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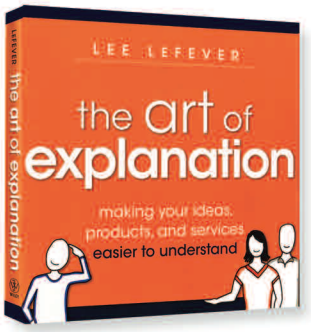
The Art of Explanation

Making Your Ideas, Products, and Services Easier to Understand



by Lee LeFever

THE SUMMARY IN BRIEF

You've done the hard work. Your product or service works beautifully — but something is missing. People just don't see the big idea, and it's keeping you from being successful. Your idea has an explanation problem.

The Art of Explanation is built on Lee LeFever's years of experience in creating explanations for organizations and educators. His company, Common Craft, is known around the world for making complex ideas easy to understand in the form of short videos. No brand is better known for explanations.

The Art of Explanation is for businesspeople, educators and influencers who want to improve their explanation skills and start solving explanation problems. Tools, tactics and techniques are presented that will help you consistently inspire audiences to fall in love with your ideas, products or services through better explanations in any medium.

The Art of Explanation is your invitation to become an explanation specialist and see why explanation is now a fundamental skill for professionals.

IN THIS SUMMARY, YOU WILL LEARN:

- Explanation basics, what causes them to fail and how to diagnose explanation problems.
- To create an explanation strategy using simple elements that builds confidence and motivates your audience.
- To produce remarkable explanations with visuals and media.

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THE COMPLETE SUMMARY: **THE ART OF EXPLANATION**

by Lee LeFever

The author: Lee LeFever is the chief explainer, illustrator and the voice of Common Craft LLC and is widely credited for inspiring the video explanation industry. Since 2007, the company has won numerous awards and has created explanations for the world's most respected brands, including Intel, Google, Dropbox and Ford Motor Co. Common Craft's mission is to make the world a more understandable place to live and work by inspiring and equipping professionals to become explanation specialists.

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For additional information on the author, go to www.summary.com.

Preface

Chances are that you explained something recently — why dinner tastes the way it does, why you were late for a meeting, what an article means to your company. We explain so many different things so frequently that we take the art of explanation for granted. This is a tragedy because a great explanation can make our ideas come to life, invite people to care and be motivated to learn more. However, we lose the opportunity to do this unless we recognize that explanation is an essential skill we can learn and master.

PART 1: PLAN

Learning to Run

Six months ago Trevor picked up running again after his doctor said he needed to get more exercise. He set a goal of completing a half marathon within a year. But it didn't seem like this was going to happen — not the way things were looking. He joked with his friends that he felt like an old man at 45.

Trevor had recently been enjoying a drink with a friend and mentioned that he was having a difficult time preparing for the race. His friend asked, "Have you tried changing how you run?" Perplexed, Trevor replied, "I'm not sure what you mean. I run how I run." His friend asked again, "Seriously, have you ever thought about how you run — and what you could do to run better?"

Trevor had always taken his running style for granted. "Nah, the way I run is fine. And anyway, aren't we born with the ability to run?"

His friend replied, "Of course we can all run. But like anything, there is an art and skill to running, and part of getting what you want out of it is knowing how to run correctly."

"What could possibly make my running better?"

"Look it up." And that is just what he did.

The more he researched, the more he saw running as a skill that he could improve. He learned about proper posture, stride and how a foot strikes the surface, and he discovered tactics that professional runners use to stay healthy. As he trained for the race, he began paying attention to his form and movements. His knee and back pain began to fade, and his endurance seemed to jump, which gave him the energy to run longer.

We all take *explanation* for granted. Because it is a natural part of how we communicate, the thought may never occur to us that explanation is a skill we can improve and put to work in achieving our goals. In this way, running and explanation have much in common:

- We have the ability to do it.
- We may do it so frequently that we never think about it.
- We think the way in which we do it is normal.
- We never consider that we could improve the way we do it.
- Improvement *is* possible and creates positive results.

Explanation is a skill that we can apply to nearly every part of our lives. ●

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Rebecca S. Clement, Publisher; **Sarah T. Dayton**, Editor in Chief; **Andrew Clancy**, Senior Editor; **Amanda Langen**, Graphic Designer; **Corbin Collins**, Contributing Editor

What Is an Explanation?

Most of us take explanation for granted. For many people, it's just something that happens. Someone asks a question, we answer it in the form of an explanation. We do not often step back and think about what makes an explanation an explanation or how we could approach it differently.

An explanation is an act or process that makes something known, plain or understandable. Explanations make facts more understandable. Creating a great explanation involves stepping out of your own shoes and into the audience's. It is a process built on empathy, on being able to understand and share the feelings of another.

Great explanations often do not come from rigorous research and testing; they come from someone's unique approach to communication. Two people could have profoundly different ways of explaining a single idea and still achieve equal levels of understanding. Explanation thrives on being unique and novel; it succeeds when it helps people see ideas from a new perspective. Explanation is a creative act that turns facts into useful, informative and memorable ideas.

Science has helped us make sense of the world by showing that there is a reason things are the way they are. There is a reason that water freezes at 32°F and airplanes can fly. The laws of our universe have been tested and are proven: They explain *why*. Unfortunately, many of the facts and ideas we see on a day-to-day basis cannot be defined by the laws of the universe. We cannot explain Twitter's popularity in terms of gravity or inertia. We need explanations to tell us why Twitter is so popular. Explanation is the art of not just packaging facts but also presenting them in a way that answers the question "why?" — as in why does it make sense to do this?

Explanation is the art of showing why the facts, laws and specifics make sense. Explanations present an idea in a way that makes people *care*. Explanations help people feel confident in choosing to learn more because they care about the idea. People who care about an idea are often motivated to learn more. ●

Why Explanations Fail

Every day, many companies, homes and schools are filled with blank stares and discouraged explainers. We all struggle to find the best way to communicate our ideas, and we sometimes fail.

Blank stares often appear when someone has lost confidence that they can grasp — or should even care about — the idea you are communicating. It can be easy to discern when an explanation is failing with a one-person audience. However, it can be more difficult to determine in a group meeting or classroom setting where you have no way of knowing each person's level of confidence in the material. When you're faced with this, you must make assumptions about the confidence of the overall group, and inevitably your assumptions will not match reality.

We can look at our decisions through the lens of *the curse of knowledge*, described in *Made to Stick,* written by Chip and Dan Heath. When we know a subject very well, we have a difficult time imagining what it is like *not* to know it. Our level of knowledge interferes with our ability to see the world from another person's perspective and to gauge their confidence level accurately. The curse of knowledge is an underlying cause of numerous problems in explanations.

But what about the other side of the coin? Knowing too little is an obvious problem when it comes to explanation. Approaching an explanation without sufficient understanding is a quick way to dig yourself into a hole. If you understand a subject and are prepared to answer questions, you are set up for success. But if you lack the understanding needed to converse about the subject and frame your ideas as an explanation, your lack of knowledge can easily be discovered and cause your explanation to fail. ●

Planning Your Explanations

How often do we sit down and focus on how we will explain an idea? An explanation problem is related to how we choose to communicate ideas. A great idea poorly explained ceases to appear great, and the cost is tremendous. Without a way to explain something effectively, we limit its ability to spread.

We can use the "explanation scale" to develop a plan for solving explanation problems. This model provides a way to visualize the audience, account for their needs and move them from misunderstanding to understanding via a carefully crafted explanation. The simple A-to-Z continuum will be our guide to planning explanations. "A" represents less understanding, and "Z" represents more understanding. Our goal is to move from left to right on the scale.

This scale serves as a way to think about almost any explanation problem that people encounter. Think about your own situation. Ask yourself the following:

- Where are you on the scale regarding a specific idea?
- Where is your audience?

- What assumptions are you making about their level of understanding?
- Are your current explanations accounting for everyone on the scale?
- Should they?

These questions are important because they frame perhaps the biggest problem in communication: We make poor assumptions about what people already know, and these assumptions limit the potential of our explanations. By using the explanation scale, we have a simple way to think about, talk through and plan our explanations. ●

PART 2: PACKAGE

Packaging Ideas

Packages have limits. Only so many things can fit into a package, and this is true of explanations as well. By packaging ideas into explanations, we define the package's contents by what we include or exclude. This gives our explanation form, shape and limits. The idea is to identify an explanation problem and build a package that will solve it through explanation.

Packaging ideas is a simple process that requires the person presenting ideas to account for the audience's needs. And because every audience and idea is different, there are innumerable ways to package ideas. However, they all focus on a few important elements:

- **Agreement:** Agreement builds confidence from the very first sentence. It is accomplished through big-picture statements that most people will recognize, such as "We can all agree that gas prices are rising."
- **Context:** Context moves the points we have agreed upon into a specific place. It gives the audience a foundation for the explanation and lets them know why it should matter to them. You could say, "More of your hard earned income is going to pay for transportation."
- **Story:** Story applies the big ideas to a narrative that shows a person who experiences a change in perspective and the emotions that accompany that change. "Meet Sally; she's tired of paying so much for gas and needs alternatives. Here's what she found."
- **Connections:** Connections often accompany a story and are analogies and metaphors that connect new ideas to something people already understand. "Sally could see that taking the bus was like multitasking because she could work and commute at the same time."
- **Descriptions:** Descriptions are direct communications that are more focused on how versus why. "Sally found that she could save more than $20 a week by taking the bus three times weekly."
- **Conclusion:** Conclusion wraps up the package with a summary of what was learned and provides a next step with a focus on the audience. "The next time gas prices get you down, remember …"

Think about these elements as stepping stones in an explanation, with each step moving the audience from "A" to "Z" with confidence. ●

Context

Context is a foundational element of communication — it provides a place for people and ideas to come together. Context allows ideas to come alive and to be applied in new ways. Unfortunately, context is often forgotten or limited. This makes our ideas appear to be inside jokes in which the punch line requires previous knowledge.

You have probably heard the saying "You are missing the forest for the trees." Taking the time to build context means talking first about the forest and then about the trees.

In most cases, developing context can be a simple matter of making a few declarative statements. We want the audience to feel that they agree with the statements and are confident that the explanation is heading in a direction that they can grasp. As my friend Boris Mann said recently regarding product pitches, "You want to keep everyone's head nodding."

An explanation that builds context can be very compelling. The context then becomes the person's feelings, which can be very powerful.

Done well, context makes it possible to invite experts and beginners alike to see ideas from a new, helpful perspective. ●

Story

Storytelling, especially a specific kind of storytelling, represents an untapped resource when we are trying to make ideas easier to understand.

Stories, in the context of explanations, need facts. And facts can be explained much more effectively in the form of a story. Facts give stories *substance*. Stories give facts *meaning*. Substance and meaning are two of the most powerful factors in any explanation. However, we rely on fact telling more than ever and forget the power of storytelling. We focus so tightly on facts that story

falls by the wayside — and with it, our ability to give those facts the context and meaning that make them attractive to our audiences.

Award-winning journalist Al Tompkins wrote: "The difference between fact telling and storytelling is the difference between watching a stock ticker and hearing a story about an elderly woman who lost every dime she needs for shelter and medicine because the market just tanked."

By adding a person to a narrative, we make the facts more meaningful and interesting. Tompkins also wrote that "Viewers remember what they feel." That is the goal — to create an explanation people remember because it made them feel something.

Many of the stories we tell in Common Craft videos follow a very simple format that goes something like this:

- Meet Bob; he's like you.
- Bob has a problem that makes him feel bad.
- Now Bob found a solution, and he feels good!
- Don't you want to feel like Bob?

The simple inclusion of a human can make a huge difference and invite people to see your ideas from a new, more natural perspective. ●

Connections

Dan O'Bannon and Ron Shusett pitched their movie using three simple words: "*Jaws* in Space." Their idea became the Oscar-winning movie *Alien*. O'Bannon and Shusett were able to connect their idea to something the audience already understood.

If we can connect an old, easily understood idea to something new, we can help the audience feel confident that they can understand the new idea.

Let's say you find yourself trying to explain cloud formation to a 10-year-old named Jasmine:

- Option 1 — Explain Clouds by Establishing New Ideas: With this approach, you might assume Jasmine needs to understand the basics of evaporation, condensation, and weather to understand clouds. You would need to introduce some new ideas, such as: clouds form when the water in oceans, lakes and rivers evaporates; clouds are made of tiny droplets of water; clouds are part of the atmosphere that surrounds Earth.
- Option 2 — Explain Clouds by Connecting Ideas: With this approach, you would look for ideas Jasmine already understands and use them as a foundation. The question then becomes, what does Jasmine currently understand that could connect her to cloud formation? The answer hits you — boiling water. With this in mind, you start at a level that allows her to feel confident. You ask, "You've seen boiling water, right? Have you ever noticed the steam that comes from the pot? When water gets hot it changes, and some of it turns into drops that are so tiny they float in the air. The steam that rises is like a little cloud. Earth has oceans, lakes and rivers. All that water slowly turns into tiny drops that are lighter than air, and when it does, clouds form in the sky."

By connecting clouds to something she already knows, we can help her see the big idea and give her confidence from the start that she can understand it.

Analogy compares two ideas for the purpose of outlining a connection between them. When two ideas connect, they are analogous. In explanation, the use of analogy is a key to making ideas easy to understand. Analogy represents an explanation strategy and an approach to connecting ideas. ●

Description

The elements of context, storytelling and connections are most important and appropriate when the audience is near the "A" end of the scale, where they are trying to establish why an idea makes sense. But some explanations must account for people near the other end of the scale, which means approaching explanations from a different perspective.

For example, a team of mechanics who are learning to use a new tool are unlikely to benefit from a discussion of the importance of repairing cars or from stories about someone using the tool to solve problems. Their level of understanding is near the end of the scale — maybe at "U." Because they already understand the big idea, they need an explanation that focuses more on the details of *how* than on *why*.

We published a video in early 2012 called "Web Browsers Explained by Common Craft." Because the concept of the browser was likely clear, we started to account for the actions one must take to use a browser. We spent a few sentences on context by establishing that we were referring to software on a computer. We used a quick connection to explain the idea of a browser extension by transforming the concept of tabs into a short story about movie times. Then we wrapped it up with a reminder about the browser being a window to the online world. We were still using the principles of explanation, but the elements were more compressed and focused.

When people already feel comfortable with a concept and need an explanation that focuses on *how* more than on *why*, we may be prone to falling back on a recipe approach and focusing solely on the specific tasks that will produce the desired outcome. In some situations this may be appropriate. By thinking about these steps in terms of explanation, however, we may see opportunities to present the ideas in a form that interests the audience and motivates them to learn more. This may mean building context, making quick connections and using short stories to show not just how to complete a task but also why the task makes sense. ●

Simplification

One of the most profound products of the curse of knowledge is the inability to simplify. The knowledge we bring to the table inhibits our ability to predict what will appear simple for others, which then makes our explanations overly complex.

When an idea seems unattainable, it has an impact on how experts explain the idea. The curse causes explanations to be accurate yet incomprehensible, detailed to the point of being ineffective, filled with unfamiliar words and presented without context or application.

However, when we consider simplification, we focus on transforming that complex bundle of details into big, understandable ideas that serve as stepping-stones to future understanding. Here are some guidelines:

- Do not make assumptions about what people already know.
- Use the most basic language possible.
- Zoom out and try to see the subject from the broadest perspective possible.
- Forget the details and exceptions and focus on big ideas.
- Trade accuracy for understanding.
- Connect the basic ideas to ideas the audience already understands.

Inside that big bundle of details and ideas is a single notion that will make the overall concept easier to understand. To get to that core, you can use the guidelines like a machete to hack away at all the extraneous knowledge that causes complexity. Soon enough, you will find any complex idea can be made simple. It just takes a new approach. ●

Constraints

As much as we think we *want* a large number of choices, too many can become a problem and prevent us from feeling happy with any choice. We encounter this same decision making process when we're thinking through explanations. Our myriad choices can seem overwhelming and prevent us from feeling confident that we choose the correct analogy or story, for instance.

Since creating the first Common Craft video, we've worked under a very specific set of constraints that give our videos a specific shape, form and intent. By agreeing on a set of constraints, we can start to evaluate ideas from the context of what is possible within them. Although these constraints limit, they also liberate. We intentionally create a container that allows us to evaluate quickly what's in or out, which frees up our attention to focus on other things. Constraints help us focus on connecting what will fit.

Perhaps you're not sure where to begin, and you need to give your explanation a shape to move forward. One way to do this is to think about the explanation in terms of constraints and eliminate all the ideas and data blocking your view. Start by using the constraints that we encounter in making a video:

- **Timeline:** When do you need to have the explanation ready?
- **Duration:** How long should it take to explain?
- **Location:** Where will the explanation be presented?
- **Format:** How will the information be presented?
- **Idea volume:** How many ideas can you explain in the defined duration?
- **Language:** How technical is the language that the target audience speaks?

A common process for brainstorming and organizing ideas is to use sticky notes, each of which contains one idea. You can think about all the themes and ideas that could be part of your explanation and then put them all up on a wall. Next organize them into groups and start filtering them by removing the ones that don't fit with the big idea groups that emerge.

Only by considering a specific situation's limitations can we identify the right combination of factors that work to achieve the outcomes we want. ●

Preparing for and Writing an Explanation

The best path to solving explanation problems and making ideas easier to understand is to have explanations in writing, where they can evolve before being presented. Written explanations become living documents that

provide a means for sharing and developing ideas and concepts. Although explanations may be effectively presented in text form, it is the *process* of writing that clarifies an explanation and gives it a form that can be presented in many ways.

Our focus before any presentation is writing. All Common Craft videos follow the same basic process prior to the storyboard phase:

1. Big idea: "We are going to make a video about X." If you intend to solve explanation problems, it is essential that you identify the right problem or big idea. Scan the environment of your work or home and look for explanation problems. Look for gaps in understanding that, if filled, would give people a way to see a big idea from a new perspective.

2. Research and discovery: "What main points do we need to make?" Our research and discovery are not only focused on the facts themselves but also on how they have been communicated or explained in the past. Approaching the research in this broad way will increase your chances of identifying major points and finding ways to make your explanations more useful and remarkable.

3. Script writing: "How will we make it easy to understand?" The script is the foundation of any explanation. The secret to crafting a great explanation is learning to recognize when people can't grasp an idea and developing a script that solves the problem.

PART 3: PRESENT

Common Craft's Lessons Learned

People often ask us what makes Common Craft video explanations work. We've identified lessons we learned that go beyond writing and focus on presenting explanations in a manner that befits our audience:

• **State your intentions early:** Perhaps the first chance we have to build context is the title we give our work. This prepares the audience for the presentation and sets expectations. The title shows that the video's intention is to accomplish a specific goal.

• **Solve a problem:** People in any situation — a classroom, business or social setting — are anxious about falling behind on information. If you can create an explanation that solves a problem and helps them feel confident about an idea, it will make an impression and create demand for more.

• **Keep it short:** People are busy. This is why we always keep our videos under four minutes long and why they are designed to relate only a handful of ideas. This is one of the constraints that matters most. We embrace the fact that we cannot include every detail.

• **Reduce noise:** People are surrounded by noise all the time. That's why experiences designed to reduce noise stand out and attract our attention. We make a concerted effort to reduce visual noise. Nothing appears on the whiteboard that isn't there for a purpose.

• **Use visuals:** Many people are visual learners. The combination of text and visuals can be greater than the sum of the parts. Visuals have the potential to captivate the audience in a way that words alone cannot.

• **Embrace imperfection:** Common Craft videos are inherently imperfect. They feature hand-drawn characters on hand-cut paper. Our videos show that we are more concerned about substance and understanding than about polished design and perfection.

• **Slow down:** The first few Common Craft videos were presented with minimal practice, and looking back, it's obvious they were too fast. We now approach our current work with an emphasis on a consistent, low-intensity pace that appeals to a very wide audience and accounts for a variety of viewers, such as older people and those for whom English is a second language.

• **Be timeless:** We want our explanations to be valuable today and years into the future. If we use an example that changes six months later, the video becomes outdated and less relevant. Some refer to this as shelf life. Our explanations can have longer shelf lives if we focus on big ideas and themes.

• **Be accessible:** In whatever medium you choose, consider the implications for those who might face challenges in experiencing your medium, then try to find a way to make it accessible to them as well.

• **Have fun:** Gentle humor and informality are among the true hallmarks of a Common Craft video. We make it a priority to not be too stuffy. Informality helps us be remarkable, and we hope it causes people to smile.

Right Medium for the Message

Have you ever wondered about the lack of cooking shows on the radio? Radio is an auditory medium, and cooking is best when it's visual or, even better, live. Medium matters. One of the keys to getting the most out of an explanation is being deliberate about the media in which you choose to present it.

Your audience and access to tools are unique to you

and the explanation you're crafting. To be truly effective, you'll need to consider how to transform your explanation into forms that fit with your audience and their needs. There is a range of options for doing this:

- **Media options:** The various forms of communication: text, image/graphic, audio and video.
- **Presentation modes:** The platform that presents the forms: documents, presentation/slideshow, website, webinar, video and web-based presentation apps.
- **Recording and distribution options:** How we make the resulting explanation shareable.

Instead of defining the perfect tool for every situation, it's more powerful to think at a higher level about the basic options we have and to learn to use constraints to help us decide what will work best. Two types of constraints are media constraints (these focus on the explainer's access to media) and audience constraints (these focus on the audience's need and situations).

We can't use a simple formula to find the right combination of media for every situation; however, we can use constraints to help give our explanation a form. By thinking in terms of audience and media constraints, we can narrow the choices to a manageable few that fit our needs. ●

Visuals

Only after we introduce a visual do some ideas easily make sense to the average person. The visual becomes the embodiment of the idea, something memorable and reproducible. And that is the goal of visuals in the context of explanation: They make ideas memorable and reproducible.

Visual thinking focuses not only on representing ideas but also on solving problems. According to Dan Roam, author of *Back of the Napkin*, you can classify any problem into six problem clusters:

- **Who and what problems:** Challenges that relate to things, people and roles.
- **How much problems:** Challenges that relate to measuring and counting.
- **When problems:** Challenges that relate to scheduling and timing.
- **Where problems:** Challenges that relate to direction and how things fit together.
- **How problems:** Challenges that relate to how things influence one another.
- **Why problems:** Challenges that relate to seeing the big picture.

Much of *Back of the Napkin* is related to solving these problems with pictures. The six problem clusters are associated with specific kinds of hand-drawn pictures that best relate that information and solve problems.

Visuals are an incredibly important part of the Common Craft experience; however, our videos are more focused on the script than on the visuals. The visuals support the script, not the other way around. Common Craft videos are designed to be a noise-free experience. The figures don't have faces because faces would represent unneeded noise — something for your brain to perceive and understand. And this is our goal: to have people see themselves in the characters we use in the videos. By eliminating faces, we can invite people to do just that.

Keep viewers' attention on the ideas that are the focus of the explanation. Ask whether the words, faces, buttons, features or ideas support the big idea or make it more difficult to see. Work to remove noise from your message, giving people a way to experience your ideas without distractions. ●

Explanation Culture and Your Life as an Explainer

By thinking about your own life and work in terms of explanation, you can start to develop and evolve stories and connections that are more powerful than any answers you've given before.

You don't have to wait around for the perfect explanation problem — your first explicit explanation may be right in front of you. If you seize the opportunity, you may find that it takes on a life of its own.

Once explanation becomes a part of your communication toolbox, you'll start to see all the ways you can use it. Explanation represents an amazing opportunity to make your ideas more understandable. If you choose to pursue it, it could change your life for the better. ●

RECOMMENDED READING LIST

If you liked *The Art of Explanation*, you'll also like:

1. ***Resonate* by Nancy Duarte.** Learn how to transform any presentation into an engaging journey by discovering how to understand your audience, create persuasive content and elicit a groundswell response.
2. ***Well Said* by Darlene Price.** Face-to-face communication proficiency has become increasingly important in efforts to increase business. Price offers guidelines to help you present yourself and your message with clarity, credibility and confidence.
3. ***Snap Selling* by Jill Konrath.** Konrath offers four SNAP rules to win more sales, and she teaches us that sales is an outcome, not a goal. Today, you actually will be more successful if you make fewer calls, meetings and presentations.