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FEATURE

Writing for Busy Readers

Unlocking the Science of Effective Writing

by Todd Rogers and Jessica Lasky-Fink

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Unlocking the Science of Effective Writing

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We live in an unprecedented age of media saturation and information overload. Readers routinely decide how valuable a message is without actually reading it. In one recent survey, people reported skimming nearly 40% of their emails and 20% of their texts. We may have been taught the fundamentals of writing *well* in school—but how do we write *effectively* in this current hyper-interactive environment?

As behavioral scientists, we set out to understand the science of how busy readers interact with writing and identify universal principles of effective writing. To distill the science, we reviewed research in cognitive psychology, social psychology, behavioral economics, neuroscience, communications, literacy, teaching and learning, marketing, time management, and more. And, we conducted hundreds of randomized experiments with collaborators to understand what works and what doesn't.

Our research, our findings, and our recommendations on how to write effectively are shared in our new book, *Writing for Busy Readers*. We understand how critical communication is for district and school leaders, who must convey important information to families, students, the community, and their many other stakeholders. In the book, you can find specific examples and tips for increasing the effectiveness of your written communications.

How to Write Effectively for Busy Readers

We begin by examining how to understand and engage with the busy reader. What does recent brain research tell us about what we notice and what we don't when reading? How does task juggling affect our reading? We identify a four-step process that a reader goes through every time they encounter a written communication:

- First, they must decide whether to engage with it at all.
- Second, if they decide to engage, they must decide *when* to engage. Sometimes the decision to engage leads to a decision to engage later.
- Third, once they do engage, they must decide how much time and attention to allocate to reading the message.
- Fourth, if they read something that requires a response, they must decide whether to respond or react.

Readers make these decisions almost instantaneously. To navigate through these four critical rounds, writers must first know their goals, and then follow these six principles of effective writing:

1. Less is more.
2. Make reading easy.
3. Design for easy navigation.
4. Use enough formatting but no more.
5. Tell readers why they should care.
6. Make responding easy.

LESS IS MORE

There is a distressingly widespread misconception among writers that more is better. The average American adult takes in about 240 words per minute when reading nonfiction—just four words per second. Although the time required to read an additional few words or sentences can seem trivial, it quickly adds up.

Busy readers are more likely to make time to engage with short, clear, well-structured messages. And if they do engage, they are more likely to take away the most critical information. Spending a little more time up front to be concise can save writers a great deal of time in the end, by reducing follow-ups, misunderstandings, and requests left unfulfilled.

It is also a documented truth about the way busy readers behave: longer messages deter readers from engaging and encourage them to procrastinate.

Writing for Busy Readers

Communicate More Effectively in the Real World

(Dutton, 2023)

Todd Rogers and Jessica Lasky-Fink, behavioral scientists based at Harvard University, have collectively spent more than three decades working on the science of writing for busy voters and families. Most recently, during the pandemic, they advised state and local leaders on how to write for busy constituents.

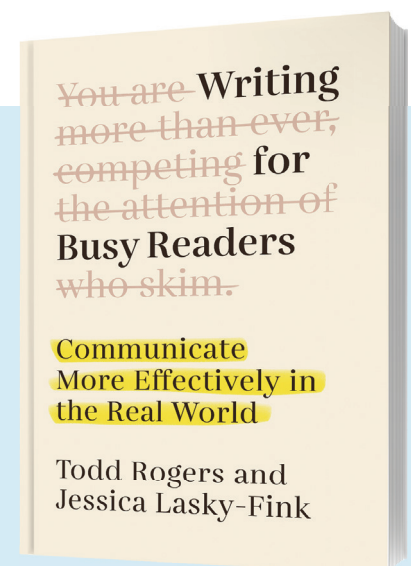
In *Writing for Busy Readers*, Rogers and Lasky-Fink unpack for us the science and psychology of how (busy) people read, and detail six research-backed principles to help us all write more effectively. They share intriguing insights from leading research and from hundreds of their own original, randomized experiments on the topic. And they provide tips for how to implement these principles with real-life examples across healthcare, marketing, management, government, criminal justice, and among family and friends. Ultimately, these principles are rooted in the universals of human nature: the mind's limited attention and focus, the rules of thumb it uses, the behaviors of busy people, and the ways that we give and receive information through written messages. The communication strategies in their book have been widely studied, analyzed, and tested, making it an essential guide for anyone who wants their writing to make a difference.

MAKE READING EASY

Complex, difficult-to-read messages are less likely to be read; if they *are* read, they're less likely to be understood. Yet, too often, practical communications are written without an eye toward readability. Anyone who has signed a contract, a lease, or a rental car agreement is familiar with the barrage of impenetrable, ineffective legal mumbo jumbo. Writers should aim for the least amount of complexity that will allow for engaging with the intended reader.

DESIGN FOR EASY NAVIGATION

One of the key aspects of writing for busy people is not strictly about writing at all. It is about *design*—specifically, designing the written content to be easy to navigate. When readers look at a message, they should immediately be able to grasp its purpose, main points, and structure. The way the words are placed should help them quickly find the pieces they want to engage with, and the pieces they prefer to skip or skim. We explore the rules of well-designed writing and give examples of what to do—and what *not* to do.



“Genius! A succinct, sage guide to writing effectively—and the only one I know of that is grounded in evidence of what really works.”

- Angela Duckworth
University of Pennsylvania
Founder and CEO of Character Lab
Author of *Grit*

“*In one recent survey, people reported skimming nearly 40% of their emails and 20% of their texts. We may have been taught the fundamentals of writing well in school—but how do we write effectively in this current hyper-interactive environment?*”

USE ENOUGH FORMATTING BUT NO MORE

Formatting is a bit like using spices when cooking: you want to include them thoughtfully, and you don't want to use too much. In that spirit, writers need to think of underlining, bolding, italics, all capitals, bullets, and other text manipulations not just as tools but as functional ingredients to add to the writing. We explore multiple examples to help unlock the key to effective formatting.

TELL READERS WHY THEY SHOULD CARE

Writers and readers often have divergent goals. Readers routinely ignore messages that don't appear to meet their goals—and then the writer's goals go unfulfilled.

Writers can't necessarily change the topics we write about to make them more interesting or relevant to our readers. What we *can* do is train ourselves to understand our readers better so that we can communicate with them more effectively. We can strategically emphasize the aspects of our messages that we think our readers might care about most and articulate clearly why we believe they should care.

MAKE RESPONDING EASY

Sometimes the primary goal of writing is to share ideas and make sure they are understood by the reader, but many types of common messages are response oriented. To this end, writers must make the request as easy as possible to comply with and lay out guidelines for doing so. Is it best to dispense with niceties and get straight to the point? What if you have more than one goal, or it's a complex message? Research unlocks the answers.

In the final section of the book, we examine practical ways to deal with complicating factors in real-world communications. For example, how do these writing principles apply to longer-format writing? What about social media? What about human biases and stereotypes?

Based on our extensive research, we share in our book detailed tips and examples to help you learn to write most effectively. The more you practice effective writing, the easier it becomes. Think of it like learning to sing, type, or drive. At first, those tasks seem intensely demanding, requiring your full attention. Eventually they become so familiar that you can do other tasks on top of them, such as answering a phone call while cruising down the highway or listening to music while typing a report. ♦



Todd Rogers is a professor of public policy at Harvard University. He is a behavioral scientist and co-founder of the Analyst Institute and EveryDay Labs. His opinion pieces have appeared in the *New York Times*, the *Washington Post*, the *Los Angeles Times*, and *Politico*, among others.



Jessica Lasky-Fink is the research director at the People Lab, based within Harvard University's John. F. Kennedy School of Government. Her research focuses on improving the delivery of government programs and services.