

Examples: Opening Paragraphs

A **strong** opening paragraph might read something like this:

Dear Mr. and Mrs. Jones:

We appreciate the opportunity to review the facts related to your Farm Service Agency (FSA) direct loan application. Unfortunately, we cannot approve your request to finance equipment for increasing hay production. This letter explains the reasons for our decision in detail, and provides you with options you may choose to take.

This opening paragraph is well-written because it is:

- **Short and to the point;**
- **Explains the decision quickly and succinctly;**
- **It briefly explains the contents for the rest of the letter.**
- **The tone is friendly, and the use of the word “Unfortunately” before the denial adds a level of sympathy and compassion.**

A **weak** opening paragraph might read something like this:

Dear Mr. and Mrs. Jones:

Attached is our formal denial to your Farm Service Agency loan request. As harsh as it sounds, I am of the opinion that you need to get another season of haymaking under your belt to provide a better assessment of your capacity as a grower before the Agency can be comfortable lending you money for more equipment to make hay on a larger scale. I promote that you work on improving yields and quality on your smaller scale operation before you expand to the size you were talking about in your 2010 plan. Work on such concepts as soil fertility, hay variety and marketing. If you are able to show significant improvement to where you are hitting at least average yields, we can then contemplate lending you money to purchase equipment that would encourage working additional acreage.

This opening paragraph has several weaknesses:

- **It immediately conveys an “opinion.” Adverse decisions must be based on facts only, and must be presented as such.**
- **It presents recommendations too early in the letter. Recommendations are fine, but they should be presented after you present the regulations and related facts of the case.**
- **It’s very long. An opening paragraph should state the decision and outline contents of the rest of the letter.**
- **The tone is flippant. Using the phrase “as harsh as it sounds” is unnecessary and unprofessional.**
- **The tone is also condescending and casts an opinion of doubt. “If you are able to show significant improvement to where you are hitting at least average yields...” indicates that you don’t believe the customer can meet targets. Also, “...we can contemplate” connotes the possibility of a personal decision. Remember, opinions play no role in adverse decisions.**