The 7% Rule Revisited

COMMUNICATION CORNER

by Philip Yaffe

Editor's Introduction

Each "[Communication Corner](#)" essay is self-contained; however, they build on each other. For best results, before reading this essay and doing the exercise, go to the first essay "[How an Ugly Duckling Became a Swan](#)," then read each succeeding essay.

In this installment, Philip Yaffe debunks the myth of verbal versus non-verbal communication.

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Have you ever heard the adage that communication is only 7 percent verbal and 93 percent non-verbal, i.e. body language and vocal variety? You probably have, and if you have any sense at all, you have ignored it.

There are certain "truths" that are prima facie false. And this is one of them. Asserting that what you say is the least important part of a speech not only insults the intelligence of your audience, but your own intelligence as well.

The whole objective of most speeches is to convey information, or to defend or rally people to a point of view. Certainly, proper vocal variety and body language can aid the process. But by their very nature, these ancillary activities can convey only emphasis or emotion, not the message itself.

The proof? Although today we presumably live in a visual world, most information is still promulgated in written form, where vocal variety and body language play no role. Even the "interactive" internet is still mainly writing. The vast majority of people who surf the internet do so looking for texts, with which they may interact via hyperlinks, but it is still essentially text.

Likewise with a speech, if your words are incapable of getting your message across, then no amount of gestures and tonal variations will do it for you. These things may help inspire people to adopt your point of view. However, you are still obliged to carefully structure your information and look for "*le mot juste*" (the best words or phrases) to express what you want to say.

So just what does this "7% Rule" really mean?

The origin of this inimical adage is a misinterpretation, like the adage "the exception that proves the rule." This is something else people say without examining it. If you believe this is actually true, I will demonstrate at the end of this essay that it isn't. But first things first.

In the 1960s Professor Albert Mehrabian and colleagues at the UCLA (University of California at Los Angeles) conducted studies into human communication patterns. When their results were published in professional journals in 1967, they were widely circulated across mass media in abbreviated form. Because the figures were so easy to remember, most people forgot about

what they really meant. Hence, the myth that communication is only 7 percent verbal and 93 percent non-verbal was born. And we have been suffering from it ever since.

The fact is, Prof. Mehrabian's research had nothing to do with giving speeches, because it was based on the information that could be conveyed in a single word.

Subjects were asked to listen to a recording of a woman's voice saying the word "maybe" three different ways to convey liking, neutrality, and disliking. They were also shown photos of the woman's face conveying the same three emotions. They were then asked to guess the emotions heard in the recorded voice, seen in the photos, and both together. The result? The subjects correctly identified the emotions 50 percent more often from the photos than from the voice.

In the second study, subjects were asked to listen to nine recorded words, three meant to convey liking (honey, dear, thanks), three to convey neutrality (maybe, really, oh), and three to convey disliking (don't, brute, terrible). Each word was pronounced three different ways. When asked to guess the emotions being conveyed, it turned out the subjects were more influenced by the tone of voice than by the words themselves.

Prof. Mehrabian combined the statistical results of the two studies and came up with the now famous—and famously misused—rule that communication is only 7 percent verbal and 93 percent non-verbal. The non-verbal component was made up of body language (55 percent) and tone of voice (38 percent).

Actually, it is incorrect to call this a "rule," being the result of only two studies. Scientists usually insist on many more corroborating studies before calling anything a rule.

More to the point, Prof. Mehrabian's conclusion was that for inconsistent or contradictory communications, body language and tonality may be more accurate indicators of meaning and emotions than the words themselves. However, he never intended the results to apply to normal conversation. And certainly not to speeches, which should never be inconsistent or contradictory.

So what can we learn from this research to help us become better speakers?

Basically, nothing. We must still rely on what good orators have always known. A speech that is confused and disorganized is a poor speech, no matter how well it is delivered. The essence of a good speech is what it says. This can be enhanced by vocal variety and appropriate gestures. But these are auxiliary, not primary.

Toastmasters International, a worldwide club dedicated to improving public speaking, devotes the first four chapters of its beginner's manual to organizing the speech itself, including a chapter specifically on the importance of words in conveying meaning and feeling. Only in Chapter 5 and Chapter 6 does it concern itself with body language and vocal variety.

I don't know how to quantify the relative importance of verbal to non-verbal in delivering speeches. But I have no doubt that the verbal (what you actually say) must dominate by a wide margin.

One of the most famous speeches of all time is Abraham Lincoln's Gettysburg Address. Its 272 words continue to inspire 150 years after they were spoken. No one has the slightest idea of Lincoln's movements or voice tones.

Now, what about that other oft-quoted misconception "the exception that proves the rule?"

If you reflect for a moment, you will realize an exception can never prove a rule; it can only disprove it. For example, what happens when someone is decapitated? He dies, right? And we know that this rule holds, because at least once in history when someone's head was chopped off, he didn't die!

The problem is not with the adage, but with the language. In old English the term "prove" meant to test, not to confirm as it does today. So the adage really means: "It is the exception that tests the rule." If there is an exception, then there is no rule, or at least the rule is not total.

Native English speakers are not alone in continuing to mouth this nonsense; in some other languages it is even worse. For example, the French actually say *l'exception qui confirme la règle* ("the exception that confirms the rule"), probably because it was mistranslated from English. This is quite unequivocal, leaving no room for doubt. But it is still wrong.

HOMEWORK: Retrospective to Communication Corner No. 9

In the previous [installment](#), you were asked to read and enjoy "The Gettysburg Address," and benefit from a line-by-line analysis of how this miniature masterpiece was put together. If you did do so, please return to Communication Corner No. 9 and do so now. Otherwise, you will miss one of the most important lessons of the whole "Communication Corner" series.

CURRENT HOMEWORK

Now that we are fully launched into public speaking, I would like to reiterate my assertion that wiring and speaking are flip sides of the same coin. Below you will find a summary of everything you have already learned about expository (non-fiction) writing in the first nine essays in the "Communication Corner" series. Your homework is to read the summary to see just how far we have already come, and to fix all the key ideas firmly in mind. While you are reviewing them, think about how they might also be applied to giving a good speech or other types of oral presentations.

But remember, these fundamental principles and practices of professional writing can be effectively employed when these fundamentals are consciously and consistently observed.

Fundamental Purpose: Expository (non-fiction) writing is designed to inform and instruct.

Fundamental Attitude: No one wants to read what you are going to write. First and foremost, you must give them reasons for doing so.

Fundament Approach: Organize information to generate reader interest.

Definition of Clarity: $C_L = EDE$

- Emphasize what is of key importance
- De-emphasize what is of secondary importance
- Eliminate what is of no importance

Definition of Conciseness: $C_O = LS$

- Long as necessary
- Short as possible

Definition of Density: $D = PL$

- Precise information
- Logically linked

Inverted Pyramid

- Lead: Who? What? When? Why? How?
- Body: Detailed information in declining order of importance

TIPS AND TECHNIQUES

The principles of good writing are the same in all languages; therefore, the following tips and techniques are applicable to all languages in which you may need to write. However, different languages have different grammars and different ways of expressing things. For example, English has a predilection towards using the gerundive form, e.g. "Running is good for health" rather than the infinitive "To run is good for health." Other languages prefer the infinitive and would consider the gerundive form as unnatural, and therefore distracting.

In whatever language you write, you can do an internet search to find these useful refinements and specificities. But remember they will always be secondary to the universal tips and techniques reviewed below.

Fog Factors

Unnecessary words in a text cause fog (reduced clarity). Eliminate them.

Fog: On the one hand the box was big and on the other hand it was green

Clarity: The box was big and green

Fog: When we take into account those factors that have an effect on the economy

Clarity: Concerning economic factors

Fog: In the last place on the list

Clarity: Finally

Nothing in a text is neutral. Whatever doesn't add to the text, subtracts from it.

Sentence Length

Contrary to the popular belief, a logically constructed long sentence can be easier to understand than several shorter ones. ("Long" and "short" are weasel words, because what is long in one situation is short in another.)

Check "long" sentences for logical coherence.

- If the ideas are closely related, leave the sentence alone
- If not, divide it into logically coherent shorter ones.

Check "short" sentences for logical linkage.

- If the ideas in several sentences are closely related, put them together into a single sentence.
- If not, leave them separate.

Placement for Emphasis

Words at the beginning and at the end of a sentence have stronger emphasis than those in the middle. These are known as "hot spots." Put key information into these hot spots to aid reader understanding.

Example 1

Poor

Astronomers hunting for evidence of life outside of our solar system announced discovery of a new class of planets yesterday.

Better

Yesterday astronomers hunting for evidence of life outside of our solar system announced discovery of a new class of planets.

Best

Astronomers hunting for evidence of life outside of our solar system yesterday announced discovery of a new class of planets.

Example 2

Poor

The national leaders met to discuss new trade relations between their two countries in the Royal Palace

Better

In the Royal Palace the national leaders met to discuss new trade relations between their two countries.

Best

The national leaders met in the Royal Palace to discuss new trade relations between their two countries.

Important Note: While hot spots exist in English, only a linguist would know if they exist in other languages as well. If you are not writing in English, check to see if your language also has hot spots. If yes, then fully exploit them on all possible occasions.

Separation for Emphasis

Separate a key idea from a longer sentence for dramatic impact.

Poor

Only a few years ago, we were a small specialty manufacturer in Europe, but we have grown, so that today we are no longer small.

Better

Only a few years ago, we were a small specialty manufacturer in Europe, but we have grown. Today we are no longer small.

Separation can also be used with paragraphs, which may lead to single-sentence paragraphs. Although more acceptable today than in the recent past, some grammarians and conventional writers would still say that single-sentence paragraphs violate some kind of grammatical “rule.” However, professional writers increasingly ignore this so-called rule when it boosts clarity; dramatic effect and clarity often go hand-in-hand.

You have already seen many examples of paragraph separation throughout the Communication Corner series. Here are two of them.

Example 1

Conventional writing

Over the past 40 years, I have frequently been told that I am an exceptionally good writer, by teachers, friends, colleagues, and clients. But I wasn’t always a good writer; in fact, I used be a very bad one.

So what happened to bring about this monumental change? Basically, university. When I was growing up (I was born in 1942), I was a very unusual kid. I absolutely loved school. I was especially fond of math and science; I never really thought about writing. However, when I went from primary to secondary school, I quickly realized that writing would become increasingly important. So being the bizarre kid I was, I decided to teach myself how to do it.

Professional writing

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Example 2

Conventional writing

You may now feel that the inverted pyramid is an excellent idea—for newspapers. But is it relevant for the type of writing that you do? Emphatically, yes! Remember, the inverted pyramid provides information in exactly the way people prefer it, particularly when they are in a hurry.

Professional writing

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Emphatically, yes!

Remember, the inverted pyramid provides information in exactly the way people prefer it, particularly when they are in a hurry.

Parentheses and Dashes for Emphasis

Use parentheses (these are parentheses) to incorporate explanatory or secondary information into a sentence.

Use dashes -- these are dashes -- to highlight exceptionally important information within a sentence.

Example

Newspapers used to be published infrequently (weekly rather than daily) and had very few pages. When they became dailies—with some even having several editions each day—they no longer had time to rewrite stories to fit the space for them on the page.

Repetition for Clarity

Don't be afraid to repeat a word for clarity and emphasis. Continually changing terminology causes hesitation and reduces clarity.

The big dog looked at me strangely. I am afraid of big dogs, so I cautiously moved away.

NOT: The big dog looked at me strangely. I am afraid of large canines, so I cautiously moved away.

If you wish to use more than one term to mean the same thing, be certain that you clearly inform the readers.

Poor

Atopic dermatitis is a common disease of infants aged 0-2 years. About half of all infants with infantile eczema will develop asthma before their fourth birthday.

Better

Atopic dermatitis (infantile eczema) is a common disease of infants aged 0-2 years. About half of all infants with infantile eczema will develop asthma before their fourth birthday.

Avoid Using the Conjunction “and”

The conjunction “and” is like an equal sign, indicating that the two ideas it connects have essentially the same weight. However, often they don't; one idea is more important than the other. Make this relationship explicit; don't expect the reader to do it.

Poor

It started to rain and John went into the house.

Better

It started to rain, so John went into the house.

It started to rain; therefore John went into the house.

Because it started to rain, John went into the house.

As it started to rain, John went into the house.

When it started to rain, John went into the house.

Active versus Passive Verb Forms

Use active verb forms rather than passive ones to create a sense of immediacy.

We have just gone through a difficult period.

NOT: We have just been in a difficult period.

“Just gone through” is active because “to go” is an action. The active verb strongly confirms that the difficult period is now over.

“Just been in” is passive because “to be” is a state or condition. The passive verb less strongly confirms that the difficult period is now over.

Verbs for Conciseness and Density

Use verbs rather than nouns to increase conciseness and density.

The new product will strongly contribute to increasing profits.

NOT: The new product will be a strong contributor to an increase in profits.

Bullet Points and Numbered Lists

Purpose of bullet points and numbered lists. Use bullet points or numbered lists to explain and highlight general statements. Bullet points or numbers that relate to nothing have no value. In other words, first state a proposition; then show bullet points or a numbered list to support the proposition.

These are the four factors that led us to this decision:

1. Economic conditions are . . .
2. Technical developments have . . .
3. Government policy will . . .
4. Social conditions are . . .

These are the four factors that led us to this decision:

- Economic conditions are . . .
- Technical developments have . . .
- Government policy will . . .
- Social conditions are . . .

Make bullet points and numbered lists “clean.” The purpose of bullet points is to make thoughts and information stand out. So why go against the current by not capitalizing the first letter of each point?

Version A

Our system helps people:

- write better;
- write faster;
- write persuasively;
- reduce errors;
- reduce formatting problems.

Version B

- Our system helps people:
- Write better
- Write faster
- Write persuasively
- Reduce errors
- Reduce formatting problems

Notice that in addition to capitalizing each bullet point, Version B also eliminates the semi-colons and the period. What logic is there for putting in commas, semi-colons, and periods? The fact that the next line is a new bullet point, i.e. clearly a new thought, makes such punctuation unnecessary, and even distracting.

Arrange listed items to start with a key word or a verb. Starting each item of a list with a verb or key word increases impact and facilitates understanding. Starting each item passively or with a minor element or little or no significance impedes impact and understanding.

Poor

There are many advantages to assertive communication

- It helps us feel good about ourselves and others
- It leads to the development of mutual respect with others
- It increases our self-esteem
- It helps us achieve our goals.

Better

There are many advantages to assertive communication. It:

- Helps us feel good about ourselves and others
- Helps us achieve our goals
- Leads to the development of mutual respect with others
- Increases our self-esteem

“It” is a limp term. Using it four times within the list detracts from the impact and understanding we want the list to achieve. Using it only once in the introduction to the list does the job much better.

Since each bullet point now takes the form of a phrase rather than a complete sentence, we can eliminate the periods at the end, which now serve no real purpose.

Display Data for Easy Comprehension

Display data directly next to their reference. Data displayed “respectively” requires the reader to stop and confirm the correct order.

Poor

The CAC, DAX and AEX all fell during past three months: -1.76%, -0.98%, and -2.26% respectively.

Better

The three indices that fell during the past three months were: CAC (-1.76%), DAX (-0.98%), and AEX (-2.26%).

When readers backtrack to confirm data, you lose some of their attention. By displaying data properly, you maintain their attention. The word “respectively” almost always causes loss of reader attention. Banish it from your vocabulary.

Writing and Re-writing

First draft

- Focus on structure and content
- Write the way you speak, i.e. rapidly put the content into the structure without too much concern for how you are writing.

Revised draft

- Focus on clarity, conciseness, density
- Correct grammar, vocabulary, wordiness, poorly placed info, etc.

The first draft and the revised draft are two distinct phases of good writing. Do them separately; don't try to do both at the same time.

Leave a few hours (or days) between the first draft and the revised draft. During this so-called “incubation period,” your subconscious mind will continue thinking about the text while your conscious mind is focused somewhere else. When you do work on the revised draft, you will be more efficient. You will produce a much better text in much less time than if you try to do the two phases simultaneously or immediately after each other.

Good writing is not easy, but it gets easier.

About the Author

Philip Yaffe was born in Boston, Massachusetts, in 1942 and grew up in Los Angeles, where he graduated from the University of California with a degree in mathematics and physics. In his senior year, he was also editor-in-chief of the *Daily Bruin*, UCLA's daily student newspaper. He has more than 40 years of experience in journalism and international marketing communication. At various points in his career, he has been a teacher of journalism, a reporter/feature writer with *The Wall Street Journal*, an account executive with a major international press relations agency, European marketing communication director with two major international companies, and a founding partner of a specialized marketing communication agency in Brussels, Belgium, where he has lived since 1974. He is the author of more than 20 books, which can be found easily in Amazon Kindle.

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