Figure 6.1 **Example of an Effective Indirect Negative Message**

First National Bank
P.O. Box 987
Ft. Worth TX 78206

April 23, 200X

David Hertfelder, Executive Director
Substance Abuse Program for Children
Dallas–Ft. Worth Region
P.O. Box 2322
Ft. Worth TX 78210

Dear David:

Thank you for your letter describing the substance abuse program. While I was aware of the existence of your program, I had not realized the extent of your services. Your request for financial support for your upcoming Awareness Fair honors us. As you mentioned in your letter, we do believe in community duty and seek out those programs that focus on children. That you know of our involvement is reassuring to us. As part of our giving program, each January we establish our contribution budget and then, in February, we announce our contributions to the public. Our contributions for 200X already have been announced and distributed.

If you decide to hold your Fair next year or wish to be considered for a contribution to another aspect of your program, please submit a proposal before January 1, 200X. Your proposal will receive careful consideration.

Thank you again for thinking of us. Good luck with your program and your Fair.

Cordially,

Traci Petalek

Traci Petalek
Director, Community Relations

Not all negative messages nor all companies follow the steps described here. A few years ago one of the largest merchandisers in the United States, in rejecting requests for credit, responded with computer-generated form letters that started

> Dear Credit Applicant:
>
> Thank you for the opportunity to consider your request for credit. We regret, however, that we cannot, at this time, accommodate your specific credit needs.
>
> As noted below,
>
> <u>ACTION TAKEN</u>
>
> Application for credit denied.
> You have the right to. . . .

Place yourself in the position of the applicant. How would you feel toward the company that sent this letter?

Persuasive Messages

The second major category of messages that relies on the indirect organization is persuasive messages. Most business writing tries to persuade others to act in a desired way. Those who are successful at altering the behavior of others make their readers want to take the proposed action. If the reader already wants to do what you propose, you should not resort to a persuasive message. Write a direct request to act. When it is necessary to change an opinion toward an action or product, however, work up to the request. You are guaranteed a rejection if you start with a request when resistance is present. Therefore, build your message following the indirect organization, which saves the request for the desired action until last. (Request messages that do not fit this concept are discussed in Chapter 7.)

Writing persuasively usually follows a series of specific steps; these steps parallel the behavior we follow each time we take an overt action. For example, analyze this vignette:

> You need some parts for your old car, so you go to the dealer. The parts department is closed for another ten minutes so you decide to wait in the showroom. You immediately notice a bright red, new BMW in the middle of the room. You admire the sleek lines and take in the rugged, powerful beauty. "Now there's a car," you say to yourself.
>
> As is usually the case, you have been near the car for only a short time when you are greeted by a salesperson: "Great little car, isn't it?" he says. "Just check this baby out!"
>
> "You're right! It's a beauty. How much is it?" you respond.
>
> "It's probably the best buy we have. Here, sit behind the wheel in the real leather seats. Have you ever seen a better dash? Looks like the car was made for you," he responds.
>
> "It's comfortable, all right. I'll bet it costs a fortune. How much is it?" you query again.
>
> For the next few minutes the salesperson continues to sidestep your inquiries about price. Instead, he maneuvers you around the car, getting you to look

here, feel there. His conclusion of each exchange with a question such as, "Feels great, doesn't it?" or "How does that compare to any other car you've seen?" eludes you. Next, there's a transition in his comments. He now tries to get you to say in a different way how much you want the car. "Picture yourself pulling into the parking lot at work. Everyone's looking at you. Feels good, doesn't it?"

"Sure does," you reply. "There's no doubt I'd love to have the car. I just can't afford it."

"Hey, wait a sec'. We've just announced a new, low, 9-percent interest rate, and this car is on special this month, as well. Payments can be made over 60 months, so that they're so small you barely notice them. What? You have a car you could trade in? So much the better. Let's go back to my office and run some scenarios on my calculator."

Your head is spinning, but you know you're under no obligation yet. This is exciting.

Concurrently, the salesperson is planning his strategy; he's moving in for the kill. He punches the calculator for a while, looks at some tables, hits the calculator some more, smiles, and says, "We can put you in that new BMW today so you can drive back to work in it today for under $400 a month. Of course that includes full warranty and service for 50,000 miles, and we'll take your old car off your hands. Let's go ahead and sign the contract; what do you say?"

Whether you sign the contract now, wait weeks or even years to buy a similar car, or never buy the BMW, you still have been through a common behavior process. Something caught your attention—in this case the bright color of the car shining in the showroom's spotlights. In other cases, advertisements or jingles might be the attention-getter.

Next, and quickly, your interest was piqued. In the vignette, the salesperson spoke of general and major attributes he felt sure you would acknowledge affirmatively.

Third, the salesperson created in you a desire for the car. He listened to your needs and filled them with his product. You started to feel you needed the car. At the same time, hesitations emerged in your mind—cost, payments, trade-in, and so on. Even before these thoughts were verbalized, he struck them down with counterarguments and opposing logic. Having convinced you not only that you needed the car, but also that you were willing to make certain trade-offs to get it, he moved to the final step: action. The concluding step reiterated some strengths, made it easy to say yes to the request, and contained the big question: Would you sign the contract?

As an advanced business communicator, your application of persuasion will have little to do with buying or selling cars. Nevertheless, as you will see, the steps are important to writing effective persuasive messages in other aspects of business. The vignette exaggerates the five steps we go through with each major action we take: attention, interest, desire, conviction, and action. Just as these are the steps we follow to action, they, too, are the steps of a persuasive message.

As we examine the writing steps in a persuasive message, be aware that there are other elements in the persuasive encounter that need consideration, such as perception of the sender, hierarchical differences, the context, nonverbal factors, degree of rapport, and others.

Attention Step

The less disposed your reader is to respond favorably to your request, the stronger and more highly defined should be the attention step. Conversely, the more likely your reader is to act as desired, the less you need an attention-getting opening.

When writing strong attention-getters, you may apply several techniques. Questions are good openers because they involve the reader. Few of us can resist answering even the silliest rhetorical question. Perhaps because of the effectiveness of the question as an attention-getter, questions are prevalent.

Attention-getting devices include making a startling statement, using mechanical or printed grabbers, focusing on a single word, giving something away, stressing low cost, describing some enticing mood or situation, or personalizing with the reader's name or address. Often, even the envelope is personalized in such a way as to encourage the recipient to read the information inside.

No rule exists about how closely related to the ultimate action the opener should be. Many magazine subscription mailings, for example, open with contests and giveaways even though these devices have no apparent connection to the action they want you to take. Compare these three openings by how they relate to the action step:

Unrelated to action. "Would you pick the $800,000 house or the year-long vacation around the world if you won this contest?" Action: subscribe to magazines.

Semirelated to action. "For only one penny you can have any 12 CDs or tapes from the hundreds listed." Action: join a CD/tape club.

Related to action. "Just as the bright, shiny penny that is glued to this letter says, 'In God We Trust,' we trust you to support our Children's Hospital." Action: financially support a children's hospital.

The goals of an attention step are (1) to get the reader's attention and (2) to develop enough attention to carry the reader into the next step. Those attention-getters that do not accomplish both objectives are in a message that will probably not result in success.

Interest Step

The interest step is one of transition; it carries the reader from the attention-getting opening to the desire step. The interest step also starts to give some direction to the message (if the opening did not do so). The step takes the undirected momentum of the attention-getter and points toward the ultimate action. The step also encourages some involvement by the reader. Interest develops through blending the strengths of the opening and the enticements of the upcoming desire step. The interest step often is relatively short.

Avoid just telling the reader to become interested; give information that creates interest. Replace "You'll be interested to know that . . ." with "Five of seven people in your job classification are desperately untrained in using a computer spreadsheet."

Desire Step

The third step develops desire in the reader for the ultimate good, service, or action. The desire grows solely from positive attributes. The goal is for the reader to feel that he or she would like the service or product. The attributes of the service or product will determine how much information to include in this step. At this step, there is no concern with the counterarguments or hesitancies against what will be proposed. These are handled in the next step.

Here is an example of a desire step that pushes the positive attributes without yet talking about their cost: "Successful businesspeople at the beginning of the twenty-first century—those making the big salaries and having job security—will have technological competence, entrepreneurial skills, and international business expertise."

Conviction Step

Before the reader has a chance to organize arguments against the upcoming action, the conviction step lays out the counterarguments. While these may sound like positive attributes, similar to those in the desire step, they actually are positive ways of looking at the action's weaknesses. For example, saying that time payments are available may disguise an unusually high price, or that the position holds great opportunities and a promising future offsets its long hours and low starting salary.

The desire and conviction steps are closely related and should flow together. Both will sound positive, but desire is inherently positive information while conviction may be seen as displacing negative information and using positive tone.

Central to all persuasion is the concept of need. A reader must feel the need to take the suggested action to satisfy some personal motivation. Without the feeling of need, the persuasion is likely to be hollow and short lived. Need is developed across several of the steps of the persuasive message but is primarily in the desire and conviction steps. The wording of the presentation of the attributes creates the feeling of need. Sometimes effective need development is as simple as employing empathy and using you words and the *you* attitude. For example, look at these statements:

Positive but impersonal and ineffective. "Underwriting this venture will be financially rewarding."

Positive, personal, and need-developing. "Enhance your image as a venture capitalist by taking advantage of this opportunity."

While the use of the you attitude is desirable in most forms of communication, including written and spoken, you will find its use especially fruitful in developing the need in the desire and conviction steps.

Action Step

Only after you are sure that the reader is convinced of the need to take the action that you plan to propose should you propose it. An action statement that occurs too early will meet defeat. Each of the first four steps sets up the next one; if any one is ineffective, the reader will not be carried to the culmination of the message. The reader may stop somewhere in the sequence or read the balance of the message but decide not to accept the proposed action.

Not only does the action step build on earlier steps, it also uses selected information from them. This last step reemphasizes the reader's benefit from taking the proposed action, makes it easy for the reader to do as suggested, and asks for the action. These three parts may be in any order within the action step.

Here is an example of an action step that incorporates the three parts:

> So, start your membership in the City Club, where the Dallas business and financial world conducts the real transactions. To qualify for the special rate, just complete the brief application form and mail it in. Your membership starts once we receive your form.

The benefits are (1) to have access to critical events; (2) to pay a special rate; and (3) to begin membership soon. Ease of response is shown by the short form that is mailed back. The action request is simple: "complete the form . . . and mail it in."

Ways to Stimulate Action

Two main categories of techniques to stimulate action are (1) punishment and reward and (2) emotional and rational appeals. Both are used in business.

You can change behavior by threatening punishment: "If you don't pay the balance due by March 1, we'll contact our lawyers." Or you can change behavior by offering a reward: "If you pay your balance by March 1, your credit rating will remain unblemished." While these approaches may both be successful, the positive tone of the reward approach is preferable in business settings. Long-term business relationships especially benefit from the reward approach.

In developing persuasive messages, you may also pick from emotional and rational appeals. Emotional appeals seek a quick action based on limited thought and perhaps incomplete logic. See how this example works on our emotions:

> Select us as your management consultants. We've had a long-term relationship with your firm that dates to its founding by your father, the insightful Mr. John Jones.

Rational appeals, on the other hand, seek a stronger commitment and one the reader is likely to feel comfortable with for a longer time. Rational appeals are based on logic. Here is the example above, rewritten with a rational appeal:

> The proposal to serve as your management consultant satisfies the three needs you have identified: sharing of intensive experience on a temporary basis, acting as a catalyst to complete the Smith project on schedule, and providing impartial advice.

Some topics, such as children or animals, are rich with potential emotional content. Other topics, including many in business, rely more on logic. Be aware of your message's strengths and weaknesses and of your goals as you select between rational and emotional appeals. Either can be effective depending on the content. Of course, a single persuasive message can hold punishment, reward, logic, and emotion. Take care, however, not to clutter the message with divergent thoughts.

Hard Sell Versus Soft Sell

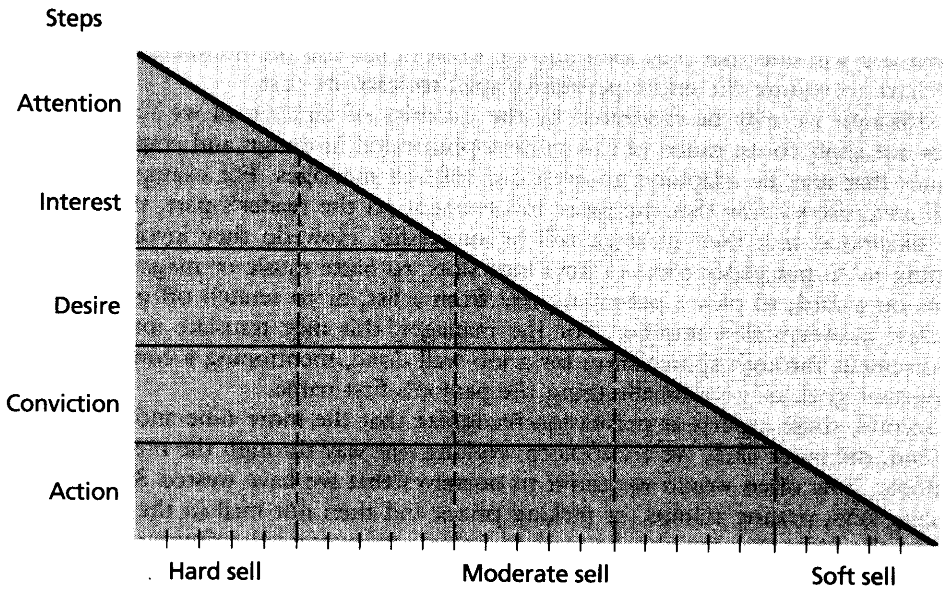
Not all persuasive messages can be characterized as the hard-sell type that push magazine or record-club subscriptions. When you describe a promising new product to a regular customer, your job is easier than if the reader is unfamiliar with you. Writing a reminder to place a periodic order would be even easier. Some persuasive messages are soft sell. In preparing soft-sell messages, you must make judgments about whether the goals of the early steps can be assumed. If, for example, you think you already have the reader's attention, you will check off this step and move on to the next one. If you have the reader's interest, you will go to the desire step. When you check off the first two steps, you start your letter with the desire step and then complete the message with the rest of the steps, in their correct order. As a manager, you are more likely to write these more subtle, softer persuasive messages.

Figure 6.2 illustrates the relationship among the five persuasive steps and hard- and soft-sell messages. The hard-sell message, such as a magazine subscription letter, will have all five steps. An extremely soft-sell letter might have only the action step: "You're invited to the office holiday party next Tuesday at 3 P.M. Hope you can be there." Other persuasive messages fall between these two extremes.

Although the illustration represents the five steps as being of equal size, that is seldom the case. The characteristics of the reader and of the proposed action will dictate the extent to which each step is developed. In one letter, there may be a brief paragraph that combines the attention and interest steps followed by well-developed desire and conviction steps. Another letter might reverse the emphasis. There is no rule regarding length of the steps.

The harder the hard-sell message, the more emphasis (and probably the more space) is needed for attention. In other words, as you move in Figure 6.2 to the left, you increase the attention step and then write the remaining steps.

Figure 6.2 **Steps in Developing Hard- and Soft-Sell Indirect Messages**



One of the major problems in writing an indirect persuasive message is deciding where on the spectrum between hard and soft sell your reader and the message fall. If in doubt, it is better to include an earlier step rather than assume that it has already been met. Further, reiteration usually does not hurt persuasion other than by lengthening the message.

Hints for Writing Persuasive Messages

Other hints may ease the task of writing persuasive messages or make the message more effective.

1. Although the steps dictate the order of information, you still need to organize your thoughts. Be careful not to let your steps overlap too much. Each step has its own goal and content. To intermix the content dilutes the impact.
2. Seek a blending from one step to the next. While each step has its own content, use transitions from step to step. Doing so will unify the entire message.
3. Consider writing your action step first. Preparing this punch line may guide the development of the earlier steps.
4. Finally, in general, try not to let your desired action leak out until the action step. In the vignette about buying a car, the salesperson avoided answering questions about cost until closing the deal. Had he told you the BMW cost $73,000 at the beginning, or even in the middle, of the conversation, he might have lost the sale. The price was so close to the desired action that the salesperson sought to hold it until the end.

When we read typical mass mailings, many of us speed through or omit passages and search at the end for what it will cost. This cost usually appears graphically with a dollar sign and some numbers. This characteristic behavior has not gone unnoticed by mass-mailing experts. They counter by hiding the dollar amount. Often you will find that they spell out the word dollar and the numbers so that we will have to endure the entire persuasive spiel to learn its cost.

Although we may be frustrated by the quantity of direct mail we receive that does not apply to us, much of it is quite sophisticated in design and employs techniques that may be adaptable to even our soft-sell messages. For example, direct-mail advertisers know that the more involvement on the reader's part, the greater the likelihood that their message will be successful. How do they involve us? By getting us to put paper coins or keys into slots, to paste music or magazine selections on a card, to pick a potential prize from a list, or to scratch off gray ink to disclose a sweepstakes number. For the manager, this may translate into seeking involvement through appreciation for a job well done, mentioning a common and important goal, or occasionally using the person's first name.

Second, these experts at persuasion recognize that the more time and effort we expend, the more likely we are to keep working our way through the message. For example, how often would we admit to ourselves that we have wasted 30 minutes placing keys, pasting stamps, or picking prizes and then not mail in the gift entry form—the form that can also be used to order a magazine subscription?

Third, these advertisers know that usually they have but one moment of your time to persuade you. If you stop to answer the phone, put the information away until later, have to search for your credit card number or checkbook, or have to look for a stamp for the envelope, you will probably not return to complete the action. Therefore, these advertisers employ techniques to encourage immediate action. For instance, they include a small pencil in the packet, supply the postage, or offer to bill later. They also know an interesting thing about human behavior: Once the return information is completed and sealed in the envelope, few people have second thoughts and decide not to mail the envelope.

In addition to Figure 6.1, which relates to negative messages, see Figure 6.3 for an example of an effective, moderate-sell, persuasive message. Figure 6.4 shows a well-written soft-sell message.

Figure 6.3 **Example of a Moderate-Sell, Persuasive Message**

YOUNG EXECUTIVE MAGAZINE

Editorial Offices:
680 Northland Blvd. / Suite 107
Cincinnati, OH 45240-3137
(513) 825-0309 Fax: (513) 825-0220
e-mail: yexec@young.com
http://www.yexec.com

Dear *Young Executive* Reader:

As a subscriber to *Young Executive* you are aware of the magazine's uniqueness. Only *YE* meets the interests and needs of America's aggressive, educated, fast-track young executives. You've seen such articles as "Investing in Condos," "Using Nonverbal Communication to Exert Your Power," and "Mexico's Best Executive Vacation Spots." You're familiar with our popular columns: CEO Gossip, Power to the Women, and Dressing the Part.

Your subscription ends in six weeks. You can continue to receive *YE* for another year with no break in your subscription, and at a $3 savings, by returning the enclosed card right away. Just check the number of years by which you wish to extend your subscription and mail the card. More great *YEs* will be on the way.

Executively,

Harrison Christopher

Harrison Christopher
Subscription Manager

Enc.

Figure 6.4 Example of a Soft-Sell, Persuasive Message

> Dear Customer,
>
> Typically, our policy is to keep all boats until we have received payment for the work done on them. Since we have extended the courtesy of delivering your boat and then mailing your bill, please help us keep our costs down by mailing the payment today. Perhaps you selected Bitsy Boats to detail your boat because, as a small firm, we focus on a select clientele. As a small business, we will notice and appreciate your help.
>
> Thank you.

Finally, personalization of form letters can enhance positive responses. As a reader, you like to see your name and comments about yourself. Computers that merge lists of names with form letters, inserting personal references from the database, make personalization easy. Letters appear individually typed with such techniques as the inclusion of phrases using the recipient's name or address. The efforts are especially likely to appear at places where the reader may lose interest: the very beginning, at the bottom of pages, and at the request for action. While the techniques may differ, knowledge of such elements of human behavior and persuasion as these can assist you in your persuasive writing.

Summary

Many messages are those that receivers do not want to see. Most negative and persuasive messages typify such messages. For the negative message, because the goals of the sender (to maintain goodwill as well as to transmit the negative news) differ from the desire of the receiver (to hear good news), use an indirect approach. For the persuasive message, when you expect to encounter resistance, use the indirect approach.

The indirect approach to a negative message has four steps: (1) an opening that delays discussion of the bad news; (2) a presentation of the reasons for the upcoming bad news; (3) the bad news; and (4) a positive ending. The first step is difficult to write because often it comes across as a delaying tactic and thus reduces its value. Instead, it should prepare the reader for a discussion of the topic and the reasons behind the decision.

Often the second step is the most important of the four. If you do not have good reasons for the bad news or if you do not present those reasons well, the reader is unlikely to accept the news or the logic of it. However, well-developed reasons will encourage acceptance of the news without hostility. Readers may not like the decision, but at least they will understand your reasoning. Further, well-planned and well-explained reasons, written with the reader's viewpoint in mind, make the delivery of the bad news much easier. After relating the bad news, change the subject to a more positive one. Do not go back to the bad news. Close on a pleasant note.

Persuasive messages follow the steps of overt behavior: attention, interest, desire, conviction, and action. Some persuasive messages are hard sell and therefore require development of each of the five steps. Soft-sell messages may assume attention and interest on the reader's part and can start with desire. Authors of persuasive messages need to calculate carefully where on the spectrum between hard and soft sell their messages fit.

Indirect message organization delays the main message component—the bad news or the request for action—because resistance is anticipated by the sender. Other message organizations that do not fit the criteria for either direct or indirect organization appear in Chapter 7.

Discussion Questions

1. Think about the spectrum of persuasive messages from soft sell to hard sell. Where on the spectrum are the most difficult-to-write messages? Which are most likely to elicit the desired response?
2. What is the intent of the delaying opening? Does it ever frustrate or anger a reader? What would it take to prepare a delaying message that would not be offensive?
3. What are the main ways of attracting a reader's attention? Which are more effective than others? Why?
4. Think about a time when you were searching for a job. How would you feel had you received a direct negative message? Why is the job-getting process so ego-involving, and why are feelings so easily hurt? Is this why almost all job rejection letters are written indirectly?

Communication in Action

1. Critique some of the hard-sell direct mail that you have received. Does each piece follow the five steps presented in the text? Do different products and services require different treatments of any steps? Where does each piece fall on the soft-to-hard-sell spectrum?

2. As an extension of Discussion Question 2 above, survey some colleagues or classmates on this thought: "How often do you prefer to receive a negative message in a direct organization?" How many said "often"? Do you believe them? How much chance is there that they think they prefer the direct organization until the message is really negative to them?

@ Internet

3. As an employee of a public relations firm, you have been given the task of preparing a fundraising appeal for money from alumni of a local university, which is a client. You have selected the concept of "the importance of one" as the thrust of your appeal. You plan to prepare a hard-copy flyer to alumni that spells out how one person has made a difference, such as one vote that took us to war, passed some major legislation, or changed history; or how one person solved a crucial puzzle or made a medical discovery. You'll list these outcomes and then persuade the reader that he or she is important, too, and should contribute to the fund. Research the "importance of one" and locate examples that you could use in the flyer. Then, write the text for the flyer.
4. As a member of the marketing department, you have been asked to locate some Web sites that excel in marketing for their companies. Locate some sites that are especially well designed for (1) ease of access to the Web site; (2) friendliness of appearance and use; (3) strong sales message; and (4) customer service.
5. You have noticed that many of your subordinates don't follow the principles of writing indirect messages, but you don't feel well-enough prepared to teach a refresher course on the topic. Also, an outside consultant may bring more authority to the situation. Use the Internet to locate some writing consultants who could help you.
6. Use the Internet to view some home pages of companies that sell either products or services. Compare the sales pitches in terms of directness versus indirectness.

InfoTrac

7. What can you find in the published literature of the last three years that connects e-mail use to the delivery of negative messages? Locate at least two full-page articles and then summarize them in an outline format. As starter topics, examine the legal and ethical issues of messages sent within Enron and Andersen Consulting in 2002.
8. Refer to Discussion Question 2 above. Use InfoTrac to see if there is literature regarding the use of the delaying (or buffer) opening. Be sure to check the business communication journals.

9. After the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks, huge amounts of money were raised for victims and families of the event. Much of the money was sent to the Red Cross, which was then challenged over not dispersing enough money quickly enough. How might the Red Cross have written a letter to potential donors seeking contributions to the disaster fund that would have misled them? Use InfoTrac to see what articles emerged that discuss the topic.
10. Some of the classic literature from social psychology reviews types of people who are most easily persuaded, such as those with low self-esteem. Use InfoTrac to locate literature that deals with groups easily persuaded.

CHAPTER 7

Writing Situational Messages

Many written messages can be classified as positive, neutral, negative, or persuasive and can follow the direct or indirect organizations described in Chapters 5 and 6. Others, however, cannot be classified so easily; they combine two or more of the four formulas or fall outside the formulas altogether. They are called situational messages. Although situational messages may account for only a small percentage of all messages, they deserve careful attention from the advanced business communicator because they are difficult to prepare.

Many executives forget that a well-written situational message can distinguish its author and its company from competitors. Situational messages often require deeper understanding of the business organization and of the environment than do other messages. Important concerns such as tone and audience analysis play an even more crucial role in situational messages, where achieving a goal is particularly difficult. Standard instruction in business writing usually stops with the four basic categories of messages. This chapter will help you develop a more sophisticated approach, one more suitable for advanced managerial communication.

This chapter divides the discussion of situational messages into two parts: those messages that are a combination of formulas and those that fall outside the formulas. The chapter also examines selected memoranda as unique applications of situational writing.

Situational Writing That Combines Formulas

As we discussed in Chapters 5 and 6, a direct organization is usually applied to positive and neutral messages, but either a direct or an indirect organization may be applied to negative and persuasive messages, depending on many variables. The steps in writing these messages create formulas for their construction; a formula-based situational message rearranges the steps and principles of the individual formulas in a manner appropriate for an individual, specific situation.

Because of the great similarity between the positive and neutral formulas, for instance, it is quite easy to prepare a message that contains both positive and neutral information. Indeed, the positive formula, which prioritizes information starting with most positive, would place neutral information immediately after the last bit of positive information. To show you techniques for writing effective situational messages, this chapter focuses on the more difficult-to-write combinations of direct [illegible] messages [illegible] exist, your understanding of these combinations w[illegible] others.

The four combinations that we will discuss are [illegible] positive/persuasive, (3) persuasive/negative, and (4) positive/persuasive/negative. These four represent most of the situational messages you will write and capture the technique of generating a plan for how to organize these messages.

In reading this discussion, refer to the summary in Table 7.1, which presents the organization of the five main message types we have already examined. Additionally, whenever you write situational messages using a combination of formulas, keep these principles in mind:

- Identify your goals and prioritize them.
- Empathize with your reader. What reaction will be likely? As with other messages, carefully analyze your audience.

Table 7.1 Formula Message Steps

	Positive Message	Neutral Message	Negative Message	Negative Message	Persuasive Message
Organization	Direct	Direct	Direct	Indirect	Indirect
Principles	Positive impact is additive; most benefit occurs when starting with most-positive information	Send important information first (unless negative); seek clarity and write to avoid follow-ups	Readers prefer the direct explanation of the bad news, or occasion calls for direct organization	De-emphasize the negative by placing it in middle of message; maintain goodwill; precede negative with explanation	Persuasion to action requires movement through all steps; softer-sell messages can assume early steps; action must come last
Steps	Most-positive information	Most-important information	Negative, presented gently	Delaying opening	Attention
	Next-most-positive information	Next-most-important information	Details	Explanation	Interest
	Next-most-positive information	Next-most-important information	Positive closing	Negative message	Desire
	Next-most-positive information	Next-most-important information		Positive closing	Conviction
					Action (request, easy to do, reader benefit)

- Try to maintain the integrity of the formulas; there are reasons for the order of the steps in each formula.
- Employ effective writing rules and techniques, as with any other written message, by making it readable, using the *you* tone, and including smooth transitions.

The Positive/Negative Combination

A message containing both positive and negative information is difficult to prepare because of the opposite approaches for negative and positive messages. Poorly prepared good-news/bad-news messages receive regular attention from many comedians with their line, "I have some good news and some bad news." To be effective, this combination needs to apply principles from the respective formulas.

In deciding how to mesh the two formulas, it may be helpful to place them side by side, as in Table 7.2. Positive information appears in two places in the negative-message formula—at the beginning and at the end. They are the two most likely places to report your good news. In deciding where to place the positive information, consider the following:

- Is the information so positive that if placed first, it will make the transition to the negative information extremely awkward? If so, move the positive information to the end.
- Is the positive information only moderately positive? If so, start your message with it.
- If you do not place the positive information first, will the receiver read the message? If not, present the positive information first. (This might occur when you are responding to a direct request from the reader.)
- Is the negative information only slightly negative? If so, it is easier to start with the positive and make a smooth transition to the negative. If the negative message is very strong, then start with a delaying opening and move to the explanation and the bad news before presenting the positive information.

In Chapter 6, the discussion of the indirect organization negative formula includes two important principles: bury the negative information in the middle of the letter, and always precede the negative information with an explanation. Adhere to these rules in your positive/negative combination message.

Table 7.2 **The Mixed Direct Positive/Indirect Negative Message**

Positive Message Steps	Negative Message Steps	Positive/Negative Mix Formulas
Most-positive information	Delaying opening information	Positive opening
Next-most-positive information	Explanation	Explanation
Next-most-positive information	Negative message	Negative message
Next-most-positive information	Positive closing	Positive closing

Table 7.3 highlights the four steps in a positive/negative message through an example that indicates the person may receive venture capital but not at the amount requested. The two formulas retain their identity while accomplishing their goals.

The Positive/Persuasive Combination

While the direct organization of the positive message and the indirect organization of the persuasive message conflict, the clash can be resolved by using the positive information as an attention-getting opening. Even in soft-sell persuasive messages, little harm is done by starting with positive information and then turning to interest, desire, or even conviction. Table 7.4 compares the two formulas and shows a resulting situational formula. Table 7.5 illustrates how the steps of the two formulas can be combined effectively.

The Persuasive/Negative Combination

Persuasive and negative messages share the indirect approach but follow different formulas. Table 7.6 compares the steps of these two formulas. In developing the situational message, retain the principles of both formulas: place the negative in the

Table 7.3 **A Sample Positive/Negative Message**

Positive/Negative Mix Formula	Example Thoughts from Steps
Positive opening	You are being considered for $200,000 in venture capital.
Explanation	XYZ Co. has limited assets available now; the economy is tight; others are also seeking our support.
Negative message	You are not receiving the full $250,000 you requested.
Positive closing	Entering into this venture will be to our mutual benefit; the project is promising.

Table 7.4 **The Mixed Direct Positive/Indirect Persuasive Message**

Positive Message Steps	Persuasive Message Steps	Positive/Persuasive Mix Formula
Most-positive information	Attention	Positive attention-getter
	Interest	
Next-most-positive information	Desire	Desire
Next-most-positive information	Conviction	Conviction
Next-most-positive information	Action (request, easy to do, reader benefit)	Action with emphasis on reader benefit

Table 7.5 A Sample Positive/Persuasive Message

Positive/Persuasive Mix Formula	Example Thoughts from Steps
Positive attention-getter with interest	Congratulations on being nominated for this year's Grant Wolford Young Manager Award.
Desire	Each year the Little Rock Jaycees select one of their members for this award; you are one of five nominees; the winner of this prestigious award receives $500.
Conviction	Each nominee must complete a seven-page questionnaire and take part in a 30-minute interview with the selection committee.
Action with emphasis on reader benefit	Complete the enclosed questionnaire and call us to schedule your interview. This is an impressive award.

Table 7.6 The Mixed Indirect Persuasive/Indirect Negative Message

Persuasive Message Steps	Negative Message Steps	Persuasive/Negative Mix Formula
Attention	Delaying opening	Attention/interest opening serves as delaying opening
Interest		
Desire	Explanation	Explanation
Conviction	Negative	Negative message
Action (request, easy to do, reader benefit)	Positive closing	Desire, conviction, and action steps, with stress on reader benefits, form positive closing

middle of the message after its explanation and end with a request for action after preparing the reader for that request.

The attention and interest steps of the hard-sell persuasive message can serve as the delaying opening of the negative message. The same is true if the persuasive message is softer in nature; still, use the desire or even conviction steps to delay the bad news. Follow with an explanation and the negative information. Once you present the negative information, leave it. Switch tone to the conviction or action step. Place special emphasis on the portion of the action step that reiterates the reader benefits. These benefits then serve as your positive closing. Table 7.7 shows one scheme for combining the steps of these two formulas.

Table 7.7 **A Sample Persuasive/Negative Message**

Persuasive/Negative Mix Formula	Example Thoughts from Steps
Attention/interest opening serves as delaying opening	You've worked for us before and have submitted bids for contracts to us.
Explanation	Oil prices are down; prospects for prices increasing are poor for the immediate future; as oil speculators, we are being hurt by the economy, too.
Negative message	We need to pay less than usual for oil-well drilling.
Desire, conviction, and action steps, with stress on reader benefits, form positive closing	There's still money to be made in oil; it's important to keep people on the payroll, to keep the equipment active, and to maintain a cash flow.
	Please submit a bid for drilling the nine shallow wells described in the attached specifications sheet; we both can benefit from you giving a low bid.

The Positive/Persuasive/Negative Combination

When you combine three of the formulas, it becomes more difficult to incorporate individual steps and principles. Table 7.8 shows positive, persuasive, and negative formulas and illustrates one situational approach that might grow from a need to combine them.

As with earlier combinations, positive information appears in the positions of primacy or recency, negative information follows the explanation, and the required persuasive steps are woven into the message prior to the action step. Depending on the relative strengths of the positive and negative information and the degree of persuasion required, you can design various situational formulas. Table 7.9 uses the situational formula from Table 7.8 and illustrates its steps with sample phrases.

If these various formulas and mixes seem confusing, there is a general technique you may use to generate your own situational formula. This technique has four steps:

1. Is the occasion indeed one that can be answered with a basic formula, or is a situational message necessary? If a simple formula can be used, apply it. Otherwise, go to step two.
2. If a situational message is required, which of the types of formulas are present?
3. Of the various types of formulas present, which one is the primary thrust of the message?
4. Using the primary message formula as a skeleton, apply the elements of the remaining message formulas to it. These elements may be inserted between steps of the primary formula or appended to the end, depending upon the situation.

Table 7.8 The Mixed Direct Positive/Indirect Persuasive/Indirect Negative Message

Positive Message	Persuasive Message	Negative Message	Positive/Persuasive/Negative Mix Formula
Most-positive information	Attention	Delaying opening	Positive attention-getter with interest, delays negative message
	Interest		
Next-most-positive information	Desire	Explanation	Desire and explanation serve as second-most-positive information
Next-most-positive information	Conviction	Negative message	Mention negative and weave in counterarguments for upcoming action
Next-most-positive information	Action (request, easy to do, reader benefit)	Positive closing	Request action with emphasis on positive aspects

Table 7.9 A Sample Positive/Persuasive/Negative Message

Positive/Persuasive/Negative Mix Formula	Example Thoughts from Steps
Positive attention-getter delays negative message	About a century ago, Butch Cassidy was offered amnesty; recently illegal aliens were also offered amnesty.
Desire and explanation serve as second-most-positive information	Amnesty can take on various forms; we need customers and payment for goods delivered; we dealt with you in good faith; you need our goods and a good credit rating.
Mention negative and weave in counterarguments for upcoming action	Pay us what you owe us; your credit rating is in jeopardy; we may need to contact credit services.
Request action with emphasis on positive aspects	We'll grant you amnesty on the penalty portion of your bill if you'll pay by Nov. 1; no questions will be asked, and you'll keep your credit card; mail your remittance today.

Nonformula Situational Writing

Not all situational messages are combinations of formulas—some reside outside the sphere of the formulas. As an advanced business communicator, you will need to follow formulas and write nonformula messages. Over time, your instincts will develop; you will gain experience and acquire knowledge from reading well-written nonformula situational letters written by others. Examples of nonformula situational messages are those that transmit goodwill, serve as a reference, encompass the collection-letter series, present negative-only content, serve as complaint letters and responses to complaints, deliver disciplinary reprimands, and are overt requests for action.

Goodwill Messages

Goodwill messages are a unique category of positive message. Like other positive messages, goodwill messages carry information likely to elicit positive responses from their readers; but with goodwill messages, the author makes an extra effort to garner an affirmative reaction from the reader that will benefit the author. This ulterior motive usually takes advantage of some pleasant event; letters or cards are sent to clients, customers, or employees for birthdays, promotions, reasons for congratulations, thank-you's, appreciations, anniversaries, special programs or sales, and holidays. These messages may benefit the author through increased business or strengthened loyalty. For similar reasons, it can be good business to send messages to new residents, new customers, regular customers, or prompt payers. As a manager, you are more likely to direct others to write goodwill messages than to prepare them yourself.

The goodwill message follows the same direct organization as other positive information messages by presenting the most positive information first. Figure 7.1 presents the body of a goodwill message.

A special case of the goodwill message is the extension of sympathy as a matter of course to a regular customer or employee on the occasion of a family member's illness or death. Clearly the topic is unpleasant. What sets this direct message apart is the potential for indirect reward, perhaps in the form of appreciation, on the part of the sender. As with other direct messages, start with your main thought.

The Recommendation and Reference Letters

In applying for jobs, usually you are asked to supply a list of references, as well as names of past and present supervisors or employers. If people on your list of references are contacted, assuming you sought their permission to supply their names, they most likely will deliver positive comments written in a letter of recommendation. Supervisors and employers, on the other hand, write letters of reference. Letters of reference often are unbiased and may be directed To Whom It May Concern. These two message types are often confused.

As a supervisor, you may receive requests for letters of reference after having allowed your name to be supplied by former or current employees who are applying for jobs or school. Your loyalty to former and current employees is likely to travel the grapevine; you will want to save copies of these letters. After having written a few letters of reference, you may find yourself following a certain pattern, in which case you may wish to develop a letter outline template that can be used for other employees. These outlines can be filled in with individualized information for each employee. Each letter—including those that follow your own form—should be individually typed and personalized to the applicant. See Figure 7.2 for an example of a letter of reference.

Figure 7.1 **Example of an Effective Goodwill Message**

Gardner, Givens
Certified Public Accountant
P.O. Box 1423
La Jolla CA 98192

November 23, 200X

Professor Adrian McGuffey
San Diego State University
San Diego CA 92183

Dear Professor McGuffey:

This is just a quick note to thank you for inviting Gardner, Givens into your classroom. We very much enjoyed describing our perceptions of the importance of communication to the accounting profession. The feedback received on this end from the students has been quite positive. We hope you, too, feel the time invested was worthwhile. I welcome any comments you wish to share about the speaker or presentation.

Gardner, Givens looks forward to participating in your classroom activities again. Such discussions afford us an excellent exposure to your high-caliber students.

For your leisure reading, I've enclosed our hot-off-the-press brochure describing the accounting services we provide.

Cordially,

GERALD GIVENS

Gerald Givens

GG: cs
Enclosure

When you write a letter of reference, you should (1) directly state the purpose of the letter; (2) explain the conditions and time frame of the acquaintanceship; (3) describe the applicant's attributes that would be of both general and specific value to the position; and (4) end with a willingness to expand on comments or answer questions.

Figure 7.2 **Example of an Effective Letter of Reference**

Adams Advertising
Baton Rouge LA 52063

May 7, 200X

Scott Burkette
Accounting Supervisor
3-A Advertising
845 Lost Creek Road, Eleventh Floor
Dallas TX 75213

Dear Mr. Burkette:

Thank you for the pleasant opportunity to recommend to you Mr. Bill Andersohn for your position of Account Executive. Not only is he one of our top Assistant Account Executives, he is also an especially mature, personable, and insightful individual. It is only because our comparable positions are and will continue to be filled for some time that we are not promoting him.

Two years ago Mr. Andersohn joined us as an intern; six months later I enthusiastically recruited him to assist me with consumer research. In evaluating consumers by a variety of characteristics, he showed an understanding of advertising and marketing and exhibited particular skill in working with sales and persuasive materials. These latter skills also have served him well in his pursuit of becoming an Account Executive.

He is a self-starter and a person who predictably meets deadlines. I often notice his impressive creativity—a characteristic he has applied in the design of some brochures.

I most sincerely believe that you would benefit from the abilities Mr. Andersohn has to offer. I enthusiastically recommend him.

Sincerely,

Jackson Adams

Jackson Adams
President

You help an applicant the most by giving relevant examples of his or her skills (the third step above). Rather than say, "She's a good manager," for example, say:

> She has demonstrated a superior ability to work with peers. Her colleagues cite her understanding of human nature, ability to direct subordinates, and achievement of high productivity. They say she is a team player.

Further, a comparison of the applicant to others can be beneficial. Generally, the more relevant information you write about the applicant, the more favorable the reaction. Readers know these letters take time, and they view your efforts accordingly. Conversely, a few checkmarks on a form and no responses to open-ended questions, such as "What makes you think this applicant might have a future with us?" do little to help the applicant. In some letters of reference, of course, you will find it necessary to be less than positive about the applicant. Not all the employees—current and past—under your supervision deserve glowing recommendations. You do little to enhance the image of your organization to another firm by exaggerating positive attributes of an ineffective or fired employee. Your message, therefore, is likely to carry less enthusiasm and fewer examples of positive behavior.

The question of ethical messages, in light of today's frequent unethical behavior by some in business, places renewed importance on saying what is accurate and can be defended.

Collection Letters

The collection letter is another message type that can benefit from an understanding of situational writing. As a manager, you may direct the writing of collection letters. Collection letters do not fit the recommended indirect approach to negative message writing because they usually consist of not one message but a series of messages, often moving from light in tone in the first message to stern in later messages. Many businesses prepare a series of three, four, or even five messages. Frequently the series starts as a gentle, direct message, progresses to an indirect message, and concludes with a strong direct message. The first message may take the form of a card with a thought such as, "Oops, I forgot to make my payment!" A second message may still be slightly positive and relatively direct, such as the main thought, "It's now been 45 days since your payment was due."

A third letter in a series probably stresses the positive reasons for making the payment, such as maintaining a good relationship, keeping a credit card, or avoiding complications.

In a fourth letter, the tone of the reasons may change to more negative thoughts: avoiding legal issues, returning the goods, and so on. A final letter, no matter how many letters are in the series, will be the most firm. If the company has decided to take the matter to court, this letter will present that decision. On the other hand, if the decision is to give up on the effort, perhaps because the legal case is weak or the amount small, the final letter might be a letter that says, in effect, "Return your credit card, and don't shop here anymore."

Figures 7.3 through 7.7 deliver the bodies of five messages in a collection letter series. Note the progression toward sternness. These letters are adapted from a software package that contains dozens of collection letters and facilitates the merging of mailing lists containing tagged, delinquent addresses with various categories of letters.[1] In addition to many other letters from which to choose, the software includes a spell checker, ample control of the messages, and a wide variety of applications, such as service, professional, product, or trade businesses.

Figure 7.3 **First Notice Letter in a Collection Series**

Dear :

Everyone forgets once in a while. Or perhaps our bill is buried in a pile of paperwork. However, now that I have brought it to your attention, perhaps you could dig it out right now and take care of it. The total balance due is $ ______ .

As a reminder, our credit terms are net 30 days. Past-due balances are subject to a finance charge of 10 percent per month. I'm sure you'll want to avoid any additional finance charges and get your account back into good standing by taking care of your balance now. I know we would appreciate it, too.

Thank you for your prompt response to this payment request. If you have any questions about your account, please call.

Sincerely,

Source: Adapted from One-Write Plus 8.0 © 2002 by Peachtree Software, Inc.

Figure 7.4 **Second Notice Letter in a Collection Series**

Dear :

In scanning our accounts, we noticed that yours is still carrying a past-due balance. We had to double-check, because that seems out of character, but there the balance was.

Right now, you owe us $ ______ , including finance charges. You probably realize that past-due balances incur finance charges at a rate of 10 percent a month if they are not paid within ______ days.

Please take just a moment right now to find your checkbook and write us a check. You would be saving additional finance charges and resuming your usual good standing.

Thanks for taking care of this right away. If you have any questions about your account, please give us a call.

Sincerely,

Source: Adapted from One-Write Plus 8.0 © 2002 by Peachtree Software, Inc.

Figure 7.5 **Third Notice Letter in a Collection Series**

Dear :

Can you help us with something? I've been trying to collect a past-due amount on your account, and up to now I haven't had much luck. Could you look into why the payment is being held up? Our records show you owe us a total of $ ______ .

You are in business, too, so I'm sure you can understand our concern. This matter really needs clearing up and you need to get your account back in order.

We would be happy to answer any questions you have about the charges and will work with you to get your account up to date. We expect either a check or a phone call in the next few days. Thanks.

Sincerely,

Source: Adapted from One-Write Plus 8.0 © 2002 by Peachtree Software, Inc.

Figure 7.6 **Fourth Notice Letter in a Collection Series**

Dear :

Something must be terribly wrong. Your account is delinquent and has been for several months. We really need your help to get this straightened out.

As things now stand, you owe a total of $ ______ . We have made several efforts to collect, but to date they have all been ignored.

It is very important that you forward your payment immediately, or get in touch with us to tell us when you will be able to pay us. Obviously, if you fail to do so, there are alternative ways of making our point. However, I can't believe that will be necessary.

If you value your good name, personally and professionally, you will make good on this obligation. I'll be expecting your call or your check.

Sincerely,

Source: Adapted from One-Write Plus 8.0 © 2002 by Peachtree Software, Inc.

Figure 7.7 **Fifth Notice Letter in a Collection Series**

Dear :

Your account is now seriously delinquent. You owe a total past due amount of $_____. We must receive payment in full immediately.

Your negligence in this matter is of great concern to us. You have ignored numerous requests for payment and failed to contact us to explain the circumstances that have held up your payment.

You are legally and morally obligated for this bill. Further delay may force us to take legal action to collect what is owed us. This could prove embarrassing and damage your personal and professional reputation.

Please do not let this problem come to that. Write out the check now, or pick up the phone and call. Do it today. Do it now.

Sincerely,

Source: Adapted from One-Write Plus 8.0 © 2002 by Peachtree Software, Inc.

Negative-Only Messages

Sometimes you will want to disregard the goal of maintaining goodwill evident in the indirect negative formula and assumed in the direct negative formula and focus on the bad news. We've just seen how a collection letter series typically begins positively and progresses to increasingly firm letters. By the time you have mailed three, four, or even five reminder letters, you have probably lost your patience. The payment, and not customer goodwill, is now the most important issue. A negative-only message conveys the extreme urgency and severity of the situation. A negative-only message differs from a direct negative message in its lack of concern for the feelings of the receiver. The body of such a message follows:

> Over six months ago you made purchases at our store totaling $795. Because of your disregard for our requests for payment and your lack of explanation, we must turn over your account to a collection agency. While its techniques for obtaining payment often are not as understanding as ours, you have left us no other option. Further, as spelled out in the state's civil code, we have the legal right to require the return of your charge card. We are exercising that right. Return your card in the enclosed envelope by April 9. If you fail to do so the matter will be remanded to the county sheriff's office for action, as prescribed by law.

The reader of this letter will have little doubt that the company is no longer gently seeking payment. The gravity of the situation is conveyed by the negative-only message. Most businesspeople resist writing negative-only messages unless absolutely necessary.

Complaints and Responses to Complaints

Another type of nonformula situational message is the complaint message and its counterpart, the response to the complaint. While, as a businessperson, you are more likely to be writing responses to complaints or directing others to do so, both situations are common in business.

The Complaint Message

Companies today are much more open to customers' inquiries than in past decades. Nevertheless, not all complaints produce satisfactory results. The likelihood of receiving your desired response largely depends on the quality of your complaint message.

Typically you initiate your complaint with the seller of the product or provider of the service. Next you complain to the manufacturer, perhaps several times and to increasingly higher levels of management. Finally, you may seek satisfaction by going to trade associations, national headquarters, consumers' rights organizations, or even to the courts. The complaint message is an important part of this process.

Complaint messages, of course, can be from individual customers or from companies complaining about products or services supplied by other companies. While the content may vary, the principles are the same. Here are some suggestions for a complaint message written by a customer.

Begin your complaint message with details, not angry criticisms. Explain what you purchased in detail—give serial and model numbers. Tell when and where you made the purchase. Be precise. What was the location of the store, and what was the exact date? You may wish to include a salesperson's name, if available. If this message is part of a lengthy complaint process, give the history of your complaint. While you want to be complete and to give important detail, do not overburden the reader with unnecessary information.

Next, explain the problem. What went wrong? What were the conditions at the time? Were you following the manufacturer's instructions? How long after the purchase did this occur?

Third, verify your purchase with copies (not originals) of sales receipts, checks, and guarantees. Check the guarantee to see if there are specific steps or information that you have forgotten, such as handling or postage charges.

Fourth, state specifically what you want. Do you seek reimbursement or replacement? By what date do you want action? Only if you have no other recourse should you threaten legal action.

You may reorganize these steps, depending on the situation, to be even more effective. However, all four thoughts are likely to appear somewhere in your message.

In writing this message, do not be sarcastic, aggressive, or negative. Let the facts present your case. Keep a copy of the message you write as documentation of what you said, to whom, and when.

Picture the complaint message as a mix of the negative and persuasive categories. The information has a negative component, and you are seeking action from the company. The negative information is in the middle of the message, and the action request appears at the end. Beyond this similarity, however, a complaint message does not follow the two formulas. See Figure 7.8 for the U.S. Office of Consumer Affairs's sample complaint letter.

Figure 7.8 **Sample Complaint Letter**

Your Address
Your City, State, Zip Code
Date

Appropriate Person
Company Name
Street Address
City, State, Zip Code

Dear (Appropriate Name) :

Last week I purchased (or had repaired) a (name of product with serial or model number or service performed). I made this purchase at (location, date, and other important details of the transaction).

Unfortunately, your product (or service) has not performed satisfactorily (or the service was inadequate) because ______________________. Therefore, to solve the problem, I would appreciate your (here state the specific action you want). Enclosed are copies (copies—NOT originals) of my records (receipts, guarantees, warranties, cancelled checks, contracts, model and serial numbers, and any other documents).

I am looking forward to your reply and resolution of my problem, and will wait three weeks before seeking third-party assistance. Contact me at the above address or by phone at (home and office numbers here).

Sincerely,

Your Name

Describe your Purchase

Name Product and Serial or Model Number or Service

State Problem

Give History of Problem

Ask for Specific Action

Include Date and Location of Purchase and Other Details

Enclose Copies of Documents

State Reasonable Time for Action

Include Your Address, Work and Home Phone Numbers

Keep Copies of Your Letter and All Related Documents and Information

Source: United States Office of Consumer Affairs, Washington, D.C.

The Response to the Complaint Letter

Responding to a well-written complaint letter—one that has presented evidence in a logical format—can be quite a challenge. In so doing, consider the following:

- Can you do what the writer is requesting? If so, use the positive formula and relate the good news immediately.
- Do you need more information? Use a neutral approach. Be pleasant but do not be too positive; you do not want to get the reader's hopes up and then dash them with your next letter.
- Should you turn down the request? Consider writing a standard negative formula letter.
- Do you have both positive and negative messages to relay? Apply the principles of each as discussed in formula-based situational letters.
- Is this response outside the formula-based situational letter approach? If so, why? Is a nonformula situational letter needed?
- What images are you projecting? You are the company, and the reader's image of the company may well depend on how you write this letter. Avoid hiding behind such weak phrases as company policy. Use solid reasons, such as expired warranties or lack of proof of purchase.
- Is an apology or indication of sympathy appropriate? Although your reasons should generally speak for themselves, there are times when you should express sympathy or state an apology.
- Is the message tailored for the individual, if possible? A form response can be irritating in and of itself.

You may need to respond with a *yes, but* letter that agrees with many of the author's points but disagrees with one or more other crucial points. For example, if you received a complaint letter from a firm that was rejected from the proposal process because their submission missed the deadline, you might agree with their points, stressing the importance of doing the best job possible in writing the proposal, that writing proposals takes time, and that it is a service to hire college students as couriers, even though they sometimes make deliveries at the wrong address. However, you must explain the reason for deadlines and that you always adhere to them, as stated in your Request for Proposals.

Disciplinary Reprimands

Another message type with negative content that you are likely to encounter is the disciplinary reprimand. Written reprimands usually follow spoken reprimands and may substantiate some disciplinary problem. Managers typically place copies in the offenders' personnel files. As a manager, you may find writing reprimands an unpleasant but necessary activity. Although a reprimand may appear to be a situation that calls for an indirect negative formula, reprimands usually avoid that formula and use a more direct approach. Follow these three steps.

First, begin the message with a direct statement of the action you are taking and why you are taking it. Explain what behavior prompted the reprimand, and why. Tell the reader what action can help correct the problem. Be firm.

Second, support the situation with specific facts. When and where did the offense occur? What were or might have been the consequences of this behavior?

Finally, explain the consequences if your instructions are not followed. Here is the body of a sample reprimand:

> Because of your misuse of the company computer network, your access code that gets you through the internal firewall to the Internet is being revoked. Our telecommunications department has found that you have been frequenting Internet sites that do not have anything to do with your job. Over the past four weeks you were logged into the system for over nine and one-half hours during the working day to Internet auction sites such as eBay. When you were given your access code, you signed a statement saying that the Internet would be used for business only. Last August, you were reminded of the company policy regarding Internet use when three questionable sites were accessed from your computer.
>
> The company places repeated Internet misuse in the category of disciplinary problems that can lead to termination. You are advised to reread our Internet policies. A copy is attached.

Overt Request for Action

A final type of nonformula situational message is the overt request for action. Using the persuasive formula, you first decide where on the spectrum of hard to soft sell the message should fall and then begin with the appropriate step that leads to action. In a moderate soft-sell message, for example, you might assume that you have the reader's attention and interest and, therefore, begin with the desired step.

A direct, overt request for action disregards the persuasive formula and opens with request for action. This may be appropriate when the requested action embodies the attention through conviction steps. The following opening illustrates such an occasion:

> Your address places you in the North Shore Subdivision. As a North Shore resident, you are no doubt aware that no full-service banking facility exists in the neighborhood. Until now, that is. To introduce you to North Shore Bank, we'd like you to. . . .

Other occasions for the overt action request are with directives and reprimands, as discussed above.

Two Examples of Nonformula Situational Writing

As you gain experience writing your own situational letters, you will begin to notice the effective style of others. Here are two examples.

Rise in Insurance Costs

In Figure 7.9, a letter from a boat owners association informs members of a rise in insurance costs. The letter is unusual because it presents the bad news (rise in costs) at the beginning and even in negative terms (unpleasant, and none of us like that). The second paragraph explains the true goal of the letter: not to deliver the news of a rise in costs but, rather, to promote understanding of the reasons for the rise.

The letter switches from the explanation to a more upbeat persuasive twist to help sell the insurance program and concludes on a positive note.

Figure 7.9 **Example of an Effective Situational Letter**

BOAT OWNERS ASSOCIATION of THE UNITED STATES

BOAT US

Washington National Headquarters
880 South Pickett Street, Alexandria Va. 22304

(703) 823-9550

Dear Member:

This year we are faced with the unpleasant fact that insurance rates are rising. None of us likes that. I, for one, have never filed an insurance claim on my home, autos, or boats, pay my premiums faithfully every year, and see my rates going up with everyone else's.

It is only natural to want to know why, and the purpose of this letter is to provide some of the answers.

The reasons are both complex and simple: Complex because they involve concepts such as increasing numbers of lawsuits and society's view of legal liability. Complex because they involve an insurance company philosophy called "cash-flow underwriting" (pursued for the past seven years) that depends on high interest rates and return on investments to cover claims and make profits. Simple because for several years now insurance companies have not been making profits.

Insurance companies won't continue business as usual when they lose money in successive years. They are going to make changes. The question is, What do they change and how? In most cases, the answer is higher rates. In a few, it is canceling or nonrenewing coverage.

Inevitably the question arises, Why not have those that filed claims pay the increase? In fact, those with claims at BOAT/U.S. do pay a heavier price as they lose their 10% "no-loss" credit for one year. Repeat claimants whose claims reflect a lack of reasonable care are refused future participation in the Group. Since we do not know which of us will suffer an accident in 200X, everyone must share to some extent in the increase. We truly regret the necessity of the increase and hope for your continued support and participation.

On the good side, 200X saw a record number of Members participating in the BOAT/U.S. Marine Insurance Group, over one billion dollars worth of boats insured, loss prevention material distributed on hurricane preparation and avoiding sinkings at the dock, and thousands of boats assisted with problems.

Your Association staff is committed to being there to assist when you need help. We wish you a safe and enjoyable year on the water.

Sincerely,

William M. Oakerson

William M. Oakerson, Director
Marine Insurance Division

Service, Savings, and Representation for the Nation's Boat Owners

Source: Used with permission of Boat Owners Association of the United States.

Order Canceled

Figure 7.10 illustrates a beautifully written situational letter. Unknown to some people, there is a law that requires mail-order houses to either fill orders within a prescribed time period or refund money. This letter is written to a customer to conform to this law. Read the message and note the tone: concern by the company for the customer, emphasis on high-quality products, adherence to the law, and desire for additional business.

Figure 7.10 **Example of an Effective Situational Letter**

L.L.Bean
FREEPORT, MAINE 04033
Outdoor Sporting Specialties
TEL. (207) 865-4761

Dear Customer,

Thank you for your order for the Pathfinder Pants. Your request for the purchase of this item is very much appreciated and our being able to ship it to you in a timely manner is important to both of us.

L.L. Bean is very concerned with providing quality merchandise. The fabric quality on the initial shipment of these pants was not satisfactory and shipment had to be returned to our supplier. The Federal Trade Commission requires that we fill your order within 60 days. For that reason we must cancel your order for the above item. Your refund check is enclosed.

We expect our shipment of the Pathfinder Pants by late September. You are welcome to reorder by returning the enclosed order blank; please include the stock number, color, size, and method of payment. A postpaid envelope is provided for your convenience.

I apologize for this poor service. Your patronage is valued here and we look forward to providing you with fine quality merchandise and service in the future.

Sincerely yours,

Marj Porter

Marj Porter
Customer Service
Manager

MP/klr
Encls:

Source: Reproduced with permission from L.L. Bean.

The first paragraph provides background in a positive tone. Paragraph two establishes the concept of quality and mentions the law. Before the reader can complain, however, mention is made of the refund check. To maintain the order, the reader learns how to reorder and receives a prepaid envelope. The letter concludes with an unnecessary apology for the poor service, even though the service appears quite good. This self-effacing phrase emphasizes the company's concern for the customer.

The letter breaks most of the rules established for formula messages, yet successfully creates a positive perception of the company. It also serves as a reminder that breaking rules can sometimes be quite effective.

Writing Memoranda

As mentioned in an earlier chapter, there are few differences in the organization of e-mail messages, memoranda, and letters. Further, the principles of the direct, indirect, and situational organization of messages apply equally well to all three. Hard-copy media such as memoranda and letters differ somewhat in appearance. *To*: and *From*: replace a letter's inside address and signature block, for example. Further, letters usually are sent outside the organization while memoranda usually are internal messages. As internal messages, memoranda tend to be more informal and more direct than their letter counterparts.

As chapter 4 explained, the medium of e-mail can carry any form of message. Most business e-mail messages are internal, but they may also cross boundaries, such as messages from customers to companies, or from colleagues working together in two different companies. In many cases, the hard-copy memorandum has been replaced by the e-mail message that carries the same content. However, the hard-copy memorandum still is valuable for mass distribution to large groups, some of whom may not be comfortable with e-mail systems; for establishing a paper trail; and for ease in filing for future reference.

More so than with letters, memos—either hard-copy or electronic—should start with a statement of the purpose early in the message. In other words, memos are more likely either to be direct messages or to bend the formula steps of the indirect organization to become situational messages.

Memoranda also need special visual treatment. Keep paragraphs short, much like newspaper articles. Consider using bullets (asterisks, lowercase o's, or large dots) in front of items in a list. One approach to typing memoranda—enhanced by software templates—places the main text of the memo in a narrow column and then, to the left of it, adds notes summarizing the content to the right. An example appears in Figure 7.11.

Another characteristic that can set memoranda apart from letters is the inclusion of humor. Humor—or attempts at it—requires judicious use in both memos and letters. However, when the internal message is lighthearted and relatively unimportant, humor in a memo can distinguish its author as a person with personality and depth. As long as humor is on target, does not embarrass others, is not overdone, and is not too frequent, it can reflect positively on its author. A word of caution is needed, however; what is funny to you may not be funny to others. You may wish to test your message on a neutral friend. Figure 7.12 presents a lighthearted e-mail message.

Figure 7.11 **New Memorandum Format Option**

Memo

To: Regional Managers
From: Fred Gilley, Vice President, Planning
Subject: Improving Regional Meetings
Date: December 3, 200X

Managers, I have a few thoughts for you:

AMENITIES AT MEETINGS

One of the objectives of regional meetings should be to provide opportunities for attendees to meet and talk with one another. Our decentralized organization does not lend itself to intraregional communications. Therefore, we should make the most of our regional meetings by providing the following:

- a reception for everyone the night we arrive
- a luncheon for everyone on Friday
- a reception for VIPs and speakers on Friday night
- coffee midmorning Friday and Saturday
- coffee and soft drinks midafternoon Friday.

Minimal cost is involved in providing these amenities and they provide the occasions for informal visits.

JOINT MEETINGS

Last year the Southwest region and the Southeast region met in New Orleans for a joint meeting. The regions shared common discussions for the first day and then split into their respective groups for the next two days for topics relevant only to themselves.

Those in attendance agree the sessions were valuable and that it was enjoyable interacting with those from another region. Maybe other regions should consider having joint meetings.

Figure 7.12 **Humorous Message**

X-Originating-IP: [142, 221, 198, 916]
FROM: Alex Bartholemew <abart76@fastnet.com>
TO: Brand Management Department
<dept.list.serv@fastnet.com>
SUBJECT: Season Football Tickets
DATE: May 1, 200X

For the past few years, several members of the Brand Management Department have banded together to submit their season football ticket applications as a group. As a result, we have been able to secure a large block of seats.

This procedure has the advantage of (a) securing a very good location, and (b) allowing you to enjoy the fine company of your colleagues, and (c) providing the opportunity to speculate as to who Jenny Carnahan's date will be. It has the disadvantage that arises from the fact that Bill Maldando and I almost always show up. Furthermore, you might be located between me and the concession stand, a high-traffic area.

All this notwithstanding, if you are interested, just deliver your application and your check to my mailbox by May 13, 200X. On May 14, depending on how many applications I receive, I will either deliver them to the ticket office and demand with righteous fervor that we be given preferential seating, or head for Rio.

Remember, we play A&M here next year, so this offer is not for the squeamish.

If you have any questions about the procedure or whether you'll ever see the money or your tickets again after you place your check in my hands, feel free to ask.

Source: Reproduced with permission from Robert Prentice, MSIS Department, University of Texas–Austin.

Summary

Situational messages require advanced levels of planning and audience analysis because they do not clearly fit either the direct or indirect organizational approaches. Instead, they piece together the steps and principles of other messages to create a unique approach to a specific message. This chapter illustrates the combination of a variety of message types to create plans for situational messages. The main focus of this chapter, then, is illustrating the thinking that supports the planning and writing of messages that are not obviously direct or indirect.

Several types of situational messages do not follow the combination-of-formulas approach. They include goodwill messages, the collection-letter series, negative-only messages, complaints and responses to complaints, disciplinary reprimands, overt requests for action, and selected memoranda.

The experienced writer uses the principles of writing discussed in Chapters 5, 6, and 7 to prepare specialized messages to well-defined audiences. With experience, you will learn to write according to the situation and to place less emphasis on the steps of the formulas.

Discussion Questions

1. What lies behind the concept of formula writing?
2. What is the difference between formula and nonformula situational writing?
3. How much discretion do you have in following the formulas for situational writing presented in the chapter?
4. What is the 80/20 rule? Does it apply to situational messages? How?
5. As part of a company 360-degree appraisal process, you have been asked to evaluate a colleague and friend who was in the same training class as you when you both started three years ago as consumer researchers in a marketing department of a large Internet provider company. You are to write a letter to your common boss with a copy to your colleague. You need to comment on his communication skills (you think they are excellent), understanding of the job (adequate), technical understanding (could be better), and potential for improvement (excellent). How would you organize the message?
6. Your company has long had a mission statement, but few employees know of its existence or content. Because of your communication training, the company president asked you to send an e-mail message to employees explaining the existence and content of the statement, and then seeking their active support of working toward that mission. How would you organize the message?
7. Humor in the workplace, and especially when written, can be tricky. What criteria do you apply to workplace humor? What types do you like to receive? Send?

Communication in Action

1. Perhaps you have saved some of your better-written memos or letters. If not, do so. Then examine them from the viewpoint of an organization. Were some situational? What mix of formulas was used? Did they follow the principles established in this chapter?
2. Locate an example of a goodwill message and critique it. Was it successful? Why? How could it be improved?
3. Examine a block of messages, such as a group of e-mail messages after an extended absence. What percentage are of direct organization? Indirect organization? Situational messages?

Internet

4. Search the Internet for web sites that give guidance on the preparation of collection letters. What advice beyond this textbook did you acquire?
5. Use the Internet to learn about the legal implications of writing a letter of recommendation or of reference. What is the degree of your exposure? Is there a difference in legal exposure between the two? What recommendations would you make to authors of such letters?
6. Use the Internet for guidance on how to write a reference request letter. Find sample letters. What are the main steps in writing such a letter?

InfoTrac

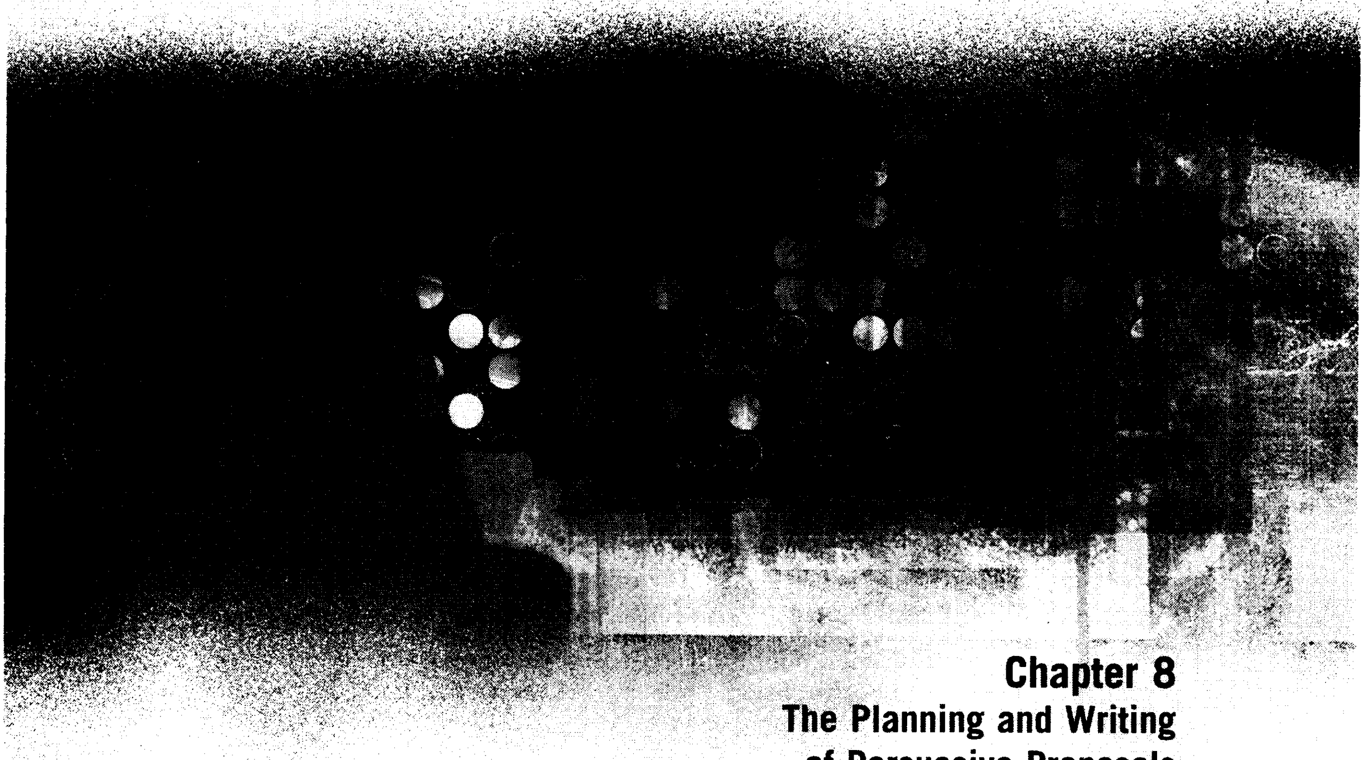
7. Research the underlying concepts that support the various message types, such as the indirect persuasive. Also, seek out information on the order of presentation of ideas and the psychology behind message organization. (The notes section in the preceding two chapters can help you get started.) How strong is the research support? From what disciplines does this support come?
8. Using InfoTrac, search for occurrences of the concept "situational messages" in the literature. How widely used does the term appear to be? Does its wide or narrow use affect its underlying philosophy?

Note

1. One-Write Plus (Version 8.0) [Computer software]. Norcross, GA: Peachtree Software. Retrieved from **http://www.peachtree.com/onewrite/**.

Part Three

Written Communication: Expanded Messages



usually the more difficult type to write because the target audience must first be convinced that a need exists and then that the response is worth the time and money required. Preparing and presenting unsolicited proposals generally requires exceptional persuasive skills.

When a company requests a proposal to supply specific goods, to solve a problem, or to exploit some situation, the proposal is solicited. There are two types of solicited proposals. Advertised proposals are requested when the desired product or service can be defined concisely and quantitatively. Potential suppliers learn of the requirements in a detailed Invitation for Bids (IFB). These proposals favor the lowest bidder. Another type of solicited proposal is the negotiated proposal, which allows the writer to specify a proposed solution to the need. The negotiated proposal originates with a Request for Proposals (RFP) from the potential customer, which explains the need and seeks responses. Negotiated proposals usually are not awarded on the basis of price, but on the quality of the solution and the ability to implement that solution.[2]

Forms of Proposals

Proposals are delivered orally, in writing, or both. Even if a simple proposal is generated by a conversation, do not neglect the important task of spelling it out in writing. A written proposal minimizes misunderstandings or disagreements about the type, quality, and cost of goods or services provided. Many proposals constitute the basis of legally binding contracts. There are four forms of proposals, which differ by the extent of work required to prepare them rather than by their content.

Letter proposals are brief proposals written for projects that are not complex or expensive enough to warrant a longer document. Use this form to present either qualification proposals or commercial proposals.

Preliminary proposals (sometimes called short proposals) find application in service areas such as public accounting, advertising, or communications or in technical areas such as research and development. They may be either qualification or commercial proposals.

Detailed proposals (sometimes called formal proposals) are the longest and most complex proposals. They are usually commercial proposals and contain precise implementation plans and cost estimates.

Oral presentations generally accompany written qualification proposals but should not take the place of them. An oral presentation is an opportunity for experts to explain their areas of knowledge and experience, to detail the services they can provide, and to give immediate feedback to questions.[3]

A fifth form of proposal, of interest to advanced business students and graduate students, is the thesis or dissertation proposal. Because this form of proposal has such a unique audience and is not a business proposal per se, it is discussed separately at the end of this chapter.

The Proposal-Planning Process

Planning is the most crucial stage in preparing a proposal and, if done properly, will greatly increase your company's chances of producing a successful proposal.

Thorough planning will make the actual writing of an effective proposal easy; view the effort as an investment in success. There are four major steps to the planning process: (1) screening; (2) creating a capture plan; (3) formulating solution and implementation strategies; and (4) budgeting and scheduling the proposal effort.

Screening: The Bid/No Bid Decision

Within the planning process, screening is perhaps the most important aspect. Omission of this task can cost your company time and money. When your company receives a Request for Proposals (RFP) or an Invitation for Bids (IFB), you must screen the document as soon as possible. Do this even if you have discussed the project with the potential client. Screening involves asking yourself whether your company should consider competing for the job. You should read the RFP or IFB thoroughly to determine if your firm qualifies. Many government RFPs contain special requirements for firms, such as having company headquarters located in specific states or having full-time engineers on staff. Read the RFP carefully, including the fine print.

You must also determine whether your company is capable of doing the work. Do you have the resources and expertise necessary to bid on the job? If not, can you obtain the resources to enable you to meet the requirements? Many companies waste time and money bidding on work of which they are not capable. Consider how taking the job will influence your staff's workload and the work being performed for your other clients. Other strategic questions that you should ask are whether taking this job will enhance your reputation and what your chances of winning are.

A final and essential step in screening is to determine the total value of the project or sale to your company. Will this opportunity reap an adequate return or profit for your company? If not, look for a higher-value project on which to bid.[4]

Creating a Capture Plan

A capture plan is an analytical planning document prepared for internal use to ensure the creation of a winning proposal. Preparation involves careful planning to review whether all variables that might affect the proposal have been considered. The capture plan entails conducting a customer analysis and a situational analysis.[5]

Conduct a Customer Analysis

The customer-analysis step, much like the audience-analysis step discussed in Chapter 4, involves researching the entity that is requesting the proposal to discover facts that will help you formulate a proposal that responds to their needs and has a high probability of being selected. The customer analysis is analogous to doing your homework and is essential preparation for the later writing of the proposal. A customer analysis is composed of four parts:

1. *Problem Identification.* Although most requests for qualification proposals outline the problem to be solved, you should not take for granted that this is the primary problem. The problem stated in the RFP may be a symptom of a greater, underlying but unstated problem. What does the customer perceive as the solution to the problem? Can this be improved on while

staying within the scope of the RFP? In the case of a commercial proposal, the type of goods the potential customer is requesting may not be adequate for the desired tasks. The best way to get clarification is to ask questions. Meet with the contracting agent in charge of receiving proposals. In addition to obtaining valuable information for identifying the problem, formulating your strategy, and writing your proposal, by having such a meeting you let the organization know of your intention to submit a proposal. Furthermore, the meeting may provide some hints of the contractor's expectations on some issues about which you cannot ask direct questions. For example, a nonverbal cue such as tone of voice may inadvertently reveal an estimate of the amount budgeted for the project.

2. *Needs Analysis.* If a formal RFP (or an IFB) is issued, be sure that you understand what the potential customer is asking for. Do not rely on previous discussions with the customer. Do not read just the Statement of Work section in the RFP or IFB. Examine the entire document, including the attachments and exhibits, which may contain important information that is not presented elsewhere. What assumptions are inherent but not stated explicitly? Are these realistic assumptions? Restate exactly what you believe the customer is requesting in the RFP or IFB and ask why.
3. *Customer's Previous Procurement Background.* Know the buying behavior of the potential customer. Conduct research to determine

   - Background about the customer found on a Web site.
   - The goods or services purchased.
   - The quality of goods or services purchased.
   - The price paid for the goods or services.
   - The customer's satisfaction with the goods or services.

   Use the results of your research when you formulate a solution to the problem. The information could spare you from proposing a brand of product or solution that is not satisfactory, a product that is priced too high, or one that is of inappropriate quality.
4. *Proposal Evaluator.* Find out who in the requesting company will evaluate the proposal. An individual or a team may serve as evaluators. Either way, a formal list of criteria is likely to be used in the evaluation. These criteria can serve as a checklist for tailoring your proposal. If the evaluator is an individual, knowledge of personal background can reveal information that might help you. For instance, if the evaluator has an accounting background, you can anticipate concern about the financial aspects and cost containment of your proposal. Knowledge of evaluation criteria for previous projects may prove useful as well. Does the company usually award contracts or jobs to the lowest bidder, or to the bidder that offers the best solution to the problem, or to the company that offers the highest-quality goods? Are bids evaluated according to a combination of factors, and if so, what are the weightings?

Conduct a Situational Analysis

As the second portion of the capture plan, the situational analysis scrutinizes the internal and external environment to make the proposal more persuasive. It supplies the groundwork for turning your proposal into a competitive marketing tool by providing information to outdo your competition, emphasize your strengths, and highlight major selling points. There are three components to the situational analysis:

1. *Competitor Analysis.* Know your competition, their strengths and weaknesses, and what they are likely to propose or offer. In most cases, you will not be able to find out which companies are submitting proposals, and you will have to assume that all firms similar to yours will submit proposals. However, you may learn who bids on similar projects by examining public records. Especially if you are trying to win a state or federal contract, previous bids are probably in the public record. As you analyze bids in these records, keep in mind that some companies bid at a loss to gain knowledge in a new area or to establish a reputation. Wasson contends that each bidder tends to follow a consistent pattern in estimating cost. Knowing your competition can influence your final product and your chances of being awarded the job.[6]
2. *Internal Analysis.* A winning proposal convinces the proposal evaluator that your company is the one to implement the solution to the problem. Conduct an internal analysis of your firm with this criterion in mind. What strengths does your company possess that should be played up in the proposal? Are there weaknesses that will hamper your ability to perform the work? How is your company uniquely suited to perform the work required for this proposal? Do you have previous experience in this specific field? In the proposal, use the strengths identified in this analysis to demonstrate that your firm has performed well in the past and can do so in the future. Build on or sell your company's reputation.
3. *Theme Development.* Themes are major selling points that run through your proposal. Develop a few major themes that communicate that your ideas are better than everyone else's. Label your themes with key words and weave these words into your title, headings, introduction, and text. Examples of themes are high quality, cost justification, efficiency, reliability of your research, major benefits of your plan, and return on investment.

In summary, a capture plan forces a proposal team or writer to analyze crucial strategic issues before writing the proposal. Perhaps the greatest benefit of a capture plan is that it helps identify the nuances of the proposal environment as well as the major themes to which one must be sensitive in order to write a winning proposal.

Formulating a Solution and Strategies

Once you have decided to submit a proposal and have evaluated the customer and the situation, the next step is to formulate a solution. The capture plan helped you understand strategic issues and identify the problem; now use these issues to devise a solution to the problem. For instance, if the problem is that a company needs some software that doesn't exist, the proposed solution might be that your staff could develop such software. With a solution prepared, you need to devise strategies for implementing it. An effective proposal contains these three kinds of strategies:

1. *Technical Strategy.* Your technical strategy explains the solution (be it a product or service) that is being proposed and how the solution will be implemented. The goal is to convince the reader that your solution best meets the customer's need. If you are preparing a qualification proposal, you will discuss your proposed research methodology or type of analysis. Readers usually evaluate this section first to ensure that a feasible solution is being proposed.
2. *Management Strategy.* The management section establishes your company's ability to carry out the solution proposed or to deliver the goods promised. Whether you are writing a commercial or a qualification proposal, you must establish your firm's ability to implement the proposed solution through expert personnel, experience, insight, facilities, internal organization, and quality control as well as a schedule or a timetable for implementation. Customers that are governmental agencies may want to review your company policies, finances, or personnel records.
3. *Cost Strategy or Cost Estimate.* Your reader needs information to assess if his or her company can afford your products or services and if your offering is reasonably or competitively priced. Many simple commercial proposals are evaluated on the basis of cost after the evaluator determines that the offering meets the company's need. The technical and cost sections of a qualification proposal carry equal weight to the proposal evaluator.

For lengthy, detailed proposals, each of the three strategies may be presented as a separate section or even as individual volumes, as in the case of large government contracts. Letter or memo proposals devote a paragraph or two to each strategy.

Budgeting and Scheduling the Proposal Effort

The final step in the planning process is budgeting and scheduling the proposal writing process. Because some proposals take months to prepare and require considerable financial investment, it is necessary to prepare a proposal cost budget and a proposal schedule. A proposal manager monitors and controls proposal costs. Calculations in employee-hours ensure that all members of the proposal team are performing their assigned tasks.

Preparation and use of a Gantt chart (see Chapter 3, Figure 3.13) aids scheduling your proposal effort. Schedule all proposal activities to meet crucial deadlines and to ensure that all aspects of preparing the proposal have been delegated to a proposal team member. Scheduling has the positive by-product of forcing you to be organized.

The Proposal-Writing Process

If you were thorough in your planning, writing the proposal should be relatively easy. In this section, we will examine three topics: the writing process, additional types of proposals, and proposal formats.

The Writing Process

The writing stage requires strict attention to detail. The written proposal must reflect all the work you have done to this point. It is a tragedy to have a brilliant solution disqualified because of dull text, poor writing skills, lack of organization, or use of an ineffective or inappropriate format. Your proposal package requires persuasion, effective writing, and appealing graphics.

Be Persuasive

Your goal in writing a proposal is to win—to be awarded the project or job. You are selling your solution and your organization. Some suggestions for being persuasive include:

- Open with a persuasive and conclusive summary. The proposal evaluator exhaustively analyzes every detail of your proposal, but the final selection decision may be made by a busy executive who can spend only a few minutes reviewing your proposal. A concise but thorough summary that is hard-hitting will appeal to his or her needs. (This opening is often called an Executive Summary.)
- Use a hook or attention-getting device to begin your proposal. Choose your words carefully; maintain a business tone. For businesses, the most effective attention-getting device is often to focus on profits. Governmental agencies show more interest in competence and reliability.
- Use the themes you formulated in the capture plan.
- Back up your statements with facts, statistics, and expert testimony to be convincing and to build credibility for your solution.[7]

Write Effectively

Your writing should be clear, concise, attractive, and free of spelling and typographical errors. Readers interpret writing ability as an indication of how well you can do the job, especially if the job involves writing.[8] In addition to following the suggestions for effective writing in Chapter 4, you should take care to organize your proposal well. Organization is especially crucial if you are not well-known by your audience; the clarity of your language and organization are the best—sometimes the only—ways your target can judge your thinking and organizing ability.

Near the beginning of your proposal place a specific statement of what you propose. Organize your writing for maximum clarity and psychological effect. Avoid the tendency to write in chronological order; starting with remote causes can be boring and appear irrelevant. Save the background details for middle paragraphs. Locate the most important unknown information at the beginning—the proposal evaluator needs the specific details of your solution as early as possible. Consider summarizing highly detailed portions in the body of the proposal and relegating the details to an appendix to avoid a dull text.

Use Graphic Appeal

Graphic appeal refers to the look of your proposal. For better or for worse, your reader gains a first impression of your work before reading a single word of it. Several graphic features determine whether the piece invites or discourages reading, places emphasis efficiently, or adds clarity. Some graphic considerations are:

- Provide adequate margins and white space on each page. If the proposal looks tight and jammed on the page, it does not draw the reader in and could even be viewed as a chore to read.
- Construct paragraphs that vary in length and are no longer than one quarter of a page. Long, heavy-looking paragraphs discourage reading. Short paragraphs invite reading and emphasize content. Keep opening and closing paragraphs pleasingly short.
- Break up the text by section, subsection, and paragraph headings; use headings as often as possible—in every paragraph if appropriate. Exhibit an array of headings in contrasting type styles. For example, use bold capitals for major headings and lightface capitals for subsections for two degrees of emphasis. Avoid the use of too many different styles of type, though, and use consistent type styles for headings of the same level.
- Use appropriate graphics to illustrate, clarify, and summarize. Place the graphics to break up larger blocks of text.
- Employ desktop publishing techniques to add additional levels of professional impact at relatively low cost.

Additional Types of Proposals

The type of proposal prepared depends on the proposal's purpose. Three of the most common types are the sales proposal, the procurement proposal, and the grant proposal. A sales proposal sells a product, service, or idea and is primarily used for business-to-business transactions. Procurement proposals are solicited by federal, state, or local government agencies seeking to obtain goods or services. They are usually longer than sales proposals and their contents are usually specifically dictated in an RFP. Nonprofit organizations write grant proposals to obtain funding from businesses, foundations, and governmental agencies. Because the latter two types of proposal are written so frequently and have unique features, we will discuss them individually.[9]

The Procurement Proposal

Solicitations for proposals issued by government entities specify a tremendous amount of detail, and thus the process of preparing the proposal requires a special degree of care in every stage. Procurement proposals usually state who qualifies to submit a proposal, what form the proposal is to take, what specific information should appear in each section of the proposal, and many more requirements. These proposals and the subsequent work usually entail substantial paperwork. For large government procurements, your proposal may encompass three or more volumes. In preparing your proposal, use graphs, charts, and time lines to simplify complexities.

A common problem in proposal writing is nonresponsiveness—being disqualified because you did not follow the RFP or IFB directions or guidelines exactly. Review your proposal carefully to ensure that you have met all requirements. One omitted detail could disqualify you. Imagine a proposal that took three months to produce being disqualified because you did not include one topic. It is helpful to prepare, in advance, a checklist of the details so that you will not overlook any.

Finally, keep in mind that you may be required to show your accounting books to federal auditors. A plethora of government regulations that you must follow await if you are awarded the contract.

The Grant Proposal

Most nonprofit organizations obtain funding by applying for grants-in-aid from foundations, governmental agencies, and businesses. Before you prepare a grant proposal, your organization must qualify by proving its nonprofit status. Next, your project must be eligible to receive the grant. Funding sources usually specify the characteristics that establish eligibility.

It is important to demonstrate your credibility in the introduction. Build credibility by explaining your history, your organizational goals, what support you have received from other sources, and your previous accomplishments.

When explaining the reason for seeking aid (the "Need" or "Problem Statement" section of the proposal), define the problem narrowly. Do not attempt to solve all the ills of society with this additional funding. Document the problem with research and statistics. Demonstrate your depth of understanding of the problem.

Propose a specific objective that is measurable and realistic. If you intend to request additional funding in the future, the funding source will want to know what you have accomplished with the resources granted in the past. They will want tangible statements, such as: "purchased three buses for the disabled and transported 25 wheelchair patients to the physical therapy facility each day" or "renovated 22 homes for occupancy by low-income families."

Your proposal should have a special section entitled "Future Funding." Funding sources will want to know how you will continue your program when their funding runs out. You should present a plan for obtaining additional funding in the future.[10]

Proposal Formats

There is little agreement about what format to give proposals or what to name the various subject headings.[11] Often, RFPs or solicitation packages suggest an outline or contain a Business Proposal Instruction section. If so, follow that format. In following a dictated organization, your persuasiveness and the quality of your solution will distinguish your proposal from the others submitted. In the absence of such guidance, you may be able to follow a standard format that your company uses. Perhaps you will be fortunate enough to be able to design your own format. Designing your own format is your opportunity to be persuasive and creative, but do not deviate too far from the traditional format. Effective proposals, at the minimum, include a summary, a statement of the problem or need, the proposed solution, how the solution will be implemented, and what it will cost to implement the solution. The following is a suggested format that will be appropriate for many proposals.

1. *Cover Materials.* Include a letter of transmittal, a title page, and a table of contents.
2. *Executive Summary.* A persuasive summary briefly states the need or problem, the solution, the implementation plan, and the costs and resources required. Use an attention-getting device to open your summary and highlight the themes or strategy you will discuss throughout the proposal.

Make the summary persuasive and concise enough for your reader to make a decision about your offer on reading your summary, without having to read the entire proposal. At the same time, draw in and make your reader want to read the rest of your proposal.

3. *Introductory Materials.* The introduction can include the background to the situation or problem that the proposal is addressing, the most immediate cause of the problem, the purpose for studying the problem or submitting the proposal, the goals of the proposal, or the benefits to be derived from adoption of the proposal.
4. *Need or Problem Statement.* State the problem concisely. Differentiate between symptoms of the problem and the root problem.
5. *Technical Solution or Methodology.* This section is the heart of your proposal. Present your solution and prove that it is not only viable but that it is the best alternative for solving the customer's problem or meeting the need. Convince the reader of the strengths of your proposed solution. Demonstrate that your solution is based on the latest research findings and the most current or most appropriate technology. It is not enough to just state your solution; you must sell your solution. Use facts, figures, and expert testimony.

   This section also outlines the implementation of the technical solution. Discuss the methods. Identify major and minor tasks. Provide a time line for completion of each task. Give the specifications of materials and products used or produced.

   If you are writing a qualification proposal, describe how you will accomplish the work, how you will conduct the study, what research techniques will be employed, why they are the most appropriate measures to use, and how you will analyze the data.

   Finally, many customers want to know how you will evaluate yourself and track your progress to completion. If the job will be lengthy, the customer may ask you to periodically report on the progress of the project and to evaluate your company's performance.
6. *Management Profiles.* First, introduce the individual or team who will be implementing the solution. Describe qualifications and related backgrounds. Include résumés of key personnel in an appendix. Tailor the résumés for the specific proposal. Highlight your company's previous experience or specialization in the area. List work done for other clients in the area of interest and the scope or depth of the work performed.

   Second, describe how you will organize the project. Delineate lines of authority and responsibility. Design the workload and structure from start-up to completion. Create an organization chart. Include all resources and facilities to be used.

   Next, present the management policies and administrative methods applicable to the project. For example, describe quality control, cost accounting, payroll, timekeeping, and reporting methods.

   End the Management Profile by demonstrating that your company is stable, financially viable, and reputable. Include financial statements, letters of reference from satisfied customers (in an appendix), and awards. Close by selling your company's strengths.