AN INTERPERSONAL APPROACH TO WRITING NEGATIVE MESSAGES

Douglas Salerno

Writing negative messages is one of the most difficult tasks facing business communicators. Because we usually find saying "no" harder than saying "yes," and because refusing a request often is interpreted by a reader as personal rejection, most writers know enough to approach the task of writing negative messages with some degree of caution. Recently I spent all of five minutes writing a note to a job applicant, telling her that she had been hired for an opening. I spent almost ten times as long composing the letter sent to the applicants who did not receive the job offer.

Most business communication textbooks talk about strategies for writing negative messages, including refusal letters. And in their discussion, most of these textbooks offer tips on writing the introductory paragraph or buffer. The buffer, as most textbook present it, serves to prepare the reader for the negative news. It is almost always the first paragraph and contains the information which either "softens" the reader for the bad news to follow or attempts to diminish the negativism of the rest of the letter.

In this essay, I want to examine some commonly held (and taught) notions about buffer writing and to suggest how we might better inform ourselves on this topic by considering research in audience analysis and interpersonal communication. My main point is twofold: not all negative messages require a buffer; and, in teaching buffer writing to our students, we should be more concerned with why they construct them than with how they construct them.

Instruction in writing buffers assumes a concern for audience
and audience analysis. This concern, in turn, presupposes that writers can shape their language in specific ways to reach their readers and, most importantly, that all readers are not the same. Yet when textbook writers talk about audience analysis they often assume that their student readers already have mastered this difficult skill. Myra Kogen, for example, notes that most textbooks treat the writer's relationship to audience "in peripheral introductory chapters that describe audience contact in terms of send-message-receiver models largely borrowed from oral communication." She elaborates two "paths" that current research on audience is taking. The first path conceptualized audience as a "real" person or group of people. We "analyze" this audience by gathering information about them. Such a viewpoint encourages us to "identify the kinds of audiences for which a work is intended so that discourse can be shaped to the needs of particular readers" (p. 2). Thus we try to shape the message to take into account the needs, attitudes and other pertinent background information of that specific group of readers. We probably will construct a different message for a group of conservative, middle aged women than for an audience of liberal, young women, for example; messages to friendly audiences will differ from messages to hostile or indifferent audiences.

An alternate conceptualization treats audience as a "fiction." Walter Ong typifies this research path. Because we can never "know" our audience completely, we "create" those aspects that are missing from our knowledge of our reader. We encourage our reader to "assume a stance" with us. Assuming the dual roles of playwright and principal actor, we feed our audience "cues" as to how we expect them to react to our lines." For example, in writing a letter attempting to regain the goodwill of a present customer who has suffered poor service from our organization, we may "create" a reader who is good natured, forgiving and willing to give us another chance. Thus, rather than "bombarding" our reader with logic and good reasons as to why they should "give us another chance," we create a situation with our fictive audience which allows them to persuade themselves.

Kogen's typology parallels the recent work of Lisa Ede and Andrea Lunsford who develop the notion of "audience addressed" and "audience invoked." "Those who envision audience as addressed," they argue, "emphasize the concrete reality of the writer's audience; they also share the assumption that knowledge of this audience's attitudes, beliefs, and expectations is not only possible (via
observation and analysis) but essential" (p. 156). On the other hand, writers who invoke an audience do not "deny the physical reality of readers" but simply assume that they "cannot know this reality in the way that speakers can." Thus in adapting a message to an audience, the writer "uses the semantic and syntactic resources of language to provide cues for the reader—cues which help to define the role or roles the writer wishes the reader to adopt in responding to the text" (ibid). Unlike Kogen, Ede and Lunsford do not view these two audience types as contradictory or dichotomous. In their attempt to reconcile what they see as an inherent weakness in adapting one perspective to the exclusion of the other, Ede and Lunsford propose a model which embraces both "paths" or audience viewpoints.

Finally, Barry M. Kroll proposes three perspectives on audience.4 The first perspective, the rhetorical, is similar to "audience addressed." Kroll notes that in this most common approach to audience analysis, textbooks often "provide lists of general human characteristics along with questions designed [to] help the novice writer decide which of the characteristics—intelligence, socio-economic status, occupation, educational level, and so forth—are most relevant for reaching a particular audience in a particular rhetorical situation" (p. 173). Second, the informational perspective, treats audiences as information processors. "In simple terms," Kroll says, "the writer aims to get information into the reader’s head (p. 176). From this perspective, 'readers ‘process’ messages, transforming linguistic input into a conceptual code that must be integrated with information already stored in memory. Since the goal of writing is to get information into that memory store, a writer needs to understand how the reading process works, paying particular attention to the kinds of difficulties readers encounter in their efforts to extract information from texts" (ibid). Third, the social perspective, treats writing as a "social activity;" thus what writers say, and how they say it, is shaped in part by the culture in which writers live. In the classroom setting, this perspective is implemented in part by having students read their writing aloud to fellow classmates. One key element in this viewpoint is "decentering" or "the ability to escape from a focus on one’s own perspective, especially to avoid the 'egocentric' tendency to impute this perspective to others" (p. 179).

Little of the preceding research is addressed in current textbooks which assume that students need only consider certain demographic information and they automatically will be able to address
an effective piece of communication to their audience. Thus student writers, and even their counterparts in the business world, often use the buffer in a manner which is mechanical and obvious, sometimes even exacerbating the very problem they are trying to ameliorate!

Much writing on the buffer is ineffective for two reasons. First, some of the information is just plain wrong. Textbook writers usually assume that all bad-news communication requires some kind of buffer and/or indirect way of presenting the negative message. For example, one textbook warns: "Readers never want to hear 'no' in a letter, for they desire and expect a 'yes' answer to a request. For this reason, never begin a 'no' letter with the refusal." Another book, however, advises: "not all refusals are likely to upset the reader. Sometimes requests reflect only casual interest; other times people ask for something simply to see whether or not it's available. . . . Quite frankly, using the bad-news strategy isn't always worth the effort, even when you know the message will arouse feelings of disappointment." A second problem occurs when textbooks present the buffer as a manipulative vehicle, suggesting that writers "trick" their audience into reading something that isn't there. For example, one text says "The fact is that you start bad-news messages by 'beating around the bush,' but you do it skillfully. Beating around the bush has a bad reputation because most people do it so clumsily that it's quite obvious. It works only when the reader doesn't notice what you're up to. By the end of this chapter, you'll be an expert at it." Another textbook, analyzing an example of a buffer in a bad-news letter, offers the following comments: "The thank you sounds sincere, is germane to the invitation, and makes a positive statement about volunteerism" (emphasis mine). Such a view invites student reader cynicism. How else can we reconcile commentary which suggests that the "skill" of buffer writing is not in what we do but in how well we conceal what we are trying to do. "Beating around the bush" has a bad reputation not because "most people do it so clumsily" but because most people view it as manipulative and unethical.

Presentations of the buffer often depict the writing situation as an adversarial one between writer and reader. Students are advised to "be positive" or "don't be so bluntly negative" in constructing the opening paragraph. Given the tenor of this writing problem, it is no wonder that students develop a cynical view of the entire communication process. Such teaching merely affirms what many students,
and other practitioners, already believe: that good, effective business writing is manipulative, that it isn't what you say—and especially it isn't why you say it—but most importantly how you say it that matters. Style over substance. Besides breeding cynicism, such a teaching approach at best reinforces a wrong view of communication (mechanistic, manipulative) and at worst trivializes the complicated cognitive, social and ethical decisions that go into the formation of a piece of writing.

Let's examine one kind of "bad news" message with which almost all of us are familiar. Many of us, myself included, have been both on the receiving and sending end of these messages: the job refusal letter. To begin, we need to consider two important points: the context in which the letter is written and the audience's perspective in reading the letter. Most experienced job seekers soon realize that the arrival of a written response to a job application letter almost certainly means bad news. Employers typically use the telephone to communicate job offers and employment interviews; they use the mail to send rejection notices. In most cases, then, the letter reader is expecting "negative news" even before opening the envelope. Thus a "beating around the bush" buffer may intensify the ill will we are trying to avoid in the reader. The sheer number of refusal letters that our reader may have received makes our job all the more difficult. The potency of a stock buffer is severely diminished after the reader has received a half dozen or so refusal letters. The reader soon comes to appreciate, even anticipate, a certain structural technique: buffer, rejection, reason, goodwill closing. For many readers, then, the refusal letter can lose most or all of its functional communicative effects and become instead merely a ritualistic device, similar to typical greetings between co-workers at the office.

To illustrate my point, I would like to share the results of an analysis of twenty-two rejection letters I received in the last six months of 1983. The letters came both from academia and private industry and were in response to a variety of jobs advertised for which I sent a job application letter. Eight of the letters contained no buffer at all. In two cases, the writer emphasized the bad news by beginning with "I am sorry to inform you..." or "It is my unpleasant duty...". The other six letters began without any social amneity, merely stated the result of their job search. Four such letters began: "We have now come to the point...," and "We have at last finished...". Eight other letters contained a buffer but presented the bad news closely afterwards,
diminishing the buffer's effect. Typically the letter began with "Thank you" and then in the same sentence or in the very next sentence used language such as "however," "but," "unfortunately," "I regret," "we regret, however" and "I am sorry to tell you." In these cases, the letter writer seemed to regard the buffer as a mere formality, as ritualistic language. Readers would be likely to miss the intended buffer completely because of the proximity of the negative news.

Finally, six letters contained at least a full-sentence buffer and a "bridge" between the opening paragraph and the bad news. The writer usually used several paragraphs to explain the selection process. In some cases, the name of the appointed person was given. In all cases, the writer closed by repeating some part of the buffer, usually the "thank you," and wished the reader well ("good luck") in the job search. Two letters stand out as being particularly well crafted. The first message was typed on a postcard and consisted of only two sentences: "We have at last finished our review of applications and have filled the position in our department. Thank you for applying." The second letter began "We are most happy to announce that [name of appointee] has accepted a position...." The first letter's effectiveness is contained in its brevity. The letter writer, perhaps realizing the ineffectiveness of a letter easily recognizable as belonging to the "refusal genre," finesses the expected refusal by allowing the reader to infer that "I did not get the job." Such a tactic removes the necessity of the almost always awkward (and insincere) language extolling the reader's virtues and merits. The tone and brevity confirm a reasonably friendly, humane refusal. The second letter also catches the jaded refusal letter reader by surprise. As in the first case, the writer spares the reader a direct refusal and instead allows the reader to infer the bad news through the information provided by the writer.

Given the above, we might want to rethink the notion that all bad news messages necessarily require a buffer. Particularly when our reader expects to receive bad news, the reader may interpret the buffer as either insincere or merely ritualistic neither response being what we want. Certainly there are other kinds of business communication where the telephone is used to communicate compliance and where a letter conveys a refusal. In these cases, the buffer may be irrelevant, even counterproductive in maintaining good will.

There are many situations, however, when a reader opens a letter and either does not know what to expect or has optimistic
expectations. In these situations, a well-written buffer can prepare the reader for refusal. However, the writer will need to be sensitive to the reader’s expectations and motivation for making the request and the likely response to the refusal (anger, disappointment, resignation) and the reader’s "next step" as a consequence of receiving the refusal (litigation, another letter, withdrawal of business). In preparing a written piece of communication, behave in ways similar to facing an interpersonal exchange, viewing the letter not from a one-way perspective, but anticipating the interior state of our audience and their likely response to certain strategies.

I would like, then, to present an interpersonal approach to writing negative messages. My perspective presupposes that writing instruction and evaluation should concern itself not only with the product, the what that students produce, but also the process, trying to discover why students produce the writing they do. For example did they complete a business letter assignment merely by copying some format outlined on the blackboard, did they copy it from 1001 Models of Effective Business Communication or did they actually sit down, analyze the situation and audience and then attempt a specific response to it. My instructional perspective is based upon recent research and writing on cognitive complexity, perspective taking and audience.

Cognitive complexity research generally is recognized as beginning with the work of psychologist George Kelly who argued that people’s processes are "psychologically channelized by the ways in which [they] anticipate events." As Michael Beatty and Steven Payne have noted, most cognitive complexity research rests on the notion that individuals differ in the number and kinds of "personal constructs" or "lenses" they use to view and anticipate events and process information. Jesse Delia and Barbara O’Keefe define constructs as "organized schemas or patterns of expectation within which events are construed or interpreted. "Any event," they argue, "can make sense only in so far as it is ordered within the construct system." Researchers typically measure cognitive complexity by having subjects write descriptions of two persons they know, one they like and one they dislike. Researchers then count the number of different ways subjects describe the two people. Cognitive complexity can be viewed as a continuum of information processing ability, specifically information about people. According to research summarized by Beatty and Payne, the lower end of the continuum includes "categorical
thinking, rapid closure and simple and absolute rules for combining constructs whereas abstract, continuous, probabilistic thinking, complex and flexible combinatory rules and suspension of closure are indicative of the higher end of the continuum. Researchers argue that cognitive complexity measures are different from measures of intelligence or verbal acuity, and that this skill is developmental, increasing with chronological age.

Perspective taking describes "the ability of a person to represent another's perspective or point of view." Research with children and adolescents conducted by Delia, Clark and others suggests at least three levels of perspective taking. At the lowest level, subjects give no evidence of perspective taking at all. Persuasive strategies constructed at this level are entirely centered within the perspective of the persuader. At level two, subjects acknowledge that their audience does not share their opinion, but subjects provide arguments which support only their own viewpoint. At level three, subjects not only anticipate objections but also provide counter-arguments in messages to their audience. While statistical analyses of cognitive complexity and social perspective taking results have not provided researchers with a unanimous conclusion regarding the correlation between these two measures, some writers suggest such a relationship. Finally, several studies conclude that there is a positive correlation between cognitive complexity and communication effectiveness. As O'Keefe and Sypher argue in their critical review of cognitive complexity research, this measure has "important consequences" for the kinds of communicative strategies, rationales and number of persuasive arguments used by individuals in persuasive encounters with their audiences.

The research reviewed above suggests three strategies to consider when we write negative messages. First, we should realize that not all audiences are the same. If the purpose of our communication is to refuse a request and to retain our reader's goodwill, then we must obtain a sense of that person as a unique individual. It follows then that we should try to assume the perspective of the person to whom we are communicating. This involves more than merely presenting social niceties in the introduction of the letter; instead, we need to provide sufficient information and cues which allow our reader to feel understood and addressed personally. Finally, we might benefit from invoking an audience rather than trying to "manipulate" some pre-conceived audience. Our writing would then provide "cues" to our
readers, informing them of a perspective, establishing a stance from which we and they could complete the most effective and efficient communication transaction.

The teaching strategy I use to present effective buffer writing (and all other writing) is based on Roundy and Thralls work which allows students to construct their own writing assignments.¹⁹ My students construct a plausible problem situation which necessitates a letter. They specify an audience for their assignment and a specific purpose they hope to achieve with that letter. When they have completed this preliminary assignment, the have created a "case study" for a business letter. I evaluate their case study, grading primarily on thoroughness of formulating the problem. Then, after receiving my comments on their case study, they write the business letter. I evaluate that assignment on the basis of information presented in their case study. My methodology assumes that no one knows the audience better than the writer. Therefore, I can best evaluate someone's writing by looking over their shoulder, by having the student inform me of the specifics (problem, audience, purpose) of the writing context. The buffer, for example, may or may not be necessary in a particular writing context. For example, the student may create a reader who likes his or her messages "straight and to the point." I let the student decide that. If a buffer is necessary, if "space" is needed to put the reader in a mindframe conducive to accepting a negative message, I let the student decide on the nature of the buffer. Thus a "thank you for your request" may be an appropriate buffer not because it "beats around the bush" but because it is something the writer has decided that his or her reader expects in a business letter, or because the reader will want some acknowledgement of his or her letter before receiving a reply. Thus I am just as interested in my students' writing strategies as I am in the content of their message.

I have tried to argue that letter writing is not simply information transfer. Research in interpersonal communication and audience analysis suggests that we examine all writing strategies taught to our students. We might re-examine our rationale for using a buffer, the manner in which we define its use and thus present a slightly more sophisticated perspective of the communication process. The research on cognitive complexity, perspective taking and audience analysis does not fully inform us on how to be effective communicators in business letters. But this research can broaden
the perspective we present to our students regarding the communication process.

Washtenaw Community College
Ann Arbor, Michigan

Notes

7Hatch, p. 247.
13Beatty and Payne, p. 209.
15Delia and O'Keefe.
16O'Keefe and Sypher, pp. 81-82.
17O'Keefe and Sypher; Claudia L. Hale, "Cognitive Complexity-Simplicity as a Determinant of Communication Effectiveness," Communication Monographs, 47 (November 1980), 310; Barbara J. O'Keefe, and Jesse G. Delia, "Construct Comprehensiveness and Cognitive Complexity as Predictors of the Number and Strategic
Douglas Salerno


1 See O'Keefe and Sypher, pp. 85-86.