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CHOOSING YOUR AUDIENCE

This is a book. So what, you ask. Plenty. We can learn an important lesson from this book. We can save ourselves a lot of grief and failure by learning from someone else's mistakes. This book is a sad example of not choosing your audience.

What's the story behind this book? Why is it such a sad-but-true example? Here's the story. This book, "The Blow Flies of North America," was written by Dave Hall, USDA entomologist. He used it at the Laramie regional workshop in his topic of Choosing Your Audience. You see, he was talking about himself--which made his remarks all the more meaningful. He was trying to save his listeners there from the same serious mistakes he had made. That's the kind of person you just naturally respect--who openly admits his human slip-ups so others can learn from them.

Incidentally, Dave now supervises about 4 editors who work on popular USDA publications. He now calls himself a reformed scientist-editor. He also has received the cherished Annual Award from American Public Relations Council for directing the year-long observance of 100 years of Entomology in 1953. He has also received USDA's Superior Service Award. I feel privileged to be his friend and to have his quick OK to tell you of his experience.

Well, Dave says he spent 15 years on Uncle Sam's payroll to do his research and 8 more years to write his book. All the reviews praised it highly. Dave adds that it contained facts of direct interest to 120,000 professional people. On page 2 he writes: "This work has been prepared for use of entomologists, public health officials, physicians, veterinarians, biologists and students." This makes a potential audience of 500,000 people. In fact some of the information affects every man, woman and child.

But Dave calls his book "a magnificent failure." Since 1948 when the book was published, only 810 copies have been sold. He reached only one out of every 625 possible readers. Here are some typical quotes: "Male and female characters held in common. Head usually and often considerably wider than high, sometimes wider in female than in male, clypeus flush to deeply impressed, and most often half as wide as long but sometimes either wider or narrower; facials usually slightly bowed; vibrissae usually strong, . . .," etc. On page 160 and this is typical, it reads, "Thorax with disc or mesonotum convex; humeral bristless five; propleuron strongly pilose in center," and on and on for 477 pages.

Dave adds: "Do you think this book would be read by students? By busy physicians? By entomologists whose major interests involve crop insects? Of course not."

"My years of effort," writes Dave, "are buried in pages and pages of details so difficult to follow that few persons will ever dig them out." (Tell here how often taken out of local library).

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He continues:

"Here is the moral: Had I known the first of three simple principles of writing, this colossal failure could have been prevented.

"The principle I did not follow was this. Although I didn't realize it then, I really wrote this book for entomologists, in reality only for entomologists who are dipterests--people who study the classification of flies. There are less than 100 of these specialists in the entire world.

"To reach physicians, I should have developed information of medical interest into a paper directed to physicians. I should have omitted all information of no medical interest. Had I developed my information into different papers for different audiences, I would have successfully put my information into the hands of those who could use it, the information the taxpayers paid me to obtain, develop and disseminate."

To put the moral another way: Don't shoot until you see the whites of their eyes. Don't write one word until you've decided, after careful thought, exactly who you're writing for. Who is this reader? Who's your "customer?" Who's that person on the receiving end? Decide this first--choose your audience first--before you write anything. Don't shoot until you see the whites of their eyes!

Then wait some more. Don't write a word until you've finished two other important steps: (1) Choose only the information of interest to that audience and (2) organize those facts into a logical outline. Then--and not until then--are you ready to write.

But we're getting a bit ahead of ourselves. Right now we're talking about Choosing Your Audience. That reminds me about the story of the Tennessee mountaineer. He was telling his friend about his experience bear hunting. Seems he spotted a bear way off across the gully and it would be a tough shot to get him. He'd have to bounce the bullet off a rock at just the right angle to get the bear. His friend perked up immediately--a shot like that was impossible. "Did you get him?" he asked. "Nope," replied the hunter, "I missed the rock!"

We've been talking about "your audience" so far without defining this creature. You probably know pretty well by now what we mean. Your audience is simply the person or persons who will read what you have written. He's literally the person we're all working for and with.

Within agriculture alone, we have many audiences of course. Farm men, farm women and 4-H'ers. Among the men, we have dairy, poultry, wheat, tobacco, fruit, hog farmers and all the other farm products. Within dairying alone, we can write for dairy farmers, processing plants, or consumers. Besides dairy farmers, you may also want to report your information to veterinarians, equipment dealers, health officials, feed stores and all the other groups tied in with dairying somehow. Normally you'd probably have several audiences for your information.

And that brings up an important point: Do not mix your audiences. That's fatal--just like in Dave Hall's book. Don't try to write one report to "cover the water front." That's about like trying to kill a bear with a shotgun. You're spreading yourself too thin and you don't really get through to any one audience.

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To illustrate: Suppose we have a new disease of beef calves on the range and research makes you suspect it's carried from place to place by manure and dirt in trucks and railroad cars. The disease is not fatal but it seems to make the calves extremely thirsty. The cause is unknown yet, and for some reason, the conditions seem to clear up within about two weeks after calves reach the corn belt.

This may be an odd example, but it illustrates several points. Who's interested in these facts? Ranchers obviously. Also truckers and railroads, as suspected means of spreading the disease. Veterinarians also need to be informed. And corn belt cattle feeders want to know "why for" this unusual thirst that disappears harmlessly.

You can't write one report for all four groups and expect them all to get your info clearly. That's mixing too many breeds of cats. You don't reach any one of them fully. You're diluting your message for each one. For best results, do not mix your audiences. Give each group only the info which applies to that group.

Here's another point worth remembering: You're dealing with only two types of audiences--a captive audience or a free audience. A captive audience is literally that--they're forced to read what you write. You know you'll have readers--it's guaranteed. A letter to your wife or mother, a report to your boss, a paper in your technical journal--these are examples of reporting to a captive audience. They'll read what you have written to the bitter end, whether they want to or not. It's almost a required duty.

But a free audience is quite different. They can take you or leave you. You're forced to compete for their attention. You have no guaranteed readers. You have to attract them. Anything you write for farm people which reaches them through a general circulation farm magazine or newspaper is an example of trying to reach a free audience. Even our ag college circulars fall into this class. Farmers don't have to read them. They may or may not, as they choose. Our job is to make them so compelling that people simply must get a copy, read it and follow our recommendations.

Writing for a captive audience need not be long, dull and boring. Don't take advantage of your readers like that. That's pure laziness. It's to your benefit to write the best report or technical paper you can. Your boss and fellow scientists are of utmost importance to you and your future. Your chances for future advancement--financially and professionally--can be very easily influenced by the kind of report you write for those captive audiences.

Writing for a free audience by necessity must be lively, concise and interesting. Remember, these readers can take you or leave you. They don't have to read one word you write. You can write a million words, but if no one reads them, who failed? You, or the readers? As Dave Hall says, "Look what happened to me. I had a potential audience of 500,000 people--and they didn't care."

A Russian author puts it this way: "If people around you are spiteful and callous, and will not hear you, fall down before them and beg their forgiveness; for in truth you are to blame for their not wanting to hear you."

Or the same idea from Stuart Chase in "The Power of Words." He says: "When the audience turns away, there is something wrong with the writer's communication line. He should look to his tools. This holds for anyone who has something to say to others. It is primarily his lookout that the message gets through, not theirs."

Now for just a minute, let's look at the job of reporting scientific findings. Research people working for state experiment stations and the U. S. Department of Agriculture agree to do three things when they begin work. First, they agree to abide by the rules of the institution. Second, they agree to do the public's research and fact-gathering. Third, they agree to make the results of their research known to the public. This includes Extension people who inform the public.

The scientist's obligation to public reporting of his work does not require him to be a professional writer. By no means. But it does mean close teamwork with his campus information people. (Insert here statement coming from Dr. R. L. Lovvorn, Acting Director, N. C. Experiment Station, on this point).

All this bears on a related point. Anyone who speaks English can learn to transfer his thoughts into good, clear reports and publications. Just like you can learn to play the piano mechanically or learn to draw after a fashion. These reports or publications may not turn out to be masterpieces, but how many good, well-constructed buildings become first-rate examples of architecture?

It takes practice to write clearly. You keep your skill polished by using it often. Yet, as Dave Hall (himself a research man) emphasized at Laramie, how many research people spend years in obtaining and developing their data and then spend just a couple of weeks writing their report? The research job is never done until you report your results to all interested groups. In fact, isn't that the most important step? The most helpful facts are useless, unless people know about them.

Another thing about writing ability: It is perfectly safe to assume that scientists have logical minds, otherwise they wouldn't be successful scientists. Research in any field requires logical minds. If you can develop a clear, logical research program, then it follows that you can write clearly and logically. The two go together, like ham and eggs, or boys and girls.

To summarize then on choosing your audience, don't shoot till you see the whites of their eyes. Don't write one single word until you've decided exactly who you're writing for. Remember what happened with Dave Hall's book. Choose your audience first. Write only to one audience at one time. Whatever your audience, is it captive or free? A free audience can take you or leave you. With either audience, it's your lookout that your message gets through, not the readers.

To repeat: Don't shoot till you see the whites of their eyes. Don't write a word until you choose your audience.

