Part 3: Planning messages

3.10 Adapting messages

Let's say you've analyzed your audience until you know them better than you know yourself. What good is it? How do you use this information? How do you keep from writing something that will still be incomprehensible or useless to your readers?

The business of writing *to* your audience may have a lot to do with in-born talent, intuition, and even mystery. But there are some controls you can use to have a better chance to connect with your readers. The following "controls" mostly have to do with making information more understandable for your specific audience:

- Add information readers need to understand your document. Check to see whether certain key information is missing—for example, a critical series of steps from a set of instructions, important background that helps beginners understand the main discussion, or definitions of key terms.

- Omit information your readers do not need. Unnecessary information can also confuse and frustrate readers—after all, it's there so they feel obligated to read it. For example, you can probably chop theoretical discussion from basic instructions.
- Change the level of the information you currently have. You may have the right information but it may be "pitched" at too high or too low a technical level. It may be pitched at the wrong kind of audience—for example, at an expert audience rather than a technician audience. This happens most often when product-design notes are passed off as instructions.
- Add examples to help readers understand. Examples are one of the most powerful ways to connect with audiences, particularly in instructions. Even in non-instructional text, for example, when you are trying to explain a technical concept, examples are a major help—analogies in particular.
- Change the level of your examples. You may be using examples, but the technical content or level may not be appropriate to your readers.
- Change the organization of your information. Sometimes, you can have all the right information but arrange it in the wrong way. For example, there can be too much background information up front (or too little) such that certain readers get lost. Sometimes, background information needs to be consolidated into the main information—for example, in instructions it's sometimes better to feed in chunks of background at the points where they are immediately needed.
- Strengthen transitions. It may be difficult for readers, particularly non-specialists, to see the connections between the main sections of your report, between individual paragraphs, and sometimes even between individual sentences. You can make these connections much clearer by adding *transition words* and by echoing *key words* more accurately. Words like "therefore," "for example," "however" are transition words—they indicate the logic connecting the previous thought to the upcoming thought.
- Write stronger introductions—both for the whole document and for major sections. People seem to read with more confidence and understanding when they have the "big picture"—a view of what's coming, and how it relates to what they've just read. Therefore, make sure you have a strong introduction to the entire document—one that makes clear the topic, purpose, audience, and contents of that document. And for each major section within your document, use mini-introductions that indicate at least the topic of the section and give an overview of the subtopics to be covered in that section.

- Create topic sentences for paragraphs and paragraph groups. It can help readers immensely to give them an idea of the topic and purpose of a section (a group of paragraphs) and in particular to give them an overview of the subtopics about to be covered.
- Change sentence style and length. How you write—down at the individual sentence level—can make a big difference too. In instructions, for example, using imperative voice and "you" phrasing is vastly more understandable than the passive voice or third-personal phrasing. Passive, person-less writing is harder to read—put people and action in your writing. Similarly, go for active verbs as opposed to *be* verb phrasing. All of this makes your writing more direct and immediate—readers don't have to dig for it. Sentence length matters as well. An average of somewhere between 15 and 25 words per sentence is about right; sentences over 30 words are often mistrusted.
- Work on sentence clarity and economy. This is closely related to the previous "control" but deserves its own spot. Often, writing style can be so wordy that it is hard or frustrating to read. When you revise your rough drafts, put them on a diet—go through a draft line by line trying to reduce the overall word, page or line count by 20 percent. Try it as an experiment and see how you do. You'll find a lot of fussy, unnecessary detail and inflated phrasing you can chop out.
- Use more or different graphics. For non-specialist audiences, you may want to use more graphics—and simpler ones at that. Graphics for specialists are more detailed and more technical.
- Break text up or consolidate text into meaningful, usable chunks. For non-specialist readers, you may need to have shorter paragraphs.
- Add cross-references to important information. In technical information, you can help non-specialist readers by pointing them to background sources. If you can't fully explain a topic on the spot, point to a section or chapter where it is.
- Use headings and lists. Readers can be intimidated by big dense paragraphs of writing, uncut by anything other than a blank line now and then. Search your rough drafts for ways to incorporate headings—look for changes in topic or subtopic. Search your writing for listings of things—these can be made into vertical lists. Look for paired listings such as terms and their definitions—these can be made into two-column lists. Of course, be careful not to force this special formatting—don't overdo it.
- Use special typography, and work with margins, line length, line spacing, type size, and type style. You can do things like making the lines shorter

(bringing in the margins), using larger type sizes, and other such tactics. Certain type styles are believed to be friendlier and more readable than others.

These are the kinds of "controls" that you can use to fine-tune your messages and make them as readily understandable as possible. In contrast, it's the accumulation of lots of problems in these areas—even seemingly trivial ones—that add up to a document being difficult to read and understand.

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