Who has not discovered to their dismay that no one wants to read their most carefully crafted, meritorious, compelling, and passionate writings? Think of all the proposals you have written that no one is interested in. Or the web pages, the blog posts, or the company brochures. Chances are, your failures are linked to an inability to connect with what your readers would be interested in reading.

Our intrepid writer about writing, Phil Yaffe, offers some valuable insight into how to get people to read your stuff. He says you need to adopt the "expository writing challenge": that no one is interested in what you are inclined to write, therefore you must discover what they want to read. Only then you can get started, and only then you can succeed.

Peter Denning
Editor

How to Generate Reader Interest in What You Write

By Philip Yaffe

Scientists and technologists today increasingly recognize the need write in order to convey interest and excitement in what they do to colleagues, managers, administrators, and even the general public. Unfortunately, most would-be authors cling to the myth that if they just put in enough effort, people will automatically want to read what they write.

Professionals (those who make a living from their words) know otherwise. For them, effective writing consists of two stages:

- First, grabbing the reader's attention in such a way they will instantly believe that the text is worth their time and effort to read
- Second, making certain that it truly is.

The first step of course is crucial. If you don't succeed at the beginning, it doesn't matter how good the rest of the text is. It will not be read.

Grabbing attention cannot be achieved by telling readers that your paper is "important", therefore they should read it. Of course you are going to say that. After all, you wrote it.

To successfully grab attention, you must look at the text from the reader's point of view, i.e. understand and apply a bit of reader psychology.

The fundamental purpose of expository texts (memos, reports, proposals, training manuals, research papers, etc.) is generally to instruct and inform. However, most people don’t like to be instructed and informed; they probably would much prefer to be doing something else.

In short, no one necessarily wants to read what you write, no matter how much effort you are prepared to put into it.

This dreary description of the unreceptive nature of the audience may seem a rather negative note on which to set about one's work. But is it really? If it is a realistic assessment of the situation, then it is the best starting point for defining and achieving a text's objectives.

To produce a truly effective document, before doing anything else, you must:
1. Define reasons why people might want to read what you are going to write
2. Present these reasons as rapidly and convincingly as possible

Recognizing and acting on the idea that no one necessarily wants to read what you write is known as the "expository writing challenge". The importance of the expository writing challenge cannot be over-stated, because it can completely transform the way you approach your subject. And the success it achieves.

An Extraordinary Example

You will probably never have occasion to write a corporate image brochure. However, an analysis of how they are composed provides a telling example of the power of the expository writing challenge in action.

Two things are certain about these expensive, glossy booklets. First, almost all companies of any size feel compelled to produce them. Second, virtually no one ever reads them. Not even the company's own employees.

It is not difficult to understand why. It's in the name. Most such brochures are far too concerned with "image", i.e. making the company look good, rather than with communicating with readers. So why should people read it?

But it doesn't have to be that way. Some years ago, I was commissioned to write a corporate image brochure for a pharmaceutical company. When it was printed, not only did people read it, they actually called the company to request additional copies to give to friends, clients, and professional colleagues.

How was this miracle achieved? You guessed it, by rising to the expository writing challenge. Starting from the assumption that no one would want to read anything about the company, I and my colleagues (it was a brainstorming) asked ourselves: *What things does this company do that people might want to read about?*

Its basic activity was producing vaccines. Most of us are all naturally interested in health, and virtually everyone knows the importance of vaccination, for themselves but especially for their children. Here were already two things people might want to read about.

We were given the assignment in the mid-1980s, just when a strange new term—genetic engineering—was beginning to appear more and more in newspaper headlines. According to the reports, this new technique would revolutionize medicine, so people were becoming more and more interested in learning what it was all about. This was a third topic of broad general interest.

To make a long story short, we defined seven areas of the company's activities that would be naturally attractive to potential readers. However, it didn't stop there. If all this exciting information were jumbled together with company propaganda, people probably still wouldn't want to read the brochure despite their natural inclination to do so.

We therefore made a daring proposal. The brochure would be laid out in seven double-page spreads, i.e. each of the seven areas of activity would be allotted two facing pages. But the text would be rigorously segregated.

1. **Theory**
   The left side of each page would be pure science; the company's name would never even be mentioned.

2. **Practice**
   The right side of each page would explain how the company used the science explained on the left to produce vaccines.

When we presented the concept, the reaction was one of shock. "You mean people could read the brochure left side only and never see our name?" Exactly. But having learned about the basic science, wouldn't they naturally want to learn how the company was using the science to produce safe, effective, and (relatively) inexpensive vaccines?

It took a while for management to accept the proposal, but finally they did. When the brochure was ready, they couldn't print enough of them.

Of course, not all companies would be suitable for this particular type of corporate image brochure. The important idea here is not this particular brochure, but the thinking process that led to it.

I subsequently wrote several other corporate brochures. None of them had quite the same overwhelming impact. However, all of them received positive feedback. Not only from the company's management, but from the people who really count—the readers for whom they were intended.

The next time you sit down to compose a text (a corporate brochure or otherwise), ask yourself the question: *I know that no one wants to read what I am going to write, so how can I write something they will want to read?* Until you can find at least one good answer (preferably more), keep your hands away from the keyboard. You are simply not yet ready to start writing.

Techniques for Grabbing Reader Attention

If you have fully accepted the expository writing challenge (no one wants to read what you are going to write), then you have also accepted that the writer's first task, before anything else, is to give readers reasons to read. But once you have defined these, how do you present them? There are several ways of doing this.

The following examples show the beginning of an extensive article on hay fever. Note that once you get beyond the "lead" (first few paragraphs), the remaining information in all five versions is essentially the same.

1. Ask questions

Few people can resist trying to see if they know the answer to a question. This lead asks three questions about hay fever. Readers who are not certain about an answer—or certain they don't know the answer—are likely to be motivated to read further.

Did you know that hay fever is not a fever? That it has essentially nothing to do with hay? And that it is much more common in cities than in the countryside?

In short, the term "hay fever" is very misleading. As every sufferer knows, the symptoms—sneezing, running nose, itchy and watering eyes, etc.—more closely resemble a cold than they do a fever. The French come closer to the truth by calling it "hay cold" (rhume des foins).

Also as every suffer knows, hay fever is an allergic reaction to pollen, the fine powder (usually yellow) which plants disperse in the wind as part of their reproductive cycle. It can be triggered by the pollen of any number of plants, including weeds, grasses, and trees. In Scandinavia, the culprit is most often birch; in Great Britain, grass; and in southern Europe, olive and cypress trees. The leading trigger for hay fever in the United States is ragweed.

For these and other reasons, doctors refer to hay fever as "seasonal rhinitis" when it affects mainly the nose, or "seasonal rhino-conjunctivitis" when it affects both the eyes and nose.

The pollen origin of hay fever was first demonstrated in 1873 by Dr. Charles Blackley, himself a hay fever suffer. The affliction is commonly called hay fever because the annual outbreak of symptoms for many allergic persons coincides with the hay harvest.

But if hay fever is caused by pollen, why should it be more common in cities than in the countryside?

The reasons are rather complex, but some observers believe it is a direct consequence of the Industrial Revolution. Before the 18th century, very little mention was made in the medical literature of hay fever. However, as rural populations became urbanized, hay fever became increasingly prevalent. Today it is believed to affect from 10-12% of the populations in Europe and North America, largely in cities.

Knowing the source of an illness is the first step towards finding an effective treatment. However, it is also necessary to know how it produces its symptoms.

2. Suggest a contrast or paradox

The terms "contrast" and "paradox" are closely related. A "contrast" is something that is commonly accepted as true but may not be so, or is at the extreme ends of a continuum (e.g. kilograms vs. milligrams, mountains vs. molecules, millennia vs. minutes, etc.).

A "paradox" is something that appears to be impossible.

Despite being a so-called "minor medical conditions", hay fever is both severely incapacitating and appallingly misnamed.

It is so incapacitating because the annual attack (April-August) can greatly disrupt the victim's ability to study or work. It also brings misery and isolation during the spring and summer, the two most "sociable" seasons of the year.

It is so misnamed because the term "hay fever" is misleading. As every sufferer knows, the symptoms—sneezing, running nose, itchy and watering eyes, etc.—more closely resemble a cold than they do a fever. The French come closer to the truth by calling it "hay cold" (*rhume des foins*).

Another reason for disavowing the term: The name “hay fever” suggests that it is an illness of the countryside. The reality is, hay fever is much more common in cities. In fact, some observers believe it is a direct consequence of the Industrial Revolution.

3. Provide concentrated information

You may not know what will interest an individual reader. However, by putting a lot of clear, concise, dense information right at the beginning, you can be virtually certain that every reader will find something to attract his or her attention.

Hay fever, hardly known to our great-great-grandparents, today affects up to 12% of people in Europe and North America, and the trend is still upwards. Although considered a “mild medical condition”, the watery eyes, running nose, incessant sneezing, etc., for several months each year can be extremely debilitating for both social and economic life. Absenteeism and reduced productivity in Europe and North America cost business an estimated U.S. $4.2 billion annually, a burden that is expected to rise to $6.8 billion by the end of the decade.

The term “hay fever” is in fact very misleading. As every sufferer knows, the symptoms—sneezing, running nose, itchy and watering eyes, etc.—more closely resemble a cold than they do a fever. The French come closer to the truth by calling it “hay cold” (rhume des foins).

Also as every suffer knows, hay fever is an allergic reaction to pollen, the fine powder (usually yellow) which plants disperse in the wind as part of their reproductive cycle. It can be triggered by the pollen of any number of plants, including weeds, grasses, and trees. In Scandinavia, the culprit is most often birch; in Great Britain, grass; and in southern Europe, olive and cypress trees. The leading trigger for hay fever in the United States is ragweed.

For these and other reasons, doctors refer to hay fever as “seasonal rhinitis” when it affects mainly the nose, or “seasonal rhino-conjunctivitis” when it affects both the eyes and nose.

4. Make a microcosm into a universe

Something that appears to be of little or no general interest can be made more vital by putting it into a broader political, cultural, social, economic, or philosophical context. The power of this technique can often be reinforced by introducing the subject with an appropriate quotation.

"A splinter in the finger can hurt more than a broken leg—if all you have is a splinter in the finger" -- Anonymous

It is very difficult to judge someone else's pain and discomfort, which is why to some people hay fever seems funny (non-sufferers) and to others it can be deadly serious (suffers).

Granted, the individual symptoms—sneezing, running nose, itchy and watering eyes, etc.—by themselves are not devastating. However, their constant repetition over several months every year (April-August) can make life virtually unbearable.

To many hay fever sufferers, its classification as a so-called “minor medical conditions” seems grossly inadequate. Not only does its annual attack cause personal pain and discomfort, it can greatly disrupt the victim’s ability to study or work. It also brings misery and isolation during the spring and summer, the two most “sociable” seasons of the year.

Hay fever really shouldn’t be called hay fever at all; the symptoms more closely resemble a cold than they do a fever. The French come closer to the truth by calling it “hay cold” (rhume des foins). This is one reason doctors prefer to call it “seasonal rhinitis” when it affects mainly the nose, or “seasonal rhino-conjunctivitis” when it affects both the eyes and nose.

Another reason for disavowing the term: The name “hay fever” suggests that it is an illness of the countryside. The reality is, hay fever is much more common in cities. In fact, some observers believe it is a direct consequence of the Industrial Revolution.

Hay fever is only indirectly related to hay. It can be triggered by any number of plants, including weeds, grasses, and trees. In Scandinavia, the culprit is most often birch; in Great Britain, grass; and in southern Europe, olive and cypress trees. The leading trigger for hay fever in the United States is ragweed.

5. Personalize the situation

There's a newspaper adage that says: "One person killed in an earthquake is a tragedy; a thousand persons killed in an earthquake is a statistic." People like to hear about other people, as individuals. Therefore, if you can personalize a situation, you will gain reader interest.

When Mary woke up that morning, the birds were singing, the sun was shinning and the sky was blue. Just the sort of day that makes you want to say, "It's good to be alive." She then noticed a slight yellowish haze in the sky, so instead she said, "I wish I were dead!"

The haze was pollen; the hay fever season had started. Instead of the promise of a wonderful day, Mary now faced the certainty of sneezing, a running nose, itchy and watering eyes, and other symptoms associated with her annual allergic disease.

She was not alone. Each year, more and more people suffer from hay fever. Hardly known to our great-great-grandparents, today it affects up to 12% of people in Europe and North America, and the trend is still upwards.

Although considered a "mild medical condition", hay fever can be extremely detrimental because the annual attack (April-August) can greatly disrupt the victim's ability to study or work. It also brings misery and isolation during the spring and summer, the two most "sociable" seasons of the year.

Hay fever really shouldn't be called hay fever. As every sufferer knows, the sneezing, running nose, itchy and watering eyes, and other discomforts the disease engenders more closely resemble a cold than they do a fever. The French come closer to the truth by calling it "hay cold" (rhume des foins). This is one reason doctors prefer to call it "seasonal rhinitis" when it affects mainly the nose, or "seasonal rhino-conjunctivitis" when it affects both the eyes and nose.

This list is not a grab bag. The particular device you chose among these five and numerous other possible opening gambits will depend on your analysis of what the readers really want to read. Therefore, you will have considerable thinking to do before you strike a key. However, guided by the expository writing challenge, you will find that over time the process will becomes easier and easier, and more and more satisfying for both you and your readers.

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