WRITE FOR CLARITY

Writing is simply the act of having a conversation with someone on paper. We must work as hard to be magnetic and unstoppable in our writing as we do when we are face to face...to draw people in with our energy and language and distinctiveness.

Below, you will find examples from assignments I've given to my MBA students for 10 years. One assignment asks them to write a one page reflection after making 50 cold-calls to prospects, while the other asks them for a breakthrough email to use in a job search. Each example below highlights "before" and "after" writing samples across the five critical components of great writing: clarity; simplicity; design; voice; and humanity.

CLARITY

"Clear...is KIND." As writers, we too often engage in a lot of "throat clearing" before we get down to business. When your writing is clear, you give your reader a gift. So get right to the point.

BLURRINESS

"Hi Susan -

My name is Joe, and I am currently graduating from Kellogg with my MBA. During my MBA, I concentrated on finance, strategy and operations and I led the Operations Club for the school. My background is in strategy reengineering and corporate innovation, and I have served in a Systems Engineering role at Raytheon, Operations Consulting at Deloitte, and Program Management at Facebook.

I am currently searching for my next opportunity in Product Management and saw you recruit for XYZ Company. Product Management is something I see as core to my next role.

I'd love to schedule a 15-minute informational call when it's convenient for you."

CLARITY

"Susan -

I'm Joe, and I am hoping to engage you in a conversation about puzzles.

I've loved puzzles since I was a kid. Fast-forward (a bunch) of years and I've just graduated with my MBA from Kellogg. My journey to - and through - Kellogg has had me solving puzzles at every turn: building innovation at Raytheon, ops consulting at Deloitte, and program management at Facebook. Puzzles all.

I see that you have a bit of a puzzle (okay, I'm done with this metaphor now, I promise) in your postings about Product Management for XYZ Company, and this is exactly what I'd love to talk about."

SIMPLICITY

Simplicity is about resisting the temptation to dress up your language in fancy clothes. Use "Weekend Language", as the authors Andy Craig and David Yewman write in their book of the same name. They point out that on the weekends - with our friends and families - we speak plainly. We don't dress up our language in jargon and corporate speak.

FANCY

"This multi-part assignment is about having a purposeful strategy and a tendency towards action. Once you have selected the right strategy, you must use and leverage intelligent tools, acquire a target set of contacts, and continuously iterate your script."

SIMPLE

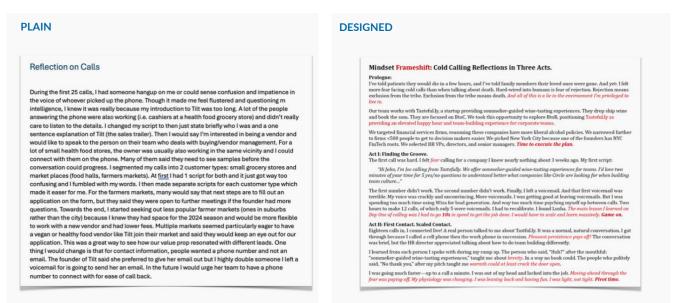
"That's the lesson of this exercise for me. It's not about selling. It's about exploding self-imposed limits. It's about understanding that bringing value to people is worth rejection."

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DESIGN

A well structured piece of writing is clear right out of the gate where it is taking the reader. Then, it uses design elements that make it easy to read: headers; small chunks; judicious use of bold type, color, and italics to make things jump off the page.

Don't read the content below...just visually take in the designs of these two pieces:



VOICE

Your "voice" should be active and not passive, so write like you talk! Never say anything in writing that you wouldn't say in a live conversation. Say; "I recommend" vs. "It is recommended." A strong voice in a piece of writing also helps make the 1-dimensional 3-dimensional by wrapping context around the facts.

PASSIVE

"It's a fact that cold-calling assignments are scary by design. They put you out of your comfort zone in a way that other assignments just don't. They force you to talk to strangers and to do call after call after call. What happens over time is that you get used to it, and it becomes easier to push through the pain of picking up the phone."

ACTIVE

"The first number didn't work. The second number didn't work. Finally, I left a voicemail. And that first voicemail was terrible. My voice was crackly and unconvincing. More voicemails. I was getting good at leaving voicemails."



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HUMANITY

Too often, in our desire to look smart or sophisticated, we squeeze all of our humanity out of a piece of writing. But what people get caught up with in a piece of writing is our energy around an idea, not the idea itself. Energy is what inspires people to action, and energy comes from communicating how we feel about the topic we are writing about...not just the facts of the case. If we infuse energy into our writing, we transform it from empty, robotic and dead to energetic, human and alive.

ROBOTIC

"As far as the actual calls, I think they went about as well as they could, given that I have a full-time job that I work at during business hours. While I couldn't talk to a lot of actual practice managers, I did get a lot of practice working through the various automated systems and talking to receptionists. So, between the first 25 calls and the second 25 calls, I certainly did make a few changes."

HUMAN

"I've told patients they would die in a few hours, and I've told family members their loved ones were gone. And yet: I felt more fear facing cold calls than when talking about death. Hard-wired into humans is fear of rejection. Rejection means exclusion from the tribe. Exclusion from the tribe means death."

HARD WRITING MAKES EASY READING

Before sending a piece of writing, review what you've written. As you look over your next week's worth of emails, presentations and proposals, read a few out loud and ask yourself before sending:

- Are these clear?
- Do they use simple words that get straight to the point?
- Are they brief? Could I take 50% out of this and still have it make the point I want it to make?
- Is it visually appealing?
- Is it written in an active voice?
- Does this piece have energy and humanity, or is it 'just the facts?'
- Does it breathe life into the subject?