

Writing Spaces

Assignments & Activities Archive

Framing Bad News: Hedging, Voice, and HR Memos

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Overview

This two-class sequence, which is an ideal fit for professional writing or business communication courses, helps students see how grammatical and lexical choices shape the ethical and practical work of workplace communication. The project culminates in students drafting a one-page memo delivering bad news through announcing policy changes and examining how organizational genres can frame policy changes (including cost-cutting and shifting responsibility and blame) as stability, competitiveness, and shared benefit – and where that framing crosses into euphemism or concealment.

A common workplace genre for announcing policy updates is the short internal memo (McLean). When updates involve disappointing news, effective messaging typically aims to convey the change while sustaining employees' trust in the institution and its decision-makers, which is particularly important as this can support employees' receptiveness to change (Yue et al.).

The activities are designed for business communication, workplace writing, and technical/professional communication courses, especially when instructors want to connect sentence-level instruction to questions of power and accountability. The approach draws on critical language awareness, which treats language as both reflective of and constitutive of social relations (Weninger and Kan). It also draws on research on organizational bad-news communication, including how omission and politeness strategies are used when delivering bad news (Lee). Finally, it treats grammar as

a rhetorical resource: for instance, hedging is one way writers calibrate commitment and manage risk (Hyland), along with voice choices which can foreground or background responsibility. Although Hyland analyzes academic research writing, hedging functions similarly in workplace genres as a tool for calibrating commitment and managing interpersonal risk.

Class 1 centers on framing at the level of genre moves. Students compare two versions of a policy document to identify concrete changes and annotate sample HR memos to locate common framing moves which might include acknowledging reductions, mitigating concern, deflecting responsibility, and narrating cuts as necessary for long-term organizational health. Guided practice invites students to test direct versus indirect delivery of bad news, to balance candor with reassurance, to anticipate audience concerns, and to experiment with comparative or institutional framing (e.g., in line with, compared to, even with).

Class 2 moves to sentence-level craft. Through brief mini-lessons and collaborative rewriting, students experiment with active versus passive voice and with hedging resources (modals, qualifiers, tentative verbs, and alignment phrases) and evaluate how these choices redistribute agency, responsibility, and certainty. Students then revise their original memo to produce language that feels accurate and honest, yet tactful. Across both days, the sequence keeps critique and practice in tension: students build a transferable toolkit for workplace writing while also naming ethical boundaries (what must be explicit, what should not be hidden, and how to avoid euphemisms that mislead).

Time Commitment

Two class sessions (50–75 minutes each) plus 30–45 minutes of drafting and revision outside class. An optional mini peer review after the second session.

Materials

A short scenario packet (print or digital) including two versions of a policy document along with a prompt that contextualizes the assignment, including audience and purpose (see Appendix A for an example) and one or two sample HR memos for annotation. For illustration, examples in the following assignment are based on health care plan documents from Truist Bank (Truist Financial Corporation) where the instructor makes a “before” and “revised” document with edits that cut benefits for employees in the “revised” version.

Students need a way to annotate (highlighters, printed copies, or a shared Google Doc), and a projector/whiteboard helps the class or work groups compile a shared change log.

Optional items to facilitate learning include a one-page “language toolkit” handout summarizing framing strategies, active/passive voice, and common hedging options for drafting and revision.

Assignment or Activity Process

- Before class, choose policy-change scenarios (for example, benefits, leave, parking, or technology access) and prepare a packet for each scenario with two versions of the policy text (an “earlier” and a “revised” version) plus a short prompt that identifies the audience and required memo elements. To ground the lesson in authentic materials, ideally identify real policy documents which can serve as the “earlier” version and then edit them for the “revised” version. For instance, Truist Bank has publicly available Health Care Policy Documents (Truist Financial Corporation); many public universities and unions make policy documents publicly available as well.
- Open Class 1 by naming the core problem: organizations often must deliver bad news, and writers make rhetorical

choices about what to say, when to say it, and how to say it; invite students to recall features of institutional messages or even search for emails they have received and to distinguish facts from framing.

- Distribute sample HR memos (for the same scenario) and ask students to annotate framing moves such as acknowledgment, explanation, justification, reassurance, deflection of responsibility, and appeals to shared benefit; discuss which moves feel ethical, evasive, or persuasive and why. Consider having students rank them in order of effectiveness and explain their rationale.
- Guide students through short rewriting practice that contrasts direct versus indirect delivery of bad news, models how to balance candor with reassurance, and invites students to anticipate audience concerns and to experiment with comparative or alignment phrases (for example, even with, compared to, in line with).
- Reflect on what students just wrote through a quick peer response. Have students read each other's work and answer: What changed? Who seems responsible? How certain is the message? What tone does it project? Use this feedback to surface how grammar shapes perceived accountability and trust.
- For Class 2, teach and practice two mini lessons, with the first one on voice and agency.
 - Begin by giving students a quick lens for agency: the *actor* (who decides/does), the *action* (what changes), and the *affected party* (who experiences the change). Put two to three memo-style sentences on the screen (ideally drawn from your sample HR memos), and have students underline actors, circle actions, and

box affected parties. Then ask them to produce two revisions for each sentence: one that *names the actor* and one that *backgrounds or omits the actor* (often via passive voice or nominalizations). In pairs, students compare versions and answer: What feels more candid? What feels more corporate? Where does responsibility land?

- Close with a short whole-class discussion that distinguishes legitimate uses of passive voice (unknown actor, focus on process, tact) from evasive uses (strategically removing the actor, e.g., “Mistakes were made”), then have students revise two or three memo sentences to compare active and passive constructions; discuss what is gained or lost when actors are named, backgrounded, or omitted.
- Teach a brief mini-lesson on hedging as a way to calibrate commitment and move from low-stakes practice to policy memo revision.
 - Open by defining hedging as precision and stance management. Offer several hedging families with one clear example each: modals/conditionals (may, expected to), qualifiers/quantifiers (some, in certain cases), tentative verbs/adjectives (appears to, likely), and alignment framing (in line with, consistent with). For the first practice round, use a few playful sentences (e.g., “The American Dream is dead” or “The campus squirrels are plotting to take over the university.”) and ask students to create (a) a high-certainty version and (b) an ethically responsible hedge that does not distort meaning.
- Then, shift to the main assignment. Introduce the policy packet (“earlier” and “revised” versions; the HR supervisor

letter, Appendix A, rubrics, etc.).

- In pairs, students compare the two policy versions and create a change log (or table) that lists concrete changes (what changed, who is affected, and when it takes effect); debrief as a class to confirm accuracy and to build a shared baseline before any memo writing.
- HR memos: students select two changes from the policy, draft matter-of-fact sentences that announce the change and then revise them using at least two hedging strategies without changing the material facts. To raise awareness about possible “spin,” students can write the *non-hedged factual core* below or as a margin note (“What is undeniably changing?”) and then have a neighbor confirm their hedge does not contradict or conceal that core. Several useful instructor prompts here include: Are all non-negotiable material facts explicit (what changed, who is affected, effective date)? Is responsibility appropriately represented (named when knowable; backgrounded only for legitimate reasons)? “Which details are hedgeable and which are not?”
 - For instance, for Truist Bank health benefits, hedges should be reserved for contingent details such as rollout timelines, implementation logistics, and projections. Core facts should be stated directly: eligibility rules, coverage removals or additions, and fixed cost figures (e.g., deductibles, premiums, copays).
- Conclude by assigning the memo drafting as homework. An optional Class 3 could be a quick peer review where students bring in their drafts and read over each other’s work with some guiding questions such as “What would an employee worry about after reading this?” and “Where does the responsibility appear to sit?” and “Does the memo accurately

and ethically capture and communicate the changes to build/maintain trust?”

Learning Outcomes

Students engaging in this activity will:

- Identify and describe material policy changes by comparing two versions of a workplace document
- Distinguish factual content from rhetorical framing in organizational messages that deliver bad news
- Apply audience and purpose analysis to choose an appropriate level of directness, candor, and reassurance
- Revise sentences to control agency and responsibility through active and passive voice choices
- Use hedging strategies to calibrate certainty while maintaining factual accuracy
- Produce and revise a concise HR-style memo that is audience-centered, credible, and ethically defensible

Learning Accommodations

- Offer sentence frames for direct and indirect delivery, for audience acknowledgment, and for common hedges; allow students to use the “language toolkit” during drafting and revision.
- Allow multiple participation modes in discussion (speaking, chat, collaborative annotation, or brief written notes). If participation is part of the grade, make it clear that multiple forms of participation count.
- Use accessible document formats (screen-reader friendly

PDFs or editable text, high-contrast highlighting, and no color-only cues) and provide sample memos in advance.

- Support multilingual writers and students unfamiliar with concepts by previewing key benefits terms (e.g., PPO, HMO, deductible, in and out of network if doing a health care focused policy), building in a brainstorming stage in small groups to identify how specific changes will affect employees, and emphasizing that clarity for the intended audience is the primary standard.
- Offer alternative scenarios (such as campus parking or Wi-Fi policy) for students who find benefits or healthcare topics sensitive and build in a moment to discuss boundaries and professional ethics.

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Further Reading

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Appendix A

Sample Assignment Prompt and Context from a HR Manager

Subject: Draft employee communication — Medical plan updates

Hi [Employee Name],

As part of Truist's annual benefits review, we're rolling out updates to the medical plan for the upcoming plan year. You've been assigned to draft the employee-facing message that explains what's changing, what's staying the same, and where employees can go with questions.

To get started, please review and compare the **Previous Healthcare Plan Overview** and the **New Healthcare Plan Overview**. Your job is to translate the key differences into clear, accurate language for a broad employee audience.

A few important notes: the updated plan includes higher deductibles, higher out-of-pocket maximums, and changes to coverage in some areas. Those elements will likely prompt questions and frustration, so we need to be transparent while also communicating the reasons why we are making these changes.

When preparing your draft, please do the following:

- **Identify and summarize the key changes** employees will care about most (e.g., eligibility, premium contributions, deductibles, out-of-pocket maximums, covered services, network/provider access, pharmacy benefits, appeals, and wellness resources).
- **Verify every detail against the plan documents.** If you use AI tools to help scan and organize differences, that's fine, but you're responsible for confirming all numbers and coverage statements directly in the source documents. Please let me know how you used AI and for what specific purposes, so we can think about ways HR can implement it in the future.
- **Be direct about increases or reductions** (costs, deductibles, coverage), but avoid euphemisms. Employees will compare

documents, so accuracy and clarity matter.

- **Use a professional, empathetic tone.** Acknowledge that plan changes can be stressful, and reinforce that Truist remains committed to offering competitive benefits.
- **Include next steps and support:** where to find the full plan information, how to contact Benefits/HR, and where/when employees can ask questions (e.g., open enrollment sessions, Q&A webinar, benefits portal).

Format: I recommend a very short introduction of the main changes and then an attached memo for your email, since employees are more likely to read a clear “what changed” snapshot. If you prefer a traditional memo/letter format, that’s okay, but just explain briefly in your reflection why that format is more effective for this audience and message.

Please send me your draft by the due date so I can review it before it goes out.

Thanks,
Chris Mayer
HR Supervisor