

Writer's Edge

Accentuate the Positive

By Ingrid Sapona

While it's not always easy to not use a negative, the benefits of not using negatives should not be discounted.

Did you understand the opening sentence when you first read it? Or did you stumble through it and have to re-read it to make sense of it? Be honest, do you not get frustrated when you come across such statements? If not, is it because you see no reason not to write like that? Indeed, for many, making sense of sentences with multiple negatives is not unlike trying to understand a foreign language.

I'm sure that by now it's obvious that this column is about how using multiple negatives can bog down text, making it tough on readers. I'm not saying all negatives must be avoided. Generally speaking, simple negatives — like the one in the previous sentence — are not much of a problem for readers. Also, there are times when it's preferable to use a negative. Commands, for example, are often clearer if phrased in the negative. For example, "Do not use near open flame" is clearer than: "May catch fire if exposed to heat."

When many negatives are thrown, the poor reader has a lot to keep track of and make sense of. Steven Pinker, a cognitive scientist and author of *The Sense of Style*, explains the mental gymnastics a reader's brain must go through to make sense of negative statements. Pinker says, "To hear or read a statement is to believe it, at least for a moment. For us to conclude that something is *not* the case, we must take the extra cognitive step of pinning a mental tag "false" on a proposition."¹

Not and Other Negatives

The most obvious words of negation are things like "not" and "no", and words beginning with "un", such as unnecessary. But negations also can be tucked inside other words or phrases, such as: though, unless, instead, less than, and so on.² Here are a few sentences with less obvious negations:

- Absent additional funding, the company will go under.
- Unless other information is provided, the application will not be accepted.
- The agent said that the buyer would accept no less than \$1 million.

Transforming Negatives

How you transform a negation into a positive statement will depend on the words used and the sentence construction. Sometimes you can just use different words. For example, use "at least" instead of "no less than". Though some writers shy away from the word "only" because it is restrictive, it can be used to convert a negative to a positive. For example, "We will not accept applications post marked after April 30th" can be phrased positively as: "We will only accept applications post marked before May 1." In other cases you can re-cast the sentence. For example, the first sentence in the examples above can be re-written as: "The company needs more funding or it will go under."

The Payoff

The main reason to convert negatives to positives is to make the information easier for the reader to grasp. But there are also benefits to the author. Text that includes negations is more prone to ambiguity. By cleaning up the negations, the author is more likely to catch the ambiguity and be able to correct it.

1 Steven Pinker, *The Sense of Style*, (Viking, 2014) at p. 172.

2 Id. at 172-173.

Conclusion

If the reasons I've mentioned so far have not persuaded you to pay attention when using negations, the *Oxford Guide to Plain English* offers one other practical reason to keep in mind: "Negative words sometimes obscure a positive message."³

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Ingrid welcomes your feedback, questions, and suggestions for topics you'd be interested in reading about. Drop Ingrid a line at: ingrid@goodwithwords.com, or call 416-259-3399.

3 Martin Cutts, *The Oxford Guide to Plain English*, (Oxford University Press, 2013), at p.92.