

Your mother told you to watch your tone and I agree.

Too often, we intend to come across as professional or tough or succinct, (which I applaud), and wind up sounding mean, abrupt, or imperious.

Most often, these are issues of tone and what is called the meta-message. What message does your communication send that underlies your overt message? Language enables you to control this, but first of all, it needs to be conscious. As often as not, tone is conveyed in the modifiers: even, now, only, ever, never, just, yet.

For example, I have a contract with one client that dictates two revisions to everything I do. So, I submitted a first draft. I was given fairly minor changes, which I made. The email I received back was: "This is very good now."

Now?

Really? Now?

So it stunk before, but now it's good? (Before you decide I'm overreacting horribly, this is a woman who deals with writers every day and should know better.) Apart from the fact that my neck hairs went up (with another revision still available in my contract), what did the writer gain by including that small word?

Nothing, right?

What did she lose?

Some good will from one of her key writers. Had she written, "This is good." I'd have been perfectly happy and eager to get to work on her next project. The "now" made me realize that, until her fingerprints were on a document, she wasn't going to like it.

Here's a stronger example:

"If you would just submit your reports on Friday, I'd be happy."

(ouch)

How about:

"This is just a reminder to submit your reports on Friday. I'll look forward to receiving them."

Who do you want to work for? Who's going to get their reports faster? And the key word in each sentence is the modifier: "just."

Watch those modifiers and watch your tone.