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Communicating with Decision Makers

I’m Smart. How Hard Could it Be?

Beth Hornbein

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Today's Agenda

- Introductions
- Some Tips on Communicating with Decision Makers & Non-Experts
  - Writing
  - Briefing
  - Briefing Exercise
- The Structured Analytic Support Cell
  - Who we are and what services we provide

Writing for Decision Makers and Non-Experts

Just because you can write doesn't mean you can write for decision makers

Technical vs. Decision Maker: Is there really a difference?

- Well-supported argument (convincing)
- Strong technical foundation
- Strong critical thinking skills
- Smart, well-informed audience

Technical vs. Decision Maker: Yes, there is a difference!

Technical

- Focus on the PAST
- Written for EXPERTS with no responsibility to act
- Complex language
- Detailed, proof-laden
- Long build-up (and justification) before conclusion
- Lists lots of data and expects reader to figure out what's going on

  and, and, and

Decision Maker

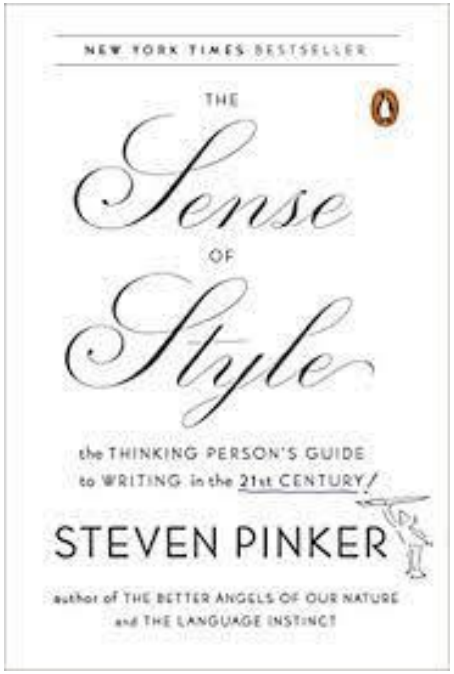
- Focus on the FUTURE
- Written for GENERALISTS struggling with real problems
- Essentials only, meaningful characterizations
- **Begins with conclusions** and explores their implications
- Tells the reader what you think is going on and why it's important – bridges the gap

  and, but, therefore

The Curse of Knowledge (we are not alone)

Harvard psychologist Steven Pinker writes:

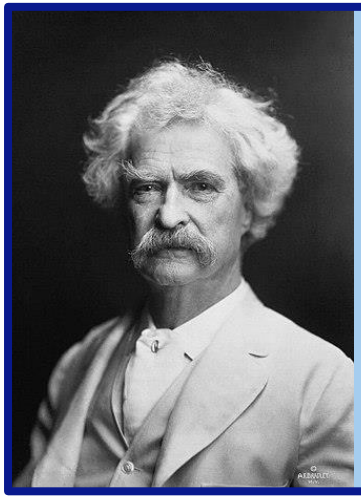
- It is difficult to imagine what it is like for someone else not to know something that you know.
- “The curse of knowledge is the single best explanation I know of why good people write bad prose.”
- "A considerate writer will...add a few words of explanation to common technical terms, as in 'Arabidopsis, a flowering mustard plant,' rather than the bare 'Arabidopsis.’”



Writing Style: CONCISION and PRECISION

CONCISE
- Simple
- Short
- Clean

PRECISE
- Correct word
- One meaning



I didn’t have time to write a short letter, so I wrote a long one instead.

-Mark Twain

Because your reader is busy, not dumb.

Word Origin: Use Anglo Saxon over Latinate

- Tonawanda dispatched military advisors to Fredonia for approximately a month to construct bunkers and to instruct rebel forces how to circumvent restrictions on weapons sales. They also attempted to repair Tonawandan-donated military equipment.

- Tonawanda sent military advisors to Fredonia for about a month to build bunkers and to teach rebel forces how to skirt bans on weapons sales. They also tried to fix Tonawandan-donated military equipment.

- The infant observed the immature canine consuming its repast.

- The baby watched the young dog eating its meal.

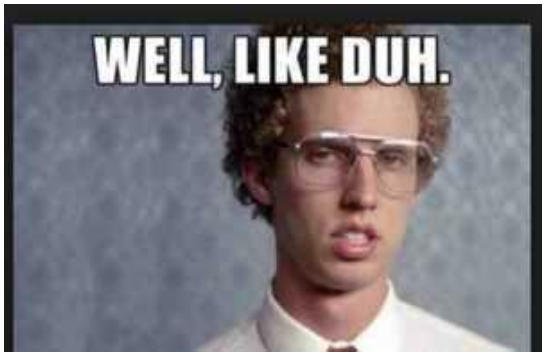
Help your reader: Include the “So What”

The “so what” explains why the reader should care.

A strong “so what”:

- Addresses what the primary audience cares about.
- Avoids technical details that only an expert would understand.
- Takes into consideration what actions the reader can take.
- Goes beyond the obvious.

A stronger “so what” includes the above AND highlights the relevance to a broader audience.



Why Bother?

- Generate excitement from the start!
- Create the context. Make it easy for the reader.
- What's obvious to you is likely not obvious to the reader.
- Some readers may not go beyond the first paragraph – make sure to tell them what they need to know.

Examples: Find the “So What” (even your title is an opportunity)

1. A New Era of Nuclear Physics at the Electron-Ion Collider
2. Quantum Chemistry using Quantum Computers
3. Prioritizing the Prior: Advanced Inversion Algorithms for Scientific Data Analysis
4. Control of Microstructural Instabilities in Composites (COMIC): A pathway to realizing damage resistant metals
5. Radiation Belt Remediation: A Complex Engineered System (RBR-ACES)
6. Proximity Effects at Meso-, Nano-, and Atomic Scales: A new Path to Quantum Functionalities
7. Directed Plant-Microbiome Evolution for Food and Biofuel Security

Structure – An Example

- If possible, the first sentence or paragraph should tell the whole story and set the structure of the paper (consider it a contract).

For example:

- First sentence or paragraph: A (What) + B (So What) + C (implications) + D (opportunities)
- Structure the rest of the paper in this same way.
  - Part 1: A – what did you find (include evidence at a high level)
  - Part 2: B – why is it important
  - Part 3: C – what are the implications
  - Part 4: D – what are the opportunities (descriptive not prescriptive)
  - Part 5: Appendix – all the nitty gritty technical details for your friends at LLNL

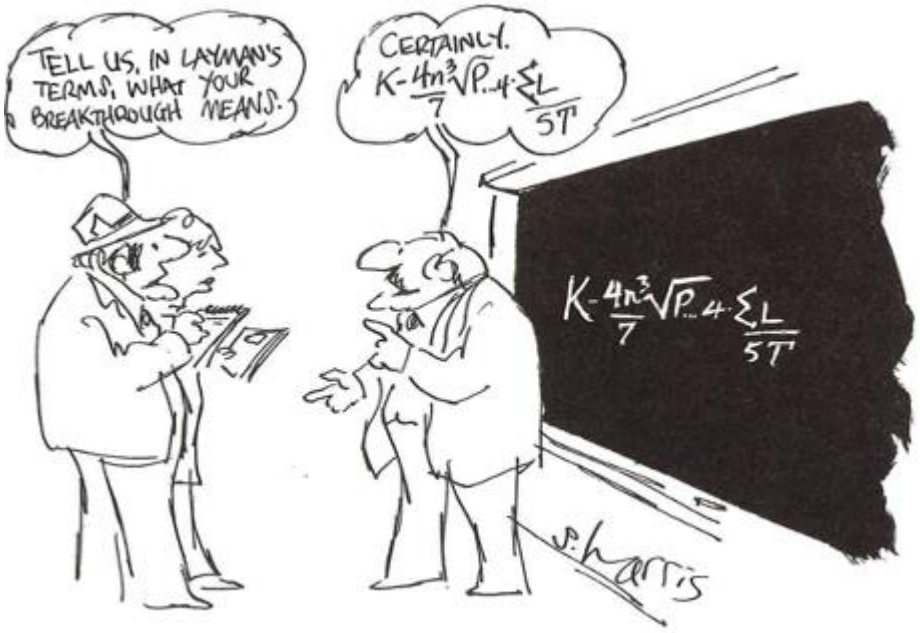
In Summary

- Your conclusion (what you found and why your reader should care) should be FIRST.
- Concise and Precise
- Simple Words
- Linear structure and flow

The way we write is a reflection of the way we think.

Tips for Briefing Decision Makers and Non-Experts

Just because you can give a technical talk doesn't mean you know how to brief a decision maker



You're just telling a story. Keep it simple. No math.
-Teddy Oglethorpe

Just because you can give a technical talk doesn't mean you know how to brief a decision maker

Randy Olson, academic turned science communication specialist, has some advice for us:

- Don't be so cerebral
- Don't be so literal minded
- Don't be such a poor storyteller
- Don't be so unlikeable(??!!)

Briefing Basics – General Structure

- Introduce yourself
- Bottom Line Up Front (BLUF) – key take away from this briefing
  - What are your conclusions?
  - Why should the audience care?
- Roadmap
  - What you will present
  - Customer can choose to skip around
- Benchmarks – references to your roadmap
- Close
  - Thank audience for their time
  - Don’t end on a slide that says “Questions”
  - End on a slide with take aways from the briefing and ask if there are questions

BLUF and roadmap are jargon.
DO NOT use the terms; DO the behavior.

Preparation

- Practice out loud, every time.
  - Have the first 30 seconds down cold
  - Accept that you will be nervous; understand how it will show up and be prepared to minimize impact
- You should be prepared to deliver every briefing 3 ways:
  - Elevator talk (1-2 minutes)
  - Short (5-10 minutes)
  - Long (full length)
- Prepare every briefing at different levels of detail. Be ready to go more general or into more detail as appropriate.

Preparation

- Write out all the questions:
  - You hope you don’t get asked
  - That might reasonably arise
  - That might come up based on current events
  - Be prepared to address each question (note that address is not the same as answer)
- Know your audience! What do they want; what do they need; what do they know; what is their agenda. Use this to:
  - Adjust content
  - Anticipate questions
  - Anticipate the likely atmosphere (hostile, friendly, indifferent, etc.)
- Conduct your Q&A prep with a hostile audience in mind. This will help you maintain composure if it happens for real.
- Dress appropriately.
  - Shorts and t-shirt communicate that you don’t respect the audience

Dress Appropriately? <Please be literal>

Know your audience.

You want them to remember what you said, not what you wore

Briefing the Director?

-male: slacks with belt; button-up long-sleeved dress shirt; dress shoes

-female: slacks with belt or skirt; blouse; dress shoes

Briefing Congress?

-male: suit and tie

-female: suit; slacks with jacket;

or knee length dress that covers shoulders

Briefing NNSA?

-probably something in between but

find out before you go

"I have no idea what the dress code allows, but I bet it doesn't include jammies."

Delivery

- Your attitude is “what can I do the help”; not “I am really smart” or “how can I not look bad”.
- Carry yourself with confidence (but not hubris).
- Make eye contact.
  - Always speak to someone
  - Sweep the room regularly with your gaze
- Enunciate, modulate, project your voice. Otherwise, you will be difficult to hear or BORING!

Delivery

- If the audience doesn't seem to understand you or rephrases your point incorrectly, gently correct them – focus on the information not the person.

- Be prepared to say "I don't know" or "we don't know".
  - But provide a value-added description of why that is true and what you're doing about it.

- Use your graphics.
  - If it's a chart, explain what each axes represents.
  - Try to avoid the phrase, "as you can see". Walk them through it.

- Bring a notepad to record questions, feedback, suggestions.

- Proofread - typos undermine your credibility.

Formal Briefings

- Face your audience, not your slides, not halfway at your slides.
- Only look at your slides if:
  - You intend to interact with them
  - You want to make sure the right one is showing
- Know your slides and practice how you will transition between them.
- In larger groups, repeat questions so everyone hears.
- Handle notes invisibly. Do not rustle, flip, or brandish them.

Briefing Exercise

Technical Briefing to a Non-Technical Audience

- Find a partner and choose one of the two technical articles:
  - The irreducible mass of Christodoulou-Ruffini-Hawking mass formula
  - Development of assay, isotopic and trace actinide measurements on solid plutonium and uranium samples by high resolution gamma spectrometry

- Create an opening statement based on the article
  - Your audience: congressional staffers whose boss is thinking about cutting funding for science; they are not hostile towards science but are collecting information.
  - Remember the BLUF: what did you find and **why does it matter**?

LANL's Structured Analytic Support Cell (SASC)

Structured Analytic Support Cell (SASC)

We can help you and your team generate new ideas, develop a strategic plan for tackling a new initiative, re-evaluate an existing assessment, or collaborate more effectively.

Analysis & Research

- Facilitations and group discussions
- Research question generation
- Gap analysis
- Research design, refinement and structuring
- Research or collection plan assessment
- Strategic planning

We can help you communicate more effectively through briefing and writing workshops, coaching, reviews, and murder boards.

Writing & Briefing

- Feedback on written products
- Conceptualization
- Writing and briefing coaching
- Paper or briefing review
- Practice sessions and feedback on presentations (murder boards)

Instruction

We offer the following classes:

- Building an effective argument
- Communicating with Decision Makers (briefing and writing)
- Critical thinking
- Generating an effective “So What”
- Intro to Facilitation Techniques
- Intro to Structured Analytic Techniques

To schedule a consultation, contact: sasc@lanl.gov

If you need help with grammar, editing, or visual design, contact Communication Arts & Services crs@lanl.gov