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BUSINESS WRITING

With Heart

How to Build
Great Work Relationships
One Message at a Time



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CHAPTER I

Add Heart to Your Writing One Message at a Time



I teach business writing to people at all levels in organizations, from vice presidents to mechanics, from auditors to security officers. When security managers and officers attend classes, they stand out—not just for their calm, commanding presence but also for the way they communicate. They write and say things like:

Request denied.

Negative.

Cut the fluff. I want the facts.

They don't have to like it. They just have to do it.

When I suggest a more positive approach, they often announce, "I'm ex-military. This is the way we communicate." If another ex-military individual is in the room, that person nods agreement.

When ex-military individuals communicate with others like them, pronouncements like "Request denied" are likely to be clear, effective, and familiar. But when these individuals communicate beyond their group—for instance, to the assistant in accounting or the intern in public

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relations—“Request denied” comes across as brusque and machine-like—not a communication that builds relationships.

Like the ex-military who attend my writing classes, you may say at one time or another, “This is the way I communicate.” But is your way effective? Does it build relationships? Bring in business? Develop new employees? Inspire commitment?

Does it have heart?

My guess is that if you are reading this chapter, you have acknowledged a need to improve the way you communicate. Maybe you have been told you need to change your tone, or you want to help others make changes. You have already moved from “This is the way I communicate” to “How can I communicate better to build business relationships?”

Luckily, for those who want to be better at building relationships through writing, the process of adding heart to your writing is not difficult, as this chapter reveals. The process involves using positive, relationship-building language; having positive intent; and warming up messages so they don’t sound abrupt or bureaucratic.

Use Positive, Relationship-Building Language

A first step is to use words that make others feel acknowledged, understood, respected, and valued. Once you start thinking about positive language, it is easy to recognize it. In each of these pairs, which sentence builds relationships?

You can’t use the conference room until my meeting ends.

As soon as we wrap up the meeting, the room is yours.

What could make this decision more workable for you?

I don’t care if you like it. Make it work.

Adding Heart =

Adding relationship-building language, having positive intent, and warming up the message.

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You are a day late for the special promotional pricing. Sorry.

I will review our pricing to make sure you are getting the best price possible.

The relationship-damaging sentences are obvious when you pay attention to them. “You can’t use the conference room” focuses on what you *can’t* do—until *my* meeting ends. (It’s all about me, right?) “I don’t care if you like it” says “I don’t care about you.” “You are a day late” says “Loser!”

Each of the other sentences in the pairs supports the business relationship by communicating positively and indicating that the reader is important. The sentences say or imply “The room is yours,” “This decision can be more workable for you,” and “You are getting the best price possible.”

The table of Relationship-Busting Statements vs. Relationship-Building Statements provides more comparisons. The relationship-busting statements use negative words and phrases: *no, cut, crap, complaining, wait, cannot, problems, confusion, misunderstood, and a lot to be desired.*

The relationship-building sentences focus on the positive with these words: *yes, wish, possible, let’s, thank you, sharing, be glad to, first thing, your concerns, just, like to, opportunity, let you know, clarify, creative, fresh, ways to strengthen, and support.*

An easy first step to creating a relationship-building message is to eliminate words with negative connotations. Whenever possible, cut negative words and phrases such as these:

absence	hesitate	no idea
complaint	impossible	no way
confusion	late	problem
deny	limited	refuse
difficult	loss	stupid
fail to	misunderstand	unreasonable

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Relationship-Busting Statements	vs.	Relationship-Building Statements
Negative. Request denied. The answer is no.		I would like to say yes—let me explain why I can't. I wish that were possible. Here's what I <i>can</i> say yes to.
Cut the crap.		Let's focus on the facts.
You don't have to like it. Just do it.		Let me explain why this task is required.
We received your letter complaining about our service.		Thank you for sharing your comments on our service.
You will have to wait. I cannot meet to discuss your problems until Monday morning.		I will be glad to meet with you first thing Monday morning to discuss your concerns.
You cannot open an account with such a small deposit.		It takes just \$100 to open your account.
Some of you have expressed confusion over our policy on telecommuting.		I would like to take the opportunity to let you know about our policy on telecommuting.
You misunderstood what I said in my email.		Let me clarify what I meant in my email.
Your ideas are interesting, but your methodology leaves a lot to be desired.		Your ideas are interesting—very creative and fresh. Let's talk about ways to strengthen your methodology to support your ideas.

Use positive words to create a positive feeling, even when conveying bad news. This approach is akin to the “sandwich method,” which involves communicating the bad-news meat of the message between two positive layers. When used sincerely (not sarcastically), positive language expresses your positive intent like a handshake and a smile.

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Maintain strong business relationships by adding these positive words to your messages:

admire	glad	pleased to
an honor	grateful	pleasure
appreciate	gratified	profit
assist you	happy	satisfied
benefit	happy to	saving
brilliant	help you	terrific
delighted	inspire	thank you
enjoy	joy	thoughtful
feel free	like to	understanding
gain	looking forward	value
generous	please	welcome

Have a Positive Intent

Positive words make a big difference in the tone of a message. But they aren't everything. As a writer, you also have to have positive intent, the desire to communicate positively with your customer, vendor, employee, manager, member, client, patient, or other reader.

I received this brief message from someone I will call Amelia, who unsubscribed from my free e-newsletter: "I teach a professional writing class at work, and I thought this newsletter would give me additional tips or writing skills we were not already teaching. It didn't." Do you think Amelia had positive intent? Was her desire to communicate positively with me, a stranger and fellow writing teacher?

Consider these situations: Imagine you were out shopping in a boutique. If you did not find anything you wanted to purchase, would you say to the shop owner as you left, "I thought I could find something unique to buy here, but I could not"? If you decided not to eat at a restaurant after reviewing the menu in the entrance, would you say, "Sorry. Nothing sounds good on your menu" before you walked away? Of course not!

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We can't know what Amelia's intent was. She may not have realized that her comment would come to me, the writer of the newsletter. Nevertheless, I experienced the comment as a putdown. In the small world of business writing teachers, my potential relationship with Amelia ended before it could develop.

Compare Amelia's comment to one from someone named Beverly, who also unsubscribed from the newsletter: "I'm just trying to reduce the amount of email I get. I can read Lynn's excellent material on her blog. Thanks."

Beverly's positive intent came through in the words *excellent* and *thanks*.

Think about your intent, your purpose in writing, before you write. Be sure to consider your overall, big-picture purpose. For example, imagine you received a request for information from a customer within your organization or outside it. Your purpose in replying would be to supply the information requested. But your larger purpose would probably be to maintain or enhance the relationship and pave the way for future business.

The way you think of your purpose affects the way you write your message. A message whose purpose is merely to respond to a request has a different approach and feeling from one that is to maintain or enhance the relationship.

Let's say you are responding to an unreasonable complaint. Although your purpose in writing may be simply to manage the situation, your larger goal is probably to maintain a good long-term business relationship or at least to protect your company's reputation and your own.

At all times, strive to focus on the big picture, the higher goal, and the long term when you write. While it might feel good to put down or get the best of another person in writing, resist that temptation. You cannot know when having a good relationship with that person would benefit a current project, your company, or your career.

Let me tell you about a time that I considered my purpose—and then wrote a different message.

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I was teaching Business Communications for Leaders in the MBA program at University of Washington–Bothell. The first assignment, a one-minute self-introduction, was due on Thursday night. On Thursday morning I started my day with this message in my email inbox, from Steve Teixeira, a student in the class and a talented communicator:

Hi Lynn,

If it's okay with you, I'm planning to deviate slightly from the "one-minute introduction" assignment tomorrow. I plan to briefly introduce myself and then deliver a mini-speech on communication. I'm trying to challenge myself to engage and motivate but to also be extremely brief. I've rehearsed it down to under a minute as long as I don't flub it.

Steve

I was checking my email while drinking my first cup of tea. Because I was not completely awake yet, I drafted a response that sounded something like this:

Hi, Steve. The assignment is a one-minute self-introduction so that the class and I can get to know you. Please do not deviate from that assignment. You can use the topic of communication for one of the later assignments.

Lynn

Before I clicked Send, I had the good sense to think about my intent. Was I hoping to prove a point? No, I didn't think so. Did I want to be sure the class assignments were done *my* way, the way I had planned? I wasn't sure. Did I want to frustrate one of the class's informal leaders by denying his first request? No, that would be disastrous during the first week of classes. Did I want to stifle creativity? No, definitely not.

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Here is the email I sent to Steve after I realized my purpose was to get off to a good start with the class and to encourage creativity and initiative:

Steve, thanks for asking about your plan. In response, I believe I have an idea that meets your needs and the expectations of the class.

Do the required 1-minute introduction. Then when everyone is finished, do the introduction you already prepared that challenges you to engage and motivate. Doing both will satisfy the requirements of the class and your desire to stretch.

Giving only your hybrid introduction wouldn't meet the expectations or needs of your audience. The reason is that we want to learn more about you. And we are expecting and prepared to give you feedback, with specific criteria, on a one-minute personal introduction.

So I invite you to do both tonight. However, if you want to give a motivating speech on communication, that would be a perfect topic for next week's presentation to inform or explain.

I look forward to being in your audience.

Lynn

Steve gave both presentations in class. When I asked him later how he had felt about my response to his email, he said that it was fine and made perfect sense to him.

Although the first message I drafted was not a disaster, it wasn't a relationship builder. It contained no positive, supportive language, and it did not communicate a positive intent. In contrast, the message I did send communicated appreciation, a solution, an invitation, and anticipation with words such as *thanks*, *meets your needs*, *engage and motivate*, *satisfy*, *invite*, *perfect*, and *look forward*.

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I am so happy I woke up enough to recognize my real purpose in writing! I hope you too will recognize your larger purpose in each message and communicate positively with your readers. If your experience is like mine, your efforts will lead to near-term positive outcomes and long-term solid relationships.

Warm Up Your Messages

People who attend business writing classes often tell me they have been accused of being abrupt in their messages, specifically in their emails. They say their style is to get to the point, but other people view them as abrupt.

If you have a job or your own business, you work against deadlines. You have to write quickly, even when the documents and messages are complex and somewhat delicate. It would not be surprising if you, like the people who attend my writing classes, were to come across as abrupt at times when you thought you were simply being efficient. This situation is especially common in email.

Coming across as brusque is a liability when it comes to building relationships. Perceived gruffness can stretch out the time it takes people to realize that you are a fine person, just abrupt. When a sensitive message comes across as brusque, it can take hours, days, or weeks to resolve misunderstandings, heal hurt feelings, and rebuild relationships.

Apply these simple ways to warm up your writing and reduce the risk of seeming abrupt:

In an email, text message, or note, include a greeting. According to my survey on business writing and relationships, 45 percent of people prefer that the emails they receive (individual messages, not group emails) include a greeting and their name; 49 percent don't care. Many respondents commented that an initial email should include a greeting, but when email becomes a back-and-forth discussion, the greeting can be dropped. I agree with that view.

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Which of these greetings suit you and your messages?

Hello, Tonya.

Hi David.

Good morning, Dr. Bryne.

Greetings, Fran!

Greetings, team.

Dear Brigitte,

Use the person's name in your message. It may seem sufficient to write “See you next week.” But when you include the person's name in the sentence (“See you next week, Sidney”), you acknowledge him or her as an individual. It's a simple gesture that can change the feeling from curt to considerate.

Use your own first name. In email, people often use automatic signatures with their full name. Others use no name at all—they just end the message. Whether you use a full signature or not, type your first name at the end of your message. Using your first name warms up the message, creating a connection between you and the reader. Note: Another way to include your first name is through a screenshot of your handwritten first name, which you can add to your automatic signature block.

Expand on fragments and very short sentences to avoid sounding cold or sarcastic. Even “Thanks” or “Thanks a lot” can sound sarcastic, especially in delicate messages. Instead, write “Thanks for handling this. I really appreciate it.” Rather than “See me” or “We need to talk,” write “Let's talk soon. I'd like to hear your thoughts on this question.”

Include words and phrases that communicate warmth and connection. Any message without positive language can seem cold and abrupt. Use the words and phrases listed earlier in this chapter for a warmer tone.

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Avoid cold, canned language. Some phrases, such as “I look forward to meeting you,” may be canned, but they aren’t cold. Others are canned *and* cold, for example, “Thank you in advance for your cooperation in this matter.” To warm up your messages, write as though the reader is a friend or valued colleague, with statements like these: “I appreciate your help, Jonas” and “Thanks so much for considering this request.”

Be explicit when you are agreeing with the person. In a quick exchange of messages, you may be tempted to write a simple sentence repeating what the other person has already written. But this action may lead your reader to think *That’s exactly what I said!* To avoid such a response, write, for example, “I agree that Auda is great for the job” (rather than just “Auda is great for the job”). That way, you avert this response: “Did he even read what I wrote? I was the one who recommended her!”

Read your message aloud—exactly as it is on the screen or page—without adding warmth in your voice. Reading aloud helps you recognize how your writing may sound to others. You may have crisply stated a fact when you wrote “Handling the Gordon account is your responsibility.” Reading it aloud, though, you may notice a hint of criticism or doom that you did not intend. Adding a phrase such as “I’m very glad,” if appropriate, at the beginning of the sentence may eliminate that hint.

Avoid the words *immediately* and *now* when you are writing with a request or assigning a task. Your reader may have several other immediate jobs, and your request may seem pushy and unthinking, even if you are the boss or owner. If a task must be done immediately, phone, text, or email to ask whether the other person is available. Assume that the other person is as busy as you—even busier.

Think of your reader as a friend. Often gruffness is accidental. But sometimes it comes across because of the writer’s underlying feeling

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of resentment or irritation. So make the reader your friend, at least while you are writing.

In business writing classes, participants sometimes write their case study assignments to imaginary readers. They creatively write “Dear Pain in the Neck” and “Dear Constant Complainer.” I advise them to try the opposite: “Dear Favorite Coworker” and “Dear Person Who Pays My Generous Salary.” Making that positive shift, changing your reader to your dear friend or respected associate, helps you glow rather than glower. It helps you choose language that comes across as warm rather than chilly.

Use exclamation points—sparingly. Exclamation points can do a wonderful job of expressing warmth and enthusiasm. They communicate the voice inflections you would likely use if you were talking on the phone or meeting in person. Compare these examples:

I appreciate your hard work.	I appreciate your hard work!
Wonderful.	Wonderful!
See you in Vegas.	See you in Vegas!
Thanks, Yvette.	Thanks, Yvette!
Welcome, Sales Team.	Welcome, Sales Team!

The secret to using exclamation points is restraint. If you pile on several exclamation points in a row (!!!), or use them in every other sentence, you run the risk of coming across like an adolescent girl, or as *Chicago Tribune* writer Rex Huppke remarked, “an overcaffeinated glee club.”

Exclamation points help to build relationships when they express positive emotions, not rude commands. If you catch yourself typing “I need it now!” you might want to breathe slowly and deeply and think again about communicating with positive intent.

Start and end with a smile. Before you click Send or Print, make sure your message starts and ends positively.

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Do Smiley Faces Communicate Heart?

Speaking of smiles, you may have noticed that smiley faces (such as 😊) did not appear in my list of ways to warm up a message. I encourage choosing the right words to bring a smile to a communication.

Nevertheless, I recognize that smiley faces do warm up emails and other online messages. That's their whole reason for being. The question is: Do readers use and approve of them? Below is part of a discussion that took place on my Business Writing blog.

Margaret Elwood, a technical training supervisor, uses smiley faces purposefully, as she explained:

I use smiley faces occasionally in internal email messages to clarify and add warmth to the tone. In our company we have typically great longevity of employment, and the strength of my relationships with other employees simply helps me get my job done efficiently and well. While I don't rely on emoticons, I use them now and then when writing a coworker, because I think they confirm my friendly tone in case there is any question of it. I also use them—sparingly—in response to a message that has used them liberally, so that my response does not appear unfriendly by contrast.

A reader named Tony voiced a similar view: “In a business environment, when discussing a difficult issue via email, the emoticon conveys that while you may be looking for resolution to the issue, you are not seriously upset about it.” Tony used the example of reminding an employee who has forgotten to do something: “You send them the reminder to get resolution. You include the smiley face. Without the smiley face or some additional wording that may be awkward, they might think that you are upset about their forgetfulness.”

John, another reader, disagreed: “I believe that the smiley face can mean too many things. A smiley could mean the writer wants resolution on a point but is not upset, a phrase was meant to be humorous,

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an expression of warmth and candor, a clue that something is meant to be a sarcastic or ironic remark, a magnification of an emotion expressed in the sentence, or a mark to indicate that a phrase is something for one to ponder or think about. To me, this is becoming too much for one poor smiley face to do.”

I agree with John that the smiley face has been stretched thin with the many expectations placed upon it. Except in rare, informal situations, I prefer words to the smiley face and other emoticons. These words express a range of sentiments:

I am glad.	I was disappointed.
I am happy.	I was devastated.
I'm excited.	I am sad about it.
I'm so pleased.	I'm stressed out.
I am proud.	I'm satisfied.
Terrific news!	I'm anxious.
That's a brilliant idea!	I am not at all upset.
I agree completely.	I am being sarcastic.
You are wonderful.	I am serious.
You are the best.	I mean it.
Thanks so much!	I'm exhausted.
I'm kidding.	I'm overwhelmed.
I'm joking.	I'm bored.
I'm being silly.	I like it.
How frustrating!	I love it.
What a pain!	I love it!
I hated it.	

Were all of those clear? Yes. Would the smiley face, frowning face, or another emoticon have been as clear? Probably not.

Regarding the decision to introduce a smiley face or another emoticon in an email, I offer the suggestion of a woman who attended one of my business writing classes: “Don't use a smiley face in a message to a client

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or customer until the person uses one in a message to you. That way you will know the person likes smiley faces too.” I recommend applying that good advice to anyone you need to impress as a professional—hiring managers, CEOs, donors, citizens, patrons, and others.

If you do use smiley faces, use them frugally, never more than one per message. And do not use a smiley face as a regular sign-off. Heather, who posted to the Business Writing blog, provided a reason for this guideline: “I have a team leader who uses :o) all of the time, in every single email I have received from her. It loses its meaning if you overuse it and can often come off as condescending when used during an email discussion or disagreement.”

Does XOXO Communicate Warmth?

XOXO radiates huggy-kissy warmth, which makes its use too intimate for nearly all business messages. Because the *x* stands for kisses, the *o* for hugs, you should use them only rarely and only with people you kiss and hug when you see them in person—or you would kiss and hug if you had the opportunity to see them. (Talk to your human resources department before taking such a step!) As I was finishing this book, *x*'s and *o*'s in various combinations were juicily appearing, mostly in women's messages. Citing researchers at Georgia Tech, Carnegie Mellon, and Stanford, authors Jessica Bennett and Rachel Simmons wrote in *The Atlantic*, “Among Twitter users, 11 percent of women *xo* in tweets, compared with only 2.5 percent of men.”

For their article “Kisses and Hugs in the Office,” Bennett and Simmons asked me to speculate why people added *x*'s and *o*'s to their business messages. They captured me saying, “It's much faster to type the four-stroke *xxoo* than ‘With warm wishes’ followed by a comma.” True, but don't do it for that reason! Only use *x*'s and *o*'s in your messages to business associates who are very dear friends or becoming dear friends. If your messages are likely to be forwarded, uploaded, or subpoenaed, stick with “Warm wishes.” Do not make *xxoo* part of your

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automatic signature, or everyone will be talking about you—not in the way you want.

Is It Possible to Change Your Writing Style?

This chapter began with a reference to ex-military individuals whose style is brusque, probably through their training and experience, perhaps through natural inclination. Is it possible for them to change their writing to create and nurture business relationships? Is it possible for you, whatever your communication style, to build success by communicating your respect and positive intent in every business message?

The answer to both questions is yes! Just remember these points from the chapter, and incorporate them into your daily business messages:

- Use positive, relationship-building language—words and phrases such as *pleased*, *opportunity*, *happy to*, *thank you*, and *looking forward*.
- Have a positive intent in each message. Think not only of the message's practical purpose, such as to respond to a request. Think also of your overall purpose, for example, to establish and sustain a relationship with the reader.
- Warm up your messages simply, by using a greeting, your reader's name, and your own first name. Avoid canned language that comes across as cold. Think of your reader as a friend.

You *can* change your writing style and enhance your work relationships—one message at a time.

Personal Reflection

- ▶ Do you have business relationships you might strengthen by considering your true, larger purpose when you write?
- ▶ Can you afford taking time to add positive language to your messages before you click Print or Send? Can you afford *not* to?

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Next Step

- ▶ Choose a message you sent recently. It may be a letter, an email, or a memo. Look for opportunities in it where you might have added positive language and warmed up the message.