



# Why Over-explaining Is Underrated, and What to Do About It

COMMUNICATION CORNER No. 54

*by Philip Yaffe*

## Editor's Introduction

*Each "[Communication Corner](#)" essay is self-contained; however, they build on each other. For best results, before reading this essay and doing the exercise, go to the first essay "[How an Ugly Duckling Became a Swan](#)," then read each succeeding essay.*

*The purpose of most expository (non-fiction) text is for the reader to understand and retain as much as possible of what it has to say. Too many people who write such text seem (subconsciously) to adopt exactly the opposite point of view. Here's how not to be one of them.*

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Earlier in "[Communication Corner](#)," I published an essay titled "[Why Clear Communication Means Aiming for the Lowest Common Denominator—and Then Some](#)." I think it would now be useful to return to the subject in a bit more detail.

The thesis of the essay was: If you say something the audience doesn't understand, you will lose some (if not all) of their attention—especially when discussing complex topics. Limiting the assumptions you make about your audience's initial level of understanding is fundamental to being a good writer and public speaker.

This seems reasonable enough, especially when you are dealing with novices in the topic of your essay or speech. When the people in your audience are reputed to be highly intelligent, highly educated, and even "experts," you might be tempted to forgo the advice. This would be a grave mistake.

For example, I recall once being asked to produce a short film ( $\pm 15$  min) to introduce a new pharmaceutical product to specialist doctors. The film had four major sections. After each section, I inserted a short review (about 30 seconds) of the key points of the section, then moved on. When the communication director of the pharmaceutical company saw the first draft of my script, he was appalled. "We are dealing with high-powered doctors, not high-school students. Get rid of those summaries. They are insulting and likely to turn opinion against our product." I protested but to no avail.

We produced the film without the summaries, then showed it to groups of doctors brought together specifically for the purpose. As they were leaving the screening room, some of them said to me, "Well, this seems to be an interesting new product. However, the information went by so fast, I am not certain I understand what it is truly all about."

After hearing such comments after screenings to several different audiences, the communication director relented. "I think we have to remake the film. Go back to your original script with

summaries after each section." We did. This time following each screening, the comments of most of the doctors were something like, "This really seems to be an interesting product. I think I have a number of patients who could probably benefit from it. Please send full information so I can give it a closer look."

Someone once said: "Nothing is so simple that it cannot be misunderstood." I have always tried to live by this maxim. The fact is, no matter how hard you try, you can never be certain of what each individual person knows and doesn't know about your topic. However, what you can be certain of is that if you say something they don't understand, you will lose some (if not all) of their attention.

It is of course necessary to make some assumptions about your audience's starting level of understanding. You wouldn't address high-school students as you would long-term practicing professionals. However, you should always make as few assumptions as possible. In a text, those readers who are already knowledgeable about what a particular section is saying will either skip it or appreciate the reminder. Those who are less knowledgeable will be grateful for your clear explanation. In a film or other types of audio-visual presentation, the members of the audience have no choice. Either they understand what you are saying when you say it, or it is lost. So be certain that they do understand, such as by stating a key idea more than once and/or using summaries.

Here is another example of how focusing too much on style and not enough on content can compromise a text or a speech. It may not look like the same thing, but it is.

I was once commissioned to produce a self-instruction training manual for aspiring pharmaceutical representatives. Reps are the people pharmaceutical companies send out to visit GPs (general practitioners) and specialist doctors to introduce them to a new product, new applications of an existing product, or simply to remind them of why they are using an existing product and should continue to do so.

The idea of the manual was that instead of attending formal classes, the reps would train themselves while still carrying out other duties. At the end of the self-training period, the reps would take a formal exam to see how much they had learned and to judge if they were ready to go out and talk to doctors.

The program consisted of five chapters covering:

1. the biology of the bodily system where the product was designed to act (e.g., heart, lungs, kidneys, urinary tract, etc.),
2. the nature of the medical condition the product was designed to treat,

3. overview of other products currently available for treating the medical condition,
4. specific benefits and categories of patients the company's product was designed to treat, and
5. ancillary help a prescribing doctor could expect from the company.

Each chapter was followed by a self-assessment test to tell the rep if he or she had sufficiently understood or should go back into the chapter for further study.

One thing I didn't know until I started this project was that most pharmaceutical reps had no specific training in medicine, or even biology. They were people who had demonstrated their personal relations skills in other areas, e.g., automobiles, insurance, real estate, etc. Being basically intelligent and having a good educational background (at least one university degree), it was believed that they would rapidly learn what they needed to know and then go out to GPs and hospitals and apply what they had learned.

When I showed the first draft to the team leading the introduction of the new product, they were very pleased by the clear, concise, straightforward nature of the text. But they were appalled by the self-assessment quizzes at the end of each section. "These questions are too easy; they aren't really challenging. And look here, the answer to question 7 is already contained in question 4. All the rep has to do is go back to question 4 in order to answer question 7."

"Yes, I know," I replied. "I planned it that way. We want the reps to master this information. Telling them to go back and review the text for any questions they get wrong is one way of doing it. However, it is hardly motivating. For one or two wrong answers, this might work. However, with four, five, or six wrong answers, it could be demoralizing. The purpose of the end-of-chapter quiz is not so much to test what they have learned, but rather to help them review what they have learned without them being aware of it. The quiz is to re-emphasize the key points of the chapter rather than challenging them to remember them. In short, they will have read the chapter twice, and have fixed the key ideas of the chapter in their minds twice, without even realizing it. The real test of their knowledge will come in a genuine exam only at the end of the course, where it belongs."

The company finally agreed to my proposal. When the real exam came at the end of the course, nearly all of the reps achieved very high scores, certainly higher than expected. To quote a physics professor I knew when I was a student at UCLA: "It doesn't matter when you learn something as long as you know it when it is needed." He knew what he was talking about.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Philip Yaffe was born in Boston, Massachusetts, in 1942 and grew up in Los Angeles, where he graduated from the University of California with a degree in mathematics and physics. In his senior year, he was also editor-in-chief of the *Daily Bruin*, UCLA's daily student newspaper. He has more than 40 years of experience in journalism and international marketing communication. At various points in his career, he has been a teacher of journalism, a reporter/feature writer with *The Wall Street Journal*, an account executive with a major international press relations agency, European marketing communication director with two major international companies, and a founding partner of a specialized marketing communication agency in Brussels, Belgium, where he has lived since 1974. He is the author of more than 30 books, which can be found easily in Amazon Kindle.

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