

## **“Bad news” letters**

You will sometimes need to deliver bad news to people: you might need to refuse a client something, inform applicants that they have lost a competition, fire someone, reprimand someone, or otherwise tell people things that they do not want to hear.

Most organizations deliver such bad news in the form of a letter, which is less ambiguous and more verifiable than a phone call or even email. You as the writer of “bad news letters” should be polite, for you do not wish to anger a client or customer, antagonize an employee, or discourage promising applicants. You should still be clear about the bad news itself, and make plain the basis for the decision. The recipient should understand the bad news—the application failed, the job lost, the claim denied, the loan turned down—while not bearing unnecessary ill-will against your organization. Ideally, you should include any information the recipient needs to pursue the matter further.

### **Overview of the “bad news” letter**

Follow a standard business letter format. Within that format, include three major sections, the whole preferably taking up no more than a page and a half, barring complicated cases. You need not include sub-headers.

The first section briefly outlines the general case, whether that be a job review, an application or competition, the review of a claim, etc. The second section is the longest and centres on delivering the actual bad news while also describing the criteria for your decision. The third section is a brief and polite closing paragraph that tells the recipient what to do next should he wish to pursue further action.

### **First section**

Open the letter by addressing your recipient formally rather than by first name. Introduce your organization and describe the situation in a sentence or two. Speak as the organization, not as an individual (i.e., use “we” or the name of the organization, not “I”). Do not promise the recipient anything. Thank the recipient for his interest in your organization. Be neutral at worst and complimentary at best. How? Some tactics would be:

- Compliment the field as a whole as exciting, fast-growing, competitive, creative, and full of possibility.
- Modestly compliment the recipient's taste or ethics as exemplified by his choice of field, project, or career (e.g., “Like you, we believe that sustainable fuels provide the best future for our planet,” or “We too find the field of database optimization an important and often overlooked part of industrial performance”).
- Praise your own organization's history, goals, achievements, reputation, recent improvements, or even the pool of applicants or employees (e.g., “Palmer Industries is proud of our record in the field of web development”).
- If you are taking applications for a competition or a job, state that you have received many great applications, making your decision both challenging but enjoyable.

This first section should be restrained and short: introduce yourself, thank the recipient for his interest, and perhaps Anything beyond the initial introduction of the organization and situation should use one tactic and should take up only a sentence or two, making this whole paragraph at most four sentences. Do not exaggerate praise or thanks, as that will sound hollow and even confusing in the light of the bad news to come.

## **Second section**

The second section should consist of one or two moderate-length paragraphs. You have five major considerations:

- a) Do not lead with the bad news, but instead put it in the middle of the first paragraph of this section. (By this time, the recipient should know what's coming, as most letter-writers put good news front and centre.)
- b) Instead, lead with the criteria for the decision, preferably taken directly from documents the recipient should already have, such as the terms of a contract or competition. Do not confuse the issue by introducing unnecessary details; this means that you may have to decide which details are unnecessary. However, always give a solid reason.
- c) Throw the reasons and the bad news itself into the impersonal passive where possible, and avoid direct addresses such as "you" and especially "I" or "we" when you can. This helps emphasize that the decision is not capricious and is based on impersonal criteria.
- d) If possible, ease into the bad news by phrasing it as the success of those who did succeed: "We awarded the contract to X," "We have admitted 50 students to the program," or so on. You rarely need to labour the words "failure," "cannot," "did not," or other negative constructions, though you may have to in extreme cases, such as when the recipient has been given many warnings and persists in pursuing a baseless claim with you, or when there simply is no good news for anyone.
- e) Always be plain about the bad news. The recipient should be quite sure he did not win the competition, keep the job, get a replacement, receive a grant, avoid a spending cut, etc. If you have not already specifically stated this bad news, you should do so by the end of this section.

The best way to lead into this section is to state the conditions for success: "As you know, applicants for the Wilson Prize had to demonstrate 'success in the field of the visual arts'"; "This agency has been granted the unique mandate to support promising organic food co-operatives in Ontario"; "The warranty for your Com-Ex mixer clearly states that we will replace any device that failed due to an manufacturing flaw, but not any that failed due to customer negligence"; and so on. This allows you to then turn to the bad news itself, which is usually either that someone else got a desirable but limited resource—a job, a prize, admission to a program—or that the letter recipient has erred in a claim or performance. You can state the bad news either in a straightforward manner, such as "For these reasons, Wychwood Inc. will not refund the late fee" or "Wright Labs is no longer considering your application for employment," or in a more roundabout way, such as "The Charles Institute has released its list of 50 grant winners, and regrets to inform you that your name is not among them."

There are obviously subcategories. Consider these possibilities:

*If the recipient was competing for a limited resource, such as employment, admission, money, goods, or aid:* You may directly praise the recipient in a limited way if it is applicable, such as by saying that his work is interesting or what have you. (It is permissible here to use “we” and “you” to reinforce this praise.) However, you must always make it plain that someone else was better still and describe the manner in which that person better succeeded: “The winning applicant had made impressive strides in the use of electronic media”; “The most successful organic food cooperatives incorporated carbon-capture methods to boost their farms’ ecological benefits”; “The winning applicants not only averaged over 75% in their high school grade point average, but had extensively volunteered in the health-care sector.” You may at this point directly convey the bad news, either in the form of announcing that someone else has been chosen or a more direct statement that the letter recipient has not been selected for the honour. For ethical reasons, do not name the winners unless you know that their names can be publicly announced, as in the case of major prizes or high-level positions. Be especially cautious if the winner has not yet accepted the prize or position.

*If the recipient failed at some task, such as job performance or making a claim for compensation:* Here, stress the requirements that the recipient has failed to fulfill, such as job performance guidelines (e.g., “Continued employment with Smith Resources Ltd. requires strict attention to customer safety, and proven employee negligence in two cases of customer injury can result in termination”) or product use guidelines (e.g., “We will happily refund double the price of our double boilers when a product failure results from manufacturing flaws”). You may explicitly state the lapse, such as “You were held at fault for two customer injuries and have not petitioned these reports” or “The double boiler in question has been dented from the outside, however, in a manner that suggests it fell off the counter, and there is no evidence of a pressure leak from the inside of the boiler.” In other words, state the requirements the recipient needed to meet to make his case or win the day, then politely note that the recipient did not do so.

*If your organization might be held partly at fault for poor communication or failure to follow a process, but you still feel the recipient has no legitimate claim:* Here, you should apologize for your failure, but still make your decision clear and close the door to further faulty claims. For instance, you might say something like “Mollitech Solutions unfortunately did not foresee the volume of applications and therefore many requests have been delayed; however, this does not affect the actual status of your service claim, which has been terminated.” If possible, throw such statements altogether into the impersonal passive: “Funds were budgeted for the relief fund as required by the Canadian government. However, the volume of applications was exceptionally high, rendering the individual settlements smaller than many applicants expected.” Finally, while you must tell the truth, many employers will suggest you not encourage further legitimate complaints, even if your organization has erred in some way.

## **Second section, addendum**

Some writers will include a brief additional paragraph at this point, especially when writing for a large or publicly funded institution. This paragraph explains alternatives and further avenues for

pursuit: where the reader can find more information, which authority to petition should he feel the decision is in error, or which specialists to consult for detailed help. You can also include a list of alternative services or options, perhaps with different organizations. Private companies will sometimes permit you to offer the reader a small gift in lieu of greater compensation, such as a coupon for goods or services.

### **Third section**

In this concluding section, be polite. You should at least thank the recipient for contacting you and, if a customer, for using your products or services. You might well suggest a contact for further discussion, if it is appropriate. If you have more time and can pay some individual attention to the recipient's projects, you can try a few other tactics: you can encourage him to reapply if appropriate, especially when his case is stronger (i.e., after developing a portfolio or finishing a degree); restate your interest in the project; or, if applicable, suggest a slightly different approach, such as a similar position or program with your organization. Finally, wish the reader good luck with future ventures or something similarly friendly but neutral, and sign off with a similarly professionally friendly closing, such as "Sincerely" or "Regards."