

# Business Writing With Heart



**How to Get Results and  
Build Relationships  
One Message at a Time**



GOLDEN GATE CHAPTER

**KNOWLEDGE  
to LEADERSHIP**

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## Learning Objectives and Table of Contents

**Writing is the lifeblood of business relationships. If you are like many professionals, you may communicate in writing more than you talk on the phone or meet in person. But the challenges of high-speed, high-demand communication can derail your message, ending in damaged results and relationships.**

**In this session learn ways to minimize misunderstandings, increase positive results, and enhance your relationships one email, text message, and memo at a time.**

Learning Objectives – You will be able to:

1. Send brief messages that come across as efficient yet friendly.
2. Choose relationship-building rather than relationship-busting language.
3. Use / statements to remove blame and focus on results in challenging situations such as reminding, giving feedback, disagreeing, and saying no.
4. Recognize how to achieve your larger purpose in writing, whether it is to maintain the relationship or pave the way for future business.

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## The ROI of Writing With Heart

Experience suggests that writing with heart yields a positive return on investment (ROI). It leads to new clients, repeat customers, referrals, partnerships, jobs, contracts, and other satisfying business dealings. However, if you would prefer evidence of ROI that is more tangible, consider these hypothetical situations. They deal solely with the investment of time, but you can imagine the investment of other resources.

<b>Time Required Without Applying the Tips and Principles of Writing With Heart</b>	<b>Time Required as a Result of Not Applying the Tips and Principles</b>	<b>Time Required to Apply the Tips and Principles of Writing With Heart</b>
To write an email to a new assistant telling him everything he did wrong on his first day: 5 minutes.	To hire a new assistant to replace the one who quit in discouragement after reading the critical email: 1–2 months.	To write an email to a new assistant telling him what he did well and what you would like him to do differently tomorrow: 10 minutes.
To write a hasty, impatient response to a client who has misunderstood a contract provision: 2 minutes.	To win back a client who has canceled a contract after reading the insulting reply: 1–3 months.	To compose a tactful, considerate response to a client who has misunderstood a contract provision: 15 minutes.
To not compose constructive feedback for a virtual employee who is doing part of her job incorrectly: 0 minutes.	To redo a virtual employee’s work when she repeatedly does it incorrectly because no one has informed her of a problem: 3 minutes a day, day after day, week after week.	To compose thoughtful, constructive feedback for a virtual employee who is doing part of her job incorrectly: 10–15 minutes.
To bang out a sarcastic email in response to a frustrated employee on another team: 2 minutes.	To repair the relationship with the employee who received the sarcastic reply: 2 years.	To stop by the employee’s desk to talk, or to write an empathetic email reply: 15 minutes.
To not write an email to introduce to the organization a new employee in a new position: 0 minutes.	For people in the organization to realize there is a new employee and figure out what he does and why: 2 months to 2 years.	To write a company-wide announcement welcoming a new employee and explaining what he will do in a new position and why: 15–20 minutes.
To not write a sympathy message to a customer whose spouse has died: 0 minutes.	To win back the customer, who has begun work with your competitor because of not feeling connected with you: a long time, if it is even possible.	To write and mail a thoughtful sympathy message to a customer: 15 minutes.
To not write an email to people in your network, updating them on your job search: 0 minutes.	To find out about the “hidden” job openings that people in your network know about but do not inform you of because you haven’t stayed in touch: a long time, if it is even possible.	To write an email to people in your network, updating them on your job search: 20–30 minutes.

From *Business Writing With Heart: How to Build Great Work Relationships One Message at a Time*.



## Scenario: Giving Feedback – Recognizing Your Purpose

Karla, who is a new manager at the firm, has just received emails from two of her peers, Gayle and Priscilla. Their messages, which are shown below, are in response to her sending out some tips on personal time management, which she thought others would find helpful.

- What was Gayle’s purpose in writing?
- What was Priscilla’s?

To: Karla  
From: Gayle

Re: Tips on Personal Time Management

Hi, Karla.

Thanks for the excellent tips. I recognized several that I can apply to my work.

I noticed that your email included the greeting “Ladies.” We have had many conversations about that greeting in the past. The consensus is that “Team” or “Greetings, everyone,” or even using no greeting is preferable. When I am back in town, I will give you the background (dirt). For now, I just wanted to let you know that “Ladies” does not work well as a greeting for our group. By the way, Lee Ralston is a man, which you would not have known.

Again, thank you for the tips!

Gayle

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To: Karla  
From: Priscilla

Subject: We Aren’t “Ladies”

Regarding your message with the greeting “Ladies”—besides the fact that some of us have worked too hard to be given that dainty label, Lee Ralston is a heterosexual man—definitely NOT a lady.

“Ladies” may have been the right greeting where you came from, but it is dead wrong here. I suggest you lose it.



## Come Across as Efficient yet Friendly

- Start with a friendly, upbeat subject.
- Reply with a friendly, upbeat subject. Change the subject when it is negative.
- Include a greeting.
- Use a friendly, positive opening sentence.
- End with a warm signoff.



## Choose Relationship-Building Language

- Use *I* statements, not *you* statements, in sensitive situations.

Compare:

“Your plan will not work.”

“I have strong reservations about parts of the plan.”

- Emphasize what can—not what can’t.

“You can’t use the conference room until my meeting ends.”

Revision:

- Emphasize what will—not what won’t.

“You won’t receive reimbursement until you prove to me that you have completed the course. “

Revision:



- Use positive language to create a positive mood.

admire	generous	looking forward
an honor	glad	please
appreciate	grateful	pleased to
assist you	gratified	pleasure
benefit	happy	profit
brilliant	happy to	satisfied
delighted	help you	saving
enjoy	inspire	terrific
feel free	joy	thank you
gain	like to	thoughtful

- Avoid negative language.

absence	hesitate	no idea
complaint	impossible	no way
confusion	late	problem
deny	limited	refuse
difficult	loss	stupid
fail to	misunderstand	unreasonable

- Ask rather than tell.



## Apply Relationship-Building Language

Revise these sentences so they use relationship-building language.

1. I received your message complaining about the schedule.
2. You misunderstood what I said in my email.
3. Send Jackson the data before you leave.
4. I can't meet to discuss your problems until Monday a.m.



## Scenario: The Disagreement

Kelly has just read Donald's proposal for on-campus recruitment and disagrees with an important part of it. Decide whether Kelly disagrees with discretion or destruction in her message below. Cite specifics.

Re: Problem With Your Recruiting Proposal

I read your proposal for on-campus recruiting. I think you are making a big mistake to invite staff directly. You ought to go through their managers. You don't want to have managers upset at you, the way they were with the job-shadowing program you instituted without their involvement.

Otherwise, it's okay.

Kelly

### Revising Kelly's Message to Build the Relationship

How would you improve Kelly's message?



## Disagreeing With Destruction vs. Discretion

This table compares written statements that disagree destructively with those that disagree discreetly. It also includes brief explanations.

<b>Disagreeing With Destruction</b>	<b>Why It's Destructive</b>	<b>Disagreeing With Discretion</b>	<b>Why It's Discreet</b>
"I disagree."	Sets up an adversarial situation rather than a collaborative or supportive one.	"I have an alternative to consider."	Avoids adversarial tone. Offers support.
"I disagree with you completely."	Emphasizes <i>I</i> vs. <i>you</i> .	"I have a different perspective."	Suggests sharing information rather than clashing.
"It's stupid for you to . . ."	Hits the person with a negative label.	"It might also be smart to . . ."	Sounds like support rather than an assault. Is respectful.
"Your solution is completely unworkable."	Suggests the person is incompetent. Personalizes the criticism with <i>your</i> .	"The proposed solution may have some drawbacks."	Suggests rather than states unequivocally. Depersonalizes.
"Your approach is unethical, if not illegal."	Implies the person is unethical, perhaps even a lawbreaker.	"I worry that this approach might be considered unethical, if not illegal."	Expresses concern rather than criticism.
"You are making a big mistake to . . ."	Suggests the person is foolish.	"There may be unexpected consequences if we . . ."	Comes across as a caution rather than a criticism.
"Your problem is that you focus exclusively on . . ."	Accuses the person of having a problem. Focuses negatively on <i>you</i> and <i>your</i> .	"One potential obstacle is the exclusive focus on . . ."	Comes across as good advice rather than an attack. Depersonalizes.
"You falsely assume that . . ."	Uses <i>you</i> in an attack. Makes an assumption.	"Does the plan assume that . . ."	Asks rather than assumes. Depersonalizes.
"You ought to . . ." "You should . . ."	Comes across as bossy and superior.	"Have you considered . . ." "I suggest . . ." [or] "One suggestion is . . ."	Asks rather than arrogantly announces. Suggests rather than dictates.
"Whose brilliant idea was this?"	Bites with sarcasm.	"I'd like to hear how this plan came together."	Comes across as a sincere inquiry.

From *Business Writing With Heart: How to Build Great Work Relationships One Message at a Time*.



## Use / Statements in Reminders

1. Use / statements to help you communicate facts rather than accusations.

- *I* statement: I look forward to receiving the data I requested.
- *You* statement: You have not yet sent me the data I requested.

2. Use / statements to communicate consequences, which help people prioritize.

Positive consequences: If I receive your data by Friday, I will be able to include it in the report.

Negative consequences: Unless I receive your data by Friday, I will not be able to include it in the report.

3. Use / statements to describe next steps you will take.

- I will stop by on Thursday to pick up the work you have completed.
- I will suspend work on the salary survey until I hear from you.

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### Sample Reminder Message

Imagine that you are waiting for overdue feedback from a partner on the staff development plan you need to finalize.

**Decide:** Would this reminder be effective in getting a response and building or sustaining the relationship? Cite specifics.

Re: Gentle Reminder FW: For Your Review – Staff Development Plan

Hello, Dan.



As we approach our deadline for input on the draft development plan, I wanted to circle back with you about your feedback. I would like to be sure we incorporate your comments before finalizing the draft on Feb. 25.

Might you be able to provide feedback by tomorrow? If not, what is your sense about the timing?

To make it easier for you to share your comments, I'd be happy to set up a phone call or stop by your office. Please let me know what works for you.

Best,

[Your first name followed by your signature block here]

[The forwarded message begins here]



## Use / Statements in No Messages

### **Sample Message: When a Staff Member Asks For Time Off**

Hi Pat,

I received your message about taking PTO on Friday. Because Cassy and Fleur are scheduled to take that day off, I cannot approve your request.

I am sorry it did not work out this time.

Tyler

### **Sample Message: When a Peer Asks You to Participate in a Panel or Project**

Dear Jill,

Thanks for thinking of me. Unfortunately, my schedule and workload for the next two months preclude me from participating in this interesting effort.

Best regards,

Josh

How would you say no in writing to a new employee who asks for an advance on her paycheck?  
Draft your message below.



## Tips for Giving Positive, Powerful Feedback

**When you deliver positive feedback**, you help people to recognize what they are doing well, feel good about their performance, and develop their trust in you as a person who cares about their success. Positive feedback builds performance and relationships. Apply these tips so your feedback is positive and powerful.

**1. Be specific.** It is acceptable to write a general comment such as “Great work!” but add why the work was great. The details make the message stick. Example:

Subject: Meeting Notes – Thanks, Jackie!

Jackie, I just read your email. Your concise notes captured my understanding exactly. Thanks for taking the initiative to write up what we agreed on. It saved me a lot of time.

Dana

**2. Avoid using the word *but* right after a compliment.** *But* is guaranteed to erase any positive feeling in the reader’s mind. Compare these statements:

I liked your rapid turnaround, but the mistakes were disappointing.

I liked your rapid turnaround. It was wonderful to get the document back so fast.

When you do need to communicate both positive and constructive feedback, include the constructive part in a separate paragraph, or at least in a separate sentence. The previous “rapid turnaround” compliment might be followed with this statement: “A few mistakes need to be corrected.”

**3. Use the pronouns *you* and *your* when making positive comments.** The pronouns give credit clearly to your reader. Compare these sentences:

The holiday party ideas were very creative and expertly carried out.

Your holiday party ideas were very creative, and you carried them out expertly.

**4. Include why the person’s performance or traits are valuable.** Perhaps the individual’s contribution:

- Made your life easier.
- Made the department look good.



- Ensured client satisfaction.
- Enhanced the company's reputation.
- Taught you a helpful lesson.
- Built goodwill.
- Increased efficiency.
- Saved time and money.
- Created beauty for everyone to share.
- Made everyone feel good.

**5. When appropriate, share positive feedback with others beyond the recipient.** If you communicate positive feedback in an email, for example, copy the person's direct supervisor on the message. If you write positive feedback for a peer on your team, copy the team on the message.

Normally copying others makes everyone feel good. However, in a potentially sensitive situation, ask yourself whether the copies could cause hard feelings. Imagine, for instance, that Joseph was promoted to a role that Amy was hoping to get. Copying Amy on positive feedback to Joseph might make her feel worse.

**6. If you find yourself saying "I have no time for this!"** recognize that positive feedback takes just a moment. The secret to making time for feedback is to write it (or to make a note to yourself to write it) as soon as you notice the excellent work. You don't have to go into great detail. These two examples involve brief but powerful feedback:

Walking through the break room, you speak to a new employee, who praises several aspects of the day's orientation program. On your smartphone, you send a text to the employee trainer: "Marty, I got a huge compliment on your onboarding program from a new employee. He loved the pop quizzes. Nice work building excitement!"

You notice the receptionist engaged in conversation with an elderly client who has been kept waiting. When you have a moment, you write a quick text, note, or email: "Kathryn—I was relieved that you kept Mr. McGowan occupied. Very thoughtful! He was smiling, even though we kept him waiting. Thank you."

**7. Help yourself remember to give positive feedback.** Add "Give positive, powerful feedback" to your planner or calendar as a daily activity.

Whether you are the administrator, a manager, the supervisor of a team, or a staff member, share positive feedback every day. Look for opportunities to recognize people's contributions to your success and the firm's. Your positive feedback will strengthen your business relationships, making them more supportive, rewarding, and enjoyable. And it will strengthen performance!

Adapted from *Business Writing With Heart: How to Build Great Work Relationships One Message at a Time*.



## Sample Revision of Kelly's Message to Donald

Re: Your New Recruiting Initiative

Hi, Donald.

Nice job on your new proposal for on-campus recruitment! You always have creative ideas about how to introduce our company to new grads.

I have one key suggestion: I believe managers will be most supportive of your plan to take staff on recruitment trips if you issue the invitations through them. If you invite staff directly, I worry that managers may feel undermined, which could work against your plan.

To get managers to say yes to the invitations, maybe you could offer an incentive such as a first crack at highly qualified candidates.

Again, nice work!

Kelly

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**Note:** If Kelly disagreed with many aspects of Donald's plan, she could still disagree with discretion:

Re: New Recruiting Proposal

Hi, Donald.

I read your proposal for on-campus recruitment. I want it to be very successful, as you do, but I have concerns about parts of it.

Can we meet to talk about the parts I believe could benefit from rethinking?

I am free this afternoon or early tomorrow morning. Please let me know what works for you.

I look forward to our conversation.

Kelly



## Learning Wrap-Up: Communicate With Heart

List three specific ways in which you will add heart to your writing to build and sustain your business relationships.

1.

2.

3.



## About Lynn Gaertner-Johnston

**Lynn Gaertner-Johnston has helped thousands of managers and employees write better.**

Since 1990, she has led writing workshops for more than 100 organizations, including Dorsey, the King County Prosecuting Attorney's Office, Association of Legal Administrators, MasterCard, REI, Kaiser Permanente, and Amazon. She has taught managerial and leadership communications in the MBA programs of the University of Washington and UW Bothell.

**She teaches from practical experience.** Lynn has written and edited for Coinstar, the National Cancer Institute, Seattle Children's Hospital, Nintendo, Safeco, Esterline Technologies, and other clients. For her company, Syntax Training, she writes a monthly e-newsletter, *Better Writing at Work*, for more than 18,000 subscribers, and a blog, Business Writing, which gets thousands of daily visitors from around the globe. She has been quoted on business writing etiquette in *The Wall Street Journal* and *The Atlantic*.

**Lynn has always been involved with the written word.** She prepared for her life's work by earning a bachelor's degree in English from Bradley University and a master's degree in communication from the University of Notre Dame.

**For information about Syntax Training** classes, products, and services, call 206-782-8410 in Seattle, Washington, or visit [www.syntaxtraining.com](http://www.syntaxtraining.com).

**For the latest tips and strategies to improve business writing** at your organization, visit Lynn's blog at [www.businesswritingblog.com](http://www.businesswritingblog.com).

**To receive the first chapter of Lynn's book, *Business Writing With Heart: How to Build Great Work Relationships One Message at a Time*,** visit this page: [www.syntaxtraining.com/heart.html](http://www.syntaxtraining.com/heart.html).