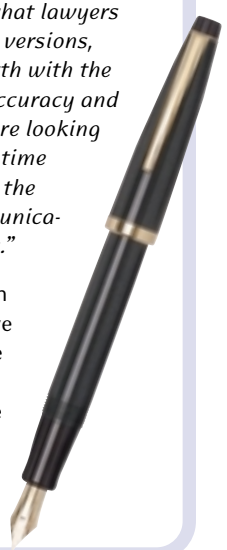
How to Write a Happier Ending

"The Solution Nobody Heard" was inspired by the frustrated comments of communications directors I've met in my travels around the country. Since internal tussles over message can undermine any organization's pursuit of its mission, I have begun looking for situations in which these "negotiations" resulted in messages *everyone* believed in—the target audience most of all. Cara Pike, communications director at Earthjustice, provided the first example:

"At Earthjustice, it has not been easy to get our attorneys to move away from lawyerly jargon, but it can be done. Taking the time to explain why a communications piece has to be relevant to the target audience and how to accomplish that makes it easier for lawyers and scientists to understand that you are not just being a menacing editor. We try to create work processes that relate to what lawyers know—specific deadlines for reviewing drafts and final versions, maximum word counts, etc. In the end, the back and forth with the attorneys results in a better product in terms of both accuracy and creativity. And when the piece gets the response you were looking for from the outside world, it reinforces why taking the time to translate pays off, and trust begins to build between the technical and communications staff members."

If you've ever been in Jane's shoes but have found a solution like Cara's, please let me know and we'll share your story in this space in coming issues.



The Last Word

"The scientist atomizes, someone must synthesize; the scientist withdraws, someone must draw together. The scientist particularizes, someone must universalize."

John Fowles

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The Solution NOBODY HEARD

A cautionary tale about the perils of being too smart for your own good cause.

In the beginning, there was the problem. And this was no small problem, like whose turn is it to drive the carpool or how come we keep running out of Wheat Thins? This was a Big Problem. Big enough that entire organizations were created just to solve it.

When the Scientist looked at the Big Problem, he saw hypotheses that could be tested, experiments that could be performed, and results that could be reached. Without a moment's hesitation, he donned his white lab coat, ran a battery of tests, and to ensure complete accuracy, he walked to the end of a dock and spent an entire day double-checking every finding. Weary but confident, he published his pier-reviewed report in the Prestigious Review of Scholarly Papers, proudly announcing his solution to the Big Problem. But no one listened.

"How could this be?" the Scientist wailed to the heavens, rending his beloved white garment. "I heated beakers with Bunsen burners. I dissected tiny members of the rodent family. *I produced sound science!*" At just that moment, an Economist was walking by and overheard these lamentations. She shook her head and smiled knowingly. "Just because your science is sound," the Economist said, "doesn't mean anybody will hear you."

The Solution NOBODY HEARD

The Scientist stared at the Economist as if she had just told him that Madonna could act. "Your science is important," she reassured him, "but it's the economics, stupid!"

The Economist explained that most people think about their pocketbooks first, unless those people are men, in which case the operative word should really be "wallets," but that's a semantic distinction she's willing to ignore because words really aren't the issue here. Numbers are. The Scientist confessed that he was getting confused, even if he knew a thing or two about numbers.

"I'll show you," said the Economist, and she reached into her pocketbook and produced an object that glinted in the sunlight, momentarily blinding the Scientist with a bright, awe-inspiring flash. "I have a graphing calculator," she declared, "and I know how to use it." She proceeded to enter numbers for supply and numbers for demand, her fingers dancing across the keyboard with the grace of a ballerina. "There," she said, regarding the Scientist with a beatific smile. "I have calculated the solution to the Big Problem."

"What is it?" asked the Scientist, eager for confirmation of his own results.

"Didn't you hear?" spat the Economist, indignant at this blatant lack of respect for her brilliant work.

"Hear what?" the Scientist shot back. "I saw you punching keys on your calculator, but I didn't hear a thing."

"Perhaps I could help," said a man in running clothes who stopped to join the conversation. After taking a moment to catch his breath—and gaze wistfully at an EMS vehicle that was rapidly disappearing down the street—the Lawyer continued. "Many economists labor under the same misperception: crunching numbers can play a role in solving the Big Problem, *but it doesn't actually make any noise.* So it's little wonder nobody hears you." The Economist was so shocked she nearly dropped her graphing calculator. The Scientist felt even more confused and began to recite the elements from the periodic table.

"It's really very simple," the Lawyer continued. "Life in this nation is governed by *laws*, so if you want to solve a Big Problem, you have to change the laws." And then the Lawyer began to speak in Latin. The Scientist and Economist tried to follow the Lawyer's argument, but neither spoke Latin. By now, they were inclined to accept this whole law-changing notion, but they had no idea what the Lawyer was saying. The only thing they were certain of was that, somehow, they were being charged by the hour.

The sound of footsteps nearby caught the Scientist's attention, and he felt a surge of hope that delivery from this predicament was at hand—but it was only Jane, the communications person. Jane owned no lab coats, didn't know how to use a graphing calculator, and the only Latin she understood was "pro bono" (the one phrase, coincidentally, which the Lawyer did not know.) The Scientist, the Economist, and the Lawyer all had a certain fondness for Jane, but since she didn't have any letters after her name, they never invited her to play Scrabble.

And when they did try to talk to her, Jane always had some niggling question, such as, Who is our audience? What do *they* think about this problem? Where do they get their information? What kind of spokespeople would they trust? Talking to Jane meant getting dragged into a conversation about some all-important "target audience," but desperation was in the air. "If people can't hear my sound science or your crunching of numbers, and if the law sounds like another language entirely," the Scientist said, "maybe Jane can figure out how to turn our solution into something people can hear."

Jane never got invited to play Scrabble

The Economist regarded Jane warily. "I don't know," she grumbled. "Did Jane graduate from a college known for its association with other colleges where creeping vines ensconce aged stone buildings? Has she ever published a ten thousand-word article in the Journal of Interminable Monographs? Can we really trust her to translate our Rigorously Rendered Results?"

The Scientist thought for a moment and shook his head. "No," he replied, "You're right. She'll try to turn our RRRs into something as simple as ABC, and every impossibly complex concept will be lost. It's just too risky." They pretended to be absorbed in plainly uninterruptable conversation, so Jane gave them a friendly wave and kept on walking, heading roughly in the direction of the setting sun.

"She does appear happy," the Scientist observed with a hint of regret.

"I wouldn't count on it," said the Economist.

"Cogito ergo sum," said the Lawyer.

And the three were never heard from again. ■