Direct and Indirect Communication

Typically, there are two types of patterns that you may use when giving good news or bad news: direct and indirect patterns.

Writing a successful letter depends upon you observing the following:

- **Audience**—in all business writing, you first consider your audience.
- **Purpose**—the purpose dictates the type of letter, the organization of the letter, and even the level of discourse that you will use.
- **Style**—you always write with a professional style.
- **Tone**—the tone is dictated by the purpose and audience.

While your style and tone will follow similar patterns, your audience and purpose will change for each letter, and that will dictate the organization of your letter and the order of the information.

Considerations for Writing a Direct or Indirect Letter¹

- What are the stakes for the reader and the writer?
- What are the expectations in your community and in your culture?
- What ethics do you want to project?
- What do you expect or anticipate as a response from your audience?
- What are the personality traits of your audience and yourself?

Direct Pattern: Typically, the direct pattern is used for good news and is broken into three or four paragraphs.

- First paragraph contains the main point or reason for the communication. Start with the good news. You may begin with an introduction: My name is John Doe, and I am writing to….
- Second paragraph offers the explanation for the good news. You will explain the good news and offer instructions or information that the audience may need. Write this section clearly and briefly. Avoid long sentence constructions, and if there are lists of directions, you may consider prioritizing them in a list of 1); 2); etc.
- Final paragraph will be the contact information and the ending in good will. You might recap some of the information.

Indirect Pattern: This organization is used for bad news. Remember to consider both the situation and context before writing the bad news communication. It is imperative that you avoid passive constructions in this type of letter.

- First paragraph is typically where you will find a buffer. Buffer paragraphs are meant to soften the bad news. In this paragraph, you may start with an introduction. In the buffer, you will provide a context for the subject; however, you should never mislead your audience into thinking that you are going to give them the good news. In most instances, after you provide the context, you should give the purpose of the letter and follow with the reason. Your tone should always remain professional. Not all scholars are in agreement with including a buffer paragraph, and

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¹ Kitty O Locker “Factors in reader responses to Negative Letters: Experimental Evidence for Changing What We Teach.”
some suggest that the situation should be considered first. Below is a list of possible reasons to use the buffer.

1. To a person or culture who values harmony.
2. When a negative reaction could be harmful.
3. When the buffer can serve another purpose besides delaying the negative information.
4. Give the reason before the bad news and make the reasons significant. If you provide a poor reason, you could create a loop hole.

- You should follow the bad news and reason with any further explanation and an alternative or compromise. Not all people read on the same level, so you should write positively, clearly, and briefly.
- Ending in good will is difficult; especially in this type of letter where you may have rejected someone’s application for credit or employment. Try to avoid common platitudes of “if we can be of further service to you.” Individualize your endings.