How to Make a Microcosm into a Universe

COMMUNICATION CORNER No. 26

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 general you can't get people to read something if they believe it is totally outside their domain of interest. Some will nevertheless read the first couple of lines to confirm what they believed that already knew. Here is a technique that could rapidly change their mind.

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A friend who was under consideration for a major career achievement award asked me to comment on a statement he was required to submit to the judging committee. I am by no means an expert in his field, but I knew enough to understand most of what he had written.

When I returned the text to him with my comments and amendments, his reaction was effusive. “This is so much better! It says everything I said but in a way that grabs attention and really puts the information into sharp relief. It’s a miracle!”

No, it wasn’t a miracle. It was simply an application of a very useful tactic that applies equally to both writing and speaking. I call it: “Making a microcosm into a universe” (MMU).

I had made reference to this expository writing/speaking tactic a few times before in these Communication Corner essays. I know my friend had been reading the essays, but apparently he had not been sufficiently struck by the tactic to put it into practice when he really needed it. His statement to the judges gave them no immediately recognizable picture of how his accomplishment had affected them and made their lives considerably easier. This is probably my fault, because previously I presented the tactic as a generalization. I never gave it this picturesque name.

What does it mean to “make a microcosm into a universe?”

We all live in our own little worlds. No matter how educated and well read we are, we seldom see the significance of something until it is gently but firmly pointed out to us. If we really want to draw people into our text or speech (our little world), we must keep this fundamental human trait uppermost in mind.

The reason the tactic is called “make a microcosm into a universe” (MMU) is not to be picturesque, but rather to highlight its fundamental mechanism.

As a writer or speaker, you may want to talk about something you consider interesting and important in your little world but for which the audience may have no intrinsic affinity. So how do you get them to leave their little worlds and temporarily join you in yours? In most cases, you can’t know what might titillate the interest of any individual person—only they know that. So in the introduction to your text or speech, you expand your little world to encompass theirs, i.e. make a microcosm into a universe. The broader you can go in the introduction, i.e. the

bigger the universe you can create, the more likely each individual in your intended audience will find something in your statement that will draw them to you, of which you are probably entirely ignorant.

It's like a shopkeeper trying to sell his wares. Suppose he keeps the shutters of the shop's display window closed so no one can see what's inside. Instead, he stands at the door and tells passers-by "Come in and look around. I'm certain you will find something you will like." Suppose another shopkeeper keeps the shutters of the window up and shows a wide variety of items for sale for each passer-by to see and evaluate. Which shopkeeper do you think will have the greater success?

For me, there is no contest. The first shopkeeper is saying "Come into my world because *I am convinced* there is something inside you will like." The second shopkeeper is saying "Come into my world because *you are convinced* (or at least strongly suspect) there is something inside you will like.

Here are a few examples of the MMU tactic at work. Each example is the introductory text of sections in a brochure by a high-tech company aimed at helping the general public better understand the difficulty and importance of what they do.

In developed countries of Europe, North America, and elsewhere, we live in a convenience society. There is usually a shop somewhere nearby to get whatever we want, virtually any time we want it.

For example, buying vegetables at the supermarket is such a routine task that it seems hardly worth a second thought. Crops are grown, packaged, delivered to the supermarket, paid for, then taken home and consumed. What could be more uninspiring?

However, the means by which crops get from the field to the store is a complex, high-tech operation.

The Mechelen Auction Halls in Sint-Katelijne-Waver, Belgium, are a key link in this generally unappreciated supply chain from farmer to the consumer. A vital part of the Halls' operations is preparing and stacking 11 million empty cardboard boxes for pick up by vegetable growers, who then bring them back filled with vegetables to be stacked and stored, ready for transport by buyers to the next phase of the supply chain to ensure the efficiency and reliability of boxing and stacking.

If you smoke, you are almost certain to put out your cigarette when you pull into a gasoline station for a fill-up. You might also avoid talking on your cell phone. These are very good ideas. Refined petroleum products such as gasoline, diesel, heating oil, etc. are highly explosive.

But imagine your concern if you worked around tons of these products all day, every day, because that's your job. This is exactly the situation inside a petroleum refinery where these useful but dangerous products are produced.

The Mineraloelraffinerie Oberrhein GmbH (MIRO) refinery in Karlsruhe is Germany's largest refinery and one of the most modern and productive refineries in Europe. Its more than a thousand skilled workers annually transform some 16 million tons of crude oil into valuable petroleum products for both industrial and personal use.

MIRO, like all other oil refineries, takes every imaginable precaution against possible explosion. To this end, the company recently carried out a major upgrade of its electrical protection systems...

Managing a railroad infrastructure is not unlike managing a fine restaurant or a top-class hotel. Users should hardly be aware that you are there except when on rare occasions when something goes wrong, and then rapidly put right.

However, managing a railroad infrastructure has another major concern—safety.

Passengers have a right to expect that they will get to their destination on time, and as smoothly and as comfortably as possible. With the increasing amount of rail traffic and the increasing speeds of trains, the daily safety aspect takes on ever more significance.

To achieve these objectives—reliability, comfort, safety—Infrabel, the infrastructure management division of the Belgian national railway, has decided to centralize its signaling system. This system, among other things, acts to control the train speeds, inform the train driver of impediments and dangers on the tracks...

Turn a knob and a gas-fired flame jumps up to cook your food. Flick a switch and a gas-fired central heating system leaps into action to heat your home. Gas is so ever-present and easily accessible, most people forget (or perhaps never knew) that for it to so effectively help us in our daily lives, it often has to travel hundreds, and even thousands of kilometres to get to where it is needed.

Vast complexes of gas pipelines around the world represent some of man's most imaginative, sophisticated engineering projects, of which each stage is vitally important.

For example, a few years ago Fabricom GTI Major Projects in Brussels (Belgium) was selected to revamp the instrumentation, and command and control installations along several gas pipelines in Algeria supplying gas to several European countries.

Because the equipment was to be assembled in Belgium, two key specifications had to be met. First, the equipment had to be as compact as possible to minimize shipping cost and space requirement in the on-site control cabinet. Second, it had to be easy to install by the Algerian technicians.

People who attend live shows are rightly impressed by the talent and skill of the performers, the acoustics, the lighting, the decor, etc. However, they are seldom aware of the incredible hidden technology that makes it all possible.

For example, the magnificent Concertgebouw in Bruges (Belgium) is fitted with movable ceilings and special curtains to ensure the best acoustics for any type of performance. Moreover, the building rests on several thousand springs to ensure that vibrations from outside do not damage the acoustics.

Especially impressive, is the movable the orchestra zone at the front part of the stage which can be raised or lowered according to need, i.e. to become part of the stage, to serve as an orchestra pit, to provide additional places for the audience, etc. It can also be used to raise or return stage equipment to and from the basement ...

THE TRANSFORMATIVE POWER OF MMU

Employing the MMU tactic can totally transform the structure of a text or speech. Here is a speech that was presented a few years ago to an international audience in Brussels. First, let's see how it might have been written without the MMU tactic, then how it was actually written with MMU.

The Speech as It Might Have Been Written

I would like to talk to you this evening about a man I admire very much. His name is Julius Nyerere and he was the first president of Tanzania after it gained independence from Britain in 1961.

Julius Nyerere was born in 1922 in Butiama, a small village in what was then Tanganyika. He was the son of Nyerere Burito, a Zanaki tribal chief. At that time schools were in very short supply. Julius began attending Government Primary School at the age of 12, which he completed

in three years instead of the standard four. He did equally well in secondary school and won a scholarship to Makerere University in Uganda, then the only university in all of East Africa.

When he returned to Tanganyika, he worked for three years as a secondary school teacher of biology and English. He then won a scholarship to attend the University of Edinburgh, where he obtained a Master of Arts degree in history and economics. This is where he began developing the ideas and tactics that ultimately helped him lead Tanganyika to independence from Britain and become the independent country's first president. Unlike many other independence movements at the time, he achieved this feat without a single drop of blood being shed.

(The presentation continues)

Analysis

This speech seems to get off to a good start. It immediately tells the audience what the speaker is going to talk about and whom he is going to talk about. Because most people in the audience probably will never have heard of Julius Nyerere, it immediately answers the question: "Who is he?" Remember, whenever you raise a question in your reader's or listener's mind, it is essential to answer it; otherwise you risk losing their attention.

All this is very good. However, the introduction is resolutely microcosmic, being entirely situated in the speaker's own little world. In effect, it tells the audience: "This is what I want to talk about and what I want you to listen to." However, it gives no reason why the audience should want to listen. Or any opportunity for the individual members of the audience to find reasons for themselves.

For many, interest may begin only when the speaker reveals that Nyerere achieved independence "without a single drop of blood being shed," a highly unusual occurrence in the independence movements of the 1960s. The speaker points this out nearly 200 words further down. This is far too late. Interest should have been generated from the very beginning.

The Speech as It Was Actually Written

We live in a cynical world where the values of truth, honesty, and integrity seem to be in short supply. We are therefore always looking for examples of such values in action, especially with regard to politicians.

I would like to offer you just such an example from Africa. You may never have heard of him, but for me he stands as a true model of integrity. Can you guess who he might be? (Speaker waits a few seconds to give the audience a moment to think, and for dramatic effect. He then resumes.) No, it is not Nelson Mandela. However, I am certain Mr. Mandela would have been more than pleased to be compared to this person.

His name is Julius Nyerere. Julius Nyerere was the man who led Tanganyika, today called Tanzania, to independence from Britain in 1961. Unlike many other independence movements of the time, this one succeeded without a single drop of blood being shed.

Because of this, when Nyerere became head of state in 1961, he was so popular that he could easily have taken on the trappings of a king or potentate. But he did exactly the opposite. He chose to live very modestly, because that was his nature. More importantly, he inspired confidence in everyone and never betrayed that confidence, because that also was his nature.

Julius Nyerere was a pragmatist riding a wave of surging optimism.

(The presentation continues)

Analysis

We live in a cynical world where the values of truth, honesty, and integrity seem to be in short supply. We are therefore always looking for examples of such values in action, especially with regard to politicians.

- Instead of immediately talking about Julius Nyerere, whom most of the audience probably would not recognize, the speaker immediately “makes a microcosm into a universe.” That is, he makes a broad generalization with which most of the audience would probably agree. Therefore, they are immediately engaged with the subject.
- The first paragraph also suggests that the speaker is about to offer a counter-example to this gloomy generalization, thereby titillating the audience’s interest even further.

I would like to offer you just such an example from Africa. You may never have heard of him, but for me he stands as a true model of integrity. Can you guess who he might be? (Speaker waits a few seconds to give the audience a moment to think, and for dramatic effect. He then resumes.) No, it is not Nelson Mandela. However, I am certain Mr. Mandela would have been more than pleased to be compared to this man.

- The second paragraph confirms the suggestion that the speaker will give a counter-example. But only partially. By promising an example from Africa, the speaker raises the speculation in the audience’s mind that he is going to talk about Nelson Mandela, probably the only African leader of world stature most of them have ever heard of.
- By asking the question “Can you guess who he might be?” the speaker confirms the audience in their speculation.

- The speaker then reverses the situation by declaring that it isn't Nelson Mandela, but someone whom Mr. Mandela himself would have greatly admired. This heightens the audience's attention and engagement.

His name is Julius Nyerere. Julius Nyerere was the man who led Tanganyika, today called Tanzania, to independence from Britain in 1961. Unlike many other independence movements of the time, this one succeeded without a single drop of blood being shed.

- Note the repetition of the name Julius Nyerere. Since most of the audience will probably never have heard of him, they are likely not to grasp the name the first time it is mentioned, so it is immediately repeated.
- Julius Nyerere is identified as the man who led Tanganyika, now Tanzania, to independence. This is a distinction, but hardly outstanding. However, the speaker immediately says that this happened "without a single drop of blood being shed," a very rare occurrence. The audience gets its first clue as to what makes this man so special.

The speech continues in this manner. It gives clear, concise, pertinent information to appease the interest of the audience already raised. It also gives a reason for the audience to continue listening when the speaker wants to change direction. For example, after giving some information about Nyerere's background and how he became president, he introduced the section on how he governed with the statement, "Julius Nyerere was a pragmatist riding a wave of unbridled optimism." What does that mean? Tell me more."

MAKING THE IMPLICIT EXPLICIT

As I mentioned at the beginning, the "make microcosm into a universe" tactic has been referred to several times in previous Communication Corner essays, but not under this picturesque name.

It was implicit in the "lead" of a news story structured as an "inverted pyramid" as discussed in Communication Corner No. 3 ["How to Improve Your Writing by Standing on Your Head"](#).

Remember: The chief purpose of the lead of a news story is to rapidly give readers sufficient information so they can determine if they want or need to read any further. If that lead statement is sufficiently complete and well crafted, they probably will continue to read.

The same is true of "make a microcosm into a universe." However, there is an important difference. With a news story, the lead must be dispassionate, giving only the facts in a clear, concise, dense manner. Emotion is forbidden. With MMU, emotion is not forbidden, and is often quite useful.

MMU is also implicit in the expository writing attitude/expository speaking attitude, discussed in Communication Corner No.16 [“If You Write It Better, You Will Say It Better.”](#)

- Expository Writing Attitude
No one wants to read what you write
- Expository Speaking Attitude
No one wants to hear what you say

In other words, your first and foremost task as a writer or speaker is to give your audience good reason to pay attention to what you are going to say. While not the only way to do so, quite often this is best achieved by making a microcosm into a universe.

Finally, MMU is also implicit in Yaffe’s Law, discussed in Communication Corner No. 8 [“How to Make Dull Information Exciting.”](#) Yaffe’s Law states: If you give people *what they want first*, they are likely to accept anything else you want them to have. If you give them *what you want first*, chances are they won’t accept anything at all. Once again, while not the only way to do so, quite often this is best achieved by making a microcosm into a universe.

The story is told of a famous speaker in the American Deep South. He always filled the auditorium wherever he went, and was always met with exuberant applause. When asked the secret of his success, he replied:

“It ain’t no secret. It’s really quite simple. First, I tell’em what I’m goin’ to tell’em. Then I tell’em. Then I tell’em what I told’em.”

He of course was being quite modest. In the example about Julius Nyerere, in the first version the speaker quite clearly tells the audience what he is going to tell them, but in such a narrow, self-centered way (my little world) as to make everyone scratch their head wondering why they should bother to listen. In the second example, the speaker also tells the audience what he is going to tell them. But in such an imaginative expansive way that most of the listeners can hardly wait to hear what he is going to say next.

That’s what the “make a microcosm into a universe” tactic is all about.

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 30 books, which can be found easily in Amazon Kindle.

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