

Chapter 2

The three Rs of good persuasive writing

A brief introduction to the Big Theory that this book is based upon, summed up in the snappy slogan, 'Remember the Reader and the Result'; a hypothetical caravan-related example of where this theory leads us; and the famous Indian Wood Carver analogy.

In a moment, I'm going to tell you my Big Theory about persuasive writing. But first, I'm going to tell you my Big Theory about Big Theories. It's that books which appear to be based on a Big Theory usually aren't. In most cases, they are based on quite a small theory, which may amount to little more than a fairly obvious statement of a common-sensical point of view.

I'll give you a couple of examples. Those management tomes that sell in their thousands in departure lounge book stalls around the world. All, as far as I am aware, could be summarised in a dozen or so words: 'Be nice to people, treat them well, and they will work harder and more productively'; or, of course, the opposite: 'Be nasty to people, treat them mean, make them fear for their

jobs, and they will work harder and more productively.' Or how about diet books? Here's the Lindsay Camp Way to a Healthier Slimmer You in just six words, one of them not strictly necessary:

Eat less, take more exercise, dummy!

If we were being cynical, we might conclude from this that the authors of books based upon Big Theories are rogues and charlatans, intent on defrauding gullible readers; that their only skill lies in taking a self-evident commonsensical point and teasing and stretching it to fill a fat tome.

But instead, let's put this more charitable interpretation on my Big Theory about Big Theories: that, in almost every field of human activity, the basic principles of what works, and what doesn't, are pretty self-evident and commonsensical; but, in the hurly burly of everyday life, people tend to lose sight of them, and simple truths become obscured. So the writers of those Big Theory-based books aren't attempting to pull the wool over anyone's eyes, but to remove the scales; to show their readers something that may once have been familiar in a fresh light; to strip away complexities that have built up around a subject over time, and reveal the surprisingly simple truth.

Anyway, that's my justification for the fact that I could easily distil all the wit and wisdom I have to offer you on good persuasive writing into one not particularly long sentence. Here goes:

My Big Theory about Persuasive Writing

The secret of good persuasive writing is to be as clear as you possibly can be about two things: who your reader is, and what result you are hoping to achieve.

In fact, I could even encapsulate it in a snappy six-word slogan, which I'm tempted to call the Three Rs of Persuasive Writing:

Remember the Reader and the Result.

Or, perhaps, just RRR.

A very rough indication of what RRR means in practice

We'll get down to details later. But let me give you the merest hint of where this Big Theory leads us. Let's imagine that you have a caravan that you really love, but which financial necessity compels you to sell. (Not entirely plausible, I know, but bear with me.) You decide to put a postcard in the window of your local corner shop. You sit down to write. And, because you love your caravan so much, what you write is a poem about the last, wonderful holiday you had in it. The only problem is that the poem turns out rather long, so that you have to write it very small indeed on the postcard, and there isn't room for any tedious details about what type of caravan it is, how many it sleeps, what kind of floor coverings and kitchen appliances it features, and so on.

The milkman's note test

The best thing I've written recently? Without hesitation, I'd say it was the note I wrote to the milkman a couple of nights ago, which I'm now going to reproduce in full:

'No milk today thanks, Dave!'

I'm serious. Just consider how effective it was. When I came down next morning, bleary-eyed, there on my doorstep was ... nothing. No milk at all. Not a single bottle. My note had been 100% successful in achieving its objective.

Why? Two reasons. First, because I knew when I wrote it precisely what that objective was. And second, because I had a very clear picture of my reader in my mind before I started.

Worth bearing in mind next time you write something that doesn't read quite as persuasively as you'd like.

You've forgotten your reader, haven't you? How is anyone supposed to buy your beloved caravan if they don't know anything about it?

Luckily, you realise this in time, and rewrite the postcard, including all the information that somebody looking for a caravan might want, as well as a nice picture of you and your family having a lovely time on holiday in the Brecon Beacons. It's much better. Except that this time you forget to put your phone number at the bottom. So, while you may have many potential buyers ready to outbid each other for your caravan, they have no way of contacting you.

You've forgotten the result you're trying to achieve.

Of course, you wouldn't be foolish enough to do any of the above. But my Big Theory is based on the observation that many intelligent people – including you, perhaps – do indeed make mistakes similar in kind, if not in degree of stupidity, every time they sit down to write.

¹I was worried when I wrote this that the hypothetical example was too far removed from reality to be enlightening. Then, a few weeks later, somebody put one of those take-away menus through my letterbox. Delicious-sounding Moroccan food, tempting prices, prompt home delivery ... no phone number or address.

The Indian Wood Carver Analogy

My friends at The Chase, perhaps the UK's wittiest graphic design consultancy, used to tell a story about an old Indian craftsman who spent his days carving beautiful elephants from blocks of wood. When asked how he did it, he would reply, 'I just cut away the wood that doesn't look like an elephant.'

The designers at The Chase believed this story illuminated their craft, as carvers of beautifully fashioned communications. They were right. But it also illustrates how my Big Theory can help us be better persuasive writers in practice: all we have to do to create a masterpiece is cut away everything that, bearing in mind who our reader is, won't help us achieve the result we want.

Which should leave us with a perfect elephant.