

## **Nasty Writing Issue #1, 'We'-ing all over your Reader: transcript**

Hi there, and welcome to Nasty Writing issue #1, 'We-ing' all over your Reader. I'm Scott Keyser, The Writing Guy.

### **00:04 What 'we-ing' all over the reader means and why it matters**

So what do we mean by 'we'-ing all over your reader? Pretty obviously, it's where we as the writer talk more about ourselves, our organization, our needs, our objectives, our message to the world, to the exclusion of the reader. And the dominant words are 'we', 'us' and 'our'. So it's writing that's all about the writer and not the reader, and this is what we mean by writer-centric writing.

The problem is that it's the exact opposite of what the reader needs to hear to be persuaded to your point of view or to follow your advice. They need your words to be all about them, not you, because they're more interested in *themselves* than in *you*. Psychologists refer to this as 'implicit egotism'.

The trouble is, when you violate that principle, you run the risk of turning your reader off, losing your reader, maybe forever. They may never revisit your writing. Your communication fails. And that means your mindset has sabotaged your communication, before the ink on the page is even dry.

### **01:20 Our language betrays our mindset**

And here's what writer-centric writing looks like. I've got an example for you. It's a contents list from a real proposal. No prizes for guessing the bid writer's focus here. There are seven mentions of the word 'our'. Okay, so there are no 'We's, but believe me, the body of the actual bid was 'we'-ing all over the reader.

And here's an interesting thing: whenever I review a longer business document, I always look at the contents lists first, 'cause that's like looking at an X-ray of the document. It helps me to see not only its underlying structure, but also the author's mindset.

And you know what? When our bias is so stark, what message are we giving the client, or the reader? We're giving them the message 'We're more important than you'. Hmm, not a great winning strategy, I'd say.

### **02:22 What/whom we focus on governs our ability to connect with the reader**

So here's what writer-centric writing looks like. The message here is that what or whom we focus on governs our ability to connect with the reader. What does this look like in practice?

So, on the graph here, you can see that the Y axis, the vertical axis, is affinity or empathy. And that's about making the reader feel understood by and connected with you. And we define empathy as the ability to understand and share someone else's feelings and ideas as if they were our own. To feel with the other person.

The point here is that empathy creates connection. Another related word is the French word *rapprochement*, meaning connection, relationship, or kinship. The ability to connect with others in a way that creates a climate of trust and understanding.

And then, on the X axis, you can see that it's quite simply our focus. So, we can choose to focus on ourselves, or we can choose to focus on the reader.

### 03:24 When we focus on ourselves, our language betrays us

When we focus on ourselves, our language gives us away. So you can see that we tend to use the words 'I', 'we', 'us', or 'our'. Also the little word 'do', as in, 'what we'll do with you or to you, or what we've done in the past'. So this is obviously 'we'-ing all over the reader. And typically we'll write about the features of our product, service or argument.

And then, the biggest mindset giveaway of all is this little word 'audience' that comes up all the time. When I'm running my writing workshops, people say, "Yeah, but we need to write for our audience." And I'm going to deal with that pesky little word in a minute.

But as you can see, when we're writer-centric, when we're talking about ourselves, then the connection with the reader is *weak*. And that's bad news; most readers will find that a turnoff.

It's a bit like the party bore. You're sitting next to somebody at a dinner party, say, who only talks about themselves. That's going to repel us, rather than draw or attract us to them.

So, why are most business writers writer-centric? Because it's easy. It's easy to talk about us, and who we are, because we know all about ourselves. But the real challenge — and where the treasure lies — is getting to know your reader. And then it makes writing for them so much easier.

### 04:58 Framing our readers as an 'audience' doesn't serve us

Framing our readers as an 'audience' gives us away. It betrays our mindset. It really doesn't serve us, and it reflects a writer-centric mindset. There are five problems with "audience."

One is, it comes from the Latin word 'Audi are', to listen or hear, and that's where we get words like 'audio' or 'audible' from. And, of course, even though there is a strong *auditory* aspect to writing, our readers are typically reading our words, they're not listening to our voice.

The second problem with "audience" is it lumps them all into the same bucket. It implies that all our readers are the same, which of course they're not. And it takes no account of individual emotional, cultural, or intellectual differences. When we talk about, or think in terms of our readers as an audience, it suggests we're broadcasting to them.

The third problem with "audience" is a passivity. Imagine, an audience sits there, in an auditorium or a theatre. And that's where we get the phrase "captive audience" from. Whereas, I would suggest that good writing makes the reader feel as if they're in a conversation, in a dialogue, rather than in a lecture.

The fourth problem is that audiences don't take decisions, individual readers do. And the fifth problem is, when you read something, do you feel like an audience? No, of course you don't. You feel like you, a unique, special, distinct, individual. And you want to be treated that way, don't you?

So, there's something called multiple personalities disorder. Writers who have this 'audience' mindset tend to treat their readers as if they're suffering from multiple personality disorder. When addressing multiple readers in the same document, maybe like an all-staff memo, they use "you" in a plural phrase, as in, "Some of you," or, "All of you."

As if their readers were huddled around one copy of the document. And when I read phrases like that, I look around me, to see who else is reading over my shoulder. So, don't indulge in multiple personality disorder.

### **07:15 Even if we're writing for 100s, treat them as individuals, not an audience**

I think the late great David Ogilvy, copywriter, founder of ad agency Ogilvy & Mather, and generally considered the father of advertising, got it right when he said: "Do not address your readers as if they were gathered together in a stadium. When people read your words, they are alone." So even if we're writing for dozens, or hundreds, or even thousands of people, we need to treat them as individuals, not an audience.

### **07:45 My cosmic analogy for being reader-centric**

I use a cosmic analogy for this. The obvious answer to "we-ing" all over your reader is to write for your reader. . And the cosmic analogy I use is our own solar system. There was a time when — 500, 600 years ago, even before then — man believed that the Earth sat at the centre of the universe. Essentially, man, or men, as it then was, sat at the centre of the universe, and the sun orbited the Earth. Now, of course, it's called the solar system precisely because the sun, the heaviest planet in our system, sits at its centre. And I use that as an analogy.

So, we as the writer must orbit the reader's needs, agenda, preoccupations, objectives, and needs. So, another way of putting it might be, allow your reader's agenda to exert a stronger gravitational pull on you than your own agenda.

### **08:50 All your writing must be relevant to the reader**

What happens to our writing when we do that is that our writing immediately becomes relevant. And studies have shown that people will read extremely long documents, as long as they are well-written, of course, and relevant. The moment our writing gains the merest hint, whiff, or scent of irrelevance, we're giving the reader the excuse they're looking for to stop reading.

Sad truth to tell, most of our readers have so many competing demands on their time and their energy, and their attention, that they seek any reason to stop reading our words. So don't give them that excuse.

### **09:31 The effect of being reader-centric**

To go back to our original graph, shifting our focus from ourselves to our reader has huge payoff in terms of our ability to influence them. So you can see here that we're focusing on them rather than ourselves, and everything changes. When we make that shift, and it is really an emotional shift rather than an intellectual one, it automatically, or automagically, maybe, changes...We're using the magic words "you" and "your." And I'll speak about those in a moment.

And typically, we use the little powerful word "get," because they're interested in what they're going to get when they follow your advice, or read your words. And, we will be talking about the benefits to them of doing whatever it is we're suggesting. And we're reader-centric.

And you can see that when we do that, when we focus on them, then the connection with the reader is *strong*. And that's what we want. So, the more we mirror their self-perception, how

they see themselves, the more we appeal to their self-interest, then the more persuasive our writing will be. And that gives us more influence over their behaviour.

And if you're involved at all in writing sales documents like bids, tenders, pitches, or proposals, this is vital. 'Cos this again is one of the biggest problems I see, that too many bids talk too much about the bidding organization, and too little about the client.

So my challenge to you, if you're a bid writer, or a bid manager, or you're involved in business development in any way, my challenge is: make every single page of your bid response either about the client, or adding value to them in some way. That's my challenge to you. The obvious answer to the issue of "we-ing" all over your reader is to write for your reader, and to personalize your writing to them.

### **11:34 Use The Magic Word**

And I mentioned the magic words, the two little magic words "you" and "your," and this really is where the magic happens. They're magic because they make the reader feel as if we're talking to them as an individual. They satisfy a basic human need to be heard and to feel special. And you almost can't overdo them. Using them liberally is a simple device you can't overdo.

And if you're writing for several reader types, different types of reader, my only word of warning is: be clear about who you mean by "you," so that there's no confusion about that. If you're into grammar as well, if you're a bit of a grammar geek, the use of "you" as the second person singular, is opposed to the first person singular, which is "I."

If you're in any doubt about the power of personalization, picture yourself flicking through a document, maybe it's a magazine article. And you suddenly spot your own name in that article. Would it make you more or less likely to read it? Well, the answer's obvious.

### **12:42 Get to know your reader**

The obvious answer is we need to get to know our reader. And how do we do that? Well, we do something called "desktop research." Live research. And I've just put down a list that I hope is useful to you.

An obvious first step: if they're a colleague, or if they work in the same company or organization as us, we can go and speak to them, or we can call them. Or we can talk to somebody who knows them or somebody outside our organization.

We can visit their place of work, their shop, their factory, their office. Obviously, we can use social media: we can look at their tweets and their Facebook posts. We can look them up on LinkedIn, we can look at their profile. And inevitably, we're going to google them, aren't we? That may well be the first thing that we do.

If they write blogs, we need to read them. And if they happen to have done a TED talk, or a TEDx talk, then we need to watch that.

Go to an event they're attending: a fair, or a conference, or an exhibition. But don't hang around underneath their bedroom window at night, 'cause that is stalking, and that's against the law! So don't do that.

And then, I've got a role-play attached to this module, which I really urge you to do. It's inviting you and helping you to step into their shoes, to walk a mile in their shoes. So, whatever we can do to get under the skin of our reader, in a nice way, then that's what we must do.

## **14:20 Otherwise, use your imagination**

So, if access to them, to our reader, is limited or impossible, then what can we do? We need to use a much-neglected writing tool, which is your imagination. Have an imaginary conversation with them, asking some of these fundamental questions. Such as: "What do you do? What's your role? What are the major challenges or demands of that role? What do you want more of, or less of? What are your values, hopes, and fears?" And then, the age-old question, which is, "What drives you, what gets you out of bed in the morning?"

What we're trying to do is we're trying to walk a mile in their shoes, to step into their shoes, and see the world from their perspective, from their point of view. This is about thinking our way into the reader's heart and mind.

## **15:17 Map out reader-types**

But let's say you're writing a blog about Brexit, a very topical subject. And you're a lawyer. And your blog may be read by ... I mean, hopefully, your blog will be read by dozens or hundreds, maybe even thousands of people.

Obviously, it's an impossible task for you to research every single reader. It would be absurd. So, what's the next best thing that we can do? Well, what we do is, we can research different types of readers. Let me show you what I would recommend.

We have here our three readers. Reader A might be general counsel in a major corporate, or the chief legal officer. He or she will have particular characteristics and needs, and particular things they will want to get out of your blog.

Who is reader B? Maybe reader B is the MD or the CEO, a business owner of an SME in the UK, and he or she is concerned and worried about the impact of Brexit on their business. So let's call them 'CEO'. And they will have particular things they want to get out of your blog.

And then, reader C might just be a member of the public. Member of the public, and they will have particular needs and agenda, and things *they* want to get out of your blog.

And then there will be stuff in the middle, content in your blog, that will be common to all three. So, what we're doing is, we're creating mini portraits, mini pen portraits, if you like, of each reader type.

And then, the way we handle that in our blog is, we just, through the structure and the subheadings, we make it clear that if you're general counsel in a corporate, then you will be interested in this stuff. If you're the MD or CEO of an SME in the UK, then you'll be interested in that. And if you're a member of the public, then you'll be interested in this content.

And then again through structure, you can make it clear that the content in the middle is common to all three. That's a simple way of making sure that each of your types of readers are getting what they need from your blog.

## **17:54 Become your reader's trusted advisor**

We've got to know our reader, whether we're using our imagination or desktop research, whatever avenue we're going down. But what is the ultimate benefit of doing this? What's the ultimate goal? Well, I maintain the ultimate goal is that we want to get our reader to know, like,

and trust us. In other words, as writers, we become both a source and a destination: a source of valued advice, and a destination for our readers. So that they seek out our views and our content.

When we do that, we're only a hop, skip, and a jump from becoming a trusted advisor. And when we're a trusted advisor, they take our calls, return our emails, meet us for coffee. And that's how we get to know them, and their business, and really get under their skin. And that's when selling just becomes another conversation. Rather than something we do *to* them, it's something that we do *with* them. So that, for me, is the ultimate benefit of getting to know our reader really well, and being reader-centric rather than writer-centric.

### **19:10 Get your mind right and you're halfway there**

You know, what is this all about, writing for your reader? This is about connecting with them, and it's about getting your mind right. And if you can get your mindset right, you're already halfway to being a much better writer. The irony is that this is much less about writing, much more about mindset. So it's more emotional intelligence than intellect or language.

And you should now understand the issue of "we-ing" all over your reader, why it matters, and what to do about it. There are a couple of exercises attached to this module to help you make that shift. So have a go at them. They're really simple, they won't take you very long, but they may ... If they shift your mindset from being writer-centric to reader-centric, then you'll make me a very happy man.

If you've got any feedback, any comments or questions, then post those in the box beneath the module, or in the Facebook group.

And just to close, in case you were wondering about this picture: these two gents are not about to give each other a Glaswegian kiss. They're actually two Uighur horse traders in a market in provincial China, and this is how they seal a deal. They touch foreheads gently, and that's all they need. That's their contract.

If you're a lawyer, you might want to think about that. I know, obviously, you're not trading horses! But nonetheless, I would suggest that we want our readers to feel as connected to us as these two gentlemen are showing.

**20:49**                      **Thanks.**