Putting Audience First: Creating “You-Attitude”

From the Ivy College of Business Writing and Speaking Center

Business communication prizes its audience, and successful communication in business stems from having a strong connection to its audience through a "you-attitude". The you-attitude in business communication argues that audiences are not concerned about the communicator’s needs, wants, or desires because they are more concerned about their own. Creating the you-attitude is a four-fold charge: 1) to identify and analyze situations from the audience’s perspective, 2) to stress what your audience already knows, 3) to respect your audience’s intelligence, and 4) to protect your audience’s ego.

To use the you-attitude in your business writing, you should:

**Do...**

**Use the second-person point of view ("you")**

When writing to a person, highlight them ("you") rather than the “I” or “we.” In other words, choose the second-person point of view over first or third when possible.

**Write with a specific purpose in mind.**

Writing with a specific purpose in mind allows you to focus more tightly on what your audience will want or need. Take the emphasis off the writer by focusing on what the reader receives, wants, or can do.

- **Writer-focused:** "We are shipping your shoes on Friday."
- **You-Attitude:** "Your shoes will be shipped Friday." Or "The shoes you ordered will be shipped Friday."

**Anticipate what your audience will need.**

Do your research on your audience. Consider who you are writing to and let that influence what they will need to know from you.

**Refer to the audience’s request specifically.**

Referring to an audience’s request specifically shows you know what they want or need. When you take the extra time to do this a communicator, it shows you care enough to remember the small details of your audience.

- **Writer-focused:** "We will process your request four days from the day we receive it."
- **You-Attitude:** "Your refund request was received June 19th and will be processed by June 23rd."

**Emphasize the positive.**

Your audience wants to hear good news, so emphasize the positive parts of your message by replacing words and phrases that negative connotations or denotations.

- **Negative emphasis:** "We have failed to take inventory for the 3rd quarter period."
- **Positive emphasis:** "Although we have not finished taking inventory for the 3rd quarter period, we are on track with sales and expect inventory to reflect that."

**Make information easily accessible for your audience.**
Your audience wants information that is well-organized and easy to access. This includes well-formed paragraphs with strong topic sentences, vocabulary choices that are understandable for your audience, and document design choices like heading, bullet points, and numbering systems to help your audience quickly scan for important information.

**Don't...**

**Assume you know how the audience feels or how they will react.**
No matter how much you've researched your audience, you cannot ever know for certain what they are feeling or how they will react to your information. Generally, you should avoid phrases like "You'll be happy to know . . . " and instead, just make the direct statement.

**Use the word "you" when discussing negative or delicate situations.**
While we generally advocate for using "you" in "you-attitude" messages, "you" should be avoided in negative situations to protect your readers ego. You can do this by using passive language or an impersonal subject.

- "You didn't account for sales taxes in your original price quote" -- > "No sales taxes were accounted for in this estimation." (passive language that does not sound like it is accusing the audience) OR " The original price quote doesn't account for sales tax." (impersonal subject that does not sound like it is accusing the audience).

**Clutter your communication with unnecessary jargon, information, and words.**
Extra words hide the meaning of the message and make it difficult for the audience to access information. You can find more information on this on our "Creating Conciseness" handout.

**Hope your reader infers correctly.**
An audience should not have to guess any meaning in your document. Explain explicitly the significance and/or relevance or your information.

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1 The rules for "you-attitude are adapted from Kitty O. Locker's *Business and Administrative Communication*