

When a bad review lands

What to write back in three calm sentences, which reviews Google's own rules let you report, and what to leave alone.

The worst time to answer a bad review is the minute you read it. You're annoyed, you know the other side of the story, and the reply box is right there under your thumb.

This guide is for that day: what to write, what you can report, and what to leave alone. It's all free. Where Google or the FTC says something, it links to their page as it read in October 2026. It isn't legal advice, and where a question needs a lawyer, I'll say so and stop.

The four example replies are templates. The reviews are made up, and the square brackets are where your details go. Rewrite them in your own words every time.

PART ONE — THE REPLY

01 Wait an hour, then write for the next reader

The urge is to answer while it stings. Don't. Put the phone down, do a job, come back. An hour is usually enough, and the next morning is fine. Google's tip is "Respond in a timely manner" (Google), so today or tomorrow is about right.

Then think about who reads it. The reviewer gets a notification when you reply (Google) and probably reads it once. The people it's really for come later: strangers choosing between you and two others, wondering whether what happened to this customer would happen to them. They're the same people step 03 of the 60 seconds guide is about, and they keep finding your reply long after the reviewer has moved on.

Google checks a reply against its content policies before it goes up, which it says usually takes up to 10 minutes and sometimes up to 30 days. It posts as the business, without your own name. And "Customers can still change their review after reading your reply." (Google) A calm reply gives them a reason to.

WHAT TO DO THIS WEEK

- Turn on review notifications in your Business Profile, so a bad one doesn't sit unanswered for a month.
- When one arrives, read it twice and close the app.

The reviewer reads your reply once. Everyone who finds your profile after that reads it too.

02 The short reply: thank them, one fact, take it off the page

Three sentences. Thank them. Say one true thing, either what happened or what you've changed since. Then give them a way to reach you.

Google's tips (Google) say much the same: "Keep it short and simple", because "people might stop reading before they get to the main point." If it's complicated, "politely request that the reviewer contact you via phone or email to resolve the issue privately." Your business phone and email are allowed in a reply; Google's policy says so (Google).

Apologize when it's deserved, and only for what was yours. Google's line is "don't take responsibility for things outside your control." Turning up late is yours. The supplier who sent the wrong part is a fact you can mention once.

Use the name shown on the review and sign off with your first name, as Google suggests. No other name. If you know their surname from the job, it stays out.

Write each reply fresh. Google advises against sending everyone the same thank-you (Google), and you can still reply to every review: just write each one new. And put no offers in it, no discount on the next job, no free visit. Google's tip is to "avoid using your response to offer deals or promotions."

Example. Not a real review. One star: "Turned up two hours late and didn't call. The work was good once he got going."

Example reply: [First name], you're right, and I'm sorry. The job before yours ran over and I should have called you as soon as I knew. Since then I text the next customer the minute a job runs late. Thanks for saying the work was good. [Your name]

It agrees with the complaint, says what changed, and keeps the excuse to one clause.

WHAT TO DO THIS WEEK

- Write your three sentences in your phone's notes first. Read them back the way a stranger would, then post.

Short enough that a stranger reads to the end.

03 When the customer is wrong

This is the hard one, because you know you're right.

You can disagree in public: once, with one fact, calmly. Nobody wins an argument in a review thread, and the stranger reading can't check who was right anyway. What they can see is how you behave when somebody's unfair to you.

The FTC's staff guidance on its review rule (FTC) puts it this way: "Yes, you can respond publicly to the review, and yes, you should watch what you say." Watching what you say means no accusation about the reviewer that you know is false, and no threats or intimidation to get the review changed or taken down.

Leave the paperwork out. Not what they paid, not the invoice, not their address, not your texts, not a photo of their house. Google says "Never share a reviewer's private information" (Google), and its policy bans posting personal information without consent (Google).

Unfair and against the rules are different things. Google says "Do not report a review just because you disagree with it or dislike it." (Google)

Example. Not a real review. One star: "Charged me way more than the price on their website. Total rip-off."

Example reply: Thanks for the review, [first name]. The price on our website is the starting price for a standard job. Before we started on yours I wrote up a quote for the extra work and we went ahead on that. I can see it still came to more than you expected, and I'd like to talk it through: [phone]. [Your name]

One fact (the written quote came first). No amount, no invoice, no "as you well know", and it ends with an open door.

WHAT TO DO THIS WEEK

- Pick the one fact that matters most and write it without an adjective.
- Read the reply back. Any sentence that's there to prove you right comes out.

Say your one fact once and stop. The last word in a review thread costs more than it's worth.

PART TWO — WHAT TO REPORT, AND WHAT TO LEAVE ALONE

04 Reviews you can report, and how

Google takes down reviews that break its rules, and being harsh doesn't break them. In Google's words, "only those that violate Google policies are eligible for removal", and "Google doesn't get involved in conflict between businesses and customers." (Google)

What the content policy covers, in plain words (Google):

- Somebody who was never a customer: content "not based on a real experience".
- A conflict of interest, such as a competitor posting on your profile.
- Harassment and threats.

- "Unsubstantiated allegations of unethical behavior or criminal wrongdoing." He's a thief, with nothing behind it.
- Your personal information, or anyone's, posted without consent.
- Profanity used "to offend other users or emphasize criticism".
- Rants, and general, political or social commentary.
- Spam: the same thing posted again and again.

What stays: "We do allow content that describes negative experiences in a respectful manner." A real customer describing a real job, even bluntly, is probably that, and it stays up.

You can't delete a review yourself. The help pages give a business a way to report one and nothing more; only the person who wrote it can edit or delete it (Google, Google).

How to report, as Google describes it (Google). Google moves its buttons, so if a step doesn't match your screen, follow the page.

- In your Business Profile, open your reviews, choose Report next to the one, pick the reason that fits and send it.
- Or use the Reviews Management Tool, which shows where your report has got to. "Review evaluation typically takes several days."
- If Google says it doesn't break a policy, you get one appeal.
- Then leave it. The FTC tells businesses not to misuse reporting "to get rid of honest, negative reviews." (FTC)

If a review plainly breaks a rule, report it and post a short reply anyway. Google decides what comes down, and if it stays, your reply is what the next reader sees under it.

Example. Not a real review. One star: "Never showed up for my appointment. Avoid."

Example reply: I can't find a booking that matches this, and I'd like to. If we've got something wrong, please call me on [phone] and I'll look into it today. If you meant a different business, no harm done. [Your name]

Nobody gets called a liar. A stranger sees someone who checked. If you're sure it isn't a real experience, report it too.

Example. Not a real review. One star, full of swearing and insults aimed at the owner, and nothing about any job.

Example reply: There's nothing here I can answer. If something went wrong on a job of ours, I want to hear about it: [phone]. [Your name]

Two sentences, nothing anyone can quote back. Profanity and harassment are both in the policy, so report it first.

IF SOMEONE ASKS FOR MONEY TO REMOVE BAD REVIEWS

Google has a separate report for this (Google). It describes "a sudden increase in 1-star and 2-star reviews on your Google Business Profile, followed by someone demanding money, goods, or services in exchange for removing the negative reviews." Google says "Do not engage with or pay the malicious individuals." Screenshot everything straight away and use the form on that page.

WHAT TO DO THIS WEEK

- Go through your bad reviews and ask of each one: is this a real customer describing a real job, however bluntly? If yes, reply. If not, report it under the reason that fits, then reply anyway.

Google decides what comes down. What you write underneath is yours.

05 What never to do

Some things feel like a fix and make it worse. Some break Google's rules, some the FTC's, a few both.

- **Don't offer anything to have a review changed or removed.** No refund on condition they delete it, no discount, no free visit. Google bans incentives "in exchange for posting any review or revision or removal of a negative review." (Google) The FTC's rule doesn't ban it in so many words, but FTC staff say paying to change or remove truthful negative reviews "may violate the FTC Act" (FTC). Offer nothing.
- **Fix the problem, then you can ask.** FTC staff say the rule doesn't stop you contacting a customer to sort out what went wrong, and "It also does not prohibit simply asking satisfied customers to update their reviews." (FTC) Google says following up "may even encourage the customer to update their review." (Google) Once it's sorted and they're happy, ask once whether they'd update it. Offer nothing, and leave the wording to them. If you refund someone because the work was wrong, keep the refund and the review apart.
- **Don't threaten to sue over a review you just don't like.** The FTC's rule bans "unfounded or groundless legal threats, physical threats, intimidation, or certain false public accusations to prevent or remove a negative consumer review." (FTC) If you think a review is defamatory, that's a question for a lawyer. Google also has a legal removals route.
- **Don't call the reviewer a liar unless you know it's false.** "I can't find a booking that matches this" is something you checked. "This is a fake review" is an accusation.
- **Don't post their details.** Section 03.

- **Don't bury it under reviews from friends, family or staff.** Google counts "current or former employment" and "familial relationships" as conflicts of interest (Google), and the FTC's rule covers insider reviews too (eCFR).
- **Never buy reviews or write your own.** Google removes them, and it may also stop the profile getting new reviews for a while, hide the existing ones for a while, or show customers a warning that fake reviews were removed (Google). The FTC's rule bans buying and selling fake reviews and lets the FTC seek civil penalties (FTC).
- **Ask exactly how before you hire anyone to "clean up" your reviews.** The FTC: "you can be held responsible for what they do on your behalf" (FTC).

WHAT TO DO THIS WEEK

- If you have ever offered anything for a review, or for changing one, stop.

Every shortcut on this list puts your honest reviews at risk too.

PART THREE — THE LONG GAME

06 Keep asking every customer

The answer to one bad review is a steady run of honest ones, so a stranger sees a year of jobs and not one bad afternoon.

- Ask all of them, the grumpy ones too. Google's policy doesn't allow businesses to "selectively solicit positive reviews from customers" (Google), and the FTC says "Don't ask for reviews only from customers you think will leave positive ones." (FTC)
- Ask, then leave them to it. Google says businesses "should not require or pressure users to leave ratings or write reviews while on the premises, nor should they request that specific content be included." (Google) Send the link and let them write it later.
- Offer nothing for it. Google bans incentives for any review at all (Google). That's stricter than the FTC's rule, and Google's is the one your profile lives under.
- Google's own tips page says "A mix of positive and negative feedback often feels more trustworthy." (Google)
- The review link and the two-tap text are in step 03 of the 60 seconds guide.

WHAT TO DO THIS WEEK

- Send your review link to every customer from the last month, including the ones you're unsure about.

One bad review among forty honest ones looks like a bad day. One among three is most of what a stranger knows about you.

WHERE TO START

All of it free, about an hour.

- Answer every review still sitting there without a reply, good and bad. Two or three calm sentences each, written fresh, signed with your first name.
- For each bad one, ask: a real customer describing a real job, however bluntly? If not, report it under the reason that fits. If so, reply and leave it.
- Write your own three-sentence reply to a fair complaint now, while nothing's stinging, and keep it in your phone's notes as a starting point. Rewrite it for each review rather than pasting it.
- Turn on review notifications so you see a bad one the day it lands.
- If you have ever offered anything for a review, or for changing one, stop.
- Send your review link to every customer from the last month, the ones you're unsure about included.

Wait an hour. Write three sentences. Keep asking.

Your reviews get a stranger as far as your website. Send me yours and I'll check what they find when they get there: whether the contact form sends anywhere, whether it works properly on a phone, broken links and images, and whether Google can tell which towns you cover. You'll get a short list of fixes within two business days, free, and it obliges you to nothing.

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