

On the Rhetorical Function of Gentle Reminder and Effective Memo Writing

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It has been observed in recent electronic memoranda in both academic and professional settings that the phrase “gentle reminder” is used in a rhetorically flawed manner. A “gentle reminder” presupposes an earlier memo or any kind of communication informing the recipient of the “gentle reminder” of the content of what the “gentle reminder” is reminding the recipient of. A “gentle reminder” also implies that the content of the communication preceding the “gentle reminder” contains some mandatory action to be taken on the part of the recipient of the “gentle reminder”. It also implies that should the “gentle reminder” fail to get the message across to the recipient; the recipient would face some consequences for lack of action or for not complying with what the original communication demanded—such as paying a telephone bill or a traffic infringement or other forms of compliance, and we all know the consequences of defaulting on payments like these. Yet anecdotal evidence shows that in many communications, the phrase “gentle reminder” is used to mean “soft” or “courteous reminder”, without reference to what might happen should the recipient of the gentle reminder fail to comply. So, if someone exhausts their “gentle reminder”, would they resort to a “sharp, harsh, crude, strong, violent, or wild reminder”? Consider the following example.¹

“Parking enforcement plays a vital role in ensuring that parking resources are used in the best interests of the community. Businesses require adequate parking with a regular turnover of vehicles. Near capacity parking (with little vehicle turnover) discourages potential shoppers and harms trade and potentially the local economy.

Just as a **gentle reminder**, there are a number of areas around Kingston which have restricted times for parking. There are also a number of disabled parking spaces and loading zones. The parking restrictions have been designed to ensure that all have a fair go when it is time to do your shopping. The Compliance Officers regularly patrol those areas and issue infringements for those few who try and stretch the friendship.”

A reminder is a note to remind a person of something not done, and it is clear from the preceding example that a gentle reminder is an early pre-warning that certain things should be done (such as observing the laws, by-laws and or regulations). A gentle reminder is normally sent out by the person who originated the first notice or announcement. Nonetheless, the phrase is now used haphazardly to mean “polite reminder” irrespective of who the originator of the first memo was. In this scenario, person (A) sends out a memo inviting employees to attend a meeting. Person (B) later sends a “gentle reminder” reminding employees or colleagues that the meeting is taking place, adding that “it would be nice if you could attend”. The latter sentence reveals how the phrase “gentle reminder” is understood and used. From a process perspective, person (B) should have the authority and responsibility to send the “gentle reminder” within an escalation process that defines the actions that need to be taken. Intention by an employee to “remind” colleagues of an upcoming event or some other required action should not be expressed in “gentle reminder” terms if the employee does not have the authority or responsibility to do so. Here is another example of erroneous usage of the phrase.

“A **gentle reminder** of tonight’s recital. Hope to see you there.”

This paradoxical statement (*gentle reminder* and *hope* to see you there) begs the question: if I do not show up for the event, what will happen? And if the gentle reminder doesn’t work, will I receive a harsh reminder? Shush! They are sleeping! Don’t wake them up! A gentle reminder would be enough! In the following example, the sender of this email soliciting feedback is asking permission to send a “gentle reminder” should the recipient not respond to the invitation to participate in the survey.

“Thank you for your help. If we have not heard from you in the coming week, please allow us to send a **gentle reminder**.”

In the mid 1990s in Australia, the Plain English movement was in full swing and government departments and utilities companies, such as water, gas and electricity, launched Plain English programs to revamp their memo language. The aim was to make it more user-friendly and less threatening and the phrase “gentle reminder” was introduced as a way of alerting the customers and subscribers who do not pay their bills on time to pay them soon, without causing them to have a heart attack. In those days, many people hated receiving windowed envelopes for this reason (and they still do). The language was stern and threatening and Plain English was meant to make communication better not only by removing jargon and gobbledegook but also by changing the tone and manner in which business and professional communication was expressed. It was also meant to transform society from an adversarial, belligerent, post-industrial society into an open-minded, all-embracing, mutually supporting, inclusive modern society. This was happening alongside other transformations for the same purpose in the legal system and other social services systems. For example,

police cars were marked with the word “POLICE” all in caps. This was changed to “Police” with an initial cap and the rest of the letters in lowercase—all part of making the system more user-friendly.²



(Photo courtesy of Wikipedia, public domain)

A friendly reminder falls into the same category. It is used without enough care and attention to how it is employed and how it functions in the system of email and memo communication. An email is sent requesting something to be done. Later an email arrives with the label “A Friendly Reminder”.

“To my friends and colleagues,

This is a **friendly reminder** that the polls close today at 5 p.m. for your choices of two senators to represent your interests on the Faculty Senate for the next two years. You will select a Humanities Representatives and an At-Large Representative. Faculty in the Math and Sciences will vote for an at-large candidate and for a representative to specifically represent their disciplines. [...] . The polls are open until 5 p.m. Every vote matters. Remember, if you don't vote someone in another department will chose your representative for you. Please take a few minutes from your busy schedule to make your wishes known today. Thank you for your consideration.”

If the recipient has a choice and the only consequence in this example is losing his or her vote, with no penalty imposed, why say friendly reminder? What will follow is a hostile reminder?

Writing effective memos is not just about using clear and correct language. It is also about holding the logic of the communication together within the system of communication and the taxonomy of this type of communication. The phrase “A Gentle Reminder” is a prime example of how the rhetorical function of an expression is lost and how the logic of the communication is compromised. Each memo type has its place in the rubric of memos, and labels such “gentle

reminder”, “final reminder”, “letter of demand”, “letter of complaint”, and so on, should be used clearly to mean what they say. Reminders are written in an escalatory series from first (gentle) reminder to last call (strong) reminder. Rhetorically, a “gentle reminder” label is designed to alert, persuade and motivate the recipient to take the action required to avoid unpleasant consequences. As such, a “gentle reminder” calls attention to an oversight or urge prompt action to avoid such unpleasant consequences.

Internal emails are used within the organization to communicate important information in the most effective manner. They should be clear, precise, short and to the point. Above all, they should fulfil the intended rhetorical function. A “gentle reminder” used in the manner described above fails to do that. In the mayhem of language and academic gobbledegook today, others may disagree!

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About the Author

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¹ Source: Kingborough Council.

<http://www.kingborough.tas.gov.au/site/page.cfm?u=362>. Emphasis added.

² It is also argued that lowercase is easier and faster to read while less threatening than all caps.