



MULTIPLY 417

Passion: The Bridge between People and Purpose

Let's Talk about Writing

Dear Ministry Leader,

I mentioned in the last article I was going to dedicate all of May's tips to different writing ideas, issues, and tips. That's still the plan, with the exception that last week was completely hijacked with family medical issues and challenges.

For those that followed along, thanks for the prayers, Marian came home that Sunday (May 5) and continues to do well. We just need to make some massive changes to her dietary and activity schedule.

Now, on to writing. Let's start with some simple tips:

1) Use Saxon words not Latin ones

The majority of words in English are drawn from either Anglo-Saxon or Latin roots. The Norman conquest of England in 1066 led to an influx of Latin inspired words from France. As a general rule, words derived from Anglo-Saxon roots tend to be shorter, more concrete, and more direct. Whereas their Latinate counterparts are longer, more abstract, and regarded as elegant or educated (Birch 2009). For example:

Bodily = Corporal
Brotherly = Fraternal
Thinking = Pensive
Dog = Canine
Come = Arrive
Ask = Inquire

It is also best to avoid polysyllabic words, such as the following:

Approximately = About
Establish = Set up
Participate = Take part

2) Use short paragraphs and vary the lengths

A powerful paragraph can be constructed out of just one sentence, but if every paragraph follows this model the impact will be lost. Smith (1996, p87) tells

us:

"Avoid the temptation to write snappy little paragraphs like this."

They can work.

But not always!

In fact, they can be boring.

And I hope the three paragraphs above prove the point. The paragraph I am writing now is, ironically, much easier for you to read. It is also more courteous, as short sentences in short paragraphs have a habit of sounding like slogans.

3) Get to the point

Donors will expect that a nonprofit will be asking them for money. There is little point in dressing this up in the hope of lessening the pain. Far better to get to the point early and explain why the monies are needed.

4) Use active verbs not passive ones

Passive: 'Food will be sent to Somalia as a matter of urgency.'

Active: 'We must send food to Somalia urgently.'

5) Use 'I' and 'You.' Avoid the 'we' word wherever possible. However, the corporate "we", which is intended to include them is great.

A letter should sound like a communication between two human beings, not a communication from a stuffy corporation. Donors generally do not like mailings that appear too corporate, and words can create this impression just as strongly as other ingredients of the design.

6) Relate the story to the reader

It may be true to say that one in three of the population will be touched by cancer at some point in their lives, but it is altogether more powerful to say: "One in three of your friends and family will suffer from cancer..."

7) Does it sound like someone talking? If not, why not?

Smith argues that we need to write with passion, honesty, and conviction and avoid hysterical, tiresome, or jaded copy. To achieve this he advocates reading the communication aloud to a friend or colleague. If they laugh it is probably terrible copy, if they fall silent it is probably impactful - "...if they start to tear up, you have hit the jackpot".

Good copy should sound like a conversation and it should sound like a conversation from a peer. One of the problems with a lot of bequest fundraising copy, for example, is that it is written by a much younger audience when the majority of the readership will be actually sixty and seventy somethings. Copy needs to be checked with the target audience before being used in a communication.

Passionately,

Rick

P.S. Credit to George Smith, a legendary copywriter, for the bulk of these ideas, with just a few edits by yours truly.