

How Great Customer Service Writing Improves Retention



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Hi! I'm Leslie O'Flahavan, owner of [E-WRITE](#), a writing training consultancy. I help customer care professionals write better email, chat, social media, and text. I can help the most stubborn or word-phobic person write better content. Want to improve customer experience in your organization? Check out my writing courses on [LinkedIn Learning](#) and my [blog](#).

Don't let bad writing drive customers away

Bad customer service writing is like bad breath: all too common but possible to fix. If you want to retain customers, you must avoid these three common types of bad writing:

- 1. Robotic scripted responses.** It's impossible to convey "I care about you and want to help you" using a script. If your team uses email templates, for example, agents must customize them for each response.
- 2. Sloppy spelling, grammar, and punctuation.** Most customers will overlook one typo or comma mistake, but a sloppy response raises the questions that make customers leave: "Is this information accurate?" and "Does this company care about quality?"
- 3. Stone-cold tone.** To show customers you care about them, you must express empathy for their perspective. Write, "I understand why you're concerned about this..." or "I would be frustrated too."

Be curious and ask better questions

Don't let a one-and-done mindset prevent you from real (written) conversations with customers. If you want to deepen your customers' connection with your company, allow for some back-and-forth. Replace the rote questions with sincere ones that encourage a response.

Instead of ending a chat with this question:

"Is there anything else I can help you with today?"

Write this question:

*"Can I answer any other questions about [insert topic] today?
Or anything else?"*



Instead of asking this question in a support email:

"What error message did you see?"

Write this question:

"What were you trying to do when you got the error message?"



Instead of asking this question:

"We'd be glad to send you a \$10 coupon for your next purchase of ABC Fancy Fine Chocolates. May I have your postal address?"

Write these questions:

"We'd be glad to send you a \$10 coupon for your next purchase of ABC Fancy Fine Chocolates. Would you prefer that I add \$10 worth of points to your loyalty account or send you the voucher by mail?"



Develop analytical reading skills

Analytical reading is the source of all great customer service writing. It's the high-level cognitive skill that enables a customer service agent to distinguish between what the customer is saying (which may be written in a confusing way) and what they're asking. When your team reads analytically, their written responses will connect with customers.

Here's an example of analytical reading in action. First, let's take a look at the incoming email to WABC Public TV station from customer Amanda St. Clair.

Customer's email

Dear WABC Public TV,

You changed the way programs are shown. I used to be able to see the schedules for all the WABC channels at once. I can't do that any more. I can guarantee that I will be watching less, as I will not be conveniently previewing what's available on a given day. This is a very cumbersome way to view upcoming schedules.

I hope you return the way you show the schedules, as I hope that Washington Week in Review returns to channel 2, as that is my best broadcast reception.

Amanda St. Clair

Though short, Amanda's email requires analytical reading because she has written in a stream-of-consciousness style. She hasn't used a single question mark! And if an agent writes back quickly, without reading analytically, they're likely to give a poor quality reply, as Dan Berg does, below.

Version 1: A no-analytical-reading not-very-good email reply from WABC Public TV

Dear Ms. St. Clair,

Thank you for your interest in our programming. As an audience-supported station we love to hear from listeners and viewers.

We apologize for any inconvenience you've had with trying to view all our programs on one page at WABC.org. You should be able to see all WABC channels at our new [Schedule page](#). If you are still having trouble, please update your browser or try an alternate one, such as Firefox, Chrome, or Safari.

It's a highly competitive world out there for philanthropic support; our goal is to earn your trust and support every day. For additional WABC information, please visit WABC.org or [click here](#) to become a member.

If you have any further questions, please contact WABC Audience & Member Services.

Sincerely,

Dan Berg, WABC Audience & Member Services

Analytical reading means understanding what the customer is asking. Though she didn't state them explicitly, here are Amanda's questions:

1. Why did you change the way you present the schedule?
2. How can I easily preview the entire schedule now?
3. How do I watch Washington Week in Review on broadcast?

Version 2: Analytical reading yields a great email reply from WABC Public TV

Dear Ms. St. Clair,

Thank you for contacting us about the issues you are having viewing all our program schedule information in one place. We've updated the way we display our schedule to include all our new programs, and I understand that getting used to the new display might be confusing at first. I certainly want to help you easily find Washington Week in Review, which we are now making available twice per day.

At our [Schedule](#) page, you should be able to see all the WABC channels and programs, displayed one day at a time in hourly increments. If you are still having trouble, please update your browser or try an alternate one, such as Firefox, Chrome, or Safari.

If you have any further questions, or need troubleshooting help with the program display, please contact us at [WABC Audience & Member Services](#).

Sincerely,

Anna Brockhurst, WABC Audience & Member Services

Apologize sincerely

No company is goof-proof. Most customers understand this. You'll retain customers—and even build loyalty--if you apologize sincerely when mistakes happen.

But you can't apologize sincerely if you're using old, tired, corporate-sounding wording, such as "We regret any inconvenience this may have caused." That sentence is the worst. It's evasive. It's boilerplate. It sounds like you typed it while rolling your eyes.

In a few quick steps, you can change this insincere apology sentence to a sincere one. Let's say, for example, that you're a customer service agent for a company that sells portable lighting for virtual meetings (ring lights). A long-time customer emails you to complain that she recently received the light she ordered on April 17 when delivery was promised for April 10. She's not happy.

Here's how to transform "We regret any inconvenience this may have caused," so your apology is believable.

1. Cut the passive aggressive words "any" and "may have." We know what kind of "inconvenience" happened: late delivery. And it did happen. No "may have" about it.

"We regret ~~any~~ the inconvenience this has ~~may have~~ caused."

2. Replace "inconvenience" with a more specific word. It's not merely inconvenient to wait a week for the product you ordered. The apology will be more sincere if you use a word that accurately describes what the customer's experienced. "Hassle," "disappointment," or "frustration" would all be better choices.

"We regret the frustration this has caused."

3. Insert a noun after "this." The more specific the wording, the more believable the apology.

"We regret the frustration this delay has caused."

Build stronger relationships by responding to the details the customer shares

It'll be awkward if your customer service responses get too personal ("How long were you and your ex married?"), but it's also off-putting when a response to a customer ignores all personal details. To retain customers, you must show that you care about them as people not just revenue sources. When you write back, look for opportunities to incorporate the details they've shared in their incoming messages.

If the customer asks for help with this:

“My wife and I will be flying to Paris to celebrate our 25th wedding anniversary in May. Can I combine loyalty points from two accounts to upgrade our seats to first class?”

Your reply might include this:

“Many congratulations on celebrating this milestone anniversary...”

If the customer mentions this:

“We’re onboarding five new employees next month, so we’ll need to add licensed users to our account...”

Your reply might include this:

“Your team is really growing!”

Share the work-around

In a perfect world, our company’s products would work perfectly or, in the case of the rare flaw, the troubleshooting steps listed in our official documentation would solve the problem. But here in the real world, we--and our most loyal customers--develop work-arounds.

Share these work-arounds in your responses to customers. You’ll demonstrate that you want to help customers any way you can, you’re versatile, and you value good outcomes more than the party line. Here’s what you could write:

- Though our software should work smoothly in any browser, we’ve found it doesn’t have this glitch in Chrome, so that’d be your best choice...

- I wish you could register twenty course participants on one form, but our system sets a max registration of 10 participants per form. However, as a workaround, you can complete two registration forms with the same purchase order number on each. That way, your 20 registrations will be grouped together on the course roster and for billing purposes.

Educate while answering

Your company has produced lots of useful content for customers, so make it your business to mention at least one useful item in every response you write (even in social media). You're not just schooling the customer. You're using each contact as an opportunity to deepen the relationship with your customer.

Include direct links to self-service content (a training session, video tutorial, FAQ, knowledge base, or documentation) as well as engagement-building content (a whitepaper, customer success stories, recorded webinar, community form, social channels, blog, or podcast). Use sentences like these:

- *We also have a video tutorial that explains this process...*
- *For future reference, our knowledge base has two articles about exporting and importing data...*
- *You mentioned how much you like the new design of this miter saw. You might like to listen to this episode of our podcast, which features an interview with the designer.*

Reduce customer effort

When you make things harder for customers, they leave. It's that simple. So study your written responses to be sure your writing style and your writing practices aren't increasing customer effort. Here are some written practices to watch out for:

- **Use deep links.** Don't just link to your "site" or your "FAQs." When you share helpful content, use a deep link to a specific page or FAQ.
- **Always provide ways to contact you, even when you're sending email from a "Do Not Reply" account.** If customers can't reply to an email from you, be sure the email explains the other ways they can get in touch.

- **Give customers the reason you want them to send you a private message.** In social, we frequently ask customers to DM us, but we must tell them why. (Remember, from a customer effort standpoint, a DM is a second contact.) For example, if you ask a customer to DM you their account number or date of birth, also write "...so I can review your account info and get back to you right away."
- **Switch written channels to reduce effort.** Don't continue a customer service conversation in email when live chat would enable you to troubleshoot. And don't continue a conversation in live chat, when email would enable you to describe all the options in one communication. To reduce effort, offer to have the written exchange in the channel that allows you to give the best service.