

Module

6 You-Attitude

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

Module 6 focuses on the importance of you-attitude in business communication. After completing the module, you should be able to

LO 6-1 Apply strategies for you-attitude use.

LO 6-2 Compare and contrast situations for you use.

LO 6-3 Apply strategies for goodwill creation with you-attitude.

LO 6-4 Apply strategies for point-of-view adaptation.

You-attitude is a style of writing that

- Looks at things from the reader's point of view.
- Respects the reader's intelligence.
- Protects the reader's ego.
- Emphasizes what the reader wants to know.

You-attitude is a concrete way to show empathy (◀◀ p. 24) and the foundation of persuasion.

You-attitude is a matter of style. That is, revisions for you-attitude do not change the basic meaning of the sentence. However, revising for you-attitude often makes sentences longer since sentences become more specific.

Often, we can create you-attitude by changing words. Sometimes, however, it's necessary to revise organization and content as well as style to create the best document.

How do I create you-attitude in my sentences? LO 6-1

► Talk about the reader—except in negative situations.

To create you-attitude,

1. Talk about the reader, not about yourself.
2. Refer to the reader's request or order specifically.
3. Don't talk about feelings, except to congratulate or offer sympathy.
4. In positive situations, use *you* more often than *I*. Use *we* when it includes the reader.
5. Avoid *you* in negative situations.

1. Talk about the Reader, Not about Yourself

Readers want to know how they benefit or are affected. When you provide this information, you make your message more complete and more interesting.

Lacks you-attitude: I have negotiated an agreement with Apex Rent-a-Car that gives you a discount on rental cars.

You-attitude: As a Sunstrand employee, you can now get a 20% discount when you rent a car from Apex.

Any sentence that focuses on the writer's work or generosity lacks you-attitude, even if the sentence contains the word *you*. Instead of focusing on what we are giving the reader, focus on what the reader can now do. To do that, you may need to change the grammatical subject.

Lacks you-attitude: We are shipping your order of September 21 this afternoon.

You-attitude: The two dozen ComingWare starter sets you ordered will be shipped this afternoon and should reach you by September 28.

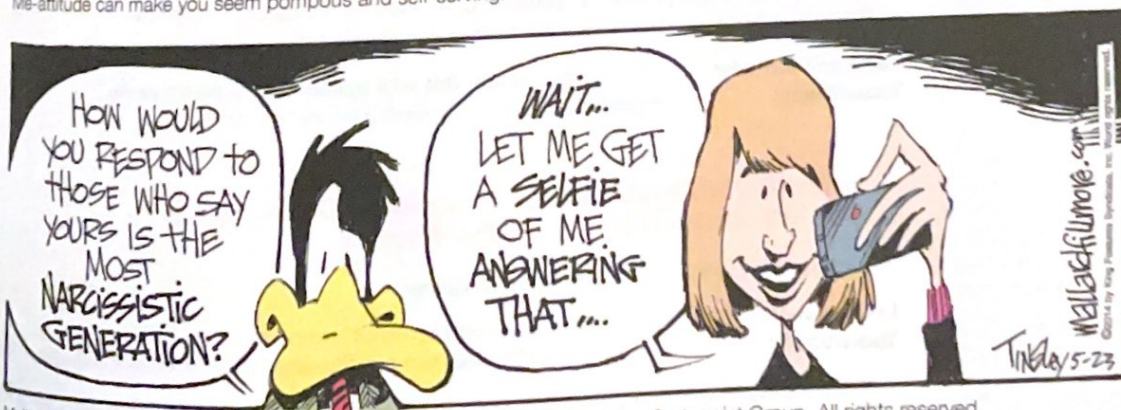
Emphasize what the reader wants to know. The reader is less interested in when we shipped the order than in when it will arrive. Note that the phrase "should reach you by" leaves room for variations in delivery schedules. If you can't be exact, give your reader the information you do have: "UPS shipment from California to Texas normally takes three days." If you have absolutely no idea, give the reader the name of the carrier, so the reader knows whom to contact if the order doesn't arrive promptly.



In 2008, drugstore giant Walgreen announced plans to open pharmacies and operate health centers at work sites throughout the U.S., bringing services to busy customers rather than the other way around. The company purchased I-trax, Inc., and Whole Health Management, two companies that collectively ran 350 health centers at corporate offices. The company further identified more than 7,600 office sites with 1,000 or more employees that could support similar centers. The result is Take Care Clinics, part of a wholly owned subsidiary of Walgreen. Looking at things from the customer's point of view is helping Walgreen and other companies transform health services.

Source: Amy Merrick, "How Walgreen Changed Its Prescription for Growth," *The Wall Street Journal*, March 19, 2008, B1; and Take Care Clinic at Select Walgreens website ("About Us"), downloaded on February 12, 2010, at http://www.takecarehealth.com/about/?tab=tc_about_us.

Me-attitude can make you seem pompous and self-serving.



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Site to See

Go to

www.quality.nist.gov

You-attitude, positive emphasis, and bias-free language build goodwill with words, just as service, quality, and reliability build goodwill with actions. The Baldrige National Quality Program encourages and recognizes quality in U.S. businesses.



The word *company* has the same root as the word *companion*: both come from the Latin words for eating bread together.



Instant Replay

Definition of You-Attitude

You-attitude is a style of writing that

- Looks at things from the reader's point of view.
- Respects the reader's intelligence.
- Protects the reader's ego.
- Emphasizes what the reader wants to know.

2. Refer to the Reader's Request or Order Specifically

Refer to the reader's request, order, or policy specifically, not as a generic *your order* or *your policy*. If your reader is an individual or a small business, it's friendly to specify the content of the order. If you're writing to a company with which you do a great deal of business, give the invoice or purchase order number.

Lacks you-attitude: *Your order . . .*
You-attitude (to individual): *The desk chair you ordered*
You-attitude (to a large store): *Your invoice #783329*

3. Don't Talk about Feelings, Except to Congratulate or Offer Sympathy

Lacks you-attitude: *We are happy to extend you a credit line of \$5,000.*
You-attitude: *You can now charge up to \$5,000 on your American Express card.*

In most business situations, your feelings are irrelevant and should be omitted. The reader doesn't care whether you're happy, bored stiff at granting a routine application, or worried about granting so much to someone who barely qualifies. All the reader cares about is the situation from his or her point of view.

It is appropriate to talk about your own emotions in a message of congratulation or condolence.

You-attitude: *Congratulations on your promotion to district manager! I was really pleased to read about it.*
You-attitude: *I was sorry to hear that your father died.*

In internal memos, it may be appropriate to comment that a project has been gratifying or frustrating. In the letter of transmittal that accompanies a report, it is permissible to talk about your feelings about doing the work. But even other readers in your own organization are primarily interested in their own concerns, not in your feelings.

Don't talk about the reader's feelings, either. It can be offensive to have someone else tell us how we feel—especially if the writer is wrong.

Lacks you-attitude: *You'll be happy to hear that Open Grip Walkway Channels meet OSHA requirements.*
You-attitude: *Open Grip Walkway Channels meet OSHA requirements.*

Maybe the reader expects that anything you sell would meet government regulations (OSHA—the Occupational Safety and Health Administration—is a federal agency). The reader may even be disappointed if he or she expected higher standards. Simply explain the situation or describe a product's features; don't predict the reader's response.

When you have good news for the reader, simply give the good news.

Lacks you-attitude: *You'll be happy to hear that your scholarship has been renewed.*
You-attitude: *Congratulations! Your scholarship has been renewed.*

4. In Positive Situations, Use You More Often than I. Use We When It Includes the Reader

Talk about the reader, not you or your company.

Lacks you-attitude: *We provide* health insurance to all employees.
You-attitude: *You receive* health insurance as a full-time Procter & Gamble employee.

Most readers are tolerant of the word *I* in e-mail messages, which seem like conversation. Edit paper documents to use *I* rarely if at all. *I* suggests that you're concerned about personal issues, not about the organization's problems, needs, and opportunities. *We* works well when it includes the reader. Avoid *we* if it excludes the reader (as it would

in a letter to a customer or supplier or as it might in a memo about what we in management want you to do).

5. Avoid You in Negative Situations

To avoid blaming the reader, use an impersonal expression or a passive verb. Talk about the group to which the reader belongs so readers don't feel they're singled out for bad news.

Lacks you-attitude: You failed to sign your check.
You-attitude (impersonal): Your check arrived without a signature.
You-attitude (passive): Your check was not signed.

Impersonal constructions omit people and talk only about things. **Passive verbs** describe the action performed on something, without necessarily saying who did it. (► See Module 16 for a full discussion of passive verbs.)

In most cases, active verbs are better. But when your reader is at fault, passive verbs may be useful to avoid assigning blame.

Normally, writing is most lively when it's about people—and most interesting to readers when it's about them. When you have to report a mistake or bad news, however, you can protect the reader's ego by using an impersonal construction, one in which things, not people, do the acting.

Lacks you-attitude: You made no allowance for inflation in your estimate.
You-attitude (passive): No allowance for inflation has been made in this estimate.
You-attitude (impersonal): This estimate makes no allowance for inflation.



Goodwill comes in many forms. Whitlow R. Green spent a lifetime teaching students the value of economics—and living a frugal life that included buying expired meat and secondhand clothes. When he passed away in 2002, the 88-year-old willed \$2.1 million to his alma mater, Prairie View A & M University, for scholarships, the largest single-donor gift in the institution's history.



A University of California, Berkeley, study suggests couples who use inclusive language, such as *we* and *our* rather than *I* or *me*, are more likely to have greater affection and less physiological stress during a disagreement.

Source: Rachel Rettner, "Couples Who Say 'We' Fare Better in Fights," *LiveScience*, February 3, 2010, <http://www.livescience.com/culture/couples-we-words-100203.html>.



A study sure to provoke strong feelings found a link among prejudices, low intelligence, and social conservatism, suggesting, among other things, that anti-prejudice campaigns that expect participants to see things from another person's point of view may be too difficult to handle for people with low IQs. As researchers suspected, low intelligence in childhood corresponded with racism in adulthood. Still, they are quick to point out that drawing sweeping conclusions from the study is unwise. Said lead researcher Gordon Hodson: "There are multiple examples of very bright conservatives and not-so-bright liberals, and many examples of very principled conservatives and very intolerant liberals."

Source: Stephanie Pappas, "Low IQ & Conservative Beliefs Linked to Prejudice," *Live Science*, January 26, 2012, <http://www.livescience.com/18132-intelligence-social-conservatism-racism.html>.



Instant Replay

Five Ways to Create You-Attitude

1. Talk about the reader, not about yourself.
2. Refer to the reader's request or order specifically.
3. Don't talk about feelings, except to congratulate or offer sympathy.
4. In positive situations, use *you* more often than *I*. Use *we* when it includes the reader.
5. Avoid *you* in negative situations.



When executive Greg Smith resigned from Goldman Sachs, he criticized the firm for ignoring the best interests of clients. He wrote that employees referred to them as "muppets" and junior analysts commonly asked, "How much money did we make off the client?" Smith's disgust at the firm's me-centered culture was revealed in a scathing editorial published in *The New York Times*.

Source: Greg Smith, "Why I Am Leaving Goldman Sachs," *The New York Times*, March 14, 2012, http://www.nytimes.com/2012/03/14/opinion/why-i-am-leaving-goldman-sachs.html?_r=1&pagewanted=all%3Fsrc%3Dip&smid=fb-share.



Instant Replay

Definitions of Impersonal Constructions

Impersonal constructions omit people and talk only about things. **Passive verbs** describe the action performed on something, without necessarily saying who did it.

A purist might say that impersonal constructions are illogical: An estimate, for example, is inanimate and can't "make" anything. In the pragmatic world of business writing, however, impersonal constructions often help you convey criticism tactfully. When you restrict the reader's freedom, talk about the group to which the reader belongs rather than about the reader as an individual.

- Lacks you-attitude:** You must get approval from the director **before you** publish any articles or memoirs based on your work in the agency.
- You-attitude:** Agency personnel must get approval from the director to publish any articles or memoirs based on **their work** at the agency.

Does you-attitude basically mean using the word *you*? **LO 6-2**

▶ No.

All messages should use you-attitude, but the words to achieve it will change depending on the situation.

- In a positive message, focus on what the reader can do. "We give you" lacks you-attitude because the sentence focuses on what we are doing.
- Avoid *you* when it criticizes the reader or limits the reader's freedom.
- In a job application letter, create you-attitude by showing how you can help meet the reader's needs, but keep the word *you* to a minimum (▶▶ Module 28).

I've revised my sentences. Do I need to do anything else? **LO 6-3**

- ▶ Check content and organization, too.
- ▶ Emphasize what the reader wants to know.

Good messages apply you-attitude beyond the sentence level by using content and organization as well as style to build goodwill.

To create goodwill with content,

- Be complete. When you have lots of information to give, consider putting some details in an appendix that may be read later.
- Anticipate and answer questions the reader is likely to have.
- When you include information the reader didn't ask for, show why it is important.
- Show readers how the subject of your message affects them.

To organize information to build goodwill,

- Put information readers are most interested in first.
- Arrange information to meet your reader's needs, not yours.
- Use headings and lists so that the reader can find key points quickly.

Consider the letter in Figure 6.1. As the red marginal notes indicate, many individual sentences in this letter lack you-attitude. The last sentence in paragraph 1 sounds both harsh and defensive; the close is selfish. The language is stiff and filled with outdated jargon. Perhaps the most serious problem is that the fact most interesting to the reader is buried in the middle of the first paragraph. Since we have good news for the reader, we should put that information first.