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Balancing convention and context: the rhetoric of rejection in real-world practice

Deborah Louise Crown
Iowa State University

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Balancing convention and context:
The rhetoric of rejection in real-world practice

by

Deborah Louise Crown

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______________________________
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Writing conventions in business communication are designed, in part, to assist practitioners with the kinds of writing tasks they face on a regular basis. Conventions for writing letters, proposals, memoranda, and other genres common to business communication help practitioners in several ways. First, adhering to certain conventions can save time; practically speaking, writers should not have to reinvent the wheel every time they write a new thank-you letter, for example.

Another reason that business-writing formulae can be quite useful is that most readers are regularly exposed to routine business communications and learn to expect certain characteristics in these communications. For example, most business people are familiar with sections common to a proposal; proposals that do not follow typical patterns may be more cumbersome for people to understand than those that do follow conventions.

Forms common to business-writing genres are also helpful in difficult situations, when the message that needs to be communicated is not what the recipient wants or expects. Most writers are ambivalent about communicating negative news and often find themselves at a loss for words, particularly when the writer wants to preserve a productive relationship with the reader. Following the common form for a negative message seems to help the writers in these cases, literally giving writers the words they need to deliver the message
and maintain the reader's goodwill. For the most part, we are relatively comfortable with writing conventions and formulae because we recognize them when we see them and can efficiently rely on them to help us communicate with each other.

One conventional form that is commonly found in business is the form for writing a negative message. Generally, the form for a letter communicating a negative message is structured indirectly, opening with a "buffer" that intends to soften the bad news that will come later. The buffer need not be overly sugar-coated, however, to still be considered a buffer. For example, many job rejection letters open with a buffer acknowledging receipt of the applicant's resume or thanking the applicant for recently interviewing with the company. I would argue that even a reference to a past inquiry or communication also serves as an effective buffer to the negative news because at the very least it provides the reader with a frame of reference for the message by offering specific information about exactly what the writer is responding to. Following the buffer, the body of a negative message typically states the reason for the bad news and is then followed by the bad news itself. The ending is usually worded positively and attempts to convey a friendly and helpful attitude on the part of the writer.

Although the conventional negative message is structured indirectly, recent business-writing textbooks maintain that the negative message itself must be communicated as clearly as possible. For example, Ewald and Burnett recommend that writers "structure the explanation so that it leads logically to
the decision. That is, the reader should be able to reach the same decision that you have reached based on the explanation...... The decision can be explicitly stated or implied, but in any case it must be clear and unequivocal" (260).

Since negative message conventions are designed to help all business writers deliver bad news, these conventions are, by necessity, general, while real-world negative message production is often, by necessity, complex and context-dependent. Considering the differences in corporate culture, not only among businesses but also among situations, it is safe to assume that more than the formula alone is needed to adequately address the complex negative-message writing situations found in day-to-day real-world practice. Martin Jacobi warns that an undue reliance on business-writing prescriptions "expends problem-solving efforts on molding communicative strategies to fit preconceived forms, rather than molding strategies to fit the conditions of the contexts, and retards rather than improves students' rhetorical skills" (43).

Even so, I believe that prescriptions for writing negative messages can still be a useful starting place. Often other factors outside of the negative message prescription can and do influence or determine the extent to which the formula is strictly followed. Although current research in negative message theory does offer more in the way of context now than it has in years past, testing of negative messages usually does not probe in depth the real-world context surrounding the production of the negative message.
As a basis for refining negative message prescriptions, several studies have tested reader response to negative messages and/or analyzed the kinds of negative messages produced in the business world (e.g., Adair; Brown; David and Graham; Locker; Jablin and Krone). Most of these studies involve many negative messages or many readers and, thus, intend to make useful generalizations that are applicable to improving theory for negative messages and instruction on how to write them. Also, many of the more recent studies and recent textbooks tend to include more on the importance of context in creating negative messages, devoting more time than ever to "exceptions" to what were once hard and fast prescriptive rules (e.g., David and Graham; Locker).

However, since their goal is often to provide a rationale for making some kind of useful generalization that improves business-writing instruction and negative message theory, most of these studies require a large body of evidence (i.e., over 100 letters to analyze) and, consequently, cannot fully explore the contextual complexity of real business-writing situations. Although some researchers attempt to get close to the "real world," many do not analyze what is actually produced, distributed, read, and interpreted in real-world practice, which makes one question their applicability in real-world practice. Detailed, specific studies of real-world practice are needed to complement these studies that test negative message theory in business on a relatively broad (and, in some cases, fictitious) scale. Especially valuable are real-world situations that
examine how practitioners balance prescriptions for writing negative messages with situations where context may not only take precedence over the prescription but perhaps even cause a writer to abandon all or part of the prescription in favor of a strategy that, in the writer's mind, best fits the occasion. In addition to negative message theory, employing theory in audience and the reader-writer relationship seems beneficial in these cases since they are context-informed and dependent on the multiple audiences (including the writer and his or her co-workers) of the negative message produced.

A contextual study allows writers to see the "why" behind the simple "how to" of the convention, perhaps promoting a better understanding of the convention that has been used over the years to respond to the given needs of its audiences. Additionally, examinations of real-world practice offer business writers the opportunity to see real audience analysis (whether it is done well, poorly, or at all) in action. Finally, some cases can illustrate the effects that individual ability and corporate culture have on the writing produced, information that most research in negative message theory never addresses.

Working in concert with results of experimental testing of negative messages, specific contextual analyses of real-world practice help to complete the picture of how best to employ negative message conventions in a context-laden reality. Jacobi explains the benefits of the business-writing approach that takes both business-writing conventions and the specific context of the situation into consideration:
Balancing modes with context analysis helps a writer learn to consider the facts of a case, his or her own intentions, the audience's knowledge of the facts, and the audience's probable attitude towards the writer's intentions. Consequently, the writer's professional writing should become more informative and more personal. (43)

Since more context-based applications of theory to reality are needed to fully demonstrate how an appreciation of context can fill the gap between theory and reality, this study is designed to examine current research in negative message theory alongside real-world practice. Although practitioners cannot possibly be prepared to comfortably and successfully communicate a negative message in any given situation, a contextual study of factors surrounding the real production and interpretation of negative messages in business can at least lead business writers to recognize the dynamic relationship between context and convention, no matter how mundane the writing task. My focus is on examining this balance between negative message conventions and particular contextual influences that surround the production of a boilerplate manuscript rejection letter in a large, non-profit organization in the Midwest. Specifically, this study is geared toward answering the following questions:

- How do negative message conventions and context balance in a complex, real-world situation in which negative messages are routinely produced?
• How does individual ability influence the production of a negative message in real-world practice?

• How does corporate culture affect the production of a negative message in real-world practice?

• What can research on audience and the reader-writer relationship contribute to the study of the production and interpretation of negative messages in real-world practice?
For most organizations, the typical bad-news letter seems to have a dual purpose: (1) to clearly convey news that the reader does not want or expect and (2) to maintain the goodwill of the reader to avoid losing business or good reputation, or, in extreme cases, to avoid a lawsuit. Given these seemingly diametrically opposed objectives, it is no wonder that many business writers are ambivalent or even downright nervous about writing negative messages. Whether the situation calls for a writer to reject a job applicant or explain the Exxon Valdez oil spill to the world, all writers of negative messages usually cringe at the possible reactions they may receive once their letter is delivered. Badly written communication of any kind is problematic enough for business writers; consequences are worse when negative news is not articulated in a way suitable for the often multiple audiences it could potentially reach.

The Special Challenges of Communicating Bad News

All correspondence is important in business; even the seemingly benign thank-you letter can cause problems for a company if not worded properly. According to Elizabeth McCord, legal problems can arise when poorly worded routine communication is misinterpreted by the receiver and when the receiver's
impression of the communication is found by a judge or jury to be a clearly plausible interpretation. McCord states that “a business person increasingly will create (often unwittingly) a binding legal obligation in the course of routine correspondence, or the writing will serve as evidence against the writer in a lawsuit. In other words, routine discourse often creates or supports legal obligation” (175).

Problems are especially compounded for negative messages, where badly worded routine correspondence can cause a business to lose customers or lose face in the eyes of the public. For example, Thomas Brice and Marie Waung state that consequences from badly worded job applicant rejection letters “may range from qualified applicants failing to apply for future openings to an organization losing the patronage of spurned applicants and their families. In either case, the company loses, be it a future job candidate or a customer” (60). Not only can badly worded rejection letters cause a company to lose business, but they can also be brought to the attention of elected officials by offended groups or individuals (Fielden and Dulek 45). In short, the delivery of negative messages is a highly sensitive practice in business communication and, therefore, merits serious attention.

In the last decade, several researchers have focused attention on routine communications in business and the sometimes life-or-death consequences of badly written routine communication, particularly when bad news is delivered or a bad situation needs to be explained (see, e.g., Ice; McCord; Tyler; Winsor,
“Communication Failures;” Winsor, “Construction;” Woolever). These studies not only clearly illustrate the need for better training in communicating negative news, but they also offer important insight into the powerful influences of contextual variables that, in many cases, dictate the composition of the negative message itself.

Dorothy Winsor's detailed examinations of the communication problems surrounding the Challenger explosion, for example, explore factors outside of the simple modes of communication themselves that contributed to the tragedy. For example, she found that hierarchical relationships between engineers and managers at Morton-Thiokol International (MTI), as well as MTI's subordinate relationship to NASA as its subcontractor, markedly affected how information about the O-ring problems in the solid rocket boosters was interpreted and communicated to higher-ups (“Communication Failures”). Specifically, many engineers had more difficulty communicating negative messages to superiors and those outside the company than they did to other engineers within their own company. The context of interoffice relationships was certainly at play here, influencing communication in a deadly way.

Outside of the office, multiple audiences exist who may or may not respond differently to the way bad news is conveyed; they should be considered when negative messages are prepared. Clear evidence for the existence of multiple interpretations of negative news is presented in recent articles exploring the rhetoric following the 1989 oil spill of the Exxon Valdez off the
Alaskan coast and the lethal methyl isocynate (MIC) gas leak at Union Carbide's Bhopal, India, plant in 1984. For example, in "Corporate Publics and Rhetorical Strategies: The Case of Union Carbide's Bhopal Crisis," Richard Ice examines the rhetoric explaining the deadly Bhopal gas leak in terms of the different desires and expectations of four distinct publics. Ice concludes that Union Carbide's "prominent [rhetorical] strategies emphasize the financial and scientific aspects of the tragedy" (357). Although these strategies did appease some of Union Carbide's audiences, they alienated others. While Ice recognizes companies' desire for consistency when explaining a bad situation to a number of audiences, he suggests that companies learn to manage and adapt different strategies to different audiences (360).

Lisa Tyler's article, "Ecological Disaster and Rhetorical Response: Exxon's Communications in the Wake of the Valdez Spill," also illustrates how communicating with different audiences can be a conundrum for companies explaining disaster. In their attempt to explain the Valdez spill and its environmental consequences, personnel at Exxon ultimately became overwhelmed by the different reactions they received from different audiences, to the point of taking a purely defensive approach to delivering and explaining the bad news (Tyler 165).

In all these cases, it is clear that the situations and the context surrounding them heavily influenced the creation of the letters, memoranda, television broadcasts, and phone calls that acted as vehicles for delivery of these
messages. As Winsor argues, "[t]o know [...] is not simply to attend solely to
evidence while ignoring social influences, for the very perception of evidence is
always shaped by social factors" ("Construction" 11). These cases also illustrate
the contradictory forces that different social influences exert on the creation of
discourse: "What do you do if your company's legal needs and public relations
needs conflict?" (Tyler 168).

Researchers who analyze these and other communication failures offer
business writers some advice for improving both the clarity and reception of the
negative message. Acknowledging the role of social context and the real
existence of multiple audiences for all communications, Elizabeth McCord
suggests that writers always consider a neutral third party, like a judge or jury,
as a potential audience for all communication produced by an organization.
McCord states:

[Since] any and all of an organization's written records can be
subpoenaed, read by an opposing party, and offered into evidence in a
lawsuit, then it becomes clear that any written business communication
can become legal evidence of an event, course of action, promise made, or
even subjective intent of the writer or employing organization. (192)

Given the potentially larger audience for every piece of writing produced by an
organization, business writers must be aware of the different ways their writing
could be interpreted by audiences beyond the recipient(s) of the correspondence.
McCord states that business writers must recognize that "a court, when
adjudicating a claim arising out of or supported by writing, asks questions similar to those good writers consider when tackling any writing project” (193).

In her article, “Corporate Language and the Law: Avoiding Liability in Corporate Communications,” Kristin Woolever cites two major issues, both rooted in Platonic and Aristotelian rhetoric, that are vital to consideration of corporate liability in business communications: “Is the message designed specifically enough for the intended audience? Does the writer intentionally mislead the audience?” (94). Woolever believes that attention to questions like these are essential to promoting trust between audience and writer, noting that “the writers' chief concern should be to anticipate [those issues] and design prose that does not violate the audience's trust” (94). Obviously, clarity and a straightforward message are important to avoiding the possibility of the legal problems an organization could face if its communications can be interpreted in multiple ways by different audiences.

Although this seems to be a commonsense notion, it is probably safe to assume that this kind of advice is not followed on a daily basis. When one's “To Do” list includes writing both a million-dollar proposal and a simple routine letter, the letter is usually written hastily, without much consideration for the potentially larger audience. Also, it is frankly impossible to predict exactly how different kinds of readers will react to a message. This uncertainty regarding audience response, combined with countless outside factors that may or may not influence a given writer, can be paralyzing. While accidents like the Challenger
disaster and the public relations nightmares surrounding the Bhopal and Exxon
catastrophes do not occur every day, most writers still want or need as much
advice as they can get about how best to communicate negative messages, no
matter how routine the bad news letter.

While studies of the production of actual routine negative messages are
not abundant, negative message theory is currently being examined through
studies of reader response to prescriptive negative messages to test the
effectiveness of those modes. Some researchers are also now beginning to
examine collections of real-world negative messages from a variety of
organizations to determine whether traditional advice about negative-message
composition is actually being followed by practitioners.

Analyses of Reader Response to Negative Messages

To assess the validity of traditional advice regarding the production of
negative messages, particularly in terms of maintaining the goodwill of the
recipient, several studies have focused their analyses on reader responses to
both researcher-prepared and actual negative messages (Aamodt and Peggans;
Brown; Jablin and Krone; Kennedy; Locker). Two other studies examine
negative message conventions from a reader's perspective, although they do not
include actual reader response to the letters apart from the authors' criticisms
(Brent; Salerno). While I find the studies by Locker and Jablin and Krone to be the most thorough and useful of the seven, all increase awareness of the social nature of sensitive messages, leading practitioners and educators toward a greater concern for audience when determining recommended characteristics of negative message correspondence.

Apart from raising an increased awareness of the social considerations important to negative messages, however, I am unable to completely accept their evidence for either changing or upholding the traditional negative message formula. Some of these studies focus only on badly written negative messages which abuse the conventions; thus, they do not offer much to the refinement or improvement of negative message writing conventions in general (e.g., Brent; Brown; Kennedy; Salerno). Also, almost all of the studies that use large numbers of letters and/or readers stop short of analyzing negative messages and reader response from the "real world;" thus, I am hesitant to wholeheartedly believe that their findings should be applied in real-world practice (e.g., Aamodt and Peggans; Jablin and Krone; Locker).

For example, in "Factors in Reader Responses to Negative Messages: Experimental Evidence for Changing What We Teach," Kitty Locker suggests amending traditional prescriptions based on her analysis of reader responses to three kinds of letters, all of which are examples of letters turning down a reader's request. In all three experiments, college students are asked to play the part of the letter recipient and offer their responses to the negative message
being conveyed. Specifically, Locker tested the validity of three traditional components of negative message writing: the buffer opening, giving the reason before the refusal, and ending the message positively (8).

Her findings seem to refine traditional advice about negative messages, particularly regarding the use of a buffer in every situation and ending on a positive note. She also hones traditional advice about providing a reason for the refusal, stating that the most effective reasons are specific:

External negative messages should normally begin with the reason for the refusal, using a buffer only if one of several "exceptions" apply. The reason should normally be spelled out in as much detail as possible. If an alternative or compromise exists, the writer should suggest it. The ending should use a bland positive rather than a strong one, especially to clients or customers. (22)

Locker admits, however, that "my experiments test a simulated rejection, a situation where people are asked to imagine that they are in a situation.... It is always possible that the way people say they will respond may be quite different from the way they actually would respond..." (8). Not only does her study test reader response to a simulated rejection, but the readers acting as responders were college students, most of whom were in their twenties and therefore relatively unseasoned and inexperienced in real-world business communication. Locker admits that "[a]ll my respondents were college or graduate students. Though this limitation is shared by most psychological research, older adults or adults with less education might respond differently"
(8). While the use of students as respondents is clearly a practical choice for many researchers, many do not even acknowledge the ramifications of using such an inexperienced audience. This inexperience and artificiality can be enough to call results into question.

"Rejecting Applicants with Tact," a 1988 reader response study by Michael Aamodt and Deborah Peggans anticipates Locker's findings, particularly regarding the prescription to provide a detailed reason for the refusal and using a blandly positive ending. Their study begins with a discussion of 120 actual job applicant rejection letters sent by organizations to actual job applicants; the letters, however, are not analyzed against traditional advice about negative messages, but are instead inventoried to determine the overall presence or absence of certain rejection letter characteristics. After the inventory was complete, the writers prepared 128 combinations of the presence and absence of seven characteristics they distilled from their original sample, and solicited reader response from 128 study participants, none of whom were the actual recipients of the job applicant rejection letters.

Aamodt and Peggans found that the ideal job applicant rejection letter "contains friendly statements, includes information about the person who was offered the job, and promises to keep the resume on file" (60). None of the complete texts of any of the letters they used in their research is included in their article, however, making their vague suggestion of "friendly statements" relatively meaningless. We can probably assume, however, that they are
advocating a somewhat positive tone on the part of the writer. However, their suggestions about providing information about the person who was offered the job and about keeping the resume on file seem to be in agreement with Locker’s reader response-based suggestion to provide a specific reason for a refusal (i.e., at least the specific qualifications of the successful applicant) and to end with a bland positive.¹

Aamodt and Peggans’s experimental methods, however, lead me to question their results and be suspicious of their advice and its application to real-world practice. Although Aamodt and Peggans state that the most important consideration in their experiment focuses on “whether the presence or absence of [characteristics common to rejection letters] actually affects the attitudes and behavior of the rejected applicant” (59-60), their study participants were by no means “the rejected applicants” whose “attitudes and behavior” were at all actually affected by the letters. They state that “[t]he 128 participants in the study were each given a rejection letter and asked to imagine that they had personally received that letter after applying for a job as a loan officer with a bank” (60; emphasis added). In this case, not only are the participants not the actual job applicants for whom the rejection letters were written, but perhaps are not even interested in ever working as a loan officer at a bank.

Further, the data for this experiment included 128 different rejection letters, each with its own, individual responder (60), hardly a statistically valid
approach. Aamodt and Peggans admit that their study “raises as many questions as it answers,” and that “care must be taken in drawing conclusions from a study involving hypothetical situations” (60). Apart from this admission and caveat, they do not delve into the possibly serious ramifications of these constraints. I would argue, then, that these kinds of constraints, although they are barely mentioned by most researchers, are important to the judgment of the accuracy of any reader response study.

In “Unkind Cuts: Rethinking the Rhetoric of Academic Job Rejection Letters,” Ted Brown examines approximately 500 academic job applicant rejection letters from his “personal collection” (770). Although Brown does include analyses of letters he considers to be particularly well crafted, the focus of his criticism is on rejection letters that are just badly written. Specifically, Brown blames problems with the letters on writers that are not clear about the rejection and an overly positive, patronizing tone. Brown specifically admits that “the motive behind these rejection letters that fail to [clearly] reject is no doubt a humane one, an effort to cushion the applicant from an unpleasant truth” (771).

Although Brown somewhat forgivingly calls the reason behind unclear or overly positive rejection “a humane one,” many other researchers argue that most readers are downright insulted and entirely unforgiving of unclear rejection, seeing the reason behind such cloudy messages as a deceptive, rude, or patronizing one. Thomas Brice and Marie Waung, for example, concur that
problems with clarity in bad news messages impede goodwill: “Applicants
deserve to know when they have not been hired and are unimpressed with the
vagueness that is prevalent in many rejection letters” (61-62). Locker notes the
danger of traditional textbook advice that recommends always buffering a
negative message, especially if the buffer is worded too positively, since it may
cause the reader to expect good news and be even more hurt when the letter
turns out to be bad news (22).

Teresa Kennedy describes the kind of patronizing treatment that authors
are often subject to during the process of manuscript rejection. In the situation
that Kennedy describes, authors receiving manuscript rejection letters are
typically accustomed to receiving such correspondence; putting too much
emphasis on maintaining goodwill, especially given an audience that is used to
rejection, only serves to insult. Responding to the manuscript rejection letters
that she is accustomed to receiving as an author herself, Kennedy states that
“[t]o attempt to soften the blow of rejection by wording it in nonspecific, vaguely
collective terms only causes a rejection to assume proportions of authority it
rarely deserves” (47).

These criticisms, however, are doing little in the way of refining
traditional negative message advice for communicating the rejection and
maintaining the goodwill of the recipient. The traditional prescription for
writing negative messages does require the writer to be clear about the rejection.
It also advises the writer to be positive without misleading the reader. In no
way do negative message conventions tell writers to be manipulative, burying the negative message in a bunch of patronizing gibberish.

Although Brown, Kennedy, and Brice and Waung stop short of calling for a refinement of negative message conventions, Douglas Brent believes that indirect structure must be done away with entirely, based mostly on his examination of writers who abuse the conventions. For example, in his reader-centered study of indirect structure, Brent sees the buffer as one of the culprits in rejection letters that fail to maintain the goodwill of the recipient:

Good readers—especially business readers, but in fact any who weren't born yesterday—are also inherently suspicious. Alarm bells will ring if the opening sentences of a communication do not seem to bear on a relevant thesis, or seem to be designed to procure agreement rather than advance an argument. As a result, they will be particularly careful not to react in the way buffer sentences are encouraging them to, because they realize that to do so might be to walk into a trap. (6; emphasis in original)

Brent also states that readers see a buffer, or any other "positive" language, as extraneous to the primary purpose of the communication, which, in the case of the rejection letter is the communication of the bad news:

...readers—again, business readers even more than other kinds—hate nothing more than feeling that their time is being wasted. And nothing strikes the average reader as more a waste of time than waiting for the ulterior motive or a set of buffer sentences to become clear. (6)

Of course, Brent's concern for the reader is admirable, but I believe that his criticisms are misplaced. Perhaps he should be blaming plain old bad writing on
the problems with bad rejection letters; it seems a bit ridiculous to assume that
a convention alone causes people to write badly.

Other researchers have suggested that the problems with the
traditionally vague, positive language of the rejection letter, particularly the
buffer, are perpetuated because such language is often suggested as a tool
writers can use to manipulate their audiences. For example, in “An
Interpersonal Approach to Writing Negative Messages,” an analysis of 22
rejection letters he received during 1983, Douglas Salerno states that this
unethical, manipulative use of the buffer is actually advocated by some
business-writing textbooks: “Such teaching,” says Salerno, “merely affirms what
many students, and other practitioners, already believe; that good effective
business writing is manipulative, that it isn’t what you say—and especially it
isn’t why you say it—but most importantly how you say it that matters” (44-45;
emphasis in original).

It is important to remember, however, that Salerno’s study, as well as
those of Brent, Brown, Brice and Waung, and Kennedy, does not provide
evidence for doing away with the buffer; nor do these studies prove that the
conventional indirect structure of a negative message or positive language
should no longer be employed. Since these studies are entirely reader-based,
they do not address the context surrounding the production of these badly
written letters. Some, like Brown, speculate about the emotions influencing the
production of badly written letters. But short of illustrating that readers are
sensitive to and critical of badly written negative messages, these studies offer little in the way of helping to refine the conventions of negative message production in business.

In their 1984 article, “Characteristics of Rejection Letters and Their Effects on Job Applicants,” Fredric Jablin and Kathleen Krone analyzed 170 actual job applicant rejection letters sent to actual job applicants. They also interviewed those applicants via questionnaire to determine how readers are affected by particular characteristics of rejection letters. Their findings led them to conclude that, overall, the rejection letter that most applicants received “seems to follow fairly closely the often cited prescriptions for writing bad news messages…” (403). They conclude that “the qualities of rejection letters do not necessarily have a strong impact on applicants’ self-perceptions, [but] they do affect applicants’ perceptions of the letters themselves. In particular, results suggest that indirect styles of rejection are perceived positively by applicants and as socially appropriate” (405).

Although I think Jablin and Krone’s study best approximates real-world practice, using real job applicants and the actual rejection letters they received, the job applicants themselves were still college students, most of whom were applying for their first “real” job after college (390). Like the student responders in Locker’s study, I believe that these respondents, too, are unseasoned judges, especially when compared with more experienced business people who are familiar with the job market. Although the job applicants in this study were all
applying for similar jobs (sales, marketing, finance, management, and data processing), Jablin and Krone still should be cautious about drawing conclusions from 170 different letters and the 170 individual reactions to each letter (391). Also, although they did acknowledge some context involved in applicants' perceptions of the letters, particularly regarding whether the applicant had high or low interest in the job for which they were applying, with such a large sample of letters, they are not able to delve into contextual variables surrounding the letters' reception.

Although some of the research methods for the above studies in experimental testing of negative messages are more questionable than others, all demonstrate a desire to fully understand the reasons behind the relative success or failure of the negative message prescriptions that real-world practitioners use. All of the above studies are clearly conducted out of respect for writers of negative messages and their need to more adequately communicate with their audiences. Thus, they draw attention to an ever-increasing awareness of the reader-writer relationship and the need for advice for maintaining and promoting that relationship. But reader-response studies are only half of the picture: although some of these studies analyze the characteristics of real letters produced by actual businesses, they do not examine the context surrounding the letters' production.
Research in Real Negative Message Production

Several researchers have focused their attention on examining how negative messages are actually produced in business and how that production compares with traditional advice about writing negative messages (see Adair; David and Graham; Davis; Mascolini). Examinations of real negative message writing in the business world provide researchers with real confirmation of whether what is suggested by negative message theory is actually being practiced.

Herbert Davis's study, "Strategies and Philosophies Used by Colleges and Universities to Minimize the Trauma of Non-Acceptance (Rejection) Letters," analyzed non-acceptance letters routinely sent by about 150 "selective" US colleges to prospective college students. Although he interviewed prospective students, as well as their parents and high school guidance counselors, it is not clear if these students had even applied to any of the 150 colleges from which he obtained the letters. Further, Davis does not interview students and their parents and counselors about the process of being rejected; instead he asks them questions about their impressions of college admissions processes. It appears that, in doing so, Davis is attempting to analyze the concerns of the audience for the letter to then determine whether the contents and tone of the letters he solicited demonstrate an implicit understanding of those concerns.
Davis suggests that colleges use at least some specific language as part of the reason for refusing admission to the applicant to help maintain his or her goodwill. He offers a model rejection letter at the end of his study and, while some of the content of the letter is questionable in my opinion (unnecessarily positive, bordering on patronizing, in too many places), Davis does see a common call for a specific reason for rejection among the readers surveyed, noting that "students and parents complained that the non-acceptance letter [frequently] did not fully explain why the applicant was not admitted" (16). Although it is practically impossible for many colleges with large applicant pools to provide specific reasons for refusing every applicant, in the context of a model letter Davis recommends that colleges and universities include a specific statement like the following: "Over ___ students applied for approximately ___ spaces in the freshman class" (19). Davis also recommends ending on a blandly positive note by wishing the applicant "a happy and successful college career" (19).

Although Davis's study includes analyses of rejection letters sent out by 150 "selective" colleges all over the US, he never clarifies the actual number of letters nor the number of students, parents, and counselors he was able to interview; his data are reported as percentages only. Also, it is unclear if Davis is surveying rejected students (and their parents) or just high school seniors who were starting the application process. Although Davis's recommendations for including as specific a reason as possible in a rejection letter and keeping a positive tone seem to be good advice (commonsense by now perhaps), his
methodology is so vague that a duplication of his experiment would be impossible without more information.

In her 1986 thesis, "Negative Messages: An Analysis of Letters Written by Employees of Manufacturing Companies," Connie Adair states that although some attention is focused on how readers respond to negative messages, there is very little research on how real business writers actually produce negative messages (10). In her experiment, Adair asked 18 manufacturing companies to write a "bad news" letter informing a fictional client of an impending price increase. Her findings seem to be helpful in refining the formulae for writing negative messages. For example, she reports that only four of 18 letter writers actually used buffers, leading her to question the traditional recommendation of starting a negative message with a buffer (17-18). She also notes that although business-writing texts "suggest subordinating the [negative] message, writers presented it clearly and forcefully" (30).

Although Adair's goal was to examine how writers actually produce negative messages in the real world, the negative messages she solicited were not being produced in a real situation; all of her study participants knew that the negative messages they were producing were for her research. She also states that "to facilitate their responses, the instructions for the letter I asked participants to write [...] were deliberately simple to allow them to make as many writing decisions as possible" (13). Given this lack of contextual information, in some cases a general letter that addressed little or no specific
context was produced. Also, it is very likely that the business writers were concerned about impressing Adair with their abilities—no business writer wants his or her prose to be the researcher's example of what not to do. Thus, I think it is safe to assume that some of the writers invented context that would make their product both easier to compose and more impressive to the researcher. Their "audience" in these cases, then, was Adair, not a real client. Actual "real world" negative messages are not produced this way. Finally, Adair acknowledges that a letter announcing a price increase may be seen as routine business rather than bad news; thus, she may not have been testing negative messages after all (31).

In "Rereading Bad News: Compliance-Gaining Features in Management Memos," Carol David and Margaret Graham examine internal negative messages using compliance-gaining theory, which focuses on the emphasis of power relationships in persuasive discourse (269). Because it is so context-dependent, this kind of examination goes beyond just testing negative messages against traditional prescriptions: the compliance-gaining features of the prose of the negative message illuminate the context surrounding its production. Also, unlike other approaches, David's and Graham's approach gets at the "why" of internal negative message production in the case they are examining. David and Graham state that "[c]ompliance-gaining models have described persuasion as a reciprocal process, where writers and readers negotiate meanings based on their past experiences and the context of the immediate message" (271). Thus,
this kind of analysis is a very social one that is centered on reader-writer relationships as evident in the prose of the memos, even though the authors do not include real reader response to the memos. Given that all the memos they analyzed were internal, it is possible that an outsider would not have as much luck recognizing corporate context and individual relationships when analyzing external messages unless he or she had access to real writers and readers of the correspondence.

While I find this study to be one of the most comprehensive because it does delve into the context surrounding the production of negative messages, it is important to keep in mind that the negative messages that David and Graham examined were internal only. More context-centered research like this needs to be conducted with external negative messages as well, since, as demonstrated above, the consequences of the external negative message can be brutal if it is not composed properly.

Most of the above research provides some justification for rethinking some traditional prescriptions about writing negative messages, particularly when considering the application of negative message theory to real-world practice. For example, studies like these point to difficulties in defining exactly what negative news is; it appears that “bad news” varies from case to case. When the definition of “negative message” becomes vague, so does knowing when and how to apply negative message theory. They also draw attention to the corporate culture and practices that inform negative message production in various
businesses. But, like the reader response studies, analyses of the production of negative messages also only present half of the picture. Studies that involve examining both the context surrounding negative message production and its reception by readers would be beneficial, particularly if the letter under examination were boilerplate, allowing the researcher to examine one real letter and a sample of real readers who receive it.

The following examination of real-world practice, which takes into account not only the context surrounding the production of an actual boilerplate rejection letter in an organization, but also real reader response to that letter, is an attempt to begin answering questions that experimental testing of negative message theory does not: namely, how do convention and corporate culture balance to produce a routine negative message? Also, what is the extent of the influences that individual ability and corporate culture have on the production of a negative message?
A CONTEXT STUDY
OF A ROUTINE MANUSCRIPT REJECTION LETTER

The following study is an attempt to provide practitioners with an example of how corporate culture and relationships, individual ability, and negative message conventions interact to produce a boilerplate rejection letter. Although the letter itself is critiqued, the influence of the corporate culture in which it is produced and the characteristics of the audiences responding to it are the main focus here, providing practitioners with a sound rationale for considering how the specifics of a situation influence the way conventional writing is created in their respective organizations.

Background

This study focuses on “Landcare,” a large, non-profit organization of individuals advocating and researching conservation and natural resource management. I first became familiar with Landcare when I worked there as an editorial intern during the spring of 1996. Landcare is headquartered in the Midwest and has about 11,000 members worldwide, although a majority of its members are from the United States. Landcare publishes a bimonthly journal whose audience includes scientists, engineers, planners, technicians, academics,
policy makers, farmers, hydrologists, foresters, and other natural resource managers. The purpose of the journal is to keep members aware of Landcare's activities and to inform interested members about new and important issues in the field of natural resource management.

Each issue of the journal includes research articles covering a wide array of topics. The research articles typically rely on analyses of data collected in the field, but sometimes the journal will publish extended literature reviews in its research section as well. Research articles are generally submitted by people with Ph.D.s who are employed by land-grant universities in the United States or by research scientists working for United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) agencies. About 10-15 percent of all submitted research manuscripts come from overseas (usually written by western Europeans doing research in Africa and Asia). Research articles are highly technical and frequently speak mostly to academics and other practitioners in the sciences.

According to the editorial staff, Landcare receives about 130-140 research manuscripts per year for possible inclusion in the journal. Of those, 30-40 are accepted for publication (a rate of 22-31 percent). The editorial staff say that this rate is relatively high compared to other similar scientific publications.

Each research manuscript submitted for publication is subject to a very regulated review and publication process. Once the research manuscript is received, Troy Norman, Senior Editor, and Carol Rudolph, Director of Publications (Troy's supervisor), review the document briefly to determine
whether it meets minimum editorial standards (regarding subject matter; length; proper format for references, tables, figures; etc.). The manuscript is then sent to Robert Paulson, Technical Editor, who briefly reviews the manuscript and assigns it to one of their Associate Editors, who are experts in particular fields of natural resource management. The Associate Editor then assigns the manuscript to three or four reviewers for blind peer review along with a guideline for review, the editorial guidelines for the journal, and a firm deadline. The above process usually takes about five weeks.

Usually the reviewers take about five or six weeks to review the manuscript and report their findings and recommendations to Robert. The manuscript is then sent back to Troy and Carol with one of the following recommendations: (1) accept as is, (2) accept with minor revisions, (3) accept after rewrite (more substantial revisions), or (4) release (i.e., reject). If the reviewers call for substantial revisions, the author is given the review comments and has six months to make the changes. If the author takes longer than six months to complete the changes, the manuscript is released. A recommendation for outright release is usually given when the research itself is inherently flawed according to the experts reviewing the document. If the manuscript is released outright, all materials, including the reviewers' comments, are returned to the author with a "release" letter, usually authored by Robert.
Robert’s Release Letter

Although the acceptance rate at the journal is comparatively high, Landcare must reject as many as 100 research manuscripts per year. Landcare’s routine rejection letter was created, like other rejection letters of its kind, to communicate the rejection while maintaining the goodwill of the rejected manuscript’s author, especially considering the number and professional status of the letter’s recipients. Unfortunately, Landcare has received some real reader response indicating that Robert’s usual letter accomplishes neither of those objectives. Figure 1 is an example of Robert’s “release” letter from about three years ago.

An Analysis of Robert’s Letter

Contrary to conventional negative message theory, Robert’s letter does not open with a buffer. It begins immediately with “I am sorry to inform you,” indicating to the reader that bad news is to follow. Since the bad news is presented immediately here, this letter is also not organized indirectly, as suggested by negative message convention. Further, the reason, although it is typically specific, is not placed before the refusal. Included with the letter are
May 10, 1994

Dr. Tom Strawberry
Building X, Room 101
College of Agriculture
University of Anywhere
City, State 11111

RE: [manuscript number and title] submitted to The Journal

Dear Dr. Strawberry:

I am sorry to inform you that we are releasing your paper back to you for possible resubmission in this or another journal. This is not a rejection of you or your research. It is a release of this paper in its current form.

Despite the outcome for this journal, both reviewers were impressed with the quality of the work. It was considered an interesting and informative article. The authors should probably seek other outlets for the work. The article was not considered acceptable for this journal because [it was not original research or was not in depth enough in any one of the many topics covered to be a review].³ We hope you find these and other comments of the reviewers useful.

How you decide to modify the paper and where you decide to resubmit are your decisions. We at The Journal thank you for submitting your work here. If you have any questions or comments, please feel free to contact us.

Sincerely,

Robert Paulson
Technical Editor, The Journal

Figure 1. An example of Robert's original release letter from about three years ago

not only the rejected manuscript itself, but the reviewers' specific comments which should explain the problems they had with the manuscript, i.e., a very specific reason for refusal. Robert does end the letter on a somewhat positive note, thanking the reader for submitting his or her work and encouraging him or her to call with questions or comments. The positive ending and specific reason
for the refusal seem to be the only negative message conventions that are followed here.

One could say that Robert also adheres to the conventions of clearly stating the rejection and of having a positive tone throughout the letter, but reader response evidence suggests otherwise. First, a problem due to lack of clarity arose from some of the word choices in this letter. Some recipients of the letter did not make the distinction between an outright release (as the above letter is supposed to be) and a recommendation for revision and resubmission. Robert’s letter states that “we are releasing your paper back to you for possible resubmission in this or another journal” (emphasis added), leading some authors to believe that they were simply supposed to revise their articles, resubmit, and then wait for them to be published.

Further, Robert explicitly states that “[t]his is not a rejection of you or your research. It is a release of this paper in its current form” (emphasis added). Statements like these imply that the research itself is not flawed, there are just some problems with the article that need to be corrected before the journal will publish it. However, if the research itself really were not flawed, the manuscript probably would not have been recommended for release; the reviewers probably would have simply recommended a substantial rewrite.

Another problematic letter characteristic that precludes clarity is the use of the word “resubmit” rather than just “submit” in the last paragraph. The use of “resubmit” could imply that Robert expects, or at least encourages, a revision
and resubmission to the journal. The journal does not accept revisions of released manuscripts under the same accession number that they had the first time they were submitted; if a researcher revises and resubmits his or her released manuscript, it is given a new accession number and treated as a brand-new submission (i.e., it cannot pick up where it left off in the review process).

While Robert's letter could pose enough problems for authors whose first language is English, it could cause more confusion for authors who are not native English speakers. Although 10-15 percent of all manuscripts are received from authors who are not US citizens, Robert sends foreign authors the same letter. Some of these authors, especially those from India, the Middle East, and the Far East, have not understood that their manuscripts were being rejected. Troy recalls one incident involving an author from India who believed that the rejection letter he received was simply asking for revisions and not rejecting his manuscript: "One author... from India was rejected four times by Robert's letter. He happily rewrote and resubmitted his manuscript four times. Finally, Robert accepted the manuscript—which was not really up to standard. This hurts the journal's reputation." Also, I think it is safe to assume that when an author receives a letter that appears to be asking for revisions and resubmittal, the author spends a considerable amount of time making the appropriate changes. Thus, if the journal ultimately does communicate an outright rejection to the author after the author resubmits, the author may be more upset than he
An Associate's Response to Robert's Letter

According to Troy, all correspondence with the author during the review process goes through Robert. However, because of the confusion that Robert's letter caused, Dan Cook, one of the Associate Editors, decided to draft his own rejection letter after he saw a copy of the letter that Robert was sending out. From that point on, Dan insisted on sending his own correspondence to the authors whose manuscripts were assigned to him. Both Carol and Troy agree that Dan's letter is much more direct (Figure 2).

March 8, 1996

Dear Dr. Strawberry:

The reviewers and I feel that there are serious problems with your manuscript. The reviewers found [your objectives unclear and indicated numerous problems with research design and empirical methods].

Unfortunately, the reviews convince me to reject this manuscript for The Journal.

Perhaps the enclosed reviews will assist you in submitting it to another journal.

Sincerely,

Dan Cook
Associate Research Editor

Figure 2. An example of Dan's release letter
An Analysis of Dan’s Letter

Dan’s letter does not appear very friendly. There is no buffer at the beginning of his letter either; the recipient knows immediately that the news is negative. Dan does, however, give the reason for the refusal before he states the refusal explicitly. His letter also ends on a blandly positive note, hoping that the enclosed reviews will be useful to the reader in revising the manuscript and ultimately publishing it somewhere.

Although traditional negative messages are usually less blunt and less negative than this one, Dan’s letter does more clearly communicate rejection than Robert’s letter. In contrast to Robert’s letter, Dan’s letter does not even mention the possibility of resubmission to this journal. The last sentence of Dan’s letter, “[p]erhaps the enclosed reviews will assist you in submitting it to another journal,” clearly indicates that Dan never expects to see the manuscript again; his business with this author is complete. Implicitly, this last sentence is a positive statement of sorts because it at least implies the possibility of future publication somewhere.

The negative message conventions that Dan’s letter does not follow include a classic indirect structure (although he does place the reason before the refusal) and a positive tone. Since Dan wrote this letter because of Robert’s letter, it is possible that he was attempting to compensate for Robert’s mistakes, making his letter as blunt and negative as possible.
According to Carol, Landcare has not received any responses regarding Dan’s letter. It would be ridiculous to assume that no one has been offended by this letter simply because no one has called them about it; however, it is possible, given that the audience for this document consists largely of researchers who are accustomed to the publishing world, that many readers would not give the letter a second thought. Even so, given the directness and clarity of the sentence that delivers the rejection and how that concern alone was what drove Dan to prepare the letter in the first place, I do not think a buffer acknowledging receipt of the manuscript and a simple “thank you for sending it” at the end could impede Dan’s clarity. Slightly more positive language could only serve to improve his persona here, without affecting the message.

“Improved” Correspondence from Robert

Dan’s letter was not the only fallout from the problems that Landcare had with Robert’s letter. Because Robert still corresponds with the authors assigned to the other Associate Editors, Carol asked Robert to rewrite his rejection letter about two years ago. Troy remembers that Robert told him that he “agonized for a weekend” trying to find the right wording. The letter he still uses today is a result of that rewrite (Figure 3).
May 10, 1996

RE: [manuscript number and title] submitted to the Journal

Dear Dr. Strawberry:

I am sorry to inform you that we are releasing the paper for publication elsewhere or resubmission. This is not a rejection of you or your research. It is a release of this paper in its current form.

That was the bad news. The good news is that the reviewer’s comments can help improve the work. We are releasing the paper because of problems with [the statistical analysis and data interpretation]. One reviewer apparently had problems linking the objectives to the rest of the paper. This is a common problem in technical writing. Please, also note that we are a national and/or international journal. Titling or writing a paper from a regional perspective is undesirable. We hope you find the comments useful.

How you decide to modify the paper and where you decide to resubmit are your decisions. We at The Journal thank you for submitting your work here. If you have any questions or comments, please feel free to contact us.

Sincerely,

Robert Paulson
Technical Editor, The Journal

Figure 3. An example of Robert’s revised release letter

An Analysis of Robert’s Most Recent Letter

While Robert intended this letter to be an improvement in terms of clarity, he left the most problematic parts of the letter untouched: “...we are releasing the paper for publication elsewhere or resubmission. This is not a rejection of you or your research. It is a release of the paper in its current form.”

Robert also kept the word “resubmit” in his last paragraph. The only obvious change is the addition of his “good news/bad news” section. Apparently, Robert
feels that the purpose of the letter (to reject the manuscript) is more obvious when he explicitly says "[t]hat was the bad news."

When manuscript authors respond to this letter by revising and returning their manuscripts, Robert occasionally sends another rejection letter similar to the above, but with an addition that attempts to make the rejection, especially to non-native English speakers, more clear. In an extra sentence or two, Robert explains that if the author revises the manuscript, it is treated as a brand-new submission to the journal. The following is a recent excerpt from a letter to an author from India:

I am sorry to inform you that we are releasing your paper for rewrite and possible resubmission. This is not a rejection of you but a release of this work in its current form. I can appreciate your frustration since this is the second time that we have returned your manuscript with this recommendation.... Please be advised that a resubmission of a previously released paper is considered a new submittal to the journal. We give the paper a new accession number and we often solicit new reviewers. (emphasis added)

Although Robert seems to be trying to make it clear that a resubmitted manuscript must start anew in the review process, I still do not believe that this letter is effectively communicating rejection. Judging from the content of this sample alone, it appears that the particular reader to whom this letter is addressed has already revised and resubmitted twice (although it is possible that the recipient knew he was being rejected the previous times and was encouraged by the "resubmit" references in Robert's usual letter). Further,
Robert's first sentence has worsened: "...we are releasing your paper for rewrite and possible resubmission" is much more problematic than his original first sentence which stated that the paper was being released "for publication elsewhere or resubmission" (emphasis added). The only options offered to the example sent to the author from India are to "rewrite" and "resubmit." To me, this first sentence looms so largely over the document that the addition about the new accession number probably does nothing to make the rejection more clear, especially if an author is unfamiliar with the specifics of the manuscript review process. Perhaps the author might think that all revised manuscripts (including those that were accepted with revisions) are given a new accession number and reviewed by different specialists. Thus, Robert's addition for rejected authors who choose to resubmit does not necessarily make this letter a success.

Even if Robert's most recent boilerplate letter (the "bad news/good news" letter) does communicate rejection to the recipient, some recipients of the letter have said that they were insulted by what they interpreted as a patronizing tone. One characteristic that is shared by the recipients of Robert's letter is that they are all highly educated academics or practitioners who have usually been published at least once; many, in fact, have been published several times. It is possible, then, that these letter recipients are bothered by what they interpret as an overly sorry tone. Possible examples of the patronization inherent in Robert's letter include "[t]his is not a rejection of you or your research. It is a release of
the paper in its current form,” “[t]hat was the bad news. The good news is that
the reviewer's comments can help improve the work,” and “[h]ow you decide to
modify the paper and where you decide to resubmit are your decisions.” These
comments seem to have two things in common. First, they are common
knowledge to the authors. As highly educated, previously published authors,
the readers know these things and probably do not appreciate Robert’s need to
state them in the context of his letter. For example, telling an author that he or
she can modify the paper any way that he or she wants to is more than
unnecessary; readers probably do not appreciate Robert’s giving his permission
or blessing to tinker with their own research. Also, after they are given the “bad
news” that their manuscript is being rejected, authors probably do not envision
the wonderful opportunity of applying the reviewer comments to a paper that
they (the authors) already thought was worthy of publication as particularly
“good news.” To me, “good news” should be reserved for telling someone that his
or her manuscript will be published.

Secondly, these comments constitute the kind of advice a veteran in the
field might give to a newcomer; authors might infer from these comments that
Robert does not see them as his academic equals, or that Robert does not think
they have published much before and he is so sorry to have dashed all their
dreams of this, their first real publication. Stating “[t]his is not a rejection of
you” may imply that Robert thinks the author might actually feel that the
reader's very self-esteem is somehow in jeopardy and that this statement is
intended to assure the poor reader that he or she should not feel badly. Also, stating that “[t]his is not a rejection...of your research” is a downright lie. If the research were not inherently flawed according to the reviewers, the manuscript would not have been released. Seasoned authors can probably see this statement as a blatant attempt to conceal the truth, possibly inferring that Robert thinks that they cannot professionally or personally handle the truth. It is also probable that seasoned researchers have personal experience with rejection letters —letters that conform more to the conventional negative message—and are expecting a rejection letter from Robert that is conventional as well. If this is the case, their expectations are not being met.

Landcare has received some responses from authors regarding Robert’s patronizing tone. About a year ago, Robert received an e-mail from one author who was not satisfied with the review of her manuscript. She also stated the following: “Finally, the tone of your letter was patronizing and seemed to be geared to be sent to someone you clearly identified as junior in the field. I suggest that you take a more respectful approach, no matter who you are writing in your decision letters.” Robert responded by e-mail to this author’s complaints about the review process, as well as to her complaint about his letter. He replied, “[a]s to your comment on the release letter, since we are also authors, we intend the letter to be polite and honest, not patronizing. We will review the form of the letter with your comments in mind.” Robert’s response here indicates a concern for audience, specifically, an audience to which Robert
very clearly adds himself. Also of interest is Robert's use of "we" instead of "I" in his response to this author. He alone wrote the rejection letter that this unhappy author received; it seems that the ambivalence that he has about writing rejection letters has caused him to credit authorship of the letter to the organization for whom he works rather than to himself.

While this author's response is not a common one, Troy indicated that Landcare has fielded this kind of criticism at least once or twice before. I think it is safe to assume that other authors have also felt insulted by Robert's tone, even if they never bothered to tell Landcare so. It is possible that Robert's letter could cause some spurned authors to revoke their memberships. Since most of the authors are Ph.D.s employed by land-grant universities, many of them probably correspond with each other, or are at least aware of the key players in their particular fields. It is possible that one seriously jilted author could damage the organization's reputation and perhaps discourage other authors from submitting their manuscripts to the journal.

Contributions of Context to Robert's Rhetorical Choices

How, then, does Robert improve? Carol had already indicated to Robert that he needed to revise his first letter to be clearer out of respect for the reader. The result was the "bad news/good news" letter, hardly an improvement over the
first. By briefly exploring several contextual features of this situation, namely corporate culture and relationships, individual ability, and the balance between negative message conventions and context, we can at least begin to determine the reasons behind the creation of and reaction to Robert’s letter.

**Corporate Culture and Relationships.** As Robert’s supervisor, Carol has attempted to guide Robert toward the production of a clearer letter. She could, in fact, ask Robert for further revision of the letter until it is completed to her satisfaction. However, as Troy and Carol have indicated, Robert is himself a very sensitive person. According to Troy, Robert said he “agonized for a weekend” when asked to revise the first time. Troy and Carol spoke freely of both Robert’s sensitivity and of the valuable scientific contributions he gives Landcare. They are not interested in jeopardizing their working relationship with him. Further, both Troy and Carol are meticulous about the quality of the journal and other publications produced by Landcare; they do not typically allow bad writing to be distributed. It is possible that, although they do not think Robert’s letter is well written, they do not see it as posing a serious problem for Landcare. In fact, I first heard of Robert’s letter during a very lighthearted discussion between Carol and Troy about Robert being “a sensitive guy.”

It is also important to note that corporate culture allowed Dan’s rejection letter to appear as a direct response to the letter that Robert originally used. Although I am unclear about Robert and Dan’s personal relationship, Robert is technically Dan’s supervisor. It seems unusual that Dan would overstep
Robert's authority and draft his own letter, but the corporate culture of Landcare (and probably Robert's "soft-hearted" personality as well) is allowing this to occur anyway. Interestingly, neither Robert nor Dan's offices are located at Landcare's headquarters; both live out of state, and Carol and Troy see them infrequently. The physical distance between Robert and Dan and Landcare's headquarters probably has a marked effect on the extent of Carol's supervision of Robert and Dan. Also, Carol has many other Landcare publications and communications to supervise; it is reasonable to assume that she sees these other communications that specifically require her attention and expertise as more important than Robert's boilerplate manuscript rejection letter. Finally, although, as Director of Publications, Carol is technically his supervisor, Robert is the "expert" regarding the research articles. Given both the physical distance between them, as well as their having expertise in different areas, it is understandable that Carol allows Robert's letter to be distributed.

**Robert and his Understanding of Audience.** Clearly, Robert sees himself as part of the audience for his own letter. He admitted to the author who complained via e-mail about his patronizing tone that he is trying to be as polite as possible because "we are also authors." He also told Carol and Troy that "rejection hurts" and that "being rejected in a rude manner is worse." However, what he is not considering about his audience is their experience in the publishing arena. Most have been published before, and all are probably not worried about being published again. Most have been rejected before and are
very likely familiar with and probably expect conventional styles of rejection. Given these real audience characteristics and the real feedback Robert has received, it is safe to assume that his own conceptions of the audience (driven largely by his inclusion of himself in that group) are informing the production of his letter.

The Balance Between Modes and Context. In this case, it is clear that contextual factors, including corporate culture and relationships and individual ability, far outweigh conventional negative message theory in the production of Robert’s letter. In the Landcare study, relationships between employees, as well as Robert’s inability to understand his audience inform the production and distribution of his letter, which, in turn, caused problems in terms of clarity and tone with its audience as well as the creation of another letter by a colleague. Although Robert is attempting to write well out of respect for Landcare as well as for his audience, in some cases his message is not being heard; in other cases his message is not maintaining the audience’s goodwill. Given the audience for his letter, perhaps more consideration of negative message convention could improve his message and, consequently, its reception.

While one cannot be certain if more of a reliance on negative message conventions can help Robert improve, the examination of corporate culture and relationships in this situation clearly illustrates that the production and relative success of a negative message has much to do with the social environment in which it is produced; thus, studies in negative message production and reader
response to those messages can benefit greatly from a contextual and cultural examination, allowing us to see the "why" behind the product and perhaps helping us to then determine how to improve. The following chapter discusses how theory in audience and the reader-writer relationship can contribute to the social understanding of how writing is produced and interpreted in real-world practice. This approach is particularly helpful for negative messages and other sensitive kinds of writing, since this kind of writing is some of the most tedious to write.
IMPLICATIONS OF AUDIENCE THEORY
FOR ANALYSES OF REAL-WORLD NEGATIVE MESSAGES

A study of the context surrounding negative message production and reception in business is necessarily a social one. Interoffice relationships and corporate culture, specific situations to which the writer is responding, and the writer's individual ability (among other considerations) all affect the product; thus, these factors, all of them social in nature, should come into play at least implicitly during production of any written document, particularly a sensitive one. Thus, in any given study of how a letter is produced, those factors must be considered.

Although "audience" and "the reader-writer relationship" are at least mentioned in some studies of negative messages (see, e.g., Brent; Davis; Locker; Salerno), several of them test simulated rejections that obviously do not consider a "real" audience. Further, even studies that do consider real rejections and their real audiences (e.g., Brown; Jablin and Krone) examine well over 100 different letters and/or different audiences, hardly a thorough examination of specific, contextualized audience response. Often researchers who examine large quantities of negative messages and researchers who test simulated rejections perform only limited real audience analysis and/or real investigation of the reader-writer relationship simply because of the nature of their investigations. Since contextual studies of the production of negative messages
in business do involve real readers and real writers, it is important to employ theory that best illuminates all of the relationships that inform the product. Specifically, research in audience and social approaches to writing can contribute much to analyses of negative message production and reader response; thus, it should be employed in any contextual study of negative messages.

Martin Nystrand sees the acknowledgment of the role of the social in the production of written discourse as essential to the interpretation of such discourse: "From [the social-interactive] point of view, we note that the structure of any text is open to analysis only insofar as the context of its production and reception—and therefore the intentions and expectations of the conversants—are taken into consideration" (73; emphasis added). Nystrand is hardly alone in his advocating a social approach to both the production and analysis of writing to better address the needs and expectations of a real audience that may not always respond in ways that the business-writing conventions for certain kinds of communication assume they will respond. Indeed, the influence of theory in audience analysis and the examination of the reader-writer relationship has become more pronounced in recent research in both composition and professional communication (see, e.g., Ede and Lunsford; Kroll; Suchan and Dulek; Thralls, Blyler, and Ewald).

Factors germane to the production of negative messages in business are seen in a new light when considerations of audience and the reader-writer
relationship are taken into account in an analysis of negative messages produced by real practitioners and distributed to real readers. In other words, when we examine the way the real writer envisions audiences, combined with actual audience responses to a particular negative message, we can see the how and why of the product's production and relative communicative success more clearly than if the message is examined in a theoretical vacuum against negative message conventions alone. As illustrated in the Landcare study of real-world practice, the writer's perception of the audience and the writer's perception of himself or herself are as important to the creation and interpretation of the message as negative message conventions. Other social considerations that inform the production of a message include interoffice relationships, and real characteristics of the audience itself.

Although different investigations of negative message theory provide different views of the applicability of negative message conventions to real situations, all researchers at least seem to share the common goal of concern for an audience that will not be pleased by the bad news message, but whose goodwill writers want to maintain. These two characteristics of the audience to whom negative message prescriptions are geared are assumed (even if they are not thoroughly discussed) in nearly every study of negative message theory. The relatively recent increase in the number of studies in reader response to negative messages surely confirms this concern. Although researchers may disagree about what to do to make a negative message more palatable to the
reader regarding the degree of clarity and the tone a letter should convey, most seem to base the why of these rhetorical choices on concerns for an audience that does not want to receive bad news and whose goodwill the writer always wants to maintain.

I would suggest, however, that these assumptions alone about audience that are evident in particular kinds of business-writing genres, that of the negative message, for example, can be misleading, causing the writer to gear his or her prose toward the audience invoked by the prescription rather than to the actual people who will read the message. Obviously it is ridiculous to assume that a writer will always “know” her audience in the same sense, say, that she knows her friend, an audience whose characteristics are defined specifically and to which the writer carefully and specifically gears the prose of her letter. However, if specific information about one’s audience is available, the writer should consider that information when composing a text. By the same token, the genre of the negative message is familiar to most people. Thus, many readers expect and understand the traditional rejection letter and are not confused or offended at all by its contents.

Several studies of audience and the reader-writer relationship provide valuable insight into ways of conceptualizing audiences that go beyond simply invoking an audience that fits the preconceived image of readers who receive messages that are routinely more or less prescripted (e.g., Ede and Lunsford; Kroll; Suchan and Dulek; Thralls, Blyler, and Ewald). Most of these studies
suggest that a blending of both real and fictional audience characteristics is achieved in the most well-written prose. The degree to which the prose is addressed to a real audience or to which the audience characteristics are created by the writer's rhetorical choices in terms of content and style of the letter varies, however, according to factors such as social context (e.g., Nystrand), genre (e.g., Thralls, Blyler, and Ewald), and writer ability to successfully visualize and bring both images of the reader-writer relationship to a text (e.g., Ede and Lunsford).

The Audience-Addressed Approach

Business writers who try to visualize a real audience when they are writing gear their rhetorical choices toward what they believe a real audience expects or wants. Ede and Lunsford term this approach "audience addressed," and state that "[t]hose who envision audience as addressed emphasize the concrete reality of the writer's audience; they also share the assumption that knowledge of this audience's attitudes, beliefs, and expectations is not only possible (via observation and analysis) but essential" (156). Ede and Lunsford see several problems with a purely audience-addressed approach, however. One limitation of viewing writing in this way is that, in placing its emphasis on the audience, this model fails "to recognize the equally essential role writers play
throughout the composing process not only as creators but also as readers of their own writing” (158; emphasis in original). Further, Ede and Lunsford state that this model tends to unethically downplay the writer’s obligation to the message being sent while also suggesting “an oversimplified view of language” (159).

The Audience-Invoked Approach

Walter Ong was one of the first to initiate discussion of how the writer could take an active role in creating (rather than simply addressing) audience characteristics within the prose of a document. In “The Writer’s Audience is Always a Fiction,” Ong discusses the writer’s role in creating his or her reader and how the writer can create a persona that the reader will willingly assume, thus contributing to the real audience’s approval of the prose. He offers an example from Hemingway in which the author speaks to the reader as a friend with whom he has shared experiences: “The reader here has a well-marked role assigned him. He is a companion-in-arms, somewhat later becoming a confidant. It is a flattering role” (13). Since the role is flattering here, the reader willingly accepts it.

Ede and Lunsford, however, note that a purely audience-invoked view of writing falsely assumes that the writer has complete power over the reader
They state that Ong's purely writer-centered approach to communication "fails adequately to recognize the constraints placed on the writer, in certain situations, by the audience. [Ong] fails, in other words, to acknowledge that readers' own experiences, expectations, and beliefs do play a central role in their reading of a text, and that the writer who does not consider the needs and interests of his audience risks losing that audience" (165).

Ede and Lunsford's concern makes sense. Since writers can create a flattering persona for the reader to assume, it is equally possible for writers to create a persona that the real reader will dislike and consequently cause him or her to disapprove of (reject, etc.) the prose. This is obviously something no writer would do on purpose, but it can result from the writer's misjudgment or ignorance of exactly which characteristics real readers would willingly assume in a given situation. In the case of negative messages and as illustrated in the Landcare study, when a writer is unusually concerned about maintaining the goodwill of the reader, a negative message with an overly concerned tone can seem patronizing, especially if too much positive or euphemistic language is employed. Some recipients of rejection letters do not want to be overly placated by a writer who (unknowingly) asks an audience to see themselves as insecure, fragile, hypersensitive, etc., all characteristics they very likely do not want to assume. Recipients of job applicant rejection letters, for example, may not need or want to be told repeatedly how impressive their resume was and that for sure they will get a really good job someday with another company. If their resume
and qualifications were so impressive, then why not this company? They then see the writer's attempt to maintain goodwill as little more than a projection of the writer's impression of them as people who need more than a professional, businesslike "no." In other words, real audiences will not willingly take on all the audience characteristics invoked by a writer simply because a writer cues an audience to do so.

Balancing Audience-Addressed and Audience-Invoked Approaches

Many researchers suggest that a balance between audience-addressed and audience-invoked approaches is necessary to good writing, particularly given the complexity of real-world practice. Ede and Lunsford, for example, conclude their investigation of audience with the following:

...the term audience refers not just to the intended, actual, or eventual readers of a discourse, but to all those whose image, ideas, or actions influence a writer during the process of composition. One way to conceive of "audience," then, is as an overdetermined or unusually rich concept.... (168; emphasis in original)

Thus, placing emphasis on solely either the audience-addressed or the audience-invoked model downplays the real reader-writer relationship and the influences that both reader and writer, as well as other social factors, have on the knowledge that is constructed in real communication.
Given the importance of blending both approaches to audience, as well as including the other “images, ideas, and actions” suggested by Ede and Lunsford which constrain and influence writers and readers alike, surprisingly little research has been done to determine whether writers are actually aware of the difference between the audience-addressed and audience-invoked modes of writing. To address this concern, Charlotte Thralls, Nancy Roundy Blyler, and Helen Rothschild Ewald conducted an informal study of think-aloud protocols of actual writers at work. Interestingly, they found that many writers, although probably unconsciously aware of their doing so, did employ actions dictated by both audience models.

Although I believe all of their findings to be significant and vital to the study of professional writers and their audiences, one of their findings is of exceptional interest. Thralls, Blyler, and Ewald suggest that a correlation may exist between the degree to which a writer relies on the business-writing prescriptions inherent in many business-writing genres and the degree to which a writer invokes an audience:

...writers who approach their writing tasks with a well-defined “picture” of a document’s content and progression and who focus their commentary almost exclusively on their texts [...] seem to perceive their readers as images to be invoked. For these writers, genre appear to function as a detailed set of textual norms stored in memory prior to the act of writing, drawing a writer’s attention inward to the norms set for a document and the image of audience such parameters tacitly include. (60; emphasis added).
This seems like a very logical correlation, one which is certainly applicable to the production of negative messages in business communication. Prescriptions in writing negative messages are designed and refined mostly out of concern for the “audience’s” expectations, needs, and concerns. However, in a given, specific situation, the real audience may not possess the same expectations, needs, and concerns as the hypothetical, generic audience. Consequently, business writers who rely too heavily on conventions may invoke the audience for whom generic prescriptions are intended, rather than the real audience for a specific document, an audience that may reject outright the prescription-dictated characteristics a writer gives them. At the same time, readers sometimes expect genre, and are implicitly comfortable with it because they recognize it. Here again, a balance between form and context is important.

In “Making Routine Letters Have Positive Effects,” Steve Walsh notes that “[w]hen business writers feel insecure about their professional writing, it is certainly tempting to draw upon form letters excessively, [but] to do so is a mistake” since most people do not like to receive a form letter (5). People turn to forms for help not only when they feel insecure about their own writing but also when they want to save time. When a form is available and their desks are piled high with other things to do, writers will use forms to complete a writing task quickly and easily. Further, writers often look to forms when they are not looking forward to saying what they have to say. It is just plain hard to tell people what they do not want to hear; it is understandable that hiding behind a
form makes us feel a little better about delivering bad news, especially if that form is what we think our readers need and want. However, Thralls, Blyler, and Ewald warn that if one relies on such genres, “the writer could ignore, and possibly even resist, information beyond that implied by the genre itself” (61). Jacobi also states that “[w]riters, in other words, know forms and rely on them as though format alone frees them from analyzing individual contexts” (Jacobi 42).

Suchan and Dulek state that instructors in professional writing must “acknowledge these complex reader factors” and tell writers “that no one approach is infallible, that it always works in a given situation” (38). The increasing interest in experimental research in reader response to negative messages suggests a growing concern about the importance of social influences on the interpretation of writing from the workplace. Current research in negative message theory is incomplete, however. Applying theory in audience and the reader-writer relationship can contribute much to the study of real negative message production and the real audiences to which they are sent.
CONCLUSION

I believe that business writers should be allowed and even encouraged to begin with the conventions when writing negative messages; however, they should also be sensitive to the factors outside of the form that will influence both letter production and reception. These factors, including individual ability, corporate culture, and the real audience (especially if members of that audience literally respond to the writer's message) all must be considered when deciding how and understanding why the convention is used. Research in audience and social approaches to discourse can contribute much to the study of real-world practice of negative message production and should be employed in conjunction with negative message theory to provide a more complete look at how negative messages are both produced and received in the business world.

To clearly illustrate how this balance between convention and context works (and does not work) in real-world practice, more in-depth studies of the context surrounding the production of real negative messages are needed. Recent studies of context surrounding the production of the rhetoric following disasters provide excellent information about how context informs the production of discourse and about how organizations communicate knowledge, both internally and to the public (e.g., Ice; Tyler; Winsor, “Communication;” Winsor, “Construction”). Although practitioners do not face disasters like these every day, many business writers still are not completely comfortable with (or
particularly good at) writing sensitive messages, particularly when bad news is conveyed. Thus, studies that address the context surrounding the routine production of negative messages are needed. To ensure accuracy of results, these studies should focus on a boilerplate letter that is sent to a number of readers. The context surrounding the production of the letter should be taken into account, as should real reader response to the letter. These kinds of studies can offer practitioners as well as business communication educators an exploration of some of the real factors at work in the production of negative messages and the implications those factors have for creating clear communication that does not offend the reader.

Specifically, studies of real-world practice should explore the balance between uses of negative message conventions and context by employing theory in audience and the reader-writer relationship. As illustrated in the Landcare study, literally exploring the contextual factors involved in real negative message production, such as individual ability, interoffice relationships, and feedback from real audiences, can provide researchers with important information regarding writer choices for a specific negative message-writing situation.

Although negative message conventions are designed to address a typical audience, context, as well as real audience considerations, must be analyzed to explain products that, for better or worse, do not necessarily follow those conventions. By adding theory in audience and the reader-writer relationship to
traditional negative message theory when we examine real-world practice, we allow for a richer analysis of real workplace writing, helping us to see how negative message conventions and context actually interact in the everyday business world.
NOTES

1 I see the promise to keep a resume on file as a bland positive; it promises very little to the reader. It does not assure the reader of a job, but lets the reader know that the company considers him/her to be a worthy applicant and is, at least, impressed enough by his/her qualifications to not dismiss him/her entirely. Companies should note, however, that if they say they are going to keep a resume on file and consider the applicant for future openings, that they are under legal obligation to literally do so (see Aamodt and Peggans 60).

2 Names of the organization and its employees are fictitious.

3 The reason for rejection varies depending on specific reviewer comments. Robert attempts to provide some sort of specific reason for the paper's release in each letter.

4 Dan also includes a reason for the paper's release, but his reasons are not usually as elaborate as Robert's explanations.
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