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Writing Without Bullshit

Boost Your Career by Saying What You Mean

THE SUMMARY IN BRIEF

Writing Without Bullshit is the first comprehensive guide to writing for today's world: a noisy environment where everyone reads what you write on a screen. The average news story now gets only 36 seconds of attention. Unless you change how you write, your emails, reports and web copy don't stand a chance.

In this practical and witty book, you'll learn to front-load your writing with pithy titles, subject lines and opening sentences. You'll acquire the courage and skill to purge weak and meaningless jargon and wimpy passive voice. And you'll get used to writing directly to the reader to make every word count.

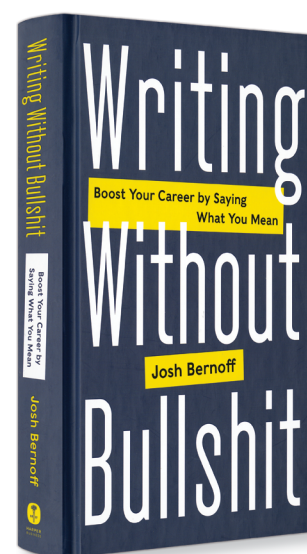
At the center of it all is the Iron Imperative: *Treat the reader's time as more valuable than your own.* Embrace that, and your customers, your boss and your colleagues will recognize the power and boldness of your thinking.

Transcend the fear that makes your writing weak. Plan and execute writing projects with confidence. Manage edits and reviews flawlessly. And master every modern format, from emails and social media to reports and press releases.

Stop writing to fit in. Start writing to stand out. Boost your career by writing without bullshit.

IN THIS SUMMARY, YOU WILL LEARN:

- Techniques that will help you adhere to the Iron Imperative.
- Why fear generates bad writing habits and how to get over it.
- Specific needs and expectations of business readers.
- To plan longer projects and embrace collaborative writing.
- To write and promote intelligently for online audiences.



by Josh Bernoff

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THE COMPLETE SUMMARY: WRITING WITHOUT BULLSHIT

by Josh Bernoff

The author: For 20 years, Josh Bernoff was a principal analyst and senior vice president of idea development at Forrester Research, the elite technology research company. He has written software documentation, online help files, press releases, newsletters, magazine articles, web copy, over a hundred research reports and four books. His first book, *Groundswell: Winning in a World Transformed by Social Technologies*, written with Charlene Li, was a *BusinessWeek* best-seller. *Writing Without Bullshit: Boost Your Career By Saying What You Mean* by Josh Bernoff. Copyright © 2016 by Josh Bernoff. Summarized by arrangement with HarperBusiness, an imprint of HarperCollins Publishers. 304 pages, \$23.99, ISBN: 978-0-06247-715-6. To purchase this book go to www.amazon.com.

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Change Your Perspective

Transcend Bullshit

The tide of bullshit is rising. Your email inbox is full of irrelevant, poorly written crap. Your boss talks in jargon and clichés. The websites you read are impenetrable and incomprehensible.

Bullshit is a burden on all of us, keeping us from getting useful work done. Technology has made it breathtakingly easy for anybody to create content and distribute it to thousands of people. Unfortunately, nobody told those creators what it takes to create good content, so we're stuck wading through a deluge of drivel.

You know this is a problem. It's also an opportunity.

One principle powers everything else you're about to read. It's called the Iron Imperative: *Treat the reader's time as more valuable than your own.* That couldn't be simpler. And yet everything that's wrong with the way businesspeople write today stems from ignoring this principle.

Bullshit is communication that wastes the reader's time by failing to communicate clearly and accurately. The biggest problem is lack of clarity. Jargon, overuse of qualifying words like "very" and "deeply," confusing passive sentences, poorly organized thinking and just general rambling on: That's bullshit. Those are constructions that hide meaning rather than reveal it.

Your objective in learning to write without bullshit is awareness of your own habits and why they exist. With that awareness and some tips on ways to do better, you can improve. The goal is not perfection; no writing is perfect. The goal is to understand what it takes to be better

and to create content that stands out from the ordinary bullshit-laden writing that surrounds us all at work.

Learning to write this way will feel like learning yoga or skiing. You'll learn new ways to do things that will feel a little weird. You're going to have to unlearn some of what you learned about writing, which will slow you down at first.

But very soon after, you'll begin to internalize these techniques. You'll be able to write shorter and faster. As you put this new, bold content out into the world, people will notice you. They will thank you for your clarity and directness. You will both feel and reflect integrity. And you might even get some of your work done a little quicker.

Seize Your Opportunity

A miasma of word pollution pervades our everyday business lives. One simple sentence explains how we got here: We spend all day long reading on screens, and what we read is unedited text created by poorly trained writers.

Reading on a screen is hard — especially when it's a five-inch smartphone screen. But increasingly, computer and phone screens are what we read all day. What is this doing to the way we read?

Josh Schwartz, chief data scientist at Chartbeat, says the average reader spends no more than 36 seconds on the average news story. When the company tested the comprehension of people who'd read a news story, they found that only 37 percent could answer a question about a detail at the end of the article, a result that's only slightly better than guessing. The issue here is how reading on-screen impairs concentration.



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service@summary.com

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Rebecca S. Clement, Publisher; Sarah T. Dayton, Editor in Chief; Ashleigh Imus, Senior Editor; Masiel Tejada, Graphic Designer; A. Imus, Contributing Editor

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Also, content is very different from what the previous generation of office workers consumed. Most of what you read comes directly from the fingertips of the person who wrote it to your eyeballs, with no editorial process. Not just editing for grammar — no one is editing for content, either. With no editors, clarity and accuracy are hit or miss, and bullshit is inevitable.

Finally, writing that succeeds in the cluttered read-on-screen environment of today needs to follow a different set of rules. In high school, you follow a rubric called the five-paragraph essay. But this training won't teach you to think very deeply or make your point in a way that sticks.

Learn to clear away the crap, regain your integrity and say what you mean. You could learn to uphold the Iron Imperative and treat the reader's time as more valuable than your own. Your readers will notice. And against a gray background of unmitigated bullshit, your bold writing will stand out.

What you need is courage and a clear set of instructions. ●

Change What You Write

Move Beyond Fear

Business writers write for one reason: to get things done.

Practical writing may sound more straightforward, but in reality, it's not, because of the fear factor. In business, fear generates bad writing habits. Feeling fear in the workplace is normal; there are risks in everything you write. You fear taking a stand, being held responsible, being wrong. Each of us would prefer to write with integrity rather than out of fear. We want to get a reputation for telling the truth, not hiding it.

But while integrity is in our hearts, fear poisons what we write. Fear destroys clarity and muddies up our writing. You cannot change how you write until you acknowledge it. The trick is to write boldly even though you are afraid. Let's start with the most important thing you can do to communicate better: Write shorter.

Write Short

Use fewer words. Of all the ways to communicate boldly and powerfully in a noisy world, this is the most effective. Get to the point quickly, deliver your message and let readers get on with the rest of their day. Remember the Iron Imperative: Treat the reader's time as more valuable than your own.

In the WOBS Writing Survey, business writers were asked what problems frequently made the material they read less effective. They cited one problem more than any other: 65 percent agreed that the material they read was frequently too long.

Your ideal should be tight writing. Eliminate everything you don't need. The tighter you write, the more persuasive you will be. Don't just trim the fat. Lop off the stuff you liked but that isn't helping enough.

Here are a few tricks for you, listed in the order you should use them, starting with broad advice and going down to the line-editing level:

Edit everything. No one writes tight prose on the first draft.

Aim for a word count. Your emails should be under 250 words. Your blog posts should be under 750. Learn the feel of a 100-, 300-, 500- or 1,000-word hunk of prose.

Say what you really mean. Sometimes you have to draft a whole piece to understand what you really mean. That's okay, as long as you go back and get rid of the parts that no longer apply.

Start boldly. Introductory text is wasteful — scrap it. Your first 50 words should intrigue the reader.

Organize relentlessly. Have you hit the same point in several paragraphs or sections? Pull them together and eliminate the redundancy. Reorganize prose around the main points.

Prune sections and arguments. If you've got five sections, could you make do with three or four? Could you cut a whole paragraph without weakening the argument?

Use bullets or tables. Lists written out in prose (e.g., "Firstly," "Secondly," or "On the one hand," "Alternatively") take up extra space. Where possible, convert to a bulleted list.

Use graphics. A simple diagram is often easier to comprehend than a lump of prose.

Trim connective tissue. Look for long sentences and break them into shorter ones. This makes prose easier to digest.

Delete weasel words and qualifiers. Every "very," "considerable" or "on the other hand" not only weakens your prose, it makes it longer.

Front-Load Your Writing

"Front-loading" your writing is putting the conclusion up front. To master this way of thinking, you must invert what you learned in school about reasoning and writing. You learned to start with a warm-up, then

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reason deductively, starting from first principles and reaching a conclusion.

Business readers have no time for warm-ups and lack the patience for extended reasoning unless they know the payoff up front. So start with bold statements and conclusions. Then follow with the reasoning that got you there. That way, readers who don't read the whole document will still benefit from reading your conclusion.

Here are some good examples of subject lines for emails to colleagues:

- July sales exceed quotas by 20 percent.
- We must respond quickly to competitor's new features.
- Change in benefits requires your attention.

Here are some terrible subject lines:

- Some things that are on my mind right now.
- Three ideas about our product.
- Time to get ready for a big change.

The first three subject lines promise content. The second three could be anything; recipients might open them but might not.

Likewise, documents should hook people with the title and opening. For blog posts, write titles that intrigue both people and Google.

Purge Passive Voice

Passive voice makes your writing muddy. It has its uses, but you're using it far too often. Everyone does.

In a passive voice sentence, the subject of the sentence is not the actor performing the action. The sentence starts instead with the noun that the action is done to. The missing actor at the start of the sentence obscures the meaning. For example, in the sentence "Attention must be paid to the state of our nation," who is supposed to pay attention? That's the missing actor. Grammatically, passive voice sentences include some form of the verb "to be" ("is," "was," "ought to be," "have been," "should be" or "can be," for example) plus a past participle.

Every passive voice sentence sets up uneasiness in readers' minds. They wonder what unseen force is responsible for the actions they're reading about, because the passive hides the "who" in sentences. The more passive voice, the more uneasy people get. This uneasiness wastes readers' time, and that violates the Iron Imperative.

Passive voice is everywhere, but it's especially common when people want "something to be done." They write a report saying what needs to happen but hide who has to

do the work. If you try to act on a recommendation like this, you immediately get stuck. You can't figure out who's supposed to do what.

Here's a sentence from a report that some folks at the University of Massachusetts wrote to analyze the cost and challenges of mounting the Olympic Games in Boston, with the passive constructions highlighted in bold. "[These are] issues that **will need to be closely monitored** in order to ensure the public sector **is protected** from extensive financial commitments." Who is supposed to monitor the issues? Who is protecting the public sector? Somebody in government, but they're not saying who.

While many passives are just lazy writing, fear is also a causative factor. You either don't want to say who's responsible for something or don't want readers to blame you. Writing these sentences in active voice is an act of courage and one your readers will respect.

To rewrite passive sentences, check that verb. Ask yourself who is monitoring or protecting. When you've answered the question, rewrite the sentence with that person or entity as the subject. Rewriting passive voice makes you think harder about what you're saying. It may require research to prove an unsupported statement. You may need to rethink the sentence altogether.

Replace Jargon

Jargon is extremely useful. It makes writers seem like sophisticated insiders. Unfortunately, it makes life much harder for readers. Remember the Iron Imperative — that you must treat the reader's time as more valuable than your own? Jargon accomplishes the opposite: It clearly communicates that you think you are more important than the reader.

The problem is that when you write in jargon, you effectively divide the world into two groups. One is the insider group — the people who, along with you, know what these special words mean. The other, much larger, group is the world outside your bubble. That other group likely includes most of your customers and many of your employees. The more jargon you use, the more you are alienating large groups of people who should be reading and understanding what you write. You make them feel ignorant because they are ignorant; they don't know your secret code. Some of them will work hard to figure it out, but most will just give up on you and whatever you're trying to get across.

The first thing to change is your attitude. Do you think that writing in direct, informal language makes you seem too simplistic? The opposite is true. Once you realize this,

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you can give yourself permission to rewrite whatever you're working on in plain language. That means looking at what you've written and asking, "Can a broad audience actually understand this?" If not, rewrite it using words and concepts anyone can understand.

Or why not skip the rewriting step and just write clearly in the first place? Here's the trick. Before you start, clearly visualize your audience. Is it a small-business person — maybe the owner of a hair salon? Is it an engineer who writes in Java? Is it all the customer service reps in your department? If you imagine average readers — not the smartest ones you know — and think of explaining whatever you're trying to get across to them, you'll be in the right mindset.

Then write a few simple, direct statements that, taken together, get across what you're trying to say. If you're communicating to the customer service reps, it might look like this: "A new software release of our product is going out this weekend. New releases typically generate a lot of calls. You need to familiarize yourself with the details of the update before you come in on Monday. It's going to be stressful, but I'm counting on you to balance efficiency and politeness. Please let me know if you're receiving calls or emails that indicate a more pervasive problem."

Reveal Structure

Prose sucks. Every paragraph that your reader reads, they're potentially losing interest. The more paragraphs, the greater the chance they won't make it to the end of what you've written.

Unless it's short, a piece of writing made of paragraphs looks uniform and therefore intimidating, especially on a narrow screen like a smartphone. Anything that's worth reading and is more than 300 words long has a structure of some kind. Reveal that structure, and you've given the reader some signposts. They see what's coming and that it looks interesting. That's why you need to mix up your text with headings, bullets, lists, tables, graphics, quotes and links.

What you write always has a beginning, middle and end. Break things up into chunks, then use headings to make those chunks easy to see. Within the chunks, use lists to create even more structure.

If you're trying to get across a complex idea and the words won't flow — or if there are just too many words — draw a picture. Brainstorm it on the whiteboard. Pull in somebody who's graphically talented if you want. But your graphical ideas don't need to be complex. Simple Venn diagrams, flow charts or boxes with arrows can often

do the job. Regardless of how you use graphics, remember three key things:

- Graphics and text are parallel ways of representing meaning. The text and the graphics in a document should work together.
- Keep it simple.
- Graphics escape their containers and roam the web freely. No matter what you do, people will clip and share your graphics.

A table stands out from the text like a graphic but enables you to present structured content neatly, like a list. Tables deliver a lot of information in a small space. Just don't get carried away and try to stuff all your data into a single table.

Two more tools you can use are quotes and links. Even within paragraphs, words in quotes stand out. In documents, blog posts, and even emails, quoted material pulled out of the text draws your attention. Links let you reference anything online within any type of writing — an email, a web page or a PDF document. Using links is second nature for bloggers, and it should be for you, too.

To get to the next stage, you must go further. You must change not just what you write but how you write it. ●

Change How You Write

Be Paranoid Early

Now you've got a bunch of new habits to get into as you type anything, whether it's an email or a blog post. Those rules are sufficient for tasks where the first draft plus a little polish is the final draft, but not for a big project.

Let's walk through your process for writing projects. You've got a big report due four weeks from now — a piece of writing thousands of words long with lots of effort behind it. For many writers, what comes next is less than ideal, a process called the three Ps:

Procrastinate: You can't start writing yet — you need to interview a few people, pull some data and sit down and do some web research. Since you can't get started and the deadline is four weeks off, you do other pressing things on your schedule — things that have nothing to do with this project.

Panic: You realize that the amount of time left is barely enough for you to get the writing done. You're writing but with lots of interruptions to get the missing pieces

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in place. The end result comes together a few days before the deadline.

Pray: There's always somebody who has to approve it before you're done: your boss, the finance guy, the copy editor. So you send them the complete (but not finished) draft to review and tell them to turn it around in a day and a half. Concurrently with their reviews, you're fixing flaws you've already noticed, and as a result, lots of the review comments come back pointing out errors you just fixed or requesting changes in sentences you've deleted. You hope against hope that nobody finds something that will blow the whole thing up — and if they do, you find yourself arguing that it's better to live with the flaws than start over again. Is it any wonder this process generates bullshit?

The key to writing an effective document in a business setting is to know what you're trying to accomplish at each stage and to put in equal effort at each stage, not to do everything at the end. So let's revisit the three stages again, this time with a clearer understanding of what you're aiming for at each stage.

Stage 1. Prepare (Be paranoid early): It takes a professional to be paranoid at the start of the writing process. Being paranoid early means not just worrying about what might go wrong but also acting to prevent it. While late paranoia generates anxiety, early paranoia is productive. Do you have a clear audience and objectives? Do you have enough content? Have you taken the most creative approach? What is your structure?

Stage 2. Draft (Find your flow): By completing your research and planning ahead of time, you put yourself in a position to write well. Your objective in this stage is to complete a draft. A complete draft is not a finished product — it is a complete piece of writing with flaws. In a four-week process, writing the first draft should take about three days.

Stage 3. Revise (Manage reviews effectively): Drafting is not an end goal. It is simply the step that allows you to get to the Revise stage. Revising is not a monolithic process either. Depending on how important your draft is, you'll need different levels of edits, each of which will get you closer to your goal: a bullshit-free finished document.

Think First

Business writing exists for one purpose: to create a change in the reader. If the reader is no different after reading, then you have wasted the reader's time and violated the Iron Imperative.

Before you start writing, you must think clearly about the elements of the change you are hoping to make.

Use the acronym ROAM to help you keep track of the change you want to make in your readers. ROAM reflects the four elements of that change: Readers, Objective, Action and iMpression.

Readers: Who is the audience? Before writing anything, visualize your readers. When you write “you,” whom are you thinking of? Different audiences require different tone and different content.

Objective: How will you change the reader? Do you want them to feel favorably about a political party? To learn the steps to change an oil filter? To support your project? To feel joy? What will they know after reading that they did not know before? Each element of your writing should guide the reader toward the objective. Cut anything that doesn't serve the objective.

Action: What do you want the reader to do? Once your readers are done reading, what will they do next? Objective and action are related but not identical. The objective describes the change that you want to create in the reader, while the action is what the reader actually does: voting for the candidate, changing the oil filter, budgeting for the project, sharing the joyful writing with others.

iMpression: What will the reader think of you? Objectives and actions may be fleeting, but impressions last. The impression is the metamessage. The readers' impression determines the future of your mutual relationship. Do you want readers to think of you as smart? trustworthy? witty? If you don't know the impression you hope to create, how will you know what style to write in?

Whether you're writing an email, a tweet or a white paper, when you have that moment where you say “What am I doing here?” deploy ROAM. It will tell you what to do — and what not to.

Collaborate Without Tears

The best thing about writing in a business setting is that there are so many people to help. The problem with writing in a business setting is that there are so many people to meddle.

Here's what you need to know: It's your document. You're writing it, and your name is probably going to go on it. Here's how to write with other people, without losing the soul of what you write.

The first thing to understand is everybody's role in the process.

Editors and project managers work throughout the process. An editor makes writing better. Editors stand in

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for the reader. They tell you what they think the reader needs, or won't understand, in what you've written. If they've got any talent, they also suggest how to fix things.

The other job that some editors do is to manage the whole writing process, interacting with your other reviewers and coordinating the feedback you get. But sometimes that's someone else's job: a project manager or traffic person who keeps track of everything, manages the flow of drafts and comments, and hammers on deadlines.

Researchers and contributors help during the research phase. Researchers do a lot of the legwork for you and can find the data, facts and content you need to beef up a piece of writing. These are often bright entry-level staffers. Turn them loose with clear instructions on what you need, and they'll find great content for you. You may also get help from other specialized contributors. For example, as you develop content ideas, you'll have ideas for graphics — pull in a designer or illustrator to work with you just as you're starting your draft.

Advisory reviewers comment on your drafts. Your organization probably includes experts who can help you in many ways — with ideas, with structure or with content knowledge, for example. Make sure your editor — your primary reviewer — knows who you're working with. And be clear with reviewers about expectations. Tell these folks the specific kind of help you want from them.

Gatekeeping reviewers get the last look. Gatekeepers are folks whose edits you're not allowed to ignore. Legal and regulatory reviews fall into this category. Sometimes your boss does, too. People fear gatekeepers, but they are there for a reason: to keep you from screwing up.

Copy editors and fact-checkers keep you safe at the end. When you think you're done with a document, you turn it over to the copy editor. The copy editor's job is to look for grammar and usage errors. But just as with any other reviewer, don't assume you must do everything the copy editor says — it's still your document. This endpoint is also when you check facts and quotes. Most organizations can no longer afford separate fact-checkers, but if you have one, they'll check to make sure you're not lying about the population of Sri Lanka or what the senior senator from Missouri said.

Embrace Edits

"I love criticism . . ." . . . said no one, ever.

How can you learn to love hearing about your flaws? Writers are proud. Criticism hurts. Well, it turns out there's a trick to it.

The first part of the trick has to do with how you feel about writing. While you are writing, you must believe you are creating something wonderful. You believe you are creative, witty and smart. Your passion to reveal the truth, without bullshit, drives you to create something good.

Once you are done writing, you must discard this frame of mind. What you have created is just words on a page. Words don't love you, so why should you love them? Your job now is not to create but to reveal truth. You can rearrange, cut or change anything that better reveals that truth. You should feel no more emotion about this than you would when pruning a shrub. You're making it better, and "it" is no longer a part of you.

This is where the second part of the trick comes in. It has to do with edits. You must not look at each suggestion and say, "Should I do this, or should I not?" That's too binary. Worse, it means that you are judging yourself against others' thinking — are they smarter than you, or are you smarter?

Instead, you should think, "What has this suggested edit revealed about what could be better here?" This way, you remain in charge, and you remain smart. You decide what flaws the edit has revealed, even if the reviewer did not see them. You decide in what way to fix things. It might be the way the reviewer suggested, or it might be some other way. You seek a higher truth, a more profound way to communicate without bullshit.

If you struggle to deal with edits, keep this key principle in mind: Editors and reviewers exist to reveal what you cannot see, not to tell you what to do. When you are seeking and addressing feedback, follow these five steps:

Be clear about your vision. Analyze your Readers, Objective, Action and iMpression. Reflect on your target sentence as you decide how to revise.

Choose editors to match what you need. There are five levels of edits, from spitballing big conceptual ideas to correcting nitpicky details: idea development, structural edit, paragraph or line edit, copyedit and fact check, proofread.

Expose your flaws. Tell reviewers what you are worried about. Is the structure right? What should I cut? Have I gone too far or not far enough? What's missing? Is it "bury the lead" or "bury the lede"? Whatever you're insecure or doubtful about, let the editor know.

Use edits to gain insights. The purpose of the editor is not to tell you what to do. You're the writer, and you have the vision. Their job is to show you what you cannot see.

Apply the insights to your rewrite. For each suggested edit or piece of advice, regardless of how big or how small, you should take one of three actions: Accept the edit,

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and do what the editor says; learn from what the editor suggests, and use that knowledge to make the writing better; reject the edit but because you have a good reason. ●

Change What You Produce

Email Thoughtfully

Emailing on automatic pilot is easy. You write a subject line, type what occurs to you, add as many people as you can think of to the “To:” line and then hit Send. It’s the quickest thing you can write.

A hastily composed email often becomes “the puzzler.” You know, the email that recipients read and say, “Why did I get this? What am I supposed to do about it?” The busy person puts it aside and then forgets about it, which means the sender needs to follow up. That wastes time. Or the recipient asks for clarification and copies everyone else, which wastes even more people’s time.

Rethink emails. The first instinct you need to change is that email is the solution to all problems. Get up and talk to people. Call them on the phone. If it’s an issue that would benefit from dialogue, email is not the best way to solve it.

If you do decide to send an email, recognize that there are two types of emails: those that are important to you and the recipient and those that are not. Important emails include emails you send to groups of customers or employees as well as those that you send to one person to generate action. Important emails are important enough to plan and execute thoughtfully. Here’s a quick checklist on what to include:

- A subject line that’s clear about what you need.
- A microwave greeting, like “I’m a colleague of Alan’s in our finance department.”
- A one-sentence summary. Your first substantive sentence should tell the whole story.
- The facts, on one topic only, structured for browsing.
- The call to action with a deadline.
- Thank you and goodbye.

Promote Intelligently

Promotion is a worthwhile activity — you have to tell people what your company is doing and why it’s good. But press releases and other marketing-focused content,

such as marketing web pages, are out of touch with the readers we’re trying to reach and with the way we consume content now.

What is a press release doing now? Here’s a ROAM analysis:

Readers: Anyone who can spread the word. The target is no longer just journalists and analysts; it’s anyone from mommy bloggers to nontraditional content sources like Upworthy and BuzzFeed — basically, anyone who can spread a story.

Objective: Positive sentiment. Get readers to believe the product is worthwhile and the company is good.

Action: Spread the word. Generating news stories used to be the ideal action. That’s still useful, but now the release can get people to share information on social media as well.

Impression: The PR person is valuable. In the past as a PR person, you didn’t care — you annoyed 998 people to get to the two who mattered. Now you’re creating a relationship.

When you remove the jargon, the fluffy quotes and the superlatives, what are you left with? Facts. Now let’s add something back in: the direct voice of the company. It could be the CEO, CMO or head of PR.

Put the news in the title, and explain what you did and why it is important. Use as many facts as possible. Write it in an easily accessible fashion to maximize spread. You can spread it through the usual PR distribution channels. But you can also post it for your company’s friends on Facebook and Twitter. If those friends read it and understand it, they will actually share it. And you’ll get the attention you deserve.

Your organization will make great strides if clarity becomes a core value. Together we can help the world to understand the value of writing without bullshit. And then, perhaps, we’ll all be able to get a little more work done. ●

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