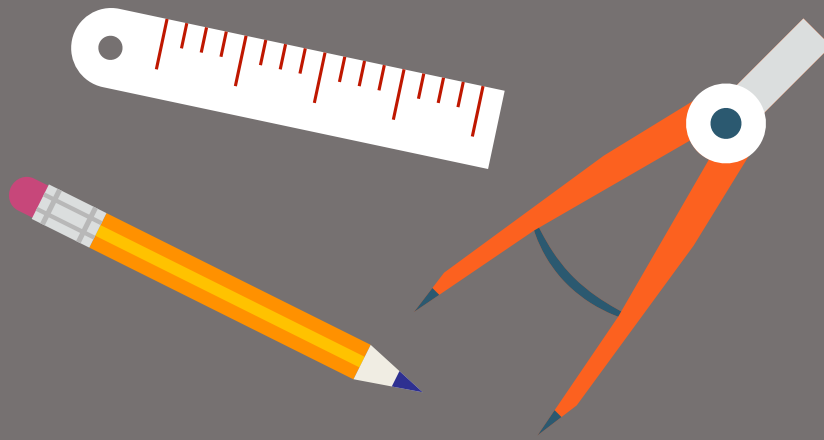


# Guide for Delivering Bad News in Writing



PRACTICAL TOOLS

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Most of the time, whoever is reading your writing appreciates when you get down to business immediately. This is particularly essential when you're relaying controversial or bad news.

Not surprisingly, business leaders are slower to share bad news than good news, found a study in *Social Science Research Network*.

Really tough news, such as laying off employees or announcing a merger, could require a slew of communications including memos, corporate website notices, group meeting agendas and more. It might even require adding details and follow ups to address everyone's questions and concerns adequately.

## Relaying bad news takes some extra effort

People commonly grasp bad news slowly, which is important to keep in mind when you're communicating it. **Have your target audience in your head before you decide what to say.** Knowing the person(s) you're delivering the bad news to should guide you in the best way to do it, says Syntax Training founder Lynn Gaertner-Johnson.

**Ultimately, you want to make sure whoever you're addressing gets past any emotional reaction to the news and fully understands what it means.** You want to make sure any action steps that need to be taken, or consequences that will happen, are fully understood.

There are strategic ways you can cushion the blow of almost any bad news. Use this guide to make sure you're conveying bad news clearly and with tact:

## 1. Steer clear of vague writing

Piling on praise or effusive cheerleading dilutes the importance of what you're trying to say. And your readers will see right through it anyway.

Here's an example. After Yahoo CEO Marissa Mayer agreed in 2015 to sell the company to Verizon, she sent an email that read in part: "... our **incredibly** loyal and dedicated employee base has stepped up to every challenge along the way ... The teams here have not only built **incredible** products and technologies, but have built Yahoo into one of the most iconic, and universally well-liked companies in the world ... I'm **incredibly** proud of everything that we've achieved, and I'm **incredibly** proud of our team."

That's four uses of "incredible" or "incredibly" in a single paragraph. All that cheerleading reads like misdirection.

## 2. Use a buffer statement

This is a sentence or phrase that helps readers understand why you're telling them not-so-great news. Preferably, it should take a complimentary tone. For example:

- *"We appreciate your ideas to improve our delivery systems. At this time, however, we have limited budget funds to make your proposed improvements."*
- *"Your desire to add to the marketing team is well-noted, but after consideration, we've decided to stick with our hiring freeze for the next four months."*

### 3. Don't feel pressure to overexplain

There's no need for a big windup or pleasantries. Avoid "introducing" what you're about to say—it only wastes space and distracts from whatever actionable information you're writing. Sometimes the less you write, the easier it is for readers to accept what's written. For example:

- Instead of: *With regard to the announcement of our salary freeze, while our Human Resources Department appreciates your patience and understands that employees may have questions, we'll be conducting information sessions to address those questions.*
- Write: *Our HR department appreciates your patience with the announced salary freeze, and will be conducting information sessions to address employees' questions.*

### 4. Remember: It's not personal

Keep in mind you're a manager, not an agent. Don't make it about the people you're addressing when it's about corporate decisions. Start in a safe place that will let you build a dialogue, rather than a monologue of your thoughts, which might focus more on negatives. This also tends to help readers better understand the outcomes behind your message and see that things might not be as bad as they think. For example, open with something like:

- *"We recognize that some employees might be wondering why we haven't replaced our CEO at this time ..."*
- *"We understand people's concerns about facing broadening competition ..."*

## 5. It's OK to sound a little passive

This is one situation where use of passive voice can soften bad news or negative information. Just make sure the point is clear and avoid wishy-washy language. For example:

- Instead of: *We don't feel your marketing plan fits our company's needs at this time.*
- Write: *At this time, your marketing plan doesn't seem a good fit for our company's needs.*

## 6. Check your facts

Never release bad news without having your facts straight. Leaving out important details or including things that are vague can lead to misinterpretation of your message and cause more headaches than the original news.

## 7. Focus on decisions and measures rather than on specifics

If possible, leave names and specific entities out. Even if they're included in an earlier draft, see if removing them changes the overall information in your writing. If it doesn't, eliminate those references to make the writing seem less personal. For example:

- Instead of: *"Our Human Resources department, run by Jane Hill and Mike Allard, hasn't been able to maintain retention of new applicants for our products division, and this has resulted in much slower growth."*
- Write: *"Our Human Resources department has seen a drop in retention of new applicants for our products division, which hasn't helped growth."*

## 8. Keep your language neutral

Avoid overwrought phrases and words such as “disaster,” “blow-up,” “unbelievable,” “unprecedented,” “awful,” and others. No matter how bad the news might be, keep an even tone in your writing. Steering clear of emotional language prompts your readers to accept the news without emotion. For example:

- Instead of: *“By now we’re sure you’ve heard about the impending implosion of our call-center division, but unfortunately, it was expected for some time.”*
- Write: *“By now we’re sure you’ve heard about the discontinuation of our call-center division, but unfortunately, it was expected for some time.”*

## 9. Avoid accusatory words

You might have to use some “bad news” words depending on what you’re reporting. But where possible, avoid accusatory-sounding language in favor of more positive speech. For example:

- **Rather than:** dishonest  
**Use:** questionable
- **Rather than:** inferior  
**Use:** lesser quality
- **Rather than:** misconduct  
**Use:** unfortunate actions
- **Rather than:** suspicious  
**Use:** unclear
- **Rather than:** corrupt  
**Use:** unlawful

- **Rather than:** incapable  
**Use:** Ineffective
- **Rather than:** failure  
**Use:** setback

## 10. Include an apology—if one is called for

Only apologize if you are somehow at fault. Don't make your apology long or drawn out, and only apologize for your part in the situation. If what happened was due to circumstances largely beyond your control, it's OK to apologize for any part you or your department may have played. But leave it at that. Overdoing "I'm very sorry" lets emotions get in the way of the useful info you need to share. For example:

- **Too personal:** "I'm really sorry to have to let you know about some recent layoffs."
- **Less emotional:** "I regret to have to let you know about some recent layoffs."
- **Better:** "Unfortunately, the company has to report some recent layoffs."

Bad news isn't as easy to deliver as good news, but if tough messages are managed and delivered well, they can help you and employees overcome the issues successfully.