



# 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.

### BLURRING

"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:

### PLAIN

#### Reflection on Calls

During the first 25 calls, I had someone hangup on me or could sense confusion and impatience in the voice of whoever picked up the phone. Though it made me feel flustered and questioning my intelligence, I knew it was really because my introduction to Tilt was too long. A lot of the people answering the phone were also working (i.e. cashiers at a health food grocery store) and didn't really care to listen to the details. I changed my script to then just state briefly who I was and a one sentence explanation of Tilt (the sales trailer). Then I would say I'm interested in being a vendor and would like to speak to the person on their team who deals with buying/vendor management. For a lot of small health food stores, the owner was usually also working in the same vicinity and I could connect with them on the phone. Many of them said they need to see samples before the conversation could progress. I segmented my calls into 2 customer types: small grocery stores and market places (food halls, farmers markets). At first I had 1 script for both and it just got way too confusing and I fumbled with my words. I then made separate scripts for each customer type which made it easier for me. For the farmers markets, many would say that next steps are to fill out an application on the form, but they said they were open to further meetings if the founder had more questions. Towards the end, I started seeking out less popular farmer markets (ones in suburbs rather than the city) because I knew they had space for the 2024 season and would be more flexible to work with a new vendor and had lower fees. Multiple markets seemed particularly eager to have a vegan or healthy food vendor like Tilt join their market and said they would keep an eye out for our application. This was a great way to see how our value prop resonated with different leads. One thing I would change is that for contact information, people wanted a phone number and not an email. The founder of Tilt said she preferred to give her email out but I highly double someone I left a voicemail for is going to send her an email. In the future I would urge her team to have a phone number to connect with for ease of call back.

### DESIGNED

#### Mindset Frameshift: Cold Calling Reflections in Three Acts.

##### Prologue:

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. *And all of this is a lie in the environment I'm privileged to live in.*

Our team works with Tastefully, a startup providing sommelier-guided wine-tasting experiences. They drop ship wine and hook the som. They are focused on BtoC. We took this opportunity to explore BtoB, positioning Tastefully as providing an elevated happy hour and team-building experience for corporate teams.

We targeted financial services firms, reasoning these companies have more liberal alcohol policies. We narrowed further to firms <500 people to get to decision makers easier. We picked New York City because one of the founders has NYC FinTech roots. We selected HR VPs, directors, and senior managers. **Time to execute the plan.**

##### Act I: Finding the Groove.

The first call was hard. I felt *fear* calling for a company I knew nearly nothing about 3 weeks ago. My first script:

*"Hi John, I'm Joe calling from Tastefully. We offer sommelier-guided wine-tasting experiences for teams. I'd love two minutes of your time for 5 yes/no questions to understand better what companies like Circle are looking for when building team culture..."*

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. But I was spending too much time using Wiza for lead generation. And way too much time psyching myself up between calls. Two hours to make 12 calls, of which only 5 were voicemails. I had to recalibrate. I found Lusha. *The main lesson I learned on Day One of calling was I had to go 10x in speed to get the job done. I would have to scale and learn massively. Game on.*

##### Act II: First Contact. Scaled Contact.

Eighteen calls in. I connected live! A real person talked to me about Tastefully. It was a normal, natural conversation. I got through because I called a cell phone then the work phone in succession. *Persistent persistence pays off!* The conversation was brief, but the HR director appreciated talking about how to do team building differently.

I learned from each person I spoke with during my ramp up. The person who said, "Huh!" after the mouthful: "sommelier-guided wine-tasting experiences," taught me about *brevity*. In a way no book could. The people who politely said, "No thank you," after my pitch taught me *warmth could at least crack the door open.*

I was going much faster—up to a call a minute. I was out of my head and locked into the job. *Moving ahead through the fear was paying off. My physiology was changing. I was leaning back and having fun. I was tight, not tight. Pivot time.*

## 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

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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?