

## Excuses, Excuses: why good writing comes second best

*Kai Merriott examines why, in a medium where communication should be paramount, learning designers and script writers constantly get it wrong.*

Private eye runs Pseuds Corner every fortnight, which includes a sub-section dedicated to impenetrable corporate mumbo-jumbo like this gem from the Environment Agency's Corporate Strategy: "We will deliver a systematic and sustained programme of efficiency and measures for improved effectiveness, translated into sustainable local delivery to ensure the delivery of more stretching centrally derived targets."

Ironically, in the same document they state: "We will use clear and focused communications".

Sound familiar? Nobody thinks this sort of gobbledygook is a good way to communicate, but it's everywhere. It plagues reports, emails, company manuals - even training courses. And not only is it meaningless, there's so much of it.

It's *almost* excusable (and that's a big *almost*) in an email, which is at least disposable and can usually be followed up with a conversation. But it's inexcusable in e-learning. Not least because:

- Reading from a screen is uncomfortable, so each page should contain the least number of words possible. You don't want to linger too long on something that amounts to a bright, flickering rectangle.
- It's a fast-track version of classroom training that people can do alongside their jobs.
- The words need to balance nicely with the rest of the screen, so people know exactly where they're supposed to be looking, and in what order.
- It's supposed to (gasp!) teach the audience something.

If the writing is vague and unclear, the audience will spend all day trying to decipher the masses of text, they'll get confused and they'll not learn a jot. In other words, the course will have failed on all four counts.

So why, in a medium where communication should be paramount, do we - as learning designers and scriptwriters - consistently get it wrong?

It's mainly down to the same well-worn excuses. Here are some of the most common:

**"The audience is VERY intelligent and they'll be willing to read long, wordy paragraphs."**

Freelancer Cathy Moore ([www.cathy-moore.com](http://www.cathy-moore.com)) portrays it best on her website. Under a screen labelled "Fantasy", a jolly businessman sits at his laptop and says "I love to sit at my computer and read read read!" On the next screen, labelled "Reality", a sterner businesswoman says "They want me to take another online course? It had better be worth it."

The truth is, if the job requires a high level of intelligence, chances are it's pressured. So employees will be less willing to battle through unintelligible nonsense. They want learning that cuts right to the chase. They don't want to keep stopping and having to interpret what's being said on-screen

Besides, being intelligent does not increase your ability to read badly-expressed, wordy paragraphs. Look at this quote from an actual e-learning course:

"At a team/Account Handler level one of the key ways to capture whether the total plan is meeting team NOS goals is to use the MDA Effectiveness measure (NOS index / MDA index\*). This measure will indicate if >or = 100 whether a team/Account Handler is driving NOS faster than MDA, if > target if a team/Account Handler is ahead of target."

Do you think a PHD would help you understand this?

**"Second drafts are a "nice to have" and we haven't got the budget to accommodate it."**

This is often an internal decision, rather than one made by the client. Writers bash out a first draft and, after a quick punctuation proof, it's winged to the client. They make some amendments, add a few more blocks of text, and it comes back. A quick once-over to check for grammar and it's ready to go.

In theory, this approach saves money. It encourages the writers to work at speed and involves fewer revisions. Writing comes second to making a profit. But here's what actually happens: writers bash out a first draft (usually as close as possible to the original, convoluted source material). Already too long, this is sent to the client. They add more text, making it even harder to read. This is

crammed into the course at the expense of graphic design, readability and usability. As mentioned earlier, the fonts are usually kept small "so we can fit it all in".

And is the client happy? Usually not, because the end result is poor. They often can't put their finger on why, since they're not the experts...I mean, you've done what they wanted so they can't complain, right?

This means late rewrites, editing on-the-fly and a general mess. Although there may be savings at the scripting stage, there are cost implications later on. So in the long term, you probably haven't saved a penny.

Another benefit to getting the scripts right is clients probably won't mess with your text too much. If it all flows beautifully, and the points are expressed clearly, the last thing they'll want to do is copy and paste a chunk of text that interrupts this flow. And if they do, you can argue against its inclusion on these grounds.

**"We need to get all this stuff in otherwise we'll miss something important out."**

A classic excuse. The more you put in, the more people will learn. Found a spare block of white space? Let's fill it! What great value for money...for the price of one course, we can fit in three. Surely that means people will learn three times more?

Of course, in practice, the opposite is true. Faced with text-heavy screens, the user will learn nothing. They won't pick out the salient points. They won't digest the points specific to them. They certainly won't read the entire screen. They'll simply skip it. So all that stuff that just had to be in there gets missed entirely.

It's better to focus on one learning point per screen. We get nervous about too much white space because it doesn't balance with the rest of the screen, so waffle gets added to pad it out. But why not make the font and graphics larger? The text will be easier to read and everything will look neater. Look at how this screen is laid out:



Pictures take up most of the screen. And why not? This is a visual medium. See how the words balance nicely with the screen. There's none of the usual conflict going on, where pictures and words seem to jostle for space.

### **"Don't worry...the audience will understand it."**

When pushing the benefits of overhauling the source material to remove the hackneyed phrases and corporate jargon, the client might explain that the audience, so ingrained in the culture, will have no trouble reading it. Therefore, there's no need to spruce it up.

But there are two issues here. First, do you really know the audience will understand it? Honestly? Every single person in the organisation? Bearing in mind that we're usually talking about an audience comprising thousands, that's a major assumption to make. And why forsake clarity just because you think the audience will understand it? What happened to good writing, full stop? Chances are, if they do understand it'll be despite the way it's written, not because of it. So let's make their lives a little easier and lose the waffle.

### **"I can't find anything wrong with it."**

Clients don't tend to be writers. So when you criticise source material for being vague or meaningless, they genuinely don't understand what you're complaining about. Plus people get institutionalised - familiar corporate words invoke certain thoughts like "Ah...now we're talking business".

Look at this paragraph:

"High performance means reaching and exceeding stretching targets for the delivery of productivity, quality, customer growth, profits and shareholder value."

At first glance, you might think "Nothing wrong with that. It's telling me what is meant by high performance." But here's a test: based on this description, imagine what an employee might actually do to achieve this high performance. Apparently they've got to "exceed stretching targets". So they set a target, stretch it further, then exceed it. Is that even possible? Also, they've got to deliver things like "productivity" and "customer growth". Are these even things that can be delivered?

### **"That's what our manual says, so keep it the same."**

Some courses are designed to replace an old company manual. As such, it's presumed the pages can simply be transferred to the screen without fuss. Maybe throw in the odd question here and there to make it 'interactive' but on the whole, don't mess with it.

There are a number of problems with this. First, chances are the manual wasn't written by a writer. More an expert, or even someone just who's been around a long time. Second, the style of writing will almost definitely be unsuitable for the web. As Jakob Nielsen says on his website ([www.useit.com](http://www.useit.com)), "People rarely read Web pages word by word; instead, they scan the page, picking out individual words and sentences. In research on how people read websites we found that 79 percent of our test users always scanned any new page they came across; only 16 percent read word-by-word."

He goes onto state that web pages need "scannable text", using techniques like highlighted keywords and bulleted lists. Also, he recommends using "half the word count (or less) than conventional writing".

You can apply this same rule to e-learning. Again, people will scan, not read word-for-word. It's the nature of reading on the screen. It's uncomfortable, so learners just want to power through. They won't linger on every word. Unlike reading on the page, it's not a particularly relaxing experience.

### **"We need to sell the message to learners."**

As you might expect, this usually relates to sales training, but not exclusively. I've often been accused of not selling an idea or product enough. Usually, this involves sticking the words 'fantastic', 'exciting' or 'dynamic' into the sentence (maybe all three). I've also had a situation where a client kept inserting the word 'interesting' into a script - as if that's going to excite the employee.

Sales words don't work. They just weigh the sentence down. You can only create excitement by being specific. Look at this tagline from Apple about the iPod touch: "Millions of songs. Thousands of videos. Hundreds of games."

It says what it does - nothing more, nothing less. It has lots of storage capacity and you can listen to songs, watch videos and play games. What more do you need? Compare this to the blurb taken from the Creative Zen's web page: "ZEN puts a world of entertainment at your fingertips. This amazing, credit card-sized digital media player, with its incredible screen, is the ultimate choice when you want to enjoy your music, movies and photos, whether downloaded from your digital library or from web sites around the world."

Note the waffle: "a world of entertainment", "amazing", "incredible", "the ultimate choice". What exactly do these add?

### **"We tried it. It didn't work."**

Let's say you've rewritten the source material. It now reads brilliantly. You've focused only on the key messages and ditched the jargon so it's clear and

concise. And then...it falls apart. The client isn't happy, their stakeholders think you've cheapened the text and completely missed the point on a number of occasions. Therefore, the new approach is blamed.

But it isn't the new approach that's at fault. In fact, all good writing does is illustrate the faults of the source material. You could leave the gobbledygook intact - nobody would question it because they don't understand it.

Surely though, it's better to focus solely on getting the message across, so we can - lest we forget - teach people something.

### How to get the writing right:

- Ditch the gobbledygook and useless sales words. Instead, consider how best to get a point across.
- Keep it short - one learning point per screen.
- Think about your audience, and be honest: are they really going to understand what you're saying?
- Spare the time to edit your work.
- If in doubt, leave it out. Focus only on what you NEED to get across.
- Don't copy and paste. Rewrite manuals for the screen.
- Most importantly...don't give up.

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