



# 8 steps to writing effective responses

Correspondence Toolkit

[www.civica.com](http://www.civica.com)

# Introduction

Our guide to delivering quality written responses to customer complaints.

## 1. Use plain language

The use of plain language can be very powerful but:

- It's not about "dumbing down" your writing. Almost anything – from leaflets and letters to legal documents – can be written in plain language without patronising the reader or being over-simple.
- It doesn't mean reducing the length or changing the meaning of your message.
- It's not about banning new words, killing off long words or promoting completely perfect grammar. Nor is it about letting grammar slip.
- It is not an amateur's way of communicating, the best managers always write in plain language.

It's not as easy as we would like to think.

We used to accept the official style of writing of bureaucrats such as lawyers, public officials and bank managers that was inefficient and often unfriendly. Many of these offenders are now putting things right by rewriting their documents clearly and training their employees in the art of plain language.

Plain language is:

- Faster to write
- Faster to read

You also get your message across more often, more easily and in a friendlier way.

## 2. Be human

Try to call the customer *you*, even if you are giving advice about what a group of people should do.

Instead of "Applicants must tell us...", say "You must tell us..."

Instead of "We always write to customers before we...", say "We will write to you before we..."

Instead of "Leaflets are available from...", say "You can get a leaflet from..."

Avoid distancing yourself from the reader. Always call your organisation we. And there is nothing wrong with using we and I in the same letter or email.

**Recommendations:**

1. Do use “we”, “our”, “you”, and “I” to be more personal – not “the Organization” or “the Authority”
2. Do say “I am sorry”
3. Do say “Our aims are”
4. Do say “We try to provide...”

## 3. Be personal

Soften bad news and start with:

“I understand your position, however...”

“I sympathise with your point of view, but...”

Finish your “No” letters and emails on a positive note.

**How to write a ‘No’ letter or email**

- Open with a neutral statement
- Give the bad news
- Explain reasons
- Suggest other options if possible
- Close with a good will statement

Other ways to be personal:

- Address all the issues raised in the original correspondence – be inclusive rather than exclusive.
- If you deal with all the points, you are less likely to receive a further letter, email or phone call.
- Picture your reader. Think about: where they live, are they young or old?
- Do they need help to understand your response?
- Think about the effect of your words. How would you feel if you got your reply?

## 4. Concentrate on the positive

Show that you understand your readers feelings

If you are writing an information letter or email:

- Open with clear statement to show that you are responding to their correspondence
- Give information in a logical sequence
- Give the source of information and contact name if possible
- Close with a goodwill statement

**Think about...**

- Who you are communicating with?
- Why you are communicating?
- What you want to say?
- What do they already know?
- How can you best deliver your message?
- When will the reader receive your response and when does the reader have to take action?

**Set paragraphs**

Use relevant set paragraphs relating to legislation, regulations or policies – but make sure that they are appropriate.

Sometimes it is not appropriate to use set paragraphs, particularly when complaint is high level, or when it is very complex.

**Writing a 'yes' letter or email**

1. Give the good news first
2. Explain the news clearing up any queries
3. Finish with a statement of good will

## 5. Make responses clear

### KISS (Keep It Short & Simple)

- Use less than 25 words per sentence.
- Low sentence scores are a safe bet for better understanding.
- Keep your sentences short make only one main point per sentence and bear in mind that you may not.
- Need to justify every point.
- Break up long sentences when re-writing any correspondence or proof reading – cut out unnecessary words.
- Beware making sentences too short or your letter/email may become fragmented.
- Consider a glossary of terms.
- Use lists if necessary.
- Be direct – write- ‘we cannot improve the service’ instead of ‘the service cannot be improved by us’.

## 6. Choose words carefully

Choose everyday words: use words like “try” instead of “endeavour”; “home” instead of “dwelling”; “about” rather than “with regard to”

Avoid lots of legal words: such as “at your earliest convenience”, “enclosed herein”, “your good selves”.

Try not to be sexist: avoid writing that carries a bias towards one gender or another

Avoid abbreviations: use “for example” instead of “e.g”.

Include in your response:

- A conclusion of the facts and findings- explain what you have found – give reasons
- A definition of the complaint: this shows the customer that you have understood his or her complaint

- A statement declaring the outcome yes we have/have not found fault
- Balance probability and precedent

If appropriate, you may also want to signpost the customer to the next stage of escalation:

1. Service or product manager
2. Chief Executive's office or a Customer relations team
3. External review (such as Ombudsman or independent arbitration)

## 7. Review what you have written

Your responses should always be proofread and revised.

Always read through your response (more than once!) and, if possible, someone else should look at it **before** it is sent out!!!

## 8. Follow a style

Some general style guidelines

- Use a strong, clear typeface: such as Arial
- Use a font size around point 12
- Separate paragraphs with a double line space

Never use full CAPITALISATION (unless you want your words to shout at your customer!)

- Use **bold** type to emphasise words
- Use open punctuation
- Use headings if the correspondence needs to be split into sections

# Author

[Michael Hill](#) is the Complaint Management Expert at Civica. Previously Michael ran his own complaint management consultancy, and is the author of two books, “Complaints management. Turning negatives into positives” and “Effective complaint management”. Also chair of the British Standards committee that designed a new complaint handling standard for the UK (BS 8543). He also represents the UK at International Standards Organization (ISO) events that debate complaint handling standards.

## About Civica Case Management

The Civica Case Management team enjoy the benefits of being part of the wider Civica group, giving us the freedom to help organisations of all types to better manage complaints and feedback, with the support and resources of a global company. Our business is the coming together of two key areas of expertise - software design and cloud architecture coupled with a deep understanding of complaint management, as both a process and the practice of consumer redress.

Our experience of system design and project management of enterprise level complaint, feedback and case management solutions in highly secure and regulated environments such as finance, local government, health and social care, central government departments and regulatory bodies stretches back over 25 years.

Our professional experience of complaint management goes back equally as long. Whether turning around customer service operations of public bodies by helping repair relationships with citizens, improve perceptions and re-build reputations; or providing the complaint management expertise to help finance operations in the UK, Europe, North America and APAC meet the demands of local and international regulatory frameworks.

Few understand how to apply technology to meet the complaint management objectives of today's regulated environments as well as us. Critical to this is uncovering the trends within complaint data and applying it for the purpose of Quality Management and Continual Improvement. Quite simply, we're better at Complaint Management because we love turning negatives into positives.

## Contact us

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