

STRATEGIES FOR THE “YOU APPROACH”

In workplace writing, a key goal is to maintain friendly relations with readers, even under conditions of tension, frustration, and strife. The “You Approach” is a set of five strategies that workplace writers can use to maintain or restore friendly relations with readers and to minimize their sense of threat in adverse business situations in which they might resist the message you’re delivering in your document.

Table 1 lists the five strategies of the “You Approach.”

Table 1: Five Strategies of the “You Approach”

1.	Write from the reader’s perspective.
2.	Anticipate and answer all questions that your readers are likely to have about the situation.
3.	Use personal pronouns.
4.	Be courteous, tactful, and respectful, especially at the end of memos, email, and letters.
5.	Cushion the blow for readers in “bad news” letters by organizing material strategically, posing questions, and using conditionals.

1. Write From the Reader’s Perspective

Focus on the reader’s situation, not on your own situation. Show that you understand the reader’s position and perspective. For example, imagine that you have just arrived to the first day of a writing course. Your instructor is about to speak. Which of these opening lines would appeal to you the most?

- Welcome to a course that I’ve enjoyed teaching here for the past eight years.
- I’m glad you’ve decided to take this course, because it could make a tremendous difference in your ability to succeed in your chosen career.

The first line takes a “Me Approach.” It centers on what is important to the instructor, not on what new students would find meaningful. The second line takes the “You Approach,” because it focuses on what matters to the students.

Example: A student intern worked at RDI, a prestigious research institute near her university. When she received the following memo from her supervisor, she felt hurt and insulted. Read the memo and consider why she reacted so negatively to the memo.

Anywhere University
Research and Development Institute

To: RDI Student Employees
From: RDI Student Supervisors
Date: November 10, 2007
Re: Attendance at RDI Staff Meetings

I am asking that you all refrain from attending RDI staff meetings in the future in order to provide coverage for permanent fulltime RDI staff members while they are busy attending RDI staff meetings (this coverage could take the form of answering phones or continuing with your regular work assignments as your supervisor determines). Let me assure you that, although you are valued employees of the Institute, the RDI staff meetings are really only relevant and necessary to members of the permanent staff, for whom the success of the RDI is of primary concern. I know that some of you enjoy attending these meetings and find them interesting, but remind you that you have the privilege of being students first and foremost.

Thank you for your understanding and cooperation.

This memo violated the “You Approach” by not considering the perspective of its target readers, the student interns. From the interns’ point of view, attending the RDI meetings was important, because it became an opportunity to learn more about RDI, to apply that knowledge to their work at RDI, and in some cases, to offer their own input to RDI decision making. Unfortunately, this memo approaches the interns, instead, as being far less significant and valued to the organization than the regular paid staff.

Can you imagine ways in which this organization could have approached the interns differently in this situation and in this memo, so that the interns would continue to feel important and valued by the organization?

2. Anticipate and Answer all Possible Reader Questions

Ideally, each workplace document would be self-sufficient with the writer anticipating in advance and then answering in the document all questions that the target readers might have about the topic. One reason is that it is common courtesy to provide readers with all of the information they'll need to act on the basis of your document – for example, to make a decision or to include something new in their schedule. Another reason is that few writers have enough time to field questions after the distribution of their document. Even though a key goal of workplace writing is to produce concise, focused documents, an equally important goal is to provide enough information to eliminate the need for your readers to email, fax, call, or meet with you with questions about the document.

For example, imagine that you are a new entry-level employee at a bank and share an office with twelve other employees. You work in a tiny cubicle where you keep all of your paperwork, files, and books. One morning, the following memo arrives. What questions would you still have in this situation after reading this memo?

TRANSACTION BANK

TO: Employees in Room 243
FROM: George Walters, Division Manager
DATE: June 25, 2007

Please note that all personal belongings must be removed from Room 243 before the end of July. Early in August, the Room 243 wing will be demolished.

Thank you for your cooperation.

You might have these questions:

- Why is our wing being demolished?
- When, exactly, do I need to remove my belongings?
- Where, exactly, will I be doing my work next? Where can I move (or store) my belongings?

Example: You are a tenant in an apartment building that suffers consistently from roach infestation. You own two cats and work full time at a downtown firm. One morning, you find this notice under your door. What questions would you have about this situation after reading the notice?

NOTICE TO TENANTS

Regency Exterminating will treat every apartment in the building again on Wednesday, September 5, 2007 beginning at 1 a.m. Please remove your pets, if any, from the building for the day (birds and fish are most at risk).

In the future, to avoid a problem with roaches and other unattractive creatures, we ask that you take the following precautions:

- DO NOT LEAVE FOOD ON COUNTERS OR IN SINK.
- KEEP GARBAGE IN PLASTIC BAGS, SECURELY FASTENED.
- CLEAN UP FOOD AND DRINK SPILLS PROMPTLY.
- REPORT ROACHES TO US, IMMEDIATELY (261-0156).

Because of the use of all caps in the final list, you might feel as if the writer is yelling at you and blaming you for the problem. This use of all caps, alone, is very unfortunate and violates the “You Approach”! But beyond that problem, here are some questions you might have, as a reader, after looking at the notice:

- Does the word “again” in the first line mean that previous attempts to exterminate the building were unsuccessful? Why do they think that this attempt will be more successful?
- Do I really have to leave the building at 1 a.m.? [That was probably a typo in the notice – be sure to proofread carefully!]
- Do I need to prepare the kitchen in any way – maybe by removing dishes, etc. from the counters or by removing pet dishes from the floors?
- I see that birds and fish are most at risk: What about cats? Are they at great risk too? How so? What might happen to them?
- Where can I take my cats? I can’t take them to work. And when can I bring them back safely to the apartment?
- Would it be safe just to leave the cats in the bedroom, close the door, and put up a note that asks the exterminators not to treat the bedroom?
- When can I return to the apartment?
- Once I return, can I wash the floors and other locations? Will I need to take any precautions to protect my health and that of my pets?

Clearly, this notice is likely to lead to reader questions that are far from trivial. That document, alone, as is, therefore does not take a “You Approach” and is far from being fully useful to its target readers.

3. Use Personal Pronouns

Your choice of pronouns can influence the tone you create in your document. If you choose the pronouns “it” and “one,” or don’t use pronouns at all, you tend to create a more formal tone, as in these examples:

It is important to choose a major in the junior year.
One should choose one’s major in the junior year.

If you choose the pronouns “you,” “your,” “yours,” “I,” “me,” “my,” and “mine,” you tend to create a more informal tone, as in these examples:

You should choose a major in your junior year.
I hope you will choose a major in your junior year.

The pronouns “we,” “us,” “our,” and “ours” tend to create a tone that is in-between, a bit formal, but also a bit informal.

We want all juniors to declare a major.
Our new rule is for all juniors to declare a major.

Often in professional documents, if you use more pronouns from the informal end of the continuum, your documents will tend to be more user-friendly and pleasant in tone and produce more positive reactions from your readers. Note how this strategy works in the opening and closing paragraphs of a letter written by the vice-president of a student organization to prospective new members (the underlines are added to the example to point out where the pronouns are located).

<opening paragraph of the letter>

Please allow me to take a small portion of your time to inform you about a new and exciting organization for students in our majors. This new organization began last semester...

<closing paragraph of the letter>

Our group is open to any of you who would like to become active in your majors. Our next meeting is Monday, February 3 in the Master Auditorium at 5 p.m. We will have regular meetings once very two weeks at this time and place. Get involved – We need you!

In another example, a college catalog includes the following two descriptions of the departments of sociology and Italian. Which description would appeal more to students trying to decide on a major, and why?

Department of Sociology

Sociology has been defined as the science of society, and most of us in the department do see ourselves as applying and encouraging students to apply the scientific method to the analysis of groups and individuals as groups. We look and encourage students to look at the way in which income, occupation, and education; ethnicity, race, and culture; family and kinship; power and authority; organizational context and a variety of other factors influence individual and group behavior.

Some of us theorize about how societies persist and change; some of us use our findings in an effort to improve society; some of us are concerned with workaday applications. But these interests are not independent. We are all involved in one degree or another in all of them.

Department of Italian

The department offers courses in elementary language study to small groups of students, with a language laboratory to augment the work of the classroom. For those who have some knowledge of the language, there are intermediate and advanced courses in the language arts, composition, conversation, and stylistics. They can lead to specialization in the department program, which includes courses in the various periods of Italian literature, Italian culture, and advanced language. The department offers, as well, courses in English on various aspects of Italian culture, such as politics, literature, and cinema, and the Italian-American experience. Courses range from the traditional lecture course to the small seminar on a particular topic. The department also offers courses leading toward certification for the teaching of Italian in secondary schools.

If you find the Department of Sociology description more appealing, it could be because it includes many personal pronouns, including many instances of “us” and “we.” These pronouns create a sense of community and humanity so that you can almost picture a group of unified faculty members who are enthusiastic about what they do and mutually supportive. The Department of Italian description, in contrast, seems colder and more distinct, perhaps because of the absence of personal pronouns. Note how it begins with “The department” instead of “We.” Note, too, the repetition of “The department” throughout the description.

On the other hand, you might have found the Department of Italian description more appealing because its content reflects concerns that many college students share, whereas the Department of Sociology description provides content that might interest specialists in that field instead of undergraduate students.

The best way to revise these two descriptions would be to (1) add more content to the Department of Sociology description that is meaningful and useful to readers and (2) add more personal pronouns (such as “we” and “you”) to the Department of Italian description, so that its tone becomes more informal and therefore more inviting to readers.

4. Be Courteous, Tactful, and Respectful to Readers, Especially at the End of Memos, Emails, and Letters

Critical to the “You Approach” is the need to be respectful of target readers, despite the circumstances. If your readers suspect, even for a second, that you are being insulting or condescending – or that you are angry at them – they’ll feel alienated from your message.

At the very least, write something kind like “Thank you,” “Please let me know if you have questions,” or “I look forward to hearing from you soon” at the end of a business letter, email message, or memo. Doing so will end your document on a positive note, which will encourage your readers to be at least somewhat receptive to the idea of doing more business and keeping good relations with you.

5. Cushion the Blow for Readers in “Bad News” Messages

In Table 2, you’ll see two columns that list different purposes of business letters. What is common about the purposes in the left column and what is common about the purposes in the right column?

Table 2: Different Types of Business Letters

Congratulate	Complain
Accept	Reject
Instruct	Inquire
Praise	Sell an idea
Inform	Sell a product

Each type of purpose in the left column delivers either a positive or neutral message to the reader and you wouldn't necessarily expect the reader to resist those messages. In contrast, each purpose in the right column either delivers a negative message to the reader or asks the reader to do something (such as answer a question or make a decision). You might expect readers to resist the messages of the right column or to resist doing what is requested of them.

Letters with purposes such as those listed in the left column – those that are less likely to result in reader resistance – are sometimes called “Good News Letters.” Letters with purposes such as those listed in the right column – those that are more likely to result in some reader resistance – are sometimes called “Bad News Letters.”

Depending on whether you're writing a “Good News Letter” or a “Bad News Letter,” you will find it strategic and persuasive to organize your letter in a certain way. As you can see in Table 3, if you're writing a “Good News Letter,” such as a letter accepting a student to a university degree program, you might begin the letter with the context of the situation (that is, who you are and why you are writing) and the “good news.” In the second paragraph of that letter, you could include details of the situation, and then you could close with some kind words to maintain good relations with your reader.

However, if you're writing a “Bad News Letter,” such as a letter rejecting a job applicant, you wouldn't begin with the “bad news” (the rejection). Instead, you would cushion the blow for the reader by starting out the letter with the context of the situation and some kind and positive words. You would reveal the “bad news” later in the letter, perhaps in the second or third paragraph, and then close in a kind way in an attempt to restore or maintain good relations with the reader.

Table 3: Different Organization of “Good News Letters” and “Bad News Letters”

“Good News Letter”	“Bad News Letter”
Begin with the context and good news	Begin with the context and kind words
Provide details in middle paragraphs	Deliver the “bad news” in the middle paragraph
Close in a kind way	Close in a kind way

For example, here is a letter of complaint that follows the appropriate organization for a “Bad News Letter.”

732 S. Brookline Avenue
Pittsburgh, PA 15213
January 30, 2007

Mr. Thomas Griswold
Henry Griswold & Co., Inc.
3222 Holly Road
San Francisco, CA 94109

Dear Mr. Griswold,

In January of 2005, I entrusted your firm with \$50,000 for you to invest for me in one unit of the Creole Oil Private Drilling Fund as a five year tax shelter. Today I saw in the *Wall Street Journal* that Creole’s stock was selling at only \$4.25 a share. I was expecting to see that the stock was still selling at \$50,000 a share since you promised that this stock was a no-risk tax shelter.

I understand from my phone conversation with your secretary that your counseling schedule is busy, but I would really like to find out what has happened. Could you please give me an explanation as to how I could have lost all this money?

As this year’s deadline for filing income taxes approaches, I would like to clarify this problem so that I may reinvest my money into your new real estate tax shelter, which you have been mentioning in your new 2007 tax reform seminars. I’m sure that you understand how I feel about my \$50,000 loss, and will respond as soon as possible so that we can do more business together.

Thank you for your attention.

Sincerely,

Jack M. Olsen

Notice the following “You Approach” strategies at work in this letter:

- The letter is organized like a “bad news letter” – the writer provides the context and details in the first paragraph, makes the request in the second paragraph, and finishes with a kind sentence.
- In paragraph two, the writer shows that he understands the reader’s perspective, that the reader must be busy. With this gesture of empathy, the

writer is expressing good will toward the reader and is trying to maintain good relations with the reader. Similarly, in the third paragraph, the reader is asked to empathize with the writer’s perspective, as well.

- The writer uses many personal pronouns throughout the letter, especially “I” and “you,” which has the effect of personalizing the letter and creating an informal, user-friendly tone.

Added Bonuses! Using Conditionals and Posing Questions:

In addition to organizing business letters strategically according to whether they report “good news” or “bad news,” writers can soften negative messages by using certain conditionals in business correspondence. Table 4 lists the conditionals that work well to “cushion the blow” in “bad news letters,” as well as conditionals (and verbs) that are especially harsh and inappropriate for these kinds of letters.

Table 4: Conditionals to Use and Avoid

Use these conditionals	Avoid these conditionals
Can, could May, might Would	Should Must

Asking questions is another strategy that helps soften the tone of a “bad news letter.” In the “bad news letter” that Jack Olsen wrote to Thomas Griswold, notice the following:

- In paragraphs two and three, the writer uses the conditionals “would,” “could,” and “may” to cushion the blow of the message.
- In paragraph two, the writer also uses a question to create an effect of goodwill and friendship.

How “You Approach” Strategies Can Result in Positive or Negative Reader Responses

Imagine that it is February and you have just decided to apply to a graduate program. You write to seven graduate schools to request information about their programs and especially about possible financial support. The following three letters arrive and you find yourself responding differently to each one. Read the three letters, then rank them according to which one alienates you the most, which one alienates you a bit less, and which one pleases you the most.

Letter 1 – from Midwestern University

Dear Applicant:

Thank you for your letter expressing interest in our graduate program in Biology. I hope you will forgive my using this form letter as our first communication, but budget limitations and an extraordinary number of inquiries have forced me to adopt this impersonal mode.

I am enclosing a copy of the Guidelines to Graduate Studies in Biology and a brochure describing the types of financial assistance available to graduate students. If you are interested in applying for an Assistantship, a Department Service Assistantship, or a University Fellowship, please fill out the appropriate forms and send them to me.

Please be reminded that the Graduate Committee will not consider your application until you have submitted all the required information.

If you have any questions that have not been taken care of by the enclosed information, please do not hesitate to write me. If you wish a personal interview, please call Ms. Esther Seeger, (442) 677-9883 and arrange one during my office hours. I shall be happy to correspond with you or talk with you personally.

Sincerely,

George J. Hendrick
Director of Graduate Studies

Letter 2 – from Southwestern University

Dear Ms. Jones,

Thank you for your inquiry about our PhD in Biology. I am enclosing a brochure describing our program in some detail. I hope it answers at least all of your larger questions. Feel free to contact me about those it does not answer.

I am also sending you other material you may find helpful. If you apply to the Graduate School, please send me a note letting me know that you applied and which semester you anticipate attending.

If I can be of assistance, please let me know.

Sincerely,

Peter Winslow
Director of Graduate Studies in
Biology

Letter 3 – from Ivy League University

Dear Ms. Jones,

Thank you for your inquiry concerning graduate studies in Biology at Ivy League University.

Enclosed are applications and information requested. However, the deadline for receiving financial aid applications is long past and considerations for such aid for the next academic year are already in progress. Regrettably, we have far more deserving applicants than we have funds to dispense.

Sincerely yours,

Mrs. Gail Bates
Assistant to the Director of Graduate
Admissions and Awards

Even though responses can vary to these letters and all responses are valid, *Letter 3 from Ivy League University* might have alienated you the most for the following reasons:

- The tone of the letter borders on being condescending, insulting, and rude. In a way, this letter is rejecting Ms. Jones even before she applied formally to the program. The letter certainly does little to build or maintain good relations with the reader. In fact, it gives the impression that the reader can have no future relationship with the university and should not even bother applying.
- Notice the lack of personal pronouns in the first line of the second paragraph: “Enclosed are applications and information requested.” To create a softer tone, the writer could have used pronouns in this sentence, as in “I have enclosed the application forms and information you requested.”

Letter 1 from Midwestern University might have pleased or alienated you, because it follows some strategies of the “You Approach,” but violates others:

- The letter does follow some strategies of the “You Approach:” The writer uses many personal pronouns throughout the letter (a notable exception is paragraph three, which comes across as condescending due to the lack of pronouns in the phrase “Please be reminded that”). The writer also does his best to overcome the limitations of a form letter and ends in a kind way by saying that he would be happy to talk with the prospective applicant personally.
- On the other hand, by mentioning budget limitations right away, in the first paragraph, the writer might alienate the reader: Why would someone interested in financial support apply to a university that mentions budget limitations as a reason for using a form letter? The writer seems to be focusing on his own concerns in this first paragraph instead of on what matters the most to the reader.

Although **Letter 2 from Southwestern University** is devoid of specific details, it might be the letter that you responded to most favorably, because:

- It includes many personal pronouns that create a friendly, informal tone that resembles a personal conversation between the writer and reader, and
- The writer seems genuinely interested in this particular applicant. In the first paragraph, he seems to be responding directly and specifically to the reader’s original inquiry.

Using a “You Approach” in workplace documents can be useful in creating and sustaining positive relationships with readers, especially in situations characterized by conflict and tension. If you try some or all of the five strategies of the “You Approach,” the chances are good that your documents will result in improved customer relations, which is an important goal in the business world.