

The lost art of saying what you mean

By Neil James

Have you ever received a letter you simply couldn't fathom? There's a good chance it came from your bank, or your lawyer or a government department. And the more you read on, the less sense the thing makes. Don't despair, it looks like the classics might be tossing us a lifeline. It's called the New Rhetoric, and it is reviving our public language using Aristotle's ancient art of persuasion.

The word rhetoric often conjures a sense of empty or manipulative language. Yet champions of the New Rhetoric are showing there is so much more to it than this. It is the systematic study of style and structure, of argument and delivery. It may well keep our heads above the wash of words that we almost drown in daily.

The first lesson of rhetoric is for every author of gobbledegook: write for your audience, and adapt your style to their needs. Too often government and business documents try to sound impressive rather than to communicate clearly. Take this example I received from my local council. This was supposed to explain why it approved a development despite resident objections:

In terms of reaching its decision Council took into consideration the matters in your submission and as the proposal complied with the objectives of Council's policies and conformed to the relevant statutory requirements, Council was of the opinion that the application should be approved.

All this means, in half the words, is:

Council considered your submission carefully. However, we had to approve the application because it complies with Council policy and meets legal requirements.

How much more persuasive is the second version? Instead of hiding behind a stuffy, bureaucratic language, it clarifies that Council was bound by precedent. I might still disagree with the decision, but at least I can understand it. I might even respect it. After reading the first version, I'm more likely to remain enraged.

Research is showing that the inability of our professionals to adapt their writing to their audience is costing them billions. A Royal Mail survey in Britain found that UK businesses lose a staggering \$9.7 billion in business every year solely because of poor writing. The National Commission on Writing in the US estimated that American businesses have to spend as much as \$4.1 billion every year in re-training their staff how to write.

Failed rhetoric hurts the bottom line. Poor structure contributes to these costs. How often have you read a letter that puts the most important information right at the end? I received one of these from my bank a couple of years ago. Great news, it trumpeted, we've simplified your accounts. I wasn't aware that they needed simplifying, as I only had one account at the time. I read a page-and-a-half of useless guff before the real point of the letter emerged: to bring me these marvellous benefits, they had to increase my fees. I changed banks.

The New Rhetoric is helping both writers and readers. It can show our professionals how to achieve their goals by adapting their style and structure to their audience. Greater public understanding of rhetoric will help us all to scrutinise the documents that swamp us, and to make more informed choices in response.

It's no accident that rhetoric first emerged alongside democracy in Athens over 2,000 years ago. Knowing how to make your case, and to analyse the arguments of others, became essential to the democratic process. Our communication has become more complex since then, but we've forgotten many of the basic tenets of public exchange. Reviving the ancient art of persuasion will not just save us time and money, but it will strengthen democracy as well.

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