Writing Letters with Sensitive Content

Occasionally, you need to write a letter with some sensitive or emotional content. We seem to have a difficult time with this. If we can stick to the facts, we're fine, but we have difficulty inserting some emotion in our letters. Letters that benefit from sensitive treatment or the expression of some emotion include bad and good news letters, thank-you letters, and letters of condolence.

1. Be especially thoughtful when writing letters with bad news.

The tone of letters that deliver bad news deserves special consideration.

If it's bad news, share the pain.
Examples:

> *We're sorry to tell you that we are revoking your third-class medical certificate. This letter explains the reason for our decision and what to do if you disagree.*
>
> *We're sorry to tell you that we are not going to do a sole source procurement to buy services to improve the main runway at Boise Airport. However, we will issue a request for proposals, and we encourage your company to submit a bid.*

2. Show your pleasure in good news.

Let people know you are happy to have good news for them.
Examples:

> *We're happy to confirm that we approved discretionary funds totaling $1,621,125 to fund this project. The approved amount is slightly less than you requested, but your staff and the Federal Aviation Administration's Airports District Office agreed on this amount.*
>
> *The Department of Transportation is happy to tell you that we have included the project you nominated under Executive Order 13274, Environmental Streamlining for Infrastructure Project Reviews, on the Secretary's list of priority projects.*

3. Express appreciation

When writing thank you letters and other expressions of appreciation, keep your letter short and to the point. Be informal; informal expressions of appreciation seem more sincere than formal ones. Personalize the letter; make sure it refers to the specific situation you're writing about. Don't use some standard form letter you could use for many different particular situations.

Example:

If the sender wrote: *We had a good meeting with your staff last week and are looking forward to meeting with you when you come to Houston next month. The meeting raised questions about . . .*

You might respond: *I appreciate hearing that you had a good meeting with my staff. I'm looking forward to meeting with you when you visit Houston. Regarding your questions, ...*

4. Be especially careful with letters of condolence and other sensitive letters.

If you are addressing a sensitive issue, show some empathy.
Example:

No empathy: *Since the employee died, the relocation payments will be terminated.*
Empathy: *We're sorry to hear about the loss of your husband. Unfortunately, we must stop sending you his relocation payments.*

If you or the Agency made a mistake, admit it freely and say we're sorry. Don't try to pass the buck; if you need to be vague, use "we." Everyone makes mistakes and it's best to admit them and clear up any problem quickly and openly. If you need to explain what caused the mistake, do so, but don't overdo it. Your reader wants the problem sorted out more than a long explanation of why it happened.

However, letters of condolence or apology may not be appropriate if FAA is involved in legal actions. For instance, if there is ongoing or impending litigation arising from an aircraft accident, the agency's legal position could be jeopardized by a litigant receiving a letter acknowledging we made a mistake. The same could be true of letters regarding employee/labor relations, which could involve an EEO case or lawsuit, or both. Because there may be many other situations where offering an apology may create a legal problem for the agency, you should coordinate these letters with the Office of the Chief Counsel to ensure that you protect the our legal position.