



# How to Write and Speak Clearly and Concisely without Insulting Your Audience's Intelligence

COMMUNICATION CORNER No. 59

*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](#)," and then read each succeeding essay.*

*People who are serious about effective writing and speaking are eager to learn and emulate the principles and practices of professionals in the field. In particular, they often worry about their text or presentation being too long, i.e., "over-explaining" for fear of insulting their audience's intelligence. This is a legitimate concern. However, "too long" doesn't actually mean what many people think it means. Let's correct this damaging misapprehension.*



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At the very beginning of this series of Communication Corner essays, I [introduced three \(quasi-objective\) functional definitions of clarity, conciseness, and density in writing and speaking.](#)

## 1. Clarity

According to the functional definition, to be clear a text or presentation (speech, audiovisual presentation, etc.) must do three things. It must:

- *Emphasize* what is of key importance
- *De-emphasize* what is of secondary importance
- *Eliminate* what is of no importance.

In symbols:  $Cl = EDE$

## 2. Conciseness

According to the functional definition, to be conciseness, a well-constructed text or presentation should be as:

- *Long* as necessary
- *Short* as possible

In symbols:  $Co = LS$

## 3. Density

"Density" is a less familiar concept than clarity and conciseness, but it is equally important. According to the functional definition of density, a well-constructed text or presentation should contain:

- *Precise* information

- *Logically* linked

In symbols:  $D = PL$

I would like to take a closer look at the functional definition of conciseness. While it may appear that the two elements of conciseness are equal, they aren't. There is a hierarchy.

- In order to be concise, it is absolutely critical to be "as long as necessary," i.e., to be certain that you have included all information necessary for your audience to understand and remember what you are trying to tell them.
- Once this is ensured, you must make the text or presentation as short as possible, so that people don't get muddled by intrusion of irrelevant or misleading information.

The order of these two elements must never be reversed or put on an equal footing. Here is a telling example of what can happen when this hierarchy is not scrupulously respected.

### **CRIPPLINGLY SHORT VIDEO**

A major pharmaceutical company once commissioned me to produce a short video presentation introducing an important new product to groups of specialist doctors. I wrote a script for a video that would run roughly 15 minutes. Twice in the script, I devoted about 60 seconds to summarizing the information just presented. Then, at the end, I summarized the whole thing.

My client wasn't happy. "We are dealing with high-powered specialist doctors. We can't insult their intelligence with these kindergarten-style summaries. Besides, we can shorten the presentation by two or three minutes. Get rid of them!"

I objected but ultimately had to do what I was told. We produced the video as the client had demanded, and then brought together groups of doctors to view it. As they were leaving the screening room, I heard a number of them say, "I think this new medicine might be useful in my practice. However, the information went by so quickly, I'm not certain I have fully understood what it is really all about."

The client also heard these comments. So ultimately, I redid the video with the two interim summaries and the final summary was now included. This time when the doctors left the screening room, the comments were more along the line, "It seems that this new medicine

could be quite useful in my practice. Please send me full information, and, if possible, have one of your representatives visit my office so we can discuss it in detail."

In short, the doctors in no way felt their intelligence had been insulted. Rather, they were grateful the presentation had been so clear and informative that they felt they hadn't wasted their time watching it.

Professionally, I was annoyed that my client had so little confidence in my expertise as to reject my original advice to include summaries. Financially, having to do the job twice allowed me to almost double my fee, which helped considerably to ease the pain.

### **CRIPPLINGLY SHORT NEWS RELEASE**

Here is another example of the importance of keeping "as long as necessary" and "as short as possible" in the proper order.

A major international company was in the process of making significant changes to its business model and adding a panoply of new services. I was commissioned to prepare and distribute a news release on the subject to all the major specialist industry news outlets. I was enjoined by my client to keep the release to a maximum of 400 words. "Why 400 words?" I asked. "Because we think 400 words is about the right length for a new release."

Earlier in my career, I had been a reporter/feature writer with *The Wall Street Journal*. One of my duties was to receive news releases and decide which ones we would use and which ones would be discarded. The length of the release was never a criterion. The deciding factors were the value of the information the release contained and how well it was presented. When I tried to point this out, once again my expertise was discounted, and I had to do as I was told.

I wrote the release, sweating bullets to keep it down to a maximum of 400 words. It was then sent out to the business press, but none of the key targets published it. The client called up a few editors to find out why. The conversation went something like this.

Client: "Why haven't you published our news release?"

Editor: "We just didn't find anything interesting in it."

Client: "But what about . . . (the client mentioned a topic)?"

Editor: "Was that in the release? I didn't see it."

Client: "And what about . . . (the client mentioned another topic)?"

Editor: "Was that also there? I didn't see that either."

And so on.

So, what happened? In order to keep the release down to 400 words, key ideas had to be so condensed that they were virtually unintelligible or appeared to be insignificant.

The client understood and asked me to prepare a new release. The revised version turned out to be about 650 words. When it was distributed, the business press published it without hesitation. Some even called the company for additional information.

### **A 160-YEAR-OLD NEWS RELEASE**

I could recount numerous other examples of this same phenomenon. But let me conclude by citing a text that at first glance may appear to be totally irrelevant. It is called "The Gettysburg Address."

"The Gettysburg Address" was originally a speech by President Abraham Lincoln, delivered on November 19, 1863, at Gettysburg, Pennsylvania, to commemorate a pivotal battle in the American Civil War (1861–1865). As a speech, it was dramatically short, but as a news release some could argue that it was unnecessarily long. Why? To emphasize the importance of his thoughts, Lincoln chose to repeat key ideas, often word-for-word.

Here is the speech (news release) as Lincoln wrote it, followed by a shorter version as someone striving for the Holy Grail of "as short as possible" might have rewritten it.

#### **The Gettysburg Address as originally written (words = 269).**

*Four score and seven years ago our fathers brought forth on this continent a new nation, conceived in liberty and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal.*

*Now we are engaged in a great civil war, testing whether that nation, or any nation so conceived and so dedicated, can long endure. We are met on a great battlefield of that war. We have come to dedicate a portion of that field as a final resting place for those who here gave their lives that that nation might live. It is altogether fitting and proper that we should do this.*

*But, in a larger sense, we can not dedicate, we can not consecrate, we can not hallow this ground. The brave men, living and dead, who struggled here, have consecrated it far above our poor power to add or detract.*



*The world will little note, nor long remember what we say here, but it can never forget what they did here. It is for us the living, rather, to be dedicated here to the unfinished work which they who fought here have thus far so nobly advanced. It is rather for us to be here dedicated to the great task remaining before us. That from these honored dead we take increased devotion to that cause for which they gave the last full measure of devotion. That we here highly resolve that these dead shall not have died in vain. That this nation, under God, shall have a new birth of freedom. And that government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from the earth.*

### **The Gettysburg Address rewritten as short as possible (words = 197).**

*Eighty-seven years ago our fathers created a nation, conceived in liberty and dedicated to the idea that all men are created equal.*

*We are now in a great war to test whether that nation, or any nation founded on this principle, can long endure. We meet on a great battlefield of that war to dedicate a portion of it as a final resting place for those who died here in defense of this important idea.*

*However, we cannot really dedicate, consecrate, or hallow this ground. The valiant men who fought here have already done so much beyond anything we could possibly add.*

*The world will little note nor long remember what we say here, but what they did here must never be forgotten. It is now our responsibility to finish the noble work for which they sacrificed so much. To dedicate ourselves to the major effort that still lies ahead. To rededicate ourselves to the cause for which they gave their very lives. To promise that this nation, under God, will have a new birth of freedom. And that government of, by, and for the people will continue to be a stellar example for the entire world.*

Which one would you publish?

### **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.

**DOI:** 10.1145/3633082