A problem well put is half solved.

—John Dewey, American philosopher, psychologist and educator

This chapter builds on the “what to say” part of communication: how to determine the best content for your goal and audience. First let’s take a closer look at the spirit from which you write or speak: tone. The tone of a written message communicates how you feel—about both the subject and the other person—and, just like tone of voice and body language, determines how the other person understands and reacts to your message. People are often unconscious of this below-the-surface impact. But it’s a top complaint when executives talk about their staff’s writing: “It reads too abruptly,” “It doesn’t seem courteous,” “Clients (or donors or customers) feel they’re being disrespected.”

Recently I presented a business writing workshop to a group of young accounting professionals who’d just been promoted to management roles. We talked about how to apply goal and audience concepts to everyday messages and I used this example of an e-mail request:

Subject: Need Black analysis Friday!

Hi Garry—I’m afraid the deadline for the April report has been moved up to next Wednesday, the 23rd. So I need your breakdown by the end of the week. I know this may mean putting in extra time—I’ll appreciate it very much. Please confirm you can handle this. Thanks, Nina

A participant, “Amy,” burst out: “Wait a minute. I’m a very direct person and a very busy one. If I want something from my staff, I write, ‘I need you to have the Green report on my desk tomorrow by 2:00.’ You’re telling me I have to take the time to personalize what I write and care about their feelings? You’re saying I have to... sugarcoat it?”
My answer: Yes. But it’s a mistake to label it “sugarcoating.” Think of it as expressing courtesy and consideration. And realize that it’s also a self-serving strategy. People are much more likely to respond the way you want when you write (and talk) from their perspective and pay attention to how the message will make them feel.

The fact that Amy would be writing to someone who reports to her, rather than a client or supervisor, makes no difference. As explained in Chapter 2, relationship building is always an important underlying goal, though an unstated one. We depend on writing to build bridges between people in a business environment that steadily grows more impersonal. How coworkers and subordinates feel about you is in large part determined by how you communicate with them. These interactions are just as critical to success as how you write and speak to a supervisor or client. Many good business leaders are inspired by the principle “build a team around you.” These leaders also notice how staff members treat those around them. Remember that respect engenders respect.

Another basic lesson Amy needed to learn is the power of why. Her message didn’t include a reason for her demand. Whatever assignment she’s meting out, phrasing it as an abrupt demand loses her a free opportunity to foster team spirit and help her assistant feel good about contributing to something important. Her approach creates a negative emotional field rather than a positive one.

Another universal magic bullet is appreciation. Resist the take-it-for-granted syndrome. It’s hard to say thank you too often. If your supervisor grants you a privilege, like participating in an important meeting, or takes time to advise you, it’s smart to express appreciation—even if you don’t agree with or like the advice. If a coworker pitches in on your project for which she has no responsibility, appreciate it. If someone who reports to you goes above and beyond, let him know you noticed and value the contribution.

Now that we have some basics about tone in place, let’s practice putting the ideas of goal and audience to work. Illustrating with e-mail, the everyday medium, is convenient. But the strategies work for all messages, including long-form documents, blogs, social media, video and oral presentations.

**DECIDE WHAT RESPONSE YOU WANT**

Suppose you are president of the Entrepreneur Group and must plan 10 guest appearances by prominent local businesspeople. Here is how the structure explained in Chapter 2 helps you determine what to say and how to say it.

Your goals:

- **Immediate:** Find good speakers and draw them to participate in the program.
- **Longer range/personal:** Establish contact with business leaders who could prove valuable for your future job hunt.
- **Practical:** Accomplish these things without killing yourself. This means recruiting enough people from the group to share the burden.
The first challenge is to recruit the volunteers. The folder you received from the outgoing president includes this e-mail from last year:

To: All Entrepreneur Group Members
From: Bunnie White
Subject: Need help—important!

As this year’s president, I’m responsible for assembling the next 10-month roster of speakers. Please help! Participate in the planning, organizing the logistics, taking care of speaker needs and general follow-up. This is the most important aspect of our club’s work and we should all want to get good results. ***If enough people volunteer, the shared workload will be a lot lighter.*** Our first meeting will be on April 10 at 7:00 p.m. in Room A.

—Bunnie

Does this make participating sound like much fun? Satisfying? Hardly. Nor does it help to know that the writer will probably take all the credit for good outcomes. The benefits are all hers. Even worse, volunteering sounds like a risky business that could sop up an open-ended amount of time. The message is unlikely to attract a lot of volunteers.

**APPLY YOUR AUDIENCE ANALYSIS**

Let’s see how considering audience can help. What do you know about the people to whom you’re writing?

That’s easy—despite differences in gender, background, national origins and so on, they’re much like you. They want to

- look good, get a good résumé credit, be recognized and appreciated;
- establish good contacts for finding jobs;
- achieve all this by doing as little as possible;
- contribute in a collegial atmosphere (which doesn’t characterize many ventures run by inexperienced managers).

How to accomplish your goals? Always look through your readers’ eyes and ask, “What’s in it for me?” (WIIFM).

In this case, it means finding an offer that will appeal to your classmates and overcome their natural resistance to committing their time. Some simple private brainstorming, or conversation with a friend, can provide a set of selling points in line with the list of audience needs or characteristics.
Take a minute to think about how you would approach this e-mail. Good thinking always precedes good writing, but there is always more than one way to achieve what you want. Here’s a version based on WIIFM.

To: Entrepreneur Group
From: Jane Green, President
Subject: Meet successful businesspeople and contribute

Dear Colleague:

You are invited to join this year’s Speaker’s Program Taskforce. There is room for 10 members who are ready to capitalize on a chance to become personally acquainted with the region’s leading businesspeople in a range of industries.

If you become part of the team expect to do the following:

- Participate in a brainstorming session to come up with a shortlist of the people we’d most like to meet and hear speak.
- Maintain telephone and e-mail contact as needed and attend two checkpoint group meetings.
- Contact one or more people on the A list to recruit them and plan logistics (we’ll try to match you up with people you’d most like to know).
- Welcome “your” speaker to campus and introduce him or her.

This year, all Taskforce members will be listed in every program.

If you want to be part of the best-ever Speaker’s Program, drop me a return e-mail by this Friday telling me about yourself in a few lines. I’ll assemble the team by the end of next week and set a convenient meeting time for kickoff.

Thanks, Jane

Will this version succeed? It provides a lot more incentive to participate. It uses a little reverse psychology, too—remember how Tom Sawyer got Huck Finn to paint the fence? Jane presents the work as a privilege rather than a burden—and a chance to be part of a winning team, which appeals to everyone.

Notice that because Jane was able to structure the project as she wished, she was able to present it more attractively. Often, the writing process—whether you’re using it for a memo or invitation or press release or promotion—reveals weakness in the event itself, or
at least room for improvement. If you don’t have enough to construct a good message, think about what you’d like to have and whether you can recast the event or project. As in Jane’s case, it may cost nothing to do this. Public relations specialists often participate in planning important events because they provide valuable input on how the audience will react. It’s hard to promote an event that doesn’t interest the targets, no matter how clever the language!

Further, writing a well-planned message oriented to reader viewpoint instantly brands Jane as a good leader. The recipients may not consciously say so to themselves, but they do notice that she’s made an attractive offer, spelled out the benefits and limited the time commitment. It’s natural to assume she will run a smart and successful operation. The ability to create such an impression is one reason why good writing is a leadership asset—and another reason to practice it.

If you think that Jane’s original e-mail basically delivered the same message and that readers would work out the reasons to participate on their own, that’s a mistake. It leads us to consider this guiding principle:

*Never assume your reader will make a deductive leap—especially one that helps your cause.*
*It’s always up to you, the writer, to spell things out and draw the right conclusions.*

It’s the writer’s job to do the reasoning, and doing it always pays off.

Observe also that when Jane made the effort to see the invitation from her audience’s perspective, the message’s general spirit—its tone—shifted. It conveys more positive energy, frames the work as a team effort and suggests that the person in charge is nice as well as effective. This is not trivial: Beyond enticing people to join the team, the message sets a good atmosphere for the project from the start.

When you thoroughly consider what you want from your readers’ viewpoint, you’re guided to choose the right content and to adopt the right tone. This contributes to achieving your immediate goal and the wider ones, like building relationships for the long term.

**BRAINSTORM YOUR CONTENT POINTS**

Once you take stock of your goal and your audience, you’re ready to brainstorm your best message points: the ideas or information that will make your case most effectively *for the reader*. Assembling a simple list often works well. Say you want to ask your colleague Sam to cover for you for a few days while you travel. The following facts and thoughts occur to you:

*Need to take three days off from June 1 to 4*
*Going to my sister’s wedding 400 miles away*
*I’ll be grateful for his help*
*Probably I can repay the favor in the future*
*I’ll make sure not to leave a lot of loose ends*
It’s a slow time of year

I’ll stay available by phone or text

I’ll leave a comprehensive to-do list

The work will be routine—check that the project materials come in on time, maybe field some phone calls

If you’re writing a lengthy document like a competitive proposal, the process is the same but you begin by identifying sections rather than single thoughts. For example: who we are, how we see the project and will handle it, expected happy outcomes, fees. Then brainstorm each section for the content that belongs there. You might, for example, outline the “who we are” section this way:

About the company

Team members

Experience

Proof of performance: track record, awards, testimonials, photographs

Why we’re the best match

With the content points spelled out, the next step is to find your opening.

**LEAD WITH STRENGTH**

It’s useful to think about everything you write as three parts:

1. The lead
2. The end
3. The middle: everything that goes between the first two elements

**Don’t Bury the Lead!**

That’s the journalist’s mantra. Figuring out how to capsulize the story, engage the reader and focus on what’s most interesting or important often spells the difference between success and failure. To find the best opening (or as journalists call it, the “lede”) for an e-mail, letter, presentation or Executive Summary, scan your content list and identify your strongest or most relevant point. All professional communicators spend a lot of time on this upfront statement. They know that whether they’re developing an article, press release, marketing piece or e-mail, the lead captures readers—or not so much. A bonus: Once the opening crystallizes, the rest often falls into place naturally. The content of
Jane’s Entrepreneur Group invitation was based on a simple brainstorming list. Leading with strength meant the “meet successful businesspeople” carrot, which immediately gives recipients a reason to care.

To ask a coworker to cover for you during a three-day absence, your lead consists of the subject line and first sentence or paragraph. Perhaps:

Subject: Away June 1–4. Please cover my desk?

Dear Sam:

My sister’s wedding is happening on June 2, and of course I want to be there. The location is Las Vegas so I’ll need to travel. I’ll appreciate it very much if you can cover my work for three days.

Logically, the note would then move on to spell out

- the nature of the work,
- how you will make it easy,
- how much you’ll appreciate the favor, and
- ultimately confirm the ask: “Please let me know ASAP if this is OK.”

**MIDDLE WELL**

The middle of a letter might consist of a paragraph; the middle of a report might occupy 50 pages. Either way, the middle typically contains the bulk of informational content. For example, a memo explaining how to fill out a form would lead with a statement about why an employee is getting these instructions (“On March 3, we will all begin using a new system for vacation time requests”). The middle explains the procedures in the detail judged necessary. A longer document like a project report would similarly lead with the subject, typically the reason for doing the project, or the problem to solve (In order to determine which new software will best help us analyze costs, we tested four systems newly available in the last six months: Red, Blue, Green and Tan).

The middle section might spell out the criteria, the evaluation process and the results.

Whatever your document length, your content list guides you. You don’t necessarily need to include every point on it. On the other hand, in pulling the message together pay attention to additional ideas that bolster your case—and any omissions you notice. For example, the message points listed for the “please cover my work” request are given in the order that they occurred to me. I didn’t think to include “what the work will consist of”—an essential—until later. And in framing the message in my head, it occurred to me that offering to buy Sam lunch would probably clinch the deal.
Juggle the order of your lists as seems sensible. Journalists were traditionally trained to write in \textit{inverted pyramid style}—that is, to start with the most important story element and then successively work down to the least important facts or ideas. The reason: Editors prefer to trim articles to fit by cutting as much as necessary from the end, rather than reading every story through to piece together the most expendable bits. News articles are still generally written this way, and the method applies nicely to most business writing.

Consider your options in deciding which points to include and in what order. In the case of an e-mail, letter or online communication, this usually takes a simple sequencing of your brainstormed list. In the case of a lengthy document, it means stay clear on the major subtopics or sections identified in the planning stage, hold onto them through the whole document and sequence them logically.

\section*{FINALLY, END WELL}

Note that in our Entrepreneur Group memo, the final sentences circle back to the lead and tell readers how to follow up:

\begin{quote}
If you want to be part of the best-ever Speaker's Program, drop me a return e-mail by this Friday telling me about yourself in a few lines. I'll assemble the team by the end of next week and set a convenient meeting time for kickoff.
\end{quote}

In the case of switching to a new vacation filing system:

\begin{quote}
I count on everyone to switch to the new system on March 3. Of course, let me know any questions about it ASAP.
\end{quote}

The report on the best software system would end with a conclusion:

\begin{quote}
Based on our goals and the capabilities of the four systems tested, we recommend investing in System Green.
\end{quote}

Some more examples of closing statements:

\begin{quote}
Please let me know if you are available to meet on March 2.
\end{quote}

\begin{quote}
Contact Jane if this new process isn't clear.
\end{quote}

\begin{quote}
I look forward to receiving the application.
\end{quote}

The close is your call to action. In every medium, from letter to blog to website page, conclude with a call to action: what you want the reader to do upon reading the message, in context, of course, of your goal. But be sure it suits the task. Telling a prospective employer to “call as soon as you receive this résumé” isn't a good idea.
You may find that when you finish your draft, you end up saying something different than you intended. This is common with many short messages and it’s one of the gifts of thoughtful writing: The process of putting the words down clarifies your thinking. When this takes you in a different direction than you began with, reassess what you want to communicate and either rewrite or rethink your message’s goal.

If your focus has shifted, you may need a different lead. In the case of longer documents, when you surprise yourself with where a proposal or report ends up, accept that as a signal to revamp content. It’s also a clue to plan more thoroughly next time. In the end, advance planning always saves you time and propels your success.

_The act of writing is itself enough: it serves to clarify my thoughts and feelings. . . . ideas emerge, are shaped, in the act of writing._

—Oliver Sacks, psychologist and author

In the next two chapters we’ll practice editing and refining the message to underwrite impact. But most important, determine to review content and tone by answering these questions:

How will the reader feel upon reading this?
Is what I want clear?
Is my message persuasive? Motivating?
Are the reasons the reader should give me what I ask for spelled out well?
Would I say yes to this message?

**CHOOSE HOW TO ORGANIZE**

Even if you’ve always felt that organizing a piece of writing was hard, you may find that thinking through the content before you write eliminates most of the problem. Writing is much more difficult when you just plunge in and start with what comes to mind first. That leads to a jumble of ideas that must be organized after the message is already written. Worse, your content is less effective because you deprive yourself of the chance to do a wide scan and delve into your reader’s perspective. When you know your beginning, middle and end, and the points you want to make, organization becomes natural. You may find that creating a simple list, as described in the section “Brainstorming Your Content Points,” goes all or most of the way toward good organization. But people are different. Here are more options to experiment with.

**Use a Formal Outline**

If the classic outline many of us practiced in school works for you, with major categories identified by numbers and subsections identified by letters, by all means use it. For an alternative
that’s specifically geared for business writing, try the approach described in “View From the Field: An Easy Organization Technique.” Many people find this strategy helpful and it adapts to a wide range of purposes.

**VIEW FROM THE FIELD: AN EASY ORGANIZATION TECHNIQUE**

Most people plunge into writing without planning—which is fine for a two-sentence e-mail, but not for writing that is longer than a paragraph or two. They write one sentence at a time without being sure where they’re going, and probably will cut and paste throughout their writing. This “plunging-in” approach will get the work done, but it’s a long and painful experience.

It’s better to do an outline. Come up with your main point, one that describes what your piece of writing is about. It should contain a key word that is generally a plural noun that relates to how the piece will be broken up. For example, if you’re writing to communicate the reasons for something, the key word is *reasons*. Or, depending on your main point, the key word might be *benefits* or *steps* or *procedures* or *advantages*. Determining your main point and the key word within it helps you construct an outline, and the writing becomes easier.

Generally, your main point should appear as the last sentence of the first paragraph. Preceding your main point is a first sentence or two that explains why you’re writing this e-mail or letter. Often it is in response to a person writing to you. At other times, you may be asked to do a piece of writing, or you may see a need to put something in writing.

Based on the above suggestions, here is an example of an introductory paragraph:

*Two years ago, our firm instituted a certain procedure for cashing checks. Unfortunately, serious problems have arisen with that procedure, and we have been forced to change the process. Below are the three steps that you should now follow to cash checks.*

Now you know what the next three sections, usually paragraphs, need to be. That is, each paragraph will deal with a new *step*, which is the key word.

The key word approach can help you create a good flow if you make sure to use transition words between sentences and paragraphs so people see how one statement relates to the next. Numbers can help: You can begin the second paragraph with *The primary advantage is...* The third paragraph can begin with *Second...* and so on.

—Dr. Mel Haber, president of Writing Development Associates

**Tell It to Someone**

Brain scientists find that writing involves complicated neurological processes that tap into memory, analysis, executive functioning and other mental capabilities scattered around different parts of the brain. In contrast, talking bypasses this complexity. Speech enables us to respond to immediate circumstances such as opportunity or danger. It preceded written communication by at least a few hundred thousand years, so little wonder that we’re better at it. You can exploit this fact: To simplify a message and find its heart, tell it to someone.

This strategy works for a challenging memo, a blog or an important long-form document. When the task is important and/or involves numerous facts and ideas that are hard to sort out, explain it to someone else. If that person is not steeped in your subject,
all the better. Often, expressing your goal gives you a good starting point. For example, “I want a new office because . . .” or “I want to recommend solving the problem this way . . .,” according to the situation. You’ll find yourself speaking clearly and to the point. Your reasoning evolves organically to show you what’s most important and how things fit together. If the person listening asks questions, figure out the answers and build them into your argument.

This is not, by the way, an unsophisticated technique. Feature writers use it all the time to figure out what’s most interesting about a story they’re developing. It connects them with their intuition and steers them toward the story’s heart. Then they know how to create the story they most want to write and that is most likely to satisfy readers. You may at times find that the talking-through process dictates a substantial shift in focus. Don’t resist this! It puts you on a better track.

To transfer your oral story to the written word, write down what you said as closely as you can. Then review it carefully. Good business writing seems conversational, but that is somewhat of an illusion. Writing is perceived differently than spoken language and must have a visibly logical flow and more “correctness” than spontaneous speech, which is here one moment, gone the next. Also, the writing-down process allows you to edit mistakes, cut extraneous information, and find flaws in an argument or gaps in your thinking.

A good technique, especially when you feel stuck, is to write out your outline and opening by hand. Neuroscientists are finding that the physicality of handwriting triggers the brain in a different way than using a keyboard. It also triggers recall differently. This is not illogical: Human beings have been “action” creatures eons longer than “thinking” ones. Many leading authors still handwrite their manuscripts, not necessarily because they’re out of date or anti-technology, but because it helps them think better. See if it works for you.

**Deploy Graphic Techniques**

Whether your document is short (like an e-mail or letter) or lengthy (like a report or proposal), you’ll find it helpful to stay organized by building in graphic options. This has a big payoff: It makes everything, regardless of length, more easily understood by readers. In fact, if you don’t build in graphics while you’re writing, you may have to add them later anyway.

Graphic tools are even more important to online writing because people tend to scan and their attention must be captured and managed. Website designers use graphics quite systematically to attract a reader’s eye and move it from point to point, taking account of typical viewing habits, based on research. Online articles, blogs, profiles and other materials all benefit from the use of graphic devices as well as many forms of imagery.

To structure a document of any kind, many writers create a series of subheads before they begin to write. Then they juggle the sequence and—presto!—a ready-made outline materializes. They add the content for each subhead, and there’s the blog or promotional piece or report.
GRAPHIC OPTIONS FOR ALL BUSINESS WRITING

Draw on your visual repertoire to organize your messages. Here are some options.

**Use subheads to introduce a new thought or section.** Choose the format you prefer:

- A larger font
- A different font
- **Boldface**
- *Italic*

Write them in sentence case, with just an initial cap, like this.

or

Write Your Subheads in Uppercase and Lowercase

You can combine some effects—bold with a different font, for example—but you must be consistent.

**Use bold lead-ins for the beginning of a paragraph or section.** Boldface, with or without italic, can also be used to highlight a fact, figure, idea or point to remember in the body of your copy. There are also times when underlining is a good way to highlight, but this looks outdated and falsely suggests that the phrase is a hyperlink. And of course color works, if the medium accommodates it. Take care when your material will be read cross-platform, because uncommon type and colors may not translate as you intend.

**Use bullet points, but remember their limitations.** They are good for

- listing ideas or facts telegraphically,
- summarizing,
- saving space,
- presenting at-a-glance information.

**But do not depend on bullet points too much.** While bulleting is a good way to present information for an audience with a short attention span—which, admittedly, is most of us—bullets need narrative context to deliver meaning. A collection of random-seeming stand-alone points is hard to absorb. Recall tends to be poor because they give the mind little to hold onto. More than four to seven at most is risky.

This applies to all media, including résumés. Listing responsibilities or accomplishments in bullet form doesn’t work without narrative-style paragraphs to interpret the big picture. Remember, never expect readers to draw conclusions for you. They may draw the wrong ones.

**Number your points.** This can work well to pull a reader through your information or argument. Some reasons for this:

1. People like to know how much is ahead of them.
2. It’s satisfying to feel a message has a beginning and an end.
3. A clear sequence can be easy to absorb and remember.

So, in print or speech, statements like “We can expect three basic results from this action” or “Here are the seven steps to filing the new form” are quite effective, followed, of course, by steps one, two, three and so on in logical order.

**Incorporate graphic techniques.** Use boxes, sidebars and pullout quotes—all demonstrated throughout the book you’re reading right now. They enable you to incorporate relevant information without breaking the flow of a narrative.

Always, **extensive and strategic use of white space is critical to accessibility and eye appeal of EVERY message.** This is particularly true of long documents but deploy white space even with brief ones. Short paragraphs help break up space. And, of course, whenever you find ways to make your point visually, through a chart, graph, image or video, consider that. But keep the document consistent and keep visuals relevant.

**Use the right font or typeface.** Be sure you’re using a very readable font and refrain from using capitals, italics or boldface for entire e-mails or large portions
of text. As a general rule, don’t mix more than two fonts, although you might use a distinctly different font for headlines and subheads. Traditional serif fonts, which have the little squiggles on the ends, are nearly always used for books, newspapers and long documents because they are considered more readable. However, sans serif fonts look more contemporary and are favored for websites, other online reading and résumés. [For specific advice on fonts and other graphic basics, see “View From the Field: A Graphic Designer’s Advice on Presenting Well” in Chapter 6.]

**Bottom line:** Less is more. Don’t jam in your copy, whatever the medium! Use formatting techniques in all media to support and clarify your message, make it reader friendly and invite the eye. Readability demands reasonable margins and thoughtfully used graphic devices.

**SUCCESS TIP**

**We’re all Screenwriters**

Writers today must take account of how on-screen reading has transformed reader expectations for print as well as electronic media. In reading so much material on miniature screens, we have evolved into scanners. We check for what’s relevant or interesting to us individually. We “dive” for information rather than systematically reading almost anything. We need choices. We bring this new attitude to all media and messaging.

Notice that few magazines or newspapers present us with dense, unbroken copy anymore. They use photographs, illustrations, pre-article summaries, charts, graphs, captions—all the access points they can devise to pull impatient people in and feed them at least a piece of the story.

**A growing number of books (like this one) do the same.** And note how sales letters and charitable solicitations are brimful of headlines, subheads, underlining, pullouts, “handwritten” notes and other devices.

Creating websites has been described as “packaging information,” and this is a helpful way to think about most of what you write. Don’t limit your attention to just the words. Consider the graphic presentation, your audience preferences and every technique you can draw on to deliver your message in a clear, attractive and compelling manner—while keeping it as concise and simple as possible. Wordiness and complex tricky graphics don’t fare well viewed on smartphones. Notice how much simpler website design is becoming: an evocative image, a few carefully selected words and so on.

**THE GOLDILOCKS PRINCIPLE: HOW MUCH IS JUST RIGHT?**

Just like Goldilocks had to find the just-right bowl of porridge, and visual artists are challenged to recognize when a painting is finished, writers must decide how much to include in a message. How do you know when you’re writing too little? Or so much that the ideas or facts or information may work against you?

A rule of thumb: Provide just enough to make your point well and resist adding anything that might undermine your goal. Consider this example of “too much.” Jeb, a grad student who is a good writer, wrote to ask a nonprofit to partner with him on a project for his public policy thesis. He hoped to conduct an in-depth survey of the population served by
the charity. His thorough three-page letter outlined the process he planned, the number of people he’d interview, his analysis techniques and so on. The executive director responded: “It doesn’t sound like something we’d want to do.”

By supplying information overkill, Jeb created a strong potential to strike a negative chord and give the reader a reason to turn him down. Probably, the extensive detail made the project sound like a lot of trouble. At his advisor’s urging, Jeb wrote a one-page abbreviated message to another nonprofit, stating who he was, his proposed project, a few lines about carrying out the survey, and how the data would benefit the charity. He was invited in to talk.

In writing his original message, Jeb misperceived the goal. Rather than requesting project approval based on a very detailed description, he would have done better to articulate a more limited goal: an opportunity to present his idea—if not in person, in a fuller written version. Considering your goals, and the limitations of a platform, helps you judge the amount of information called for. In Jeb’s case, he needed just enough to intrigue the recipient and spotlight the WIIFM. If, on the other hand, the message is a proposal for a research project, or funding, a detailed presentation is needed to move into round two.

“Audience” gives you a second clue. If you’re asking your nontechnically minded supervisor to authorize a new computer, don’t bury the ask under an avalanche of tech specs. If you want your company to pay for a course, dwell not on the benefit to you personally, but to your work and therefore the organization. Focusing on what’s in it for them tells you what content is extraneous and which arguments and facts will further your cause.

As part of your editing process, check every message for the just-right amount test. There is too much if you

- overwhelm the point you want to make and it gets lost,
- bury or fail to state the benefit to the reader or listener,
- muddy the ask by presenting your request in terms that are too explicit or too expansive,
- give the reader a reason to say no,
- create a boring message that’s tedious to get through.

Think “Goldilocks.” It can save you a lot of time while enabling you to be more effective. A cover letter for a job, for example, isn’t going to win you a job all by itself. That’s unrealistic. Your aim is to introduce the accompanying résumé so it is read in a positive light and makes a good first impression. The best proposal is unlikely to bring you a check in the mail. You need to cover the information that earns a “yes” and the right to move one step ahead.

Anticipate that many of your wants require a multi-step process. It takes a string of letters or e-mails to build a relationship and establish trust. Often reaching “yes” is a back-and-forth process between written and oral communication. For example, you write for an appointment, interact at a face-to-face meeting, follow up with a thank-you note or
written agreement, appear for another meeting and so on. And sometimes you build a sale by coordinating a combination of media: a social post to draw people to your website, which offers a giveaway in return for permission to send e-mails, newsletter issues or blogs, and eventually . . . you may score a sale. Ambitious achievements, such as asking people to risk money or time on you often requires big-time patience.

MANAGE YOUR TONE

As we’ve seen with some of the examples, a document can look well planned and written but still fail if the tone, or voice, hits the wrong note for readers. Just as with live interaction, the feeling you communicate in a written message strongly affects how your words are received. In a person-to-person situation, tone clearly results from, well, tone of voice. The same words can mean many different things according to our voice inflection, pitch, rhythm, speed and so on—factors that reflect our actual state of mind and attitude. Moreover, in talking face to face, we also communicate via facial expression, body language, conversational pauses and a whole host of cues that signal interest, curiosity, surprise, impatience, resistance or a number of other feelings.

But when we read, our eyes and ears can’t help us interpret meaning. Nonetheless, as readers we easily pick up emotional content, often subliminally, without being able to pinpoint a reason. For writers, controlling tone is critical. When you ask for something, clearly it’s not a good idea to undermine your case by showing disrespect, ambivalence or any negative feeling about the subject or reader.

A counterproductive tone may result if you have negative feelings and don’t take care to avoid revealing them. But you may also create this effect without intending to—and perhaps without even meaning it. For example, if your messages are influenced by texting and casual social media exchanges, you may write letters and e-mails in a staccato style that strikes some people as abrupt, discourteous and rude. Keep in mind that if someone perceives disrespect, you erect roadblocks, even if it just seems to you a matter of style. You can’t know which people will react to texting style this way, so be aware of this pitfall.

Therefore be conscious of your tone, and work to align it with your goal and audience. Everything you write should reinforce and build positive relationships. The principle is the same for in-person situations. Take charge of your expression, body language and voice, because inevitably people pick up signs of disrespect, dislike or disinterest.

A 10-Point Tone Checklist

How can you sharpen your writing ear to achieve the tone you want?

1. Recognize your feelings. Just as with face-to-face interaction, your tone can easily convey your actual attitude. So if you’re writing to someone you don’t much like or respect, or communicating something you disagree with but should not express an opinion about, take particular care with what you say and how you say it.
2. **Think twice about writing in an emotional state.** You risk doing yourself long-term harm if you write when you’re angry, frustrated, offended, envious, resentful or suffering from any other negative emotion. Writing that feels negative or seems to criticize the reader produces a greater and more lasting impact than an oral delivery. And a mean-tempered missive might be circulated. At best you will mark yourself as immature. If you must vent, try writing out your feelings and then burying the message. Never address such messages!

3. **Expect higher-ups to demand good manners in person and in writing.** Managers need respect to carry out their own function. VIPs, clients and customers need to feel respected too. And so do colleagues. Build in the full trappings of courtesy and often, in this age of careless communication, you stand out.

4. **Remember that subordinates also respond to courtesy.** A request or directive is better delivered with full respect. Tell people why something is necessary, give them the information they need to carry out tasks well, show appreciation. Your goals if you’re the boss always include building the team, encouraging individuals and generating enthusiasm for the work. Those who report to you take their cues from you and treat others as they are treated.

5. **Remember that tone is contagious.** Projecting a negative attitude will provoke the same from your reader or listener. That never helps, so determine to communicate in a positive spirit. Don’t earmark yourself as a complainer. If you want an enthusiastic response, show your own enthusiasm. Friendly, open and businesslike are good hallmarks to strive for in everyday communication.

6. **Stay appropriate to the subject and relationship.** If the topic is serious, don’t be breezy. If you don’t know the person, err on the side of formality. When you do know the person, call him up in your mind to automatically adopt the right tone. When it’s someone you don’t like, remind yourself not to worsen the relationship.

7. **Project a quiet confidence.** In informal channels like e-mail, aim to create the impression that you are reliable and resourceful, someone who has matters well in hand. For in-depth material like proposals and reports, avoid hedgy wording that sounds indecisive—“I believe that,” “perhaps,” “may be,” “might,” “could,” for example.

8. **Avoid ambiguity.** Double-check important messages and documents, preferably with a trusted buddy, to ensure that they cannot be misinterpreted in any way or lead to any conclusion against your interest. Imagine you were talking instead of writing: Would any statement require a particular tone of voice or facial expression or gesture to convey what you really mean? Irony and sarcasm are high risk!

9. **Adapt to the corporate culture.** Messages sent by Citibank staff may differ in tone quite a lot from messages written by employees at Facebook or a nonprofit, or they might not. An organization can be positioned along the formal to informal
scale based more on its own history and the nature of its leadership, rather than the industry it's part of. In a new work environment, invest time in analyzing the degree of formality, general style and appropriate subject matter of the written communication you see. Adjust your writing accordingly.

10. **Adapt to the medium.** Generally, a letter needs to be more formal than an e-mail. A report or proposal is typically more formal yet. Online writing, such as for websites or blogs, generally works best when it feels more casual, friendly and individual. Good websites look very accessible and spontaneous—though in fact, these qualities are always achieved through the most arduous planning, writing and rewriting.

Communicate in a positive, optimistic spirit and you will be amply rewarded. Avoid creating friction with coworkers or assaulting the boss with frequent complaints. If you encounter a problem and believe it’s important, handle it proactively in a solution-oriented manner. Remember that people respond in line with their perceptions of you and how you treat them.

**PRACTICE THE PLANNING STRUCTURE**

**Case 1: Drawing Important People to Campus**

Let’s see how the principles can be used to write speaker invitations. The Entrepreneur Group is ready to write to the selected business leaders. What could entice these people to accept a speaking invitation?

Start with brainstorming what the group has in common. Most probably, they all

- face highly pressured schedules;
- like to be recognized as leaders;
- value community connection (or at least its appearance);
- want to support the region, especially schools that foster growth and make it a good place to live;
- might have an eye toward hiring future graduates, connecting with faculty and/or interacting with young people.

Here’s one way to write a generic version of the letter.

**Dear _______________:**

*The Green University Martin School of Business is inviting the region’s most prominent business leaders to address our students and faculty this coming year. Recognizing how important Premiere Industries is to both our area’s*
economy and the community we share, and your own contributions as a leader, we hope you will accept our invitation to be part of this year’s Executive Speaker Program.

We ask for just an evening of your time. In addition to an address of approximately one hour, including a Q&A, we hope you will be our guest for dinner and meet leading members of our business school community. We would be delighted to schedule your appearance for March and can offer you a choice of dates during the month.

The Executive Speaker Program gives our aspiring business managers the chance to become acquainted with the Quadruple Cities’ most inspiring leaders. The Martin School of Business has worked hard to earn an impressive ranking internationally. We believe you’ll find the discussion stimulating.

With your permission, we plan to publicize your appearance with the local media and videotape your presentation for our widely used archive. If it would be helpful, committee members will be happy to work closely with you to support your presentation.

I’ll call you next week to ask if you accept our invitation and answer any questions. Or if more convenient, please call me at any time.

The letter takes account of the recipients’ busy schedules and makes their commitment as convenient and pain free as possible, reminds them of the community and giveback context of a university, flatters (why not?) their importance and suggests some tangible benefit in the way of positive press and contact with faculty and select students.

It could work. But is it good enough? Writing is more powerful when you personalize your message to the individual. When the stakes are high, take the trouble to find out what the person values. How to do this if you’ve never met her? Start with questions you can answer with a little effort. In the case of our theoretical guest speaker, for example:

Is she

- a graduate of the school or parent of kids who have been or might be?
- a former business major? MBA?
- a donor to the university or school?
- connected with any particular community cause?
- proud of something in particular? Known for something in business circles?
- passionate about her work?
Does the company

• hire your university’s graduates or those from your school?
• send employees to any university program for training?
• sponsor any campus programs?

Research the answers—online and by finding people to talk to who know the person or the company. Identify a professor, board member or school supporter who knows the individual personally or can connect you with someone who does.

This thinking applies to every occasion when you’re requesting something important. Look for ways to successfully relate to your audience. Obviously, it helps if your potential speaker has direct ties to your school, a relationship with a professor or a strong community spirit. In each case, you’ll use this information prominently, probably in the lead. One example:

I’m writing to you as a Green U. graduate because we’d very much like to include you as a Martin School of Business guest speaker.

A basic letter can be adapted to each recipient’s characteristics. Read the “Three Ways to Personalize Messages” box, and add the ideas to your tool kit. They work well for many documents, including job-hunting letters.

THREE WAYS TO PERSONALIZE MESSAGES

1. **Name-drop in an available and honest way.** In business, people respond to connections and references because it’s far more comfortable to deal with someone who’s vouched for than a total unknown. We trust people who are trusted by people we trust. If you have (or can find) a mutual connection, use it and use it early. For example:

   At John Black’s suggestion, I am writing to ask . . .
   
   Professor Blue, whose class on corporate culture I am currently enjoying and with whom you also studied at White, believes I would be an excellent candidate for the internship your company is offering.

2. **Do your homework, and be sure it shows.** People like to know they’re recognized or that you took the time to find out about them or their organization—especially when you can identify something they’re proud of. For example:

   Our selection committee was particularly impressed with how you’ve established Brown Industries as one of the top in its field nationally in only 10 years.

   (Continued)
In addition to your business leadership, your support of the community through the scholarship program and hospital building fund makes you an exceptional model for future corporate leaders, so we will especially value your participation.

3. **Use compliments; they often work magic.** Like everyone else and perhaps more than most people, VIPs like to feel good about themselves and know that other people recognize how special they are. This is not to suggest twisting the truth but rather that you find something nice you can say with sincerity. (Try this technique sometime with a hostile boss or colleague and you’ll be amazed at the turnaround.) For example:

   Several classmates have told me that you are an exceptionally interesting and inspiring speaker, so I’m very pleased to extend this invitation.

   I’d like to share that when we canvassed the committee members for their top speaker picks, your name came up repeatedly.

   Knowing that your company has twice been cited as a “Best Place to Work” makes us particularly excited about your sharing your insights with us.

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**Case 2: Asking for Opportunities**

Put yourself in the place of someone who’s on the job for a few months and feels frustrated by the routine work. Interesting projects are under way in your department but you have no role in them and are not invited to the planning sessions. Deciding to speak up, your first impulse is to write to the boss (or tell him face to face) something like this:

**Dear Chad:**

I want you to know that I’m feeling very sidelined by my workload. I don’t get to participate in the project planning meetings. I’m relegated to trivial assignments that don’t require my qualifications and abilities. I can do so much more. Why don’t you give me a chance? I know I can be a great asset.

The message is not likely to succeed. Why? The usual suspects:

**Goal:** You’re asking for responsibility and recognition, but undermine this desire by communicating only that you feel undervalued and bored. Concretely, what do you want the reader to do?

**Audience:** The message focuses on how you feel, unhappy and dissatisfied, which the boss may not much care about. It fails to consider reader perspective—WIIFM.

**Tone:** It’s resentful and whiny, which doesn’t speak well for the writer; nor does the touch of self-importance.

**Content:** The message makes empty claims about how good you are without providing evidence.
This message makes a “me” statement and gives the supervisor no reason to accommodate a new, impatient employee by awarding more attractive work and privilege. Challenging him to make you happy could leave you in a worse situation than you’re already in.

In contrast, if you use the strategic approach, it leads you to look at the situation through the boss’s eyes and reason out why he should give you what you want. If you’ve built a profile of the boss, as recommended in Chapter 2, you have a good idea of what he cares about. But just considering how a manager thinks based on his position goes a long way toward helping you know what to say.

Assuming you’ve been doing a good job, the boss probably prefers that you stay and succeed. Replacing a hire is expensive and time-consuming. And all supervisors want their staff members to contribute more because it’s how they in turn succeed. The question becomes: How can I connect what I want to what I assume Chad logically wants? If Chad said anything positive about your performance or an assignment, use that opening:

Dear Chad:

I was happy to hear that you’re pleased with my work. I want to do a great job and look forward to contributing more to the team.

Is it possible for me to participate in some of the project development meetings? Understanding the big picture would help me see how my assignments fit in and help me do them better. The learning experience would help equip me to take on more responsibility and support the team more effectively.

I would value this opportunity and appreciate it.

Thanks.

This message gives you better odds because it’s keyed to what Chad cares about, asks for something specific, and reflects a positive and appreciative tone. You want to contribute more. Now you’re talking the manager’s language!

Looking at a situation from another person’s perspective and figuring out the WIIFM enables you to anticipate consequences. If he reads the first message, Chad will probably feel irritated and question whether you’d deport yourself well in team meetings. The second message gives him a concrete request to consider and suggests how granting it will benefit him, which disposes him to look at it favorably. The respectful tone communicates that you will honor the opportunity and handle it well.

Can the way you frame what you write make such a big difference? Absolutely. True, Chad may say yes or no. But if he says no, you’re still ahead. Chances are good he will provide a reason—perhaps that you don’t merit that opportunity until you’re on the job longer or that you haven’t earned the right. If so you are now able to ask: How can I show you that I am ready for this? This may produce valuable guidance.

What if the boss says that the meetings will never be part of your role, and in effect that you should just stick to what you’re given and not expect more? Then you gain important data for decision making.
Case 3: Resigning From a Job

Suppose you judge from Chad’s response that your job will never grow into something better and you decide to leave the job and prospect elsewhere. How to go about resigning? You could just stop showing up—and in fact, a trend toward this tactic among younger people has been observed. This approach is not wise: You end up without a reference for the time you put in and may face a widely disseminated warning that loses you other opportunities.

If you do give notice, you might be tempted to write:

Chad—I’m out of here. I’ve had enough of being bored out of my gourd with work that hasn’t much point. Send my last check to . . .

Before delivering such a message, think about goals and consequences. Every industry is a small world, and every small world is connected by the global Internet. When you inconvenience and disrespect the boss, might he tell everyone in his network? And your immediate audience is bigger than the supervisor: It includes your coworkers. Unless you’re moving to a desert island to live as a hunter-gatherer, your peers matter. In future they will be your major referral sources and perhaps your employers. A mean-spirited departure that leaves them holding the bag does not sow good seeds. So even if (and especially when) you’re angry, take charge of yourself and write a professional message:

Dear Chad:

I’ve thought long and hard about our conversation and my prospects for advancement at WeGo Industries. I reluctantly conclude that this position just isn’t a good fit. Please accept my resignation as of April 12. If someone else is appointed to fill the job while I’m still on it, I’ll be happy to train them. I’ll also work overtime to leave everything in good shape.

Personally, I want to say how much I appreciate having had this opportunity and everything I’ve learned from working for you. Thank you and best wishes, ——.

It is always professional to leave a job gracefully, no matter your grievances. While this resignation note may not thrill the boss, it leaves him feeling as positive as possible about his investment of time in you. A rude goodbye can diminish your options more than you’ll know. Even a peer who shares your complaint might hesitate to recommend someone who left on a nasty note. So remind yourself that this too is a constant goal: to leave doors open and act in ways that accomplish that.

Case 4: Delivering a Bad News Message

Let’s suppose it’s your unhappy lot to develop a memo announcing that the company will cancel its tuition reimbursement benefit. Your boss gives you the draft she began:
To: All staff

Subject: Participants in Post-Ed Program

Please be advised that economic conditions dictate some employee benefit cutbacks. As of June 30, Rose Co. will no longer provide tuition reimbursement. It is regrettable if this causes inconvenience, but as you’ll understand, the decision is in the company’s best interest.

Talent Management Dept.

Here’s why the message fails in both tone and content. The writer needed to consider two basic audiences—those who are directly affected and those who are not. A program beneficiary is bound to be upset when an entitlement is taken away arbitrarily. Worse, it sounds like more benefits may be on the chopping block—maybe even jobs. Even if you’re not directly affected by this cut, you’d have the same uncertainties.

Further, because the bad news is delivered so impersonally—no one takes responsibility for the decision—you’re likely to think bad thoughts about your employer. Not to mention that it sounds like the company is on the downslide. More than one member of the audience might come to the same conclusion: time to update the résumé.

Studies show that the manner in which bad news is delivered, even in worst-case scenarios like layoffs, strongly affects how employees perceive a company and feel about their jobs. This is no small matter because when times are tough and the staff is lean, management needs to build an everyone-must-pull-together spirit.

Good managers, therefore, put a lot of thought into anticipating reaction to bad news. They brainstorm about how best to frame it and whether anything can be done to offset the negative impact. And plenty of consultants find their bread and butter in telling executives how to handle these situations.

In the example we’re using, then, the goals can be stated like this:

- Deliver the bad news in the most acceptable manner possible.
- Communicate honestly and realistically (anything else will backfire).
- Express empathy in a businesslike way.
- Reassure employees that there are no current plans for more cuts.
- Assure everyone that the company has a good future.

When you’re not speaking for yourself, a situation you may often encounter, begin by gathering useful information such as this:

- Who made the decision?
- Exactly why was it made?
Part I • How to Communicate in Writing

• Might the benefit be reinstated someday?
• Are other benefit cuts being effected or contemplated?
• Might layoffs follow?
• Is the firm’s situation precarious? If so, to what degree?
• What has been the company’s communication history and treatment of staff?
• What are the options for attributing the message’s authorship?

Here’s one way to reframe the message.

To: All Rose Company Staff

Subject: Suspension of tuition-reimbursement program

Dear Colleagues:

I’m sorry to tell you that as of June 30 the company will not offer tuition reimbursement.

As the management team has communicated over the past year, Rose Company has lost several important clients due to an industry-wide downturn. Additionally, a few clients have temporarily reduced their service level.

We’re working hard to broaden our client base and diversify services, as you know, and see a promising business uptick. But right now we must effect some economies. We don’t want to reduce staff beyond natural attrition. And we don’t want to trim benefits like health insurance that are critical to our corporate family’s well-being.

Accordingly, we have decided to reduce spending on tuition reimbursement as well as new equipment and conference travel. We realize that losing the program will disappoint many of you, and we continue to value our staff’s commitment to continued learning. We’ll be happy to reinstate this perk when it becomes practical to do so.

Meanwhile, I’m sure you’ll agree with our priorities and our commitment to sharing the news with you openly and honestly. I know that, with your help, Rose Co. will weather the current industry downturn and provide a supportive employment climate for all of us.

I’ll keep you closely informed of our progress.

Sincerely, Ed White, CEO

This memo tells readers why the cuts are being effected and puts them in context, establishes a team feeling, reassures readers about the company’s future and makes them feel valued. It’s hard to disagree with the expressed priorities. It sounds like management is handling
the economic challenge well and that staying with the ship is a good bet. And employees can trust company leaders to communicate straightforwardly.

Note that there are various strategies for communicating bad news, such as “sandwiching” it between positive statements. For example, “Bob, it’s been terrific to have you as a vendor all these years. But the company has grown and we’re moving on. Let’s remember the good times.”

But this cushioning approach ill suits today’s skeptical, impatient, even cynical audience. It’s much more effective to impart the bad stuff immediately. Show caring, and give reasons when you can. Try to find something truly useful to offer rather than empty rhetoric. “I can suggest a contact who may have a job lead for you” or “We’re bringing in some job search experts for you to consult with” is a lot better message than “With all your talents, I’m sure a great future awaits you.”

These principles should help you avoid a bad news messenger’s worst fate when you have that role. As you move up the ladder, remember that up-front honesty and compassion for others should guide your response to crisis. Introduce mitigating factors when possible. Where an apology is in order, offer it. Unfortunately, this lesson seems to be unlearnable in many corporate and political arenas.

The experimental memo from “Ed White” claimed a good communication history for the company only because I chose to assume that was true. Just as in personal life, good relationships must be built over time. This is true for external communication as well as internal. An institution needs to foster employee, public and media goodwill over the long run through good communication to successfully weather the inevitable crisis.

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**VIEW FROM THE FIELD: NEED TO APOLOGIZE? HERE’S HOW**

Visiting hundreds of companies and writing about their crisis du jour, I noticed that organizations that apologize have better outcomes. And individuals who do it well rise higher and have better relationships. Clearly accountability—taking responsibility and rejecting defensiveness—is an important skill. So I started to put it together into a systematic approach, the 5Rs model:

- **Recognition**—acknowledge the specific offense
- **Responsibility**—accept personal responsibility, no excuses
- **Remorse**—there’s no substitute for “I apologize” or “I am sorry”
- **Restitution**—here’s what I’ll do about it, concretely
- **Repeating**—I promise it won’t happen again

You never know when the need to apologize will come upon you, but if you’re not prepared, instinct kicks in—we want to defend ourselves, hide, deny responsibility. But the cover-up is always worse than the crime. Train yourself in small things and it will be easier to apply to big things.

Written apologies are more formal than spoken but work about the same.

These days, apologizing is a leadership skill. We see our decision makers dodging and weaving instead of accepting responsibility, and that disappoints us. We don’t expect them to be perfect, just willing to learn. In the long run, apology leads to better outcomes and more durable relationships.

—John Kador, author of business books on leadership including *Effective Apology: Mending Fences, Building Bridges and Restoring Trust*
Chapter takeaway: Use this book’s strategies not as manipulative techniques, but to communicate in ways that reflect your best self and connect with people authentically. Understanding another person enables you to frame your messages based on WIIFM—what’s in it for her—and leads you to communicate from respect. It recognizes differences and acknowledges value in those differences. You own the ability to set the tone for your work relationships even when you’re new or junior on the job. Speak and write with thought, caring, honesty and a positive voice. You will be a plus factor for the whole environment and will be appreciated.

In the next chapters, we’ll start to look at concrete ways to improve the mechanics of what you write—the engineering. Good planning and substance are essential, but you also need to craft good sentences, choose the right words and produce cohesive documents.

PRACTICE OPPORTUNITIES

I. Write a Better Note for Amy
Ask her subordinate to deliver a report by a specific time in a way that will make her feel appreciated, part of a team and happy to work hard on Amy’s behalf.

II. Group Work: Plan and Pitch an On-Site Visit
As a group, brainstorm to identify an interesting local company to visit. Come up with as many reasons as you can to justify the time required to plan, organize and make the visit.

1. Collaborate on a letter making your case to the professor.
2. Write a letter to the appropriate person at the company asking the firm to host the class.

III. Write a “Stop Order”
Write a convincing e-mail to the class telling everyone to stop texting, tweeting, Facebook viewing and so on during class time or business meetings.

IV. Draft a “Please Rescind”
Write an e-mail to a supervisor asking that the rule against texting, tweeting or Facebook monitoring during work hours be rescinded, explaining why.

V. Create a “How To”
Write a detailed document telling someone exactly how to do something practical, step by step. Make it as clear as you possibly can with thoughtful content, good writing and graphic techniques. Sample subjects: how to use the newest smartphone, fix a tire, make a paper airplane, choose a new computer, build an aquarium, catch a fish, train a dog to fetch or any subject related to your interests or knowledge base. Choose something you already know about or would like to research.
VI. Sum Up This Chapter’s Content

Draft a 300- to 500-word summary describing the most important takeaways from this chapter. Create a complete message using the strategies explained and at least five of the graphic techniques. Exchange your draft with another student, and talk about the similarities and differences in content and how each of you handled this task.

VII. Find What’s Wrong and Fix It!

Here are some real e-mails with counterproductive tone. For each, identify the problem and fix it.

1. To a supervisor:

Dana—I have a great idea for solving the problem we talked about last week. Let’s meet on Thursday at 3:00 p.m. We can talk all about it.—Robin

2. To a professor:

Dear Prof—I looked online again for the syllabus you were supposed to post and couldn’t find it. I need it by tomorrow—so last chance.—Mike White

3. To the employer’s client:

Dear Mr. Black—I sent you the Kittredge draft last week but have heard nothing. Did I miss something? The deadline is close. Please advise ASAP.—Mark

4. From a travel agent to a client prospect:

Hello (no first name) Kennedy—Previously I had e-mailed you regarding your request for a quote for Waterworld Cruises Russia trip. There were a couple of questions that I needed answered in order to provide you with a more accurate quote. When is a good time to discuss your vacation plans?

I certainly can understand your being busy, or perhaps you did not get the e-mail. So if you can get in touch with me at your convenience, I would like to provide you with all the pricing, discounts, and details.—Jenny Jay

5. From a professional acquaintance asking for help:

Dear Ms. C:

Long time no see! You’ll remember me as VP of marketing for Digital Extreme—you wrote a script for the company video under my direction about 10 years ago.

Now, alas, I’ve been downsized and am looking for new opportunities. Do you know of any job openings for people with senior experience like mine? Or can you give me some industry contacts to call?

Thanks—much appreciated! Mary Nova