Better Communication IN THE DIGITAL AGE

Brevity & Clarity

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Better Communication in the Digital Age: Learning to Love Brevity and Clarity

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Better Communication in the Digital Age

Mark Jones

Executive External Strategy and Communications Fellow

The Dow Chemical Company

23 June 2020

EDITING

Perfectionism is spelled paralysis

The Importance of Editing

Good writing is 1% inspiration and 99% elimination.

Louise Brooks

VONNEGUT'S *HOW TO WRITE WITH STYLE**

edit

- Do not ramble
- Keep it simple
- Have the guts to cut
- Sound like yourself
- Say what you mean to say
- Read *Strunk and White*

If a sentence, no matter how excellent, does not illuminate your subject in some new and useful way, scratch it out.

* excerpted

Communication Hierarchy

Tools
Tactics
Strategy
Audience
Goal

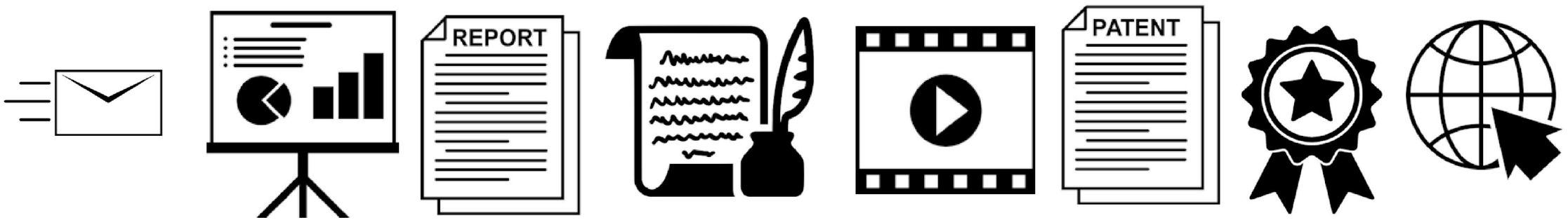
COMMUNICATION: DIFFERENT AUDIENCES

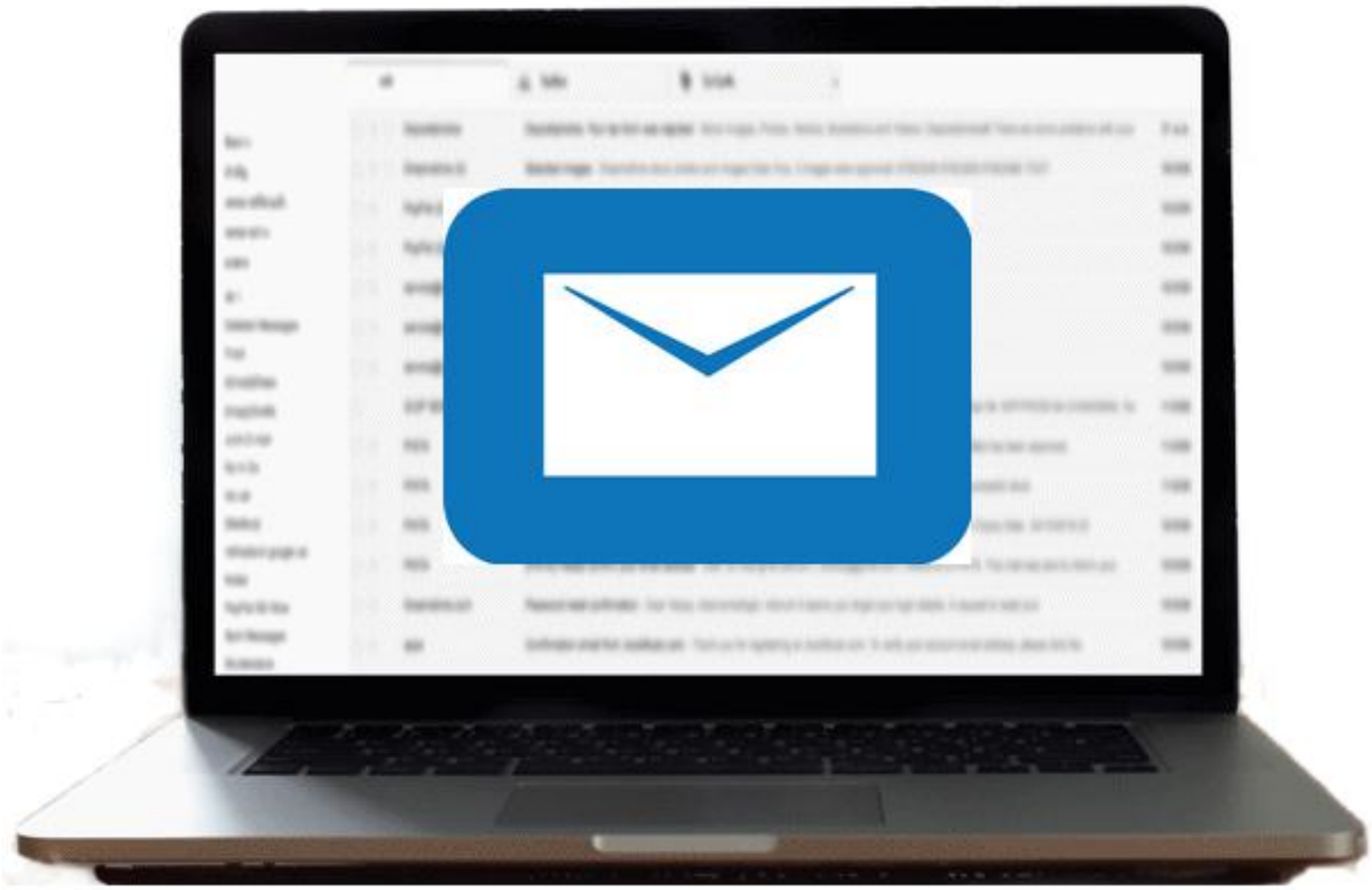
Designing ~~a presentation~~ *any communication* without an audience in mind is like writing a love letter and addressing it ‘to whom it may concern’.

Ken Haemer
Presentation Research Manager,
AT&T

in HBR Guide to Persuasive Presentations

COMMUNICATION: DIFFERENT TOOLS



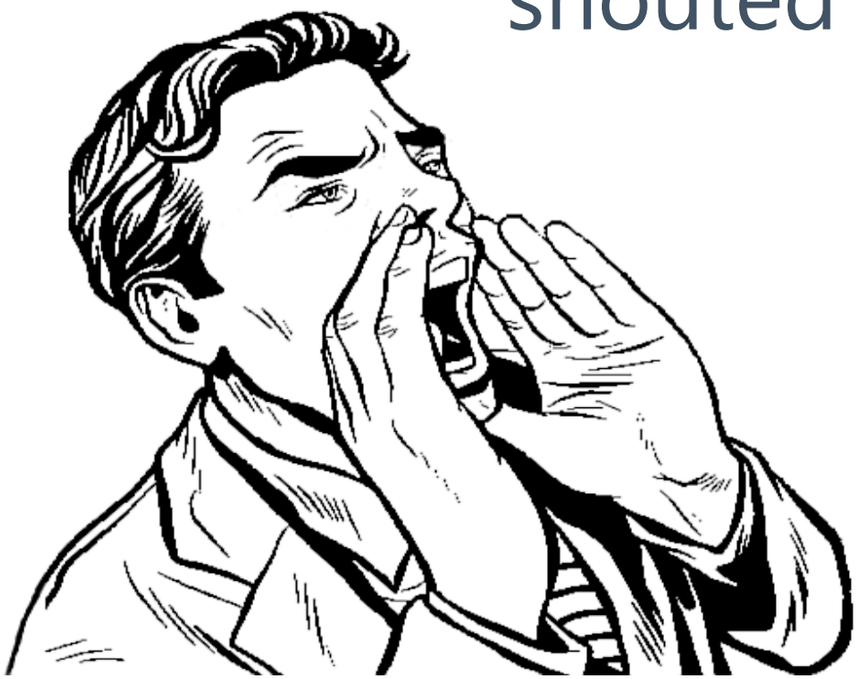


Email's Flaws

- You can't assume only the reader will see it.
- You can't assume all of any message will be read.
  - Spam filters aren't reliable.
  - Too much email!
- Over-analysis is possible, even likely.
- Autocorrect and spelling checkers.
  - Madan → Madman
  - attempt at *inconsistency* → *incontinence*

Email Rules

Assume the contents of any email will be shouted for all to hear.



Email Rules

> Don’t say anything about someone in email you would not be comfortable saying to them directly, because eventually *they* will read it.
>
> Kevin Kelly in *68 Rules*

"He Replied All."

Harry Bliss, appearing in the New Yorker, September 14, 2015

RECIPIENTS

- Carefully consider and check all recipients
  - lots of email is incorrectly addressed
- Distribution lists require special care
  - selecting the wrong list exponentiates mistakes
- Recipients forward
  - consider all content when deciding whether to forward
  - nothing says you need to send the entire message
- Recipients add names
  - check names when replying

Audience Challenge Question

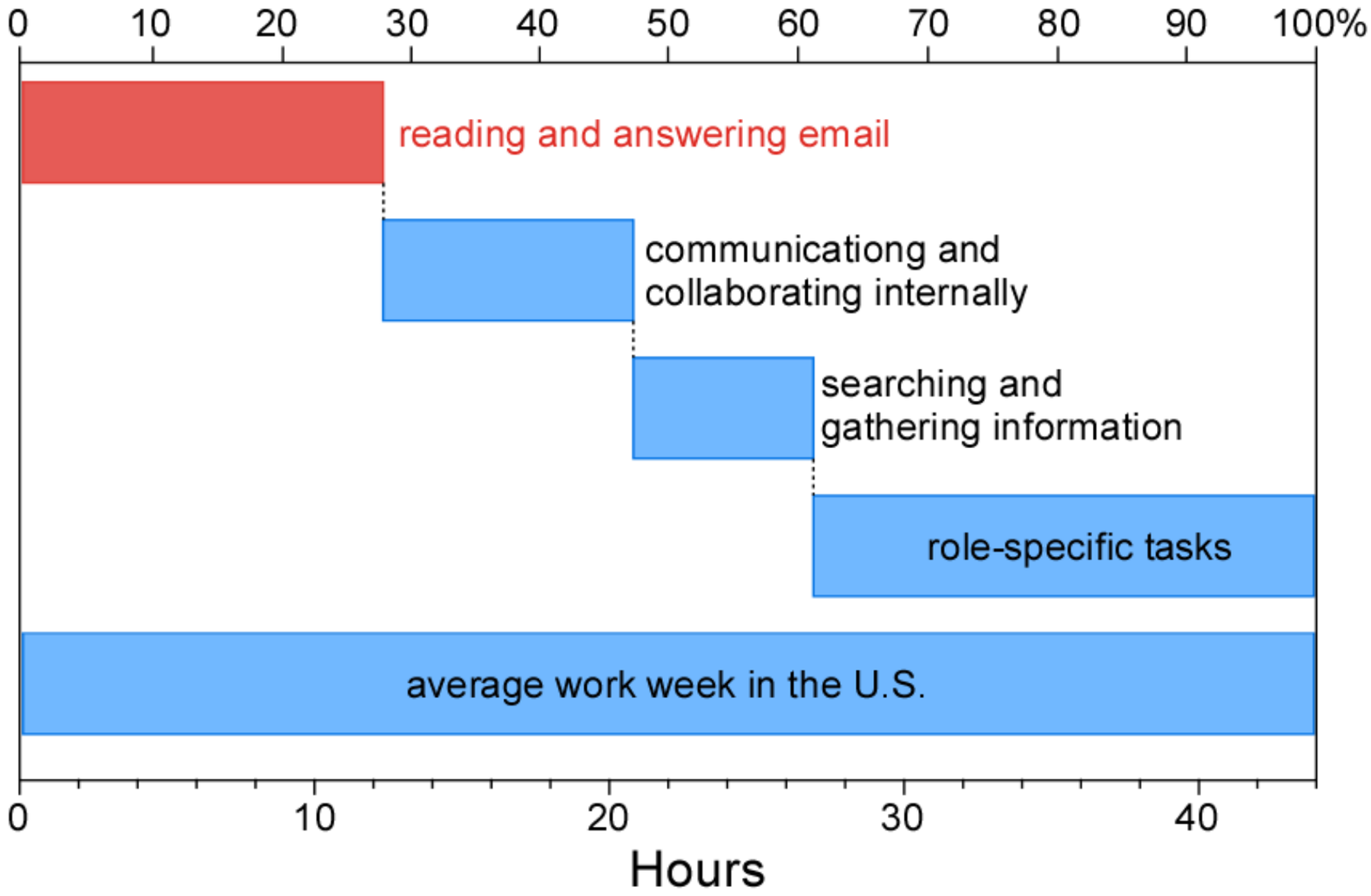
What is the average time spent reading an email?

- 5 minutes
- 1 minute
- 8.5 seconds
- 13.4 seconds

Email Reading Time

- ~ 1 minute from 147 daily emails taking 2.5 hours to read (Boomerang analysis)
- 13.4 seconds is the average reported by Litmus
- average attention span dropped to only 8.5 seconds (Microsoft 2015 study)

Time Spent on Email



McKinsey Global Institute, "The social economy: Unlocking value and productivity through social technologies", July 1, 2012

More Read on Portable Devices

- Some studies say over 40% of emails read on portable devices
- Limited screen real estate

Effective Email

- Make the subject line helpful.
- Carefully consider recipients.
- Include a greeting to signal the recipient.
- Immediately state why you sent the email and what, if any action, it requests.
- Write clearly. Write well.
- Be professional at all times.
- Proofread.
- If it is important, pause before you send.

Sample Email

Subject: Decision needed on E2V project

Dear Charlie,

A yes/no decision from you is needed on whether funds will be allocated for the plant trial for E2V. Please indicate whether you support spending the $125k.

The detailed budget is enclosed should you want to review. We winnowed the budget to the bare minimum. I do not believe we can reduce any further.

I hope your trip went well. I am sorry we were unable to discuss this matter and this is likely unexpected on your first day back. We are in a holding pattern until your decision.

Regards,

Mark

Brevity

“It is my ambition to say in ten sentences what others say in a whole book.”

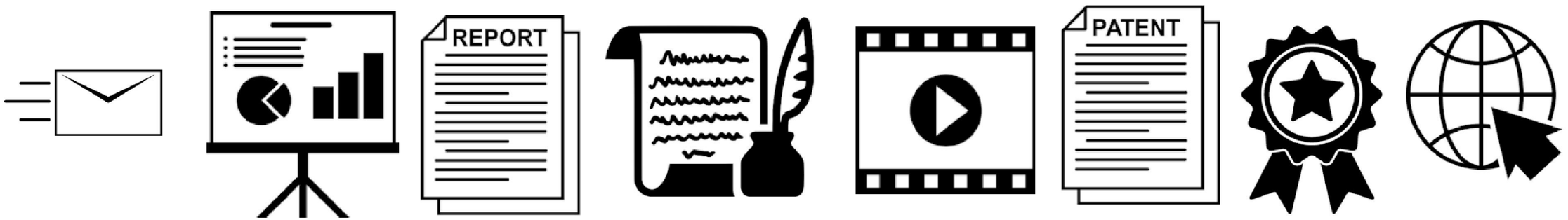
Friedrich Nietzsche

Brevity

So the writer who breeds more words than he needs, is making a chore for the reader who reads.

Dr. Seuss

COMMUNICATION: DIFFERENT TOOLS



Brevity

> Vigorous writing is concise. A sentence should contain no unnecessary words, a paragraph no unnecessary sentences, for the same reason that a drawing should have no unnecessary lines and a machine no unnecessary parts.

Strunk and White

Half the Words, All the Meaning

Materials where the molecular units have a disordered arrangement, but sufficient cohesion to produce rigid structure normally associated with crystalline materials, vitreous solids, have many applications in modern architecture but their inability to withstand tensile forces developed as a result of impact make them susceptible to catastrophic failure. Residents of buildings with large expanses of vitreous solids must take special care to avoid inadvertent impacts.

65 words

Half the Words, All the Meaning

People who live in glass houses shouldn’t throw stones.

Half the Words, All the Meaning

The most significant contributions of the chemist to human knowledge have been his successes in establishing correlations between the experimentally observed properties of matter and his knowledge of its composition and structure. The chemist treats the composition of matter in terms of atoms of chemical elements and the ways in which they combine to form molecules of chemical compounds. He seeks to understand the changes that occur when chemical substances undergo reactions with one another.

75 words

from Brill, Robert H. "A Note on the Scientist's Definition of Glass." The Journal of Glass Studies vol. 4 (1962): 127-138.

DOW

Half the Words, All the Meaning

Correlations, made by chemists, connecting the observed properties of matter with composition and structure are significant contributions to human knowledge. Chemists understand and manipulate the bonding of atoms to form molecules, the reactions that occur and the structures that result from reaction.

42 words

Writing Well Matters

found on many sites without attribution including shareitsfunny.com/psycho-the-rapist-2/

AVOID AMBIGUITY: PUNCTUATION

- A woman without her man is nothing.

- A woman: without her, man is nothing.

Tactics: Write Forcefully

✓ Kryptonite stops the Man of Steel.

versus

Kryptonite could be used to stop the Man of Steel.

Tactics: Present Tense and Forceful

✓ Rope stops people from falling off mountains.

versus

Rope has been used to stop people from falling off mountains.

versus

Rope could be used to stop people from falling off mountains.

TACTICS: STRONG PHRASING

INNATE™ reduces the environmental burden of packaging because less packaging delivers better performance.

versus

Because it allows less packaging to be used, INNATE™ reduces the environmental burden of packaging.

Avoid Ambiguity: Clarity over Brevity

- The racoon is ready to eat.

- The racoon, clearly hungry, is ready to eat.
- The cooked racoon just came out of the oven and is ready to eat.

Avoid Ambiguity: Clarity over Brevity

- I saw a man on the hill with my telescope.

- Using my telescope, I saw a man on the hill.
- I saw a man on the hill and he was using my telescope.

Layered Scientific Communication

Chest CT imaging of COVID-19 patients demonstrates common imaging abnormalities, even in asymptomatic patients, with rapid evolution from unilateral to bilateral interstitial pneumonia.

versus

Interstitial tissue supports the air sacs, or avioli, where oxygen transport occurs in the lungs. The tissue surrounding air sacs in both lungs get irritated in bilateral interstitial pneumonia. Three-dimensional X-ray techniques, commonly called CT scans, detect interstitial pneumonia, even in asymptomatic patients, and allow doctors to monitor disease progression.

Advice for Writing Well

> Separate the processes of creation from improving. You can't write and edit, or sculpt and polish, or make and analyze at the same time. If you do, the editor stops the creator. While you invent, don't select. While you sketch, don't inspect. While you write the first draft, don't reflect.

Kevin Kelly in *68 Rules*

Web Meeting Suggestions

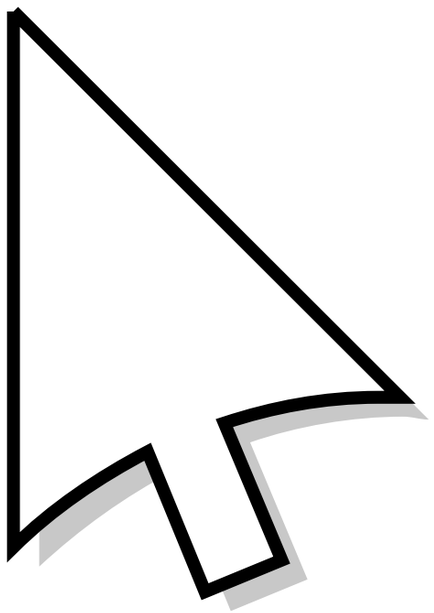
General Web Meeting Comments

- Hosts should control and monitor attendees
  - open meeting rooms can present problems
- Up your excitement level and involve others
- Animate at your own risk
  - even simple appear and disappear can give strange results
- Video will be choppy
  - take steps for critical videos
  - audio may not play to attendees

MUTE

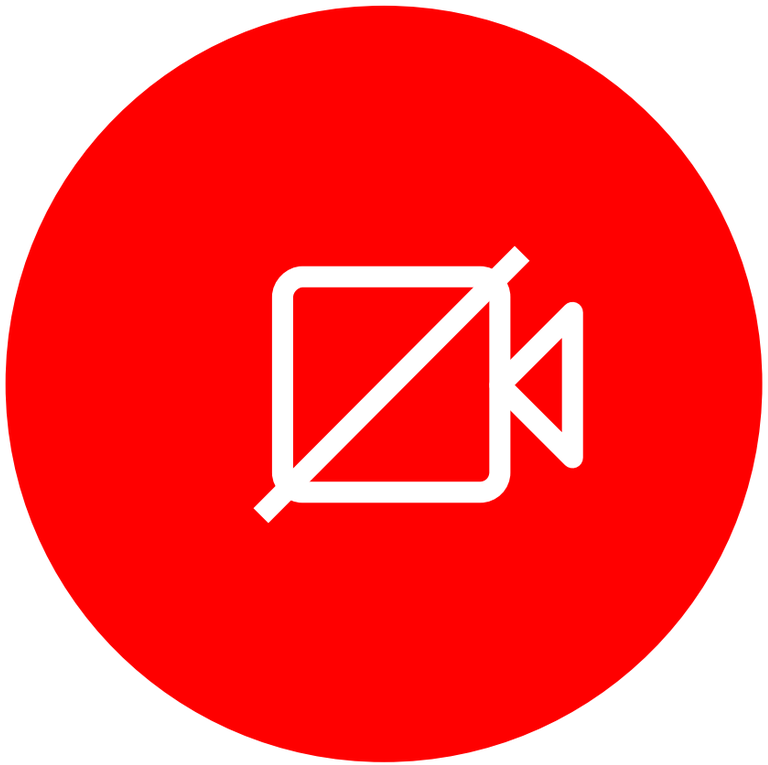
- Mute yourself if not speaking
  - autoadjusting microphones
  - dog barks, phones, yelling kids,….
  - even important in small groups
- Mute all users if you are the host at start of any presentation
- Mute disruptive attendees

The Pointer



- It is observable by your audience
- It should be used rarely
  - it is generally awkward in use
  - there is frequently a time lag
- Make graphics that don't require pointing
- If pointing is required, use the pointer so that both local and remote audiences see the pointing
  - smooth and slow motion

CAMERA



- Turn off your video if you are just listening
  - helps bandwidth
  - prevents embarrassment
- Make eye contact with your camera when it is on
- Monitoring more than 4-8 faces is difficult and distracting

COMMUNICATION HIERARCHY

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Tactics
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Audience
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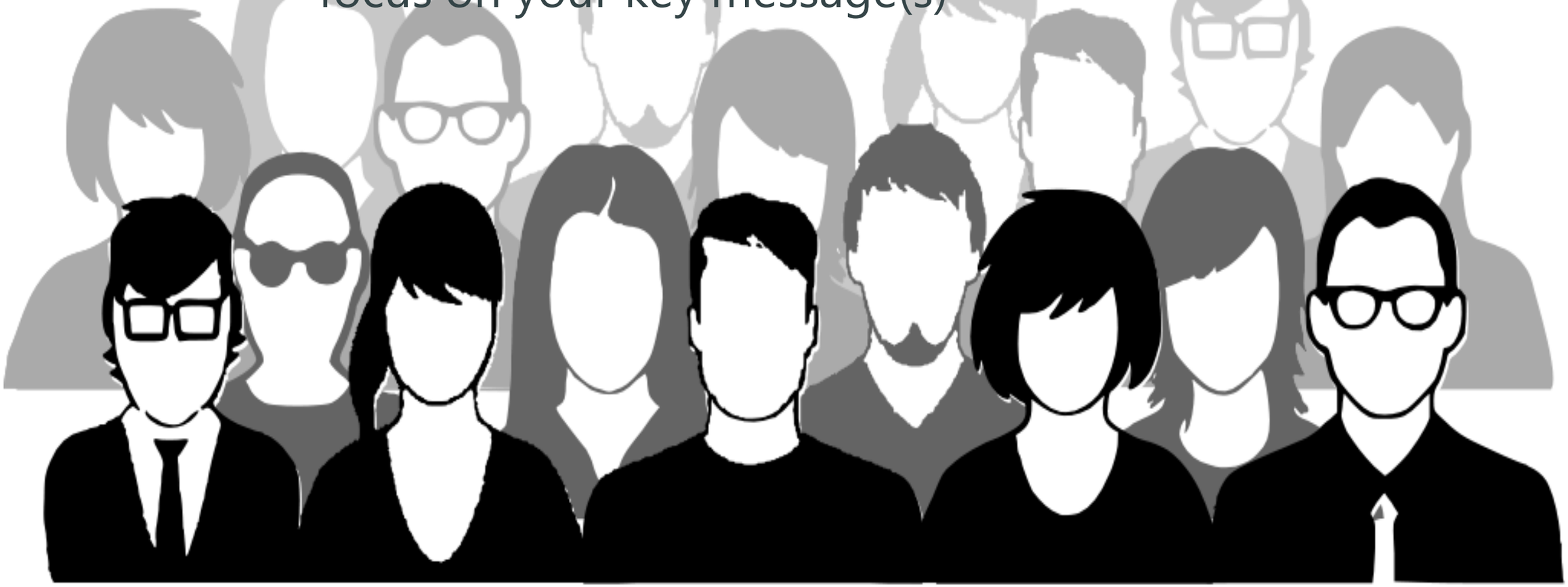
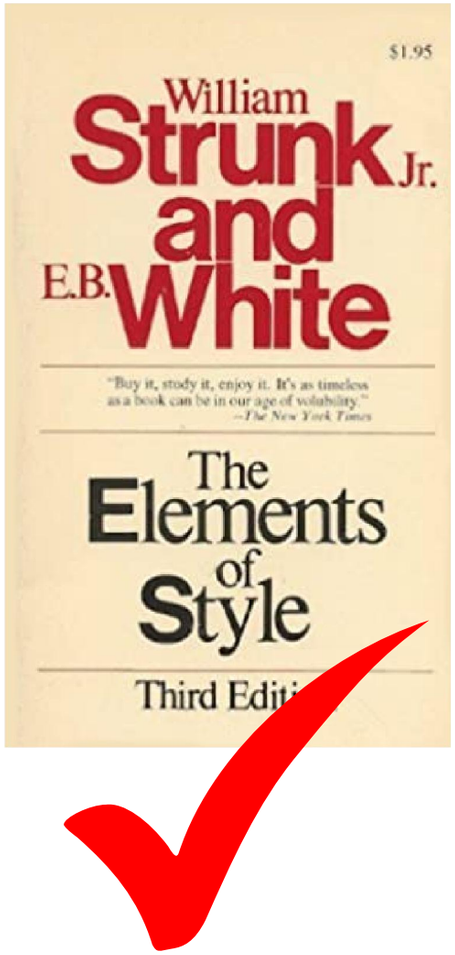
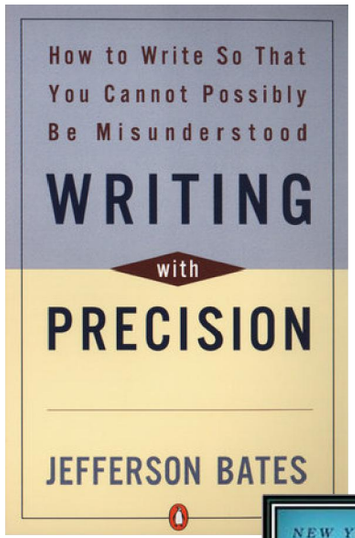
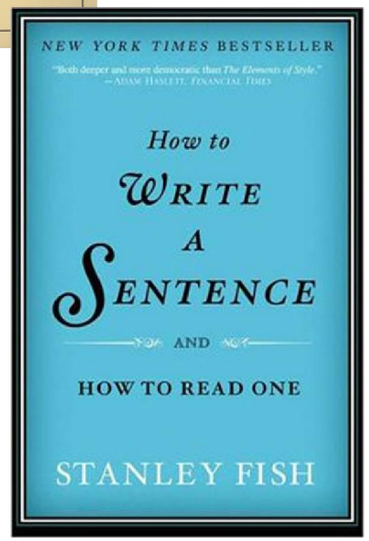
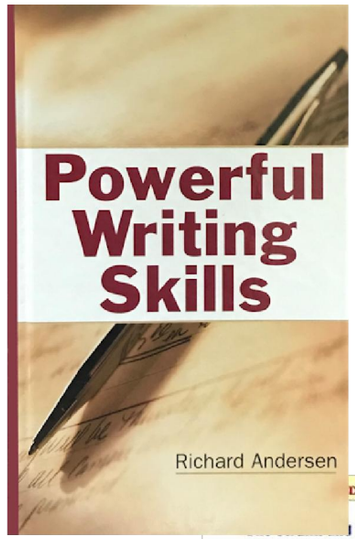
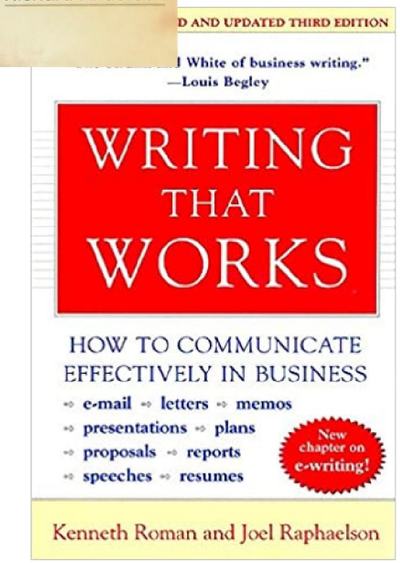
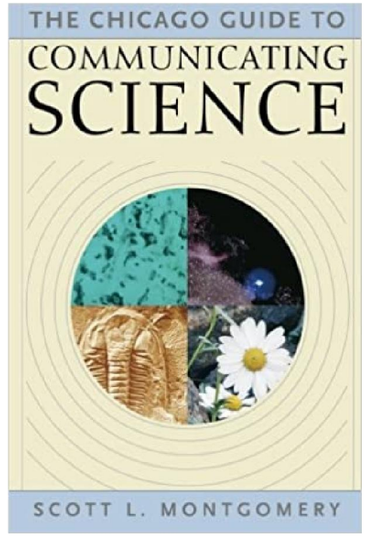
Communication Is For Your Audience

- Know your audience and craft for them
  - focus on your key message(s)



David Ogilvy on Writing*

Good writing is not a natural gift. You have to learn to write well.

Favorite References - Writing