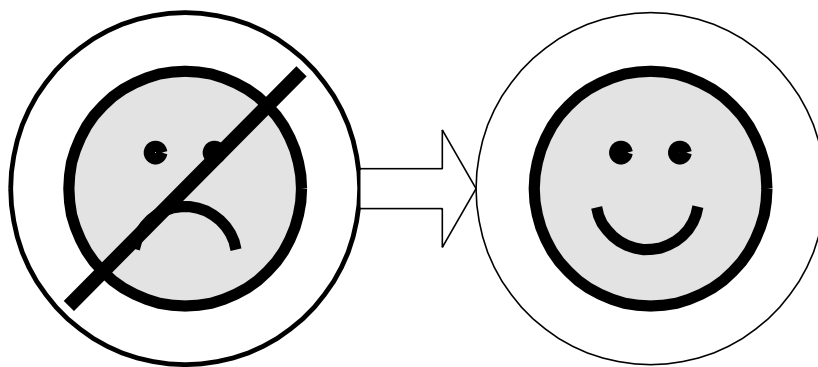


Make a Positive Statement, so People Understand Right Away—without Having to Unpack a Nest of Negatives



BACKGROUND |

Negatives slow people down

Faced with a negative, readers must often translate it into a positive statement to figure out what it means.

*The world's as ugly, ay, as sin
And almost as delightful.*

—Frederick Locker-Lampson,
The Jester's Plea

Comprehension suffers when the reader must make a logical reversal, such as when translating the statement “The switch is not off” to get the meaning “The switch is on.” (Simpson and Casey, 1988)

Negative words, especially two in a row, require more effort from the reader to understand, causing information overload. (Sammons, 1999)

Do the translation for your guests.

- | | | |
|---------------------|---|-----------|
| • not many | → | few |
| • not the same | → | different |
| • not strong enough | → | too weak |
| • did not remember | → | forgot |

One negative is bad, but two or three will confuse anyone

Avoid combining *no*, *not*, or *never* with verbs that give off negative vibes, like *avoid*, *deny*, *doubt*, *exclude*, *fail*, *lack*, *prevent*, or *prohibit*.

First, the reader has to figure out what positive action may have been attempted or asserted. Then the reader has to understand how the action got stopped. And finally, the *not* appears, turning the stop-action back on itself. Beware, too, words that are implicitly negative, such as *unless*, *however*, *without*, *against*, *lacking*.

- The cancellation form was not accepted by the server.
Please do not retry at this time unless the text in fields marked with red arrows has been erased.
- The filtering criteria you submitted have not been rejected, but failed to exclude any known sites.

To completely confuse your readers, combine negatives with passive verbs and our dreaded nominalizations.

- Returns must not be sent unless a cancellation process has been refused.
- We're sorry but privacy concerns cannot be addressed individually, except in non-secure e-mail transmissions.

If you must say NO, say why

Sometimes, you just have to say "No!" If you have to contradict an idiot, deny a statement, or fight against a misunderstanding, go ahead. But rush in afterward with a positive statement.

- We're not geeks. We're just ordinary consumers, like you.
- No surrender! We're going to go on fighting for the environment.

Take a positive stance

Making a positive statement takes more imagination. Instead of telling people, “Don’t operate in an unsafe manner,” you have to think what safe operation consists of. That takes more effort than merely waving your hand and saying, “Don’t get in trouble.” But if you can come up with concrete actions that users can take, you increase the likelihood that they will follow your advice. Which sentences would you find easier to act on?

Negative

Don’t put tools on the floor.

Don’t overload the power supply with nonstandard voltages.

Overboiling could have a negative impact on taste and texture.

Positive

Put tools on the table.

Use only 220 volt power.

Boil for 7 minutes, then drain, for best taste and tex-

EXAMPLES

Before

Caution: do not reject this offer to cancel unless you have already discounted the many benefits of membership.

Before

Except when verification of income cannot be made because of lack of documentation, applications will not be denied.

After

Please reconsider your resignation. We want you as a member, and hope you value the many benefits of membership. To stay a member, click [Stay](#).

After

To make sure your application is approved, please send us documentation so we can verify your income.

Before

We cannot agree with those negative people who unaccountably deny the reality of freedom of speech.

After

We cannot agree. We believe in freedom of speech.

Before

However often the secure server has identified a break-in, it would not be advisable to prohibit administrative access.

After

The administrator must always have access to the secure server—even if a hacker has broken in.

AUDIENCE FIT

If visitors want this...

TO HAVE FUN

How well does this guideline apply?

Taking a negative position intrigues your readers. But attack with gusto and not too many negatives.

TO LEARN

Negatives rarely work. Teach pluses, not minuses.

TO ACT

People need to know what to do. Telling them what not to do risks confusion, or worse, people doing just what you told them not to do.

TO BE AWARE

Try not thinking of fudge. Negatives have their place when you must disabuse people of established notions. But move quickly to what is true.

TO GET CLOSE TO PEOPLE

A few negatives get a good argument going. Too many, and people tune out.

See: Boomer (1975), Chase & Clark (1972), Clark & Chase (1972), Dewer (1976), Hackos & Stephens (1996), Herriot (1970), Horton (1990), Sammons (1999), Simpson & Casey (1988), Whitaker & Stacey (1981), Wickens (1984), Williams (1990, 1994).

For your review only.

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theprices@theprices.com

The Prices
918 La Senda Lane, NW
Albuquerque, NM 87107

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