

The Keys to Successful Communication: Purpose, Audience, and Tone

One convenient way to accomplish this is to make transparencies of the sample memos that appear within the chapter. Using a transparency marker and incorporating suggestions from the group, you can get beyond the obvious by drawing attention to some of the subtler features of the revisions. (If you have access to the necessary equipment, this can obviously be done in more "high tech" ways, using computers.)

Point out, for example, how even the revised subject line ("Outdoor Ashtrays") in Figure 1.2 fosters a greater spirit of cooperation than the negative original ("Littering") in Figure 1.1. Draw students' attention to the fact that the "commands" have been removed from the revision, and to how the single upbeat exclamation mark in the revision will accomplish far more than the two rather belligerent ones in the original.

Similarly, the revised middle paragraph of Figure 1.4 not only omits the embarrassing personal details of the original version in Figure 1.3 but also deletes the phrase “As you probably have heard.” This approach is more courteous, allowing the supervisor to maintain some professional distance from the situation, rather than dragging her into it. In a related vein, the phrase “Please approve” in the original is too nearly a command. “I would certainly appreciate your approving” better acknowledges the supervisor’s authority.

Many specific observations can be made about the e-mails in Figures 1.5 and 1.6. On the most basic level, the revision deflects blame away from the reader, practically guaranteeing a more positive response. In addition, the revision not only identifies the problem but also proposes a solution and concludes with an offer of assistance. And the less headlong, three-part structure allows the argument to take shape in a more persuasive fashion.

The sample memos are reproduced here for your convenience in preparing transparencies or PowerPoint slides for in-class discussion. If you require your students to word-process their assignments, similar in-class editing sessions can be conducted using actual student work. I have found that such exercises can be very productive indeed, provided they do not deteriorate into sniping sessions. Always be sure to highlight strengths along with weaknesses, and remove students' names from all work used in class. Please note that the questionnaire I distribute at the outset of each semester (see page 186 of this manual) asks, "May I use your work (anonymously) in class discussions?" I strongly recommend this.