on both their known level of familiarity and their specific sensibilities with respect to value and alignment. If they can better recognize and understand the content, they are much more likely to read the message to conclusion and you are much more likely to achieve your goal.

## Structure

Much like good manners, formatting and elements of style signal good form and can establish a positive impression immediately. Common conventions, even if only briefly noticed, build credibility by meeting the expectations for professional communication. A simple framework for a successful IT message consists of the following elements:

- Welcome greeting
- Concise lede
- Relevant context
- Achievement of purpose
- Opportunity for follow-up
- Positive closure

Every message should have a greeting. This simple convention immediately establishes a good tone. Lede is a journalism term of art. It is the opening sentence or paragraph of a news article that summarizes the most important aspects. For a simple, professional message, the lede is a single sentence that explicitly indicates the reason for the message. Because the lede is often quite dense, it is often appropriate and helpful to follow this with a small amount of context. This might be nothing more than a full definition of a term used in the lede. It might also be additional historical information that helps to frame the message. Regardless of preliminary material, a professional message should quickly get to the content that explicitly achieves the intended purpose, whatever that may be. This should be the most complete aspect of the message as it is most directly associated with the intended goal. Subsequent to the primary goal, there should always be an opportunity to get additional information, perform additional actions, and or provide feedback. Finally, every message should be gracious in closing. This allows the reader to leave the message with the same positive tone with which they entered.

## Tone

The tone of a message is the feeling you project, intentionally or not, about the subject and your readers. Tone is important because if it aligns well with your message, it can reinforce the goal of your communication. On the other hand, a mismatch between your content and tone will cause confusion. Just like with body language and how we speak, word choice and phrasing also carry subtle meaning that can either resonate well with the recipients or disengage them. Where written messages lack explicit tonal elements, readers, often subconsciously, attempt to fill this void by inserting their own interpretation of tone and subtext. Managing tone requires you to anticipate your recipients' reaction to word choice, organization of content, and even formatting choices. A simple but effective way of checking word choice is to read your communication aloud. If the language sounds awkward or abrasive to your ear, some portion of your audience will hear it the same way. Tone is open to interpretation, and how you read and understand a message will be differ from others. For especially contentious communications, ask another to review it. If your reviewer feels you are coming across negatively or angry, you should certainly revise.

## Conclusion

Most people also do not read IT communications for pleasure. It is a business transaction, and one where an audience wants to quickly extract pertinent and relevant information. A consistent structure imparts predictability. This not only aids with quick acquisition of information but also reinforces cultural expectations. An effective process ensures alignment with goals. Well written messages that are recipient centric become useful aids to the professional success of each reader. In the end, every message is an opportunity to help the reader, and this should be the primary focus. When you can repeatedly deliver quality information that hits the expected conventions and provides useful information at the right time, you create a rhythm that your community understands, trusts, and values. This, after all, is the best version of success one can achieve.