

Writing for attention

Effective written communication is a critical skill. From a thesis or book of hundreds of pages to a text, your message is only as effective as the understanding of its reader. Without any claims to the secrets of impactful writing, this article provides a few thoughts on such effectiveness.

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No matter what you are writing and who you are directing your note, e-mail, article, report or book to, your reader is never obliged to give you their full attention. To get that message across, in the face of a myriad of competing noises, you need to gain and hold their concentration.

One key message

Always be clear on your primary takeaway, the one thought that your writing must not fail to convey. Of course, you need to know what this is before you start. If this cardinal call is not clear to you, then it cannot be clear to your reader.

Your message may be aiming to achieve one of many different responses. It could trigger a change in thinking. It could be a call to action. It may contribute to a wider objective or knowledge base. Sometimes you make your aim clear. Mostly, it is implicit in your core takeaway, which must shine through your writing.

Start with the most important

For business purposes, facts matter. Keeping your reader in suspense is generally not a good strategy. You might lose them before they arrive at your key message. Your most important material comes first, you're your key message, sometimes heralded by an introduction of some sort. And then that message should be woven into the fabric of the balance of your writing, demonstrating its relevance to everything else presented to your reader.

Wherever possible, use a summary. (This might be a good place to avoid clichéd use of the prefix *Executive*, but sometimes your readers want it.) That summary is your trumpet call. It must draw attention to your intention. If it is important for your readers to consider the rest of the presentation, however, then don't give everything away. The summary should be long enough to give the key message, short enough to leave those readers curious for more.

Hierarchies and clusters

Retaining your readers' interest through the course of a long document is not easy. Aim to structure your report or article to form a clear map of overall purpose and

location within that purpose. A long book is helpfully sub-divided into a smaller number of parts and each part into a limited set of chapters. A chapter itself should have recognisable sections and those sections a limited number of sub-sections.

Even the sub-sections should be structured in such a way that the reader knows where they are and understands the relevance of each part of the overall message. Remember, it is your job to retain their attention. Introduce each component of the greater whole with appropriate context and purpose, perhaps referring to its neighbours earlier in the text. Then set out the message, highlighting the key. And then wrap it up, reiterating the golden thread and providing bridging text to the next part of the narrative.

Your writing should, like a symphony or a complex pattern, hold attention at every level of detail, from the whole document to each component.

Look and feel

Aesthetics matter, to a point. Text must be readable, spacing helpful, colour complementary. For longer documents, chapter numbering and headings should serve as signposts. Diagrams, tables, special boxes, footnotes and appendices should be used to enhance the effectiveness of the overall message, subtly indicating the relative importance of each of the contributing parts. The content page, only to be used if helpful, should provide a concise map of the whole document, not an illegible listing of details.

The key to effective aesthetic is that, engaging the right brain of your reader, you support your verbal messaging and call to action by providing complementary non-verbal signals, subtly entertaining your reader at the same time. This is very important for a long, potentially boring, technical document, but it is relevant as well to their shorter counterparts. Your e-mails should be appropriately formatted to enhance the messaging, not suppress it. Even e-mails should be written with the key message up front, perhaps with that short introduction.

We have no right to insist that our communication receives the top attention of its readers, and we are naïve if we assume that their understanding is perfectly in line with our intention. Good writers continually test the effectiveness of their messaging and adapt to improve it. Always, always check your writing before you send it. **Rob Rusconi**