

A Proposal For

Writing Without Bullshit

The transformative power of bold, clear, powerful writing

By Josh Bernoff

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OVERVIEW

The tide of bullshit is rising.

Your email inbox is full of irrelevant, poorly written crap. Your boss talks in jargon and clichés. The Web sites you read are impenetrable and incomprehensible.

Bullshit is a burden on all of us, keeping us from getting useful work done.

Technology has made it breathtakingly easy for anybody to create content and distribute it to thousands of people. Unfortunately, nobody told those creators what it takes to create good content, so we're stuck wading through a deluge of crap.

You know this is a problem. I'm here to tell you that it's also an opportunity.

Imagine for a moment that you could write boldly, clearly, and powerfully every time you sat down at the keyboard. When your email showed up in your colleagues' inboxes, it would pop. Reports you wrote would get people to sit up and take notice. If you wrote marketing copy, customers would respond to it. You'd earn a reputation as a straight-talker.

Why aren't you doing this yet? I know why. I've worked with thousands of people just like you, people who work in an office and need to communicate in their jobs. Here's what's stopping them — and you — from clearing away the bullshit and writing clearly.

First, you got the wrong training. In high school and in college, you learned to write too long and to fool teachers into believing you knew what you were talking about. Those teachers implicitly taught you that bullshitting was effective.

Then, when you started working, you found yourself immersed in more babble. From the moment you sat down and read the employee manual, you were sunk. You took your cues from the people around you, people who didn't tend to tell the plain truth when they wrote things.

Finally, you learned that avoiding risk was paramount. Clarity can be dangerous, because people who read what you wrote might disagree with it.

If you're okay with being a mindless component in the vast bullshit machine that is the business world, please put this book down and walk away. You can keep writing equivocal garbage, and you'll fit in just fine.

But if you'd prefer to stand out, I can show you how. It's not that hard. In fact, it's mostly a matter of connecting with your own natural ways of communicating.

I will give you the courage to say what you mean. Not only that, I'll give you the skills, teach you the tricks, and show you how to organize your day so you get the chance to show that courage in everything you write.

Crucially, I'll also show what's motivating you to write the way you do, and what's stopping you from writing more clearly. Every single bad habit you've learned is tied up with your own psychology at work. As I teach you to express yourself more powerfully, I'll clear away the your motivational roadblocks that are stopping you. Once you understand that psychology, you'll be on your way to making a far more powerful impression.

The more of you readers who listen to what I say and learn from it, the more clarity and the less bullshit there will be out there. I'd like to change the culture of business and life in America to one that embraces candor over bullshit. I'm happy to convert you one at a time. I'd

like you to join me. It'll be good for your career, good for your company, and good for the world. So let's get started.

Why I'm creating *Writing Without Bullshit*

I've been writing in business for 33 years. I've written everything from software manuals to Web sites to research reports that sell for thousands of dollars. I started with talent, had good teachers, and became passionate about the powerful expression of ideas.

My writing reached its pinnacle at Forrester Research, which sells reports based on objective research. Forrester's reports went through a dozen or more drafts; we knew they had to deliver enormous value in limited space, from the executive summary all the way through the argumentation and recommendations. After 15 years, I became the company's head of idea development. I co-wrote three books, edited two more, and midwived the company's most powerful ideas into streams of lucrative research.

Here's what I learned: People, especially smart people, want to express their ideas. But, for the most part, *they don't know how*. Clear expression is a lost art. People don't know how to write an email, let alone a research report, without wasting a lot of the reader's time. College students (and I've edited work from plenty of them) don't graduate knowing how write succinctly, clearly, or powerfully, and people who've been in business for decades are so steeped in corporate-speak that they hardly know the difference.

I was a brutal editor for these people and their ideas. But I heard, over and over again, "Wow, I learned so much in this process." I was able to inspire them, cure their bad habits, and enable them to express themselves far more effectively.

Now I want to do that for everyone who writes. That's pretty close to every office worker. That's 47 million workers in America alone.

What is bullshit?

I'm not just using the word "bullshit" to get attention. It's the one word that accurately describes the current flood of low-value content that we all consume on a day-to-day basis. But let's be specific. In my book:

Bullshit is any form of communication that wastes the reader's time and fails to communicate accurately and clearly.

This includes:

- Outright lies.
- Words intended to confuse.
- Obfuscation: overuse of jargon or other constructions that hide meaning.
- Passive voice and other constructions that hide the actors in a piece of writing.
- Overuse of meaningless qualifying words (e.g., "generally," "very," "deeply").
- Opinions presented as statements of fact.
- Statistics presented without sources, out of context, or in a misleading way.
- Vague connections presented as significant, for example, use of "linked to."
- Vague predictions presented as common knowledge, for example, use of "expected to."

- Any other form of writing that doesn't get quickly to a meaningful point.

The ideas in *Writing Without Bullshit* will differentiate it

I'm no fool. I know there are hundreds of books on writing out there. What will set this book apart is the quality of the ideas. This is not a "how to write" book. It is about a new way of communicating that's perfectly suited to the way we consume text now — on a screen. People who read on a screen are impatient and distracted, so everything you write for them must be brief and pointed to be effective. This demands a new creation model. Whether you're writing an email, a blog post, or a report, you need to capture people's attention instantly and then, as crisply as possible, say exactly what you mean. That's the philosophy at the center of *Writing Without Bullshit*.

Behind all of the concepts in this book is a single, simple idea that we call the Iron Imperative:

You must treat the reader's time as more valuable than your own.

Like all great ideas, this is both obviously true and hellishly difficult to implement. Once you have internalized the Iron Imperative, you must rethink everything you write and the methods you use to write it.

This could be a tough slog. But in *Writing Without Bullshit*, it won't be. Why? Because my readers are going to have fun as they learn. There is so much absurd prose out there. I've spent years pulling together absurd examples that vividly demonstrate what writers are doing wrong. Consider, for example, this earnest purpose statement from Inovalon, a health care technology company (jargon and weasel words highlighted):

Inovalon is a *leading* technology company that combines *advanced cloud-based data analytics* and *data-driven intervention platforms* to achieve *meaningful* insight and impact in clinical and quality outcomes, *utilization*, and financial performance *across the healthcare landscape*. Inovalon's unique *achievement of value is delivered* through the *effective* progression of Turning Data into Insight, and Insight into Action®. *Large proprietary datasets, advanced integration technologies, sophisticated predictive analytics, data-driven intervention platforms, and deep subject matter expertise* deliver a *seamless, end-to-end capability* that brings the benefits of *big data* and large-scale analytics to the point of care.

As I mercilessly skewer bloviation like this, I'll show readers where it comes from, why it's there, what's wrong with it, and how to fix it so humans can read it. For example, here's the *Writing Without Bullshit* rewrite of this purpose statement:

Inovalon has more insight into health data than anyone else. We analyze that data and apply the knowledge to help improve care options, reduce costs, and improve compliance for hospitals, doctors, insurance payers, and patients. We identify gaps in care, quality, and data integrity and apply our unique capabilities to resolving them.

Writing Without Bullshit includes unique ideas that set it apart from all other books on writing in business. I'll show:

- **How we got here.** In 1980, everything we read was in print. Magazines, newspapers, advertisements, and even memos went through an editorial step. Secretaries kept executives

from looking too foolish. Now, nearly everything we read is on a screen, and most of it (emails, social media posts, and the like) has no editor. The demand for content is so great, and the supply of writers of any ability so meager, that most of what we read is poor quality crap.

- **What bold writing can do for your career.** Using actual clear writing success stories from the business world, I'll provide concrete examples of how the principles of *Writing Without Bullshit* transform the way your coworkers and managers perceive you: as a clear, powerful thinker. As author and analyst James McQuivey put it, "Bold and clear writing has made all the difference in my career. I have found that there are more than a few people out there who have good ideas. And many of those people are passionate about those ideas. But few of those can communicate effectively, and very few can turn their passion into words that are cogent and persuasive."
- **How hidden motivations muddy up your writing style.** My blog post "10 top writing tips and the psychology behind them" has received 375,000 views and is consistently in the top two Google results for "writing tips." Why? Because I not only share advice on topics like weasel words, jargon, and passive voice, I explain *why* that advice runs counter to writers' habits. Fear is why people sneak qualifiers into their language, hide the subjects of their sentences, and flop around for a half a page before they get to the point. People recognize their habits in the psychology. This primes them to make meaningful change.
- **How to get to the point quickly.** In an on-screen world, burying the lead is a mortal sin. I spend a short chapter on titles, leads, subject lines, and summaries. All writers have a tendency to warm up before getting to the good stuff; I show how to purge this habit to create the best possible writing for the business world.

- **The four-step process that makes writing effective.** I explain how every piece of writing has a job to do — persuading or informing readers. To do the job properly, ask yourself about four elements of that job: identifying the readers, defining the objective, thinking clearly about the desired action, and leaving a good impression. Use the acronym ROAM to remember the four steps: Readers, Objectives, Action, and iMpression.
- **How to develop a new discipline of writing.** Writing is how we develop ideas. Sloppy writing generates weak ideas. So I teach writers habits of idea development that will lead to strong writing. This includes a systematic approach to idea development, ways to develop flow, and, crucially, how to work with collaborators and editors. I also teach writers how to edit themselves for shorter tasks like emails.
- **How to use graphics and statistics properly.** Numbers and pictures persuade far better than words alone. It's too bad that so many business writers (and presidential candidates!) use them so poorly. My background in mathematics and business analysis puts me in an ideal position to explain a few analytical and graphical principles that will make any piece of writing more powerful.

Real-world interviews will liven up the text

I have developed and road-tested many of these ideas with clients and on my blog. I also get a constant stream of examples to analyze from people who read and respond to my blog posts.

I will be interviewing and getting quotes from real practitioners and experts including Seth Godin (author, *All Marketers Tell Stories*), Richard Edelman (CEO, Edelman the world's largest PR firm), Rick Clancy (Former head of PR, Sony Electronics), Ron Grover (former LA

Bureau Chief, *Bloomberg Businessweek*), Jeff Jarvis (Director, Tow-Knight Center for Entrepreneurial Journalism, CUNY's Graduate School of Journalism), Peter Elbow (author, *Writing Without Teachers*), Ann Handley (author, *Everybody Writes*), Natalie Canavor (author, *Business Writing Today*), and George F. Colony (CEO, Forrester Research).

I'll also be interviewing and telling the stories of the heroes of *Writing Without Bullshit*, people who attribute their success to the clarity, directness, and power of their writing. These interviews will include Dave Winer (technology entrepreneur, inventor of CSS, and early blogger), Lionel Menchaca (executive, first at Dell and then at the agency W20), Ashley Ambirge (The Middle Finger Project), Joel Spolsky (serial software entrepreneur), John Gruber (blogger, Daring Fireball), Ben Kunz (agency executive), Tom Cuniff (agency executive), Ken Herron (marketing executive), Nicole Hudson (startup CEO), Jason Falls (author), and James McQuivey (technology analyst and author).

Book positioning and competing books

This book fills a gap in the market: It's a provocative, modern guide for *businesspeople*. While there are many, many writing books out there, they target fiction authors, book authors, students, journalists, or academic writers. The books that do exist for the business professional are mostly boring, dated textbooks.

Here's how my book positions against existing books:

The Elements of Style (by Strunk and White, 4th edition, Longman, 1999): A fantastic book for a general audience. Great tips, but it was originally written before there were computers, smart phones, or word processors. I genuflect in Strunk and White's direction, but we now need a guide for writing in a very different environment.

On Writing Well: The Classic Guide to Writing Nonfiction (by William Zinser, 30th anniversary edition, Harper Perennial, 2006). Originally written for a general audience, rather than business writers. Updated in 2006, but it does not acknowledge how computers and the Internet have changed the way we consume writing.

The Sense of Style: The Thinking Person's Guide to Writing in the 21st Century (Steven Pinker, Viking, 2014). Pinker is a genius, and this is a nicely done manual on writing. But like most writing books, this is a general style manual, not one designed for businesspeople. Pinker himself says his book is for those writing in the “classic style” of narrative, rather than what he calls “practical style,” or writing that gets stuff done.

The Dictionary of Corporate Bullshit (2006), *The Dictionary of Bullshit* (2006). Novelty items; these are not writing manuals.

Why Businesspeople Speak Like Idiots: A Bullfighter's Guide (Brian Fugere, Chelsea Hardaway, and John Warshawsky, Free Press, 2005). A devastating takedown of corporate blather and why it happens. Very strong on motivation, but it's not really a writing manual or how-to book.

Writing that Works: How to Communicate Effectively in Business (Kenneth Roman and Joel Raphaelson, Collins Reference, 2000). Written for the same target audience as *Writing Without Bullshit*, but it's dated. The cover states that this book is for “e-mail, letters, memos, presentations, plans, proposals, reports, speeches, resumes.” No one cares any more about letters or memos. This book does not address writing for those who read on screens. This was the best book of its kind for when it was published, but it's time for an update.

Everybody Writes: Your Go-To Guide to Creating Ridiculously Good Content (Ann Handley, Wiley, 2014). This is an excellent book and workaday manual for writing in the Internet and smartphone era, covering everything from email to blog posts. It's written in very short chapters with a highly practical bent. *Writing Without Bullshit* is more ambitious — I go into a lot more detail about motivation and what it is that makes writing for on-screen reading most effective. Basically, while Ann's book tells you how to write, I tell you how to stand out in your career by writing well.

Business Communication: Developing Leaders for a Networked World (Peter Cordon, 2013). *Business Communication: Polishing Your Professional Presence* (Barbara Shwom and Lisa Synder, 2nd Edition, 2013), and others. These are high-priced textbooks that working business professionals would be unlikely to buy and read.

HBR Guide to Better Business Writing (Bryan Ganer, HBR Press, 2013), *Business Writing: What Works, What Won't* (Wilma Davidson, St. Martin's Griffin, 1994), *The Truth About the New Rules of Business Writing* (Natalie Canavor and Claire Meirowitz, FT Press, 2009), *Business Writing Today: A Practical Guide* (Natalie Canavor, SAGE Publications, 2015), *Business Writing for Dummies* (Natalie Canavor, For Dummies, 2015). These are basic-level guides, some from established book series. They're useful but lack the edge that *Writing Without Bullshit* will have. Their audience is the beginning businessperson looking to get competent. I'm writing to elevate good writing into a career edge, with a radically different perspective on the purpose of business communication.

OUTLINE

Writing Without Bullshit will include 186 pages plus end matter. There are 32 short chapters.

Part I: Why writing without bullshit matters

I hate bullshit because it destroys our ability to *get things done*. It pollutes our world with meaningless drivel, interferes with clear communication, and leaves everyone depressed. But it's curable. It's a matter of attitude, process, and skill. To master these, you must understand why bullshit happens and how we all became immersed in it. And you must adopt the Iron Imperative: The reader's time is more valuable than your own. (7 chapters, 40 pages)

Chapters

1. Why I hate bullshit
2. How word pollution kills productivity, energy, and trust
3. Sturgeon's Law: Why 90% of everything is crap
4. Why there is so much more bullshit now
5. Everything you learned about writing was wrong
6. The Iron Imperative: Do not waste the reader's time
7. How writing without bullshit helps your career

Part II: How to write without bullshit

There are plenty of folks happy to tell you how to write better, just as any doctor will tell you to “eat right and exercise.” But changing your writing (or eating) habits only happens when you understand why you do what you do. I can help you with that. And I can tell you the 10 key things you need to work on to make your writing, clear, direct, and powerful. (11 chapters, 65 pages)

Chapters

8. The psychology of writing: why you write bullshit
9. How to write boldly when you are afraid
10. You had me at “hello”: titles, leads, and summaries
11. Eliminate the most pernicious habit: passive voice
12. Avoid the trap of weasel words
13. Root out jargon: the native language of the bullshitter
14. Write shorter: the brutal art of editing yourself
15. Shorter sentences make happier readers
16. Use numbers properly
17. Magical pronouns: “I,” “we,” and “you”
18. Leave the hype for the hucksters

Part III: Change the way you write

You may know what you're supposed to do, but can you write this way? Not if you stick with your old habits and process. You need to think differently about generating ideas, defining the stages in your writing, and especially about editing. (6 chapters, 35 pages)

Chapters

19. Give yourself permission to be creative
20. The systematic approach to idea development
21. Finding flow on purpose
22. The four questions to ask before writing: readers, objectives, action, impression
23. Getting value from edits
24. Collaborating without compromise

Part IV: Applying the “without bullshit” principles to your everyday work

Every day you are a reader, and most days you are a writer. The principles of writing without bullshit apply to everything you type, from emails and blog posts to press releases and reports. Here's how to write without bullshit every day. (7 chapters, 40 pages)

Chapters

25. Recognizing bullshit in what you read
26. Business emails that get stuff done
27. Marketing emails that generate sales

28. Blog posts, Facebook posts, and tweets that make you look smart

29. Marketing copy that makes people want to work with you

30. Press releases that escape the ordinary

31. Reports that captivate readers and make people smarter

Part V: A world without bullshit

Now that you know what bullshit is and how to avoid it, you can stand out. Your writing will be better, and people will think of you differently. You'll be known as a bold thinker and a person who commands powerful ideas. Here's how to create that change in your whole organization. (1 chapter, 6 pages)

Chapters

32. How to spread the “without bullshit” message to your colleagues, your department, your company, and the world

AUTHOR/PROMOTIONAL PLAN

Josh Bernoff

I've been a professional writer since 1982. I've coauthored three books on business strategy, including *Groundswell*, which was a bestseller. And I'm passionate about clear, brief, fascinating communication.

For 20 years at Forrester Research, I wrote and edited reports on the future of technology. I learned to do kick-ass analysis of business strategy, then taught others to do so. In my last five years there, as Senior Vice President, Idea Development, I identified, developed, and promoted Forrester's most powerful and influential ideas. I gave hundreds of speeches around the world, got quoted in every news source you can name, and gave strategy advice to countless clients from the world's largest companies and tech vendors. I also created Technographics, the segmentation that launched Forrester's highly successful consumer survey business.

My first book, *Groundswell: Winning in a World Transformed by Social Technologies* (Harvard Business Review Press, 2008), written with Charlene Li, is a *Businessweek* bestseller and the defining book on how companies can profit from blogs, social networks like Facebook, and other social media. Abbey Klaassen, the editor of *Advertising Age*, picked it as "the best book ever written on marketing and media."

Empowered: Unleash Your Employees, Energize Your Customers, and Transform Your Business (Harvard Business Review Press, 2010), written with Ted Schadler, is a book about management in the era of empowered customers and employees. It has appeared several times on the 800-CEO-READ bestseller list.

The Mobile Mind Shift: Engineer Your Business to Win in the Mobile Moment

(Groundswell Press, 2014), written with Ted Schadler and Julie Ask, is a comprehensive guide to mobile strategy. In his blurb about the book, John Chambers, CEO of Cisco, said this: “Those who seize the opportunities described in *The Mobile Mind Shift* will grow at the expense of those who don’t.”

At Forrester, I edited two books by other analysts: *Outside In: The Power of Putting Customers at the Center of Your Business* (New Harvest/HMH, 2012) by Harley Manning and Kerry Bodine and *Digital Disruption: Unleashing the Next Wave of Innovation* (Amazon Publishing, 2013) by James McQuivey.

Before Forrester I spent 14 years in technology startups writing everything from product definitions to online tutorials to press releases. Before that, I studied mathematics in the Ph.D. program at MIT and was a National Science Foundation fellow.

I am also the CEO of wellnesscampaign.org, a nonprofit organization dedicated to the pursuit of wellness through changing habits. I like recreational biking and cracking wise in front of audiences. I am married with two children, and I live in Arlington, Massachusetts.

Promotional resources

I know what an author platform is. I’ve built a few. As you read this, please understand two things. First, I literally wrote the book on social media, *Groundswell*, and have used the social marketing techniques described in that book to help sell it and all the other books I’ve worked on. And second, I’m a veteran of many public relations campaigns, including both campaigns to promote my books and ideas and campaigns for Forrester’s clients to promote their ideas.

Past book promotion successes

This book launch will be my sixth round of book promotion. Here's a summary of the promotional results of my previous five campaigns:

- *Groundswell: Winning in a World Transformed by Social Technologies* by Charlene Li and Josh Bernoff. *Groundswell* sold more than 140,000 copies. The editors at Amazon.com chose this book as a top 10 business book of 2008. It won the AMA-Berry book prize for best marketing book of the year. I gave more than 100 speeches on the topic of this book.
- *Empowered: Unleash Your Employees, Energize Your Customers, and Transform Your Business* by Josh Bernoff and Ted Schadler. In conjunction with the book launch, we published bylined articles in 12 different publications and published a companion article in the *Harvard Business Review*. Our Webinar and associated social media efforts generated more than 14,000 free Kindle downloads, reaching the No. 2 ranking on Amazon's free Kindle list. Seth Godin blogged about it.
- *Outside In: The Power of Putting Customers at the Center of Your Business* by Harley Manning and Kerry Bodine. I edited this book and coordinated the promotional efforts. Authors delivered keynote speeches at a New York event with 1,600 attendees. The publisher placed a ¾-page ad in *The Wall Street Journal*. The book generated 26 reviews or bylined articles in publications including *Harvard Business Review*, *The Economist*, and *The Financial Times*. We received blurbs from the Chairman of Vanguard, the CEO of Sprint, and Steve Forbes of *Forbes* magazine. On Amazon, 89% of reviews were four or five stars.
- *Digital Disruption: Unleashing the Next Wave of Innovation* by James McQuivey. I edited the book and coordinated promotion. Clayton Christensen, author of the *Innovator's*

Dilemma and the world's top authority on business disruption, blurbed: "This is a very important book about what tomorrow holds in store; it shows us both what will happen and how to address it. I recommend it enthusiastically." We also received blurbs from the CEO of *Newsweek*, the CEO of Random House, and New Jersey Senator Cory Booker. We generated 21 reviews or bylined articles in publications including *The Wall Street Journal* and *The Economist*.

- *The Mobile Mind Shift: Engineer Your Business To Win In The Mobile Moment* by Ted Schadler, Josh Bernoff, and Julie Ask. We used a publishing services company to publish this book, instead of a traditional publisher. We received blurbs from Cisco CEO John Chambers and the cofounder of Airbnb. We generated 21 reviews or bylined articles in publications including *The Wall Street Journal* and *The New York Times*. We made a series of author videos, an animated video, and several infographics explaining the concepts in the book. The authors gave several dozen speeches about the book.

The Without Bullshit Blog

While I no longer have access to the public relations resources I used for promotion at Forrester, I have built my own. Central to this platform is my blog, withoutbullshit.com (also accessible at bernoff.com). Think of this blog as similar to Nate Silver's fivethirtyeight.com, which addresses any topic (politics, sports, economics) for which quantitative analysis provides insight; my blog addresses any topic where analysis of language reveals truth or bullshit. Starting from nothing in March 2015, I have achieved the following milestones:

- A cumulative total of 400,000 visits and 600,000 views. The most recent monthly total for August 2015 was 40,000 visits and 64,000 views. Visitors are growing steadily at the rate of

35% per month. Continued growth at this rate would generate more than 500,000 visits per month by May 2016.

- 140 posts over six months. I post every weekday, typically 800 words of analysis. This regular posting schedule keeps visitors coming back and spreading posts on social media and builds traffic over time.
- My post “10 top writing tips and the psychology behind them” has generated more than 375,000 views on its own, and it continues to generate approximately 2,000 views per week. On any given day, it ranks first or second among Google search results for “writing tips.”
- Thirteen of my other posts have generated at least 3,000 views each.
- The blog has 1,200 subscribers, with a growth rate of 20% per month. Continued growth at this rate would result in 6,000 subscribers by May 2016.
- The blog generates vigorous discussion and comments. Readers have shared posts more than 25,000 times on Facebook, Twitter, and LinkedIn.

Recent popular posts on withoutbullshit.com have covered the speeches and positioning of Donald Trump and other presidential contenders; strategy and public communication for Twitter, Microsoft, Google, Amazon, Verizon, and United Airlines; the controversy surrounding the Boston bid for the 2024 Summer Olympics; and the Byzantine pronouncements of the Boston Red Sox, the New England Patriots, and Roger Goodell.

I embrace the concept of “newsjacking” (from David Meerman Scott’s book of the same name) — that is, tying my promotion to items in the news. I’ve successfully done that with Donald Trump speeches and *The New York Times* article about Amazon’s working conditions.

My post about Kim Davis, the Kentucky clerk who refused to grant licenses for same-sex marriages, has generated 20,000 views, and people have shared it 7,000 times. I will continue to do event-connected newsjacking during the book launch, which I hope will coincide with the bullshit-heavy election season.

My launch plan for the blog will be agile and opportunistic, depending on what's happening at the time of the launch. But I expect it to include the following promotions on my blog:

- A book promotion addition to the Writing Tips post to expose 2,000 qualified people per week to the idea that they can buy the book.
- A series of videos related to the skills and themes in the book.
- A series of infographics related to the themes in the book.
- The “Bullshitty” awards, recognizing the worst public bullshit released in the year before the book launch.

Social media

My most prominent social media presence is on Twitter, where I have 20,000 followers. (I have gained 1,000 additional followers since I started blogging on withoutbullshit.com.) My 1,400 Facebook friends frequently use the site to share professional resources because many of them are social media experts that connected with me for *Groundswell*. I do both Twitter and Facebook posts promoting each blog post; a typical post of this kind will generate between 25 and 1,000 blog post views as people comment, share, and reshare links to my posts.

I also post on LinkedIn, where I have 2,162 connections. These are all legitimate contacts that I've done business with over 20 years as an analyst and 14 more years in startup companies in Boston.

When it's time to promote the book, I'll use these social media channels to generate awareness and engage my contacts in contests, polls, and other interactions to promote the book. I'll also ramp up my use of these social channels to promote my blog posts.

I have not yet decided if it makes sense to create a Facebook Fan Page for the book. It may be the case that my current base of thousands of engaged fans is more helpful than an unlimited number of fans with much looser ties. I will plan this element of my strategy together with the publicists at my eventual publisher.

Targeted outreach through personal contacts

Because of my background in social media, my network has a broad reach. Most of my professional contacts owe me favors and will be happy to promote the book. These include:

- **Shel Israel** (3,432 Facebook friends, 29,000 Twitter followers). Author of *Twitterville*, *The Age of Context* and the forthcoming book *Lethal Generosity*, he frequently shares my Facebook and blog posts. I've helped him with his most recent book and previous books.
- **Jeremiah Owyang** (163,000 Twitter followers). He dominates coverage of the sharing economy as CEO of CrowdCompanies.com and runs the very popular blog web-strategist.com. I was a mentor of his at Forrester Research. He frequently tweets about my blog posts on Twitter, and he has promised to help me with book promotion.

- **Robert Scoble** (5,000 Facebook friends, 466,000 Twitter followers). A social media star, he frequently reposts or promotes my blog posts on Twitter and Facebook.
- **Seth Godin** (493,000 Twitter followers). Seth is proprietor of the world's most popular marketing blog. I've interviewed him, and he's blurbed several of my books. He has promoted my books in the past and advised me on strategy for *Writing Without Bullshit*.
- **Jay Baer** (1,481 Facebook friends, 166,000 Twitter followers). Author of *The New York Times* bestseller *Youtility* and CEO of Convince & Convert, he frequently promotes my posts.
- *[8 other contacts deleted from this sample version of the proposal for privacy reasons]*

This is not a complete list, but I think you get the idea.

Speeches

I will be hiring a publicist of my own to manage speech invitations. I've spoken as a keynote at the following events and expect to reach out to these groups for speeches around the time of the book's publication.

Advertising Age conferences

American Management Association

American Marketing Association

Association of National Advertisers

Business Marketing Association

Direct Marketing Association

Fortune Leadership Summit

FutureM Boston

Inbound Marketing Summit

Interactive Advertising Bureau

Massachusetts Interactive Technology Exchange

New Media Expo

Public Relations Society of America

South by Southwest

TiECON East

University of Wisconsin E-Business Consortium

Word of Mouth Marketing Association

Word of Mouth Supergenius

I will also pursue speeches at clients for whom I've spoken in the past, including large companies like Publicis, Nuance, Adobe, and SAP.

Media outreach

My publicist will also coordinate media outreach. I have personal connections with dozens of reporters who frequently quoted me as an analyst. These include *[names deleted from this sample version for privacy reasons]*.

Email campaign

My personal mailing list includes 2,000 contacts. My blog has 1,200 subscribers, plus another 250 people signed up for updates. I will boost my email list by conducting several free Webinars over the next year. I'll email all of these folks when the book launches.

SAMPLE CHAPTERS

Since the chapters are short, I've included four of them. These should give you a pretty good idea of the book content.

Chapter 4: Why there is so much more bullshit now

I've established that you're surrounded all day by crappy writing. But why? And why now, in particular? What is it about the current moment that makes so much of what you read worthless, time-wasting bullshit?

It has a lot to do with supply and demand. The current demand for content is endless. The supply flows out to meet it, without any regard for quality.

First, consider the demand we all create as readers. If you are an office worker, then all day long, you read content on a screen — a computer, a tablet, or a mobile phone. You're immersed in email, content from your company, media, and marketing from other companies. There's always more; you're never done. Multiply that by every office worker in America, and there's a prodigious demand for content.

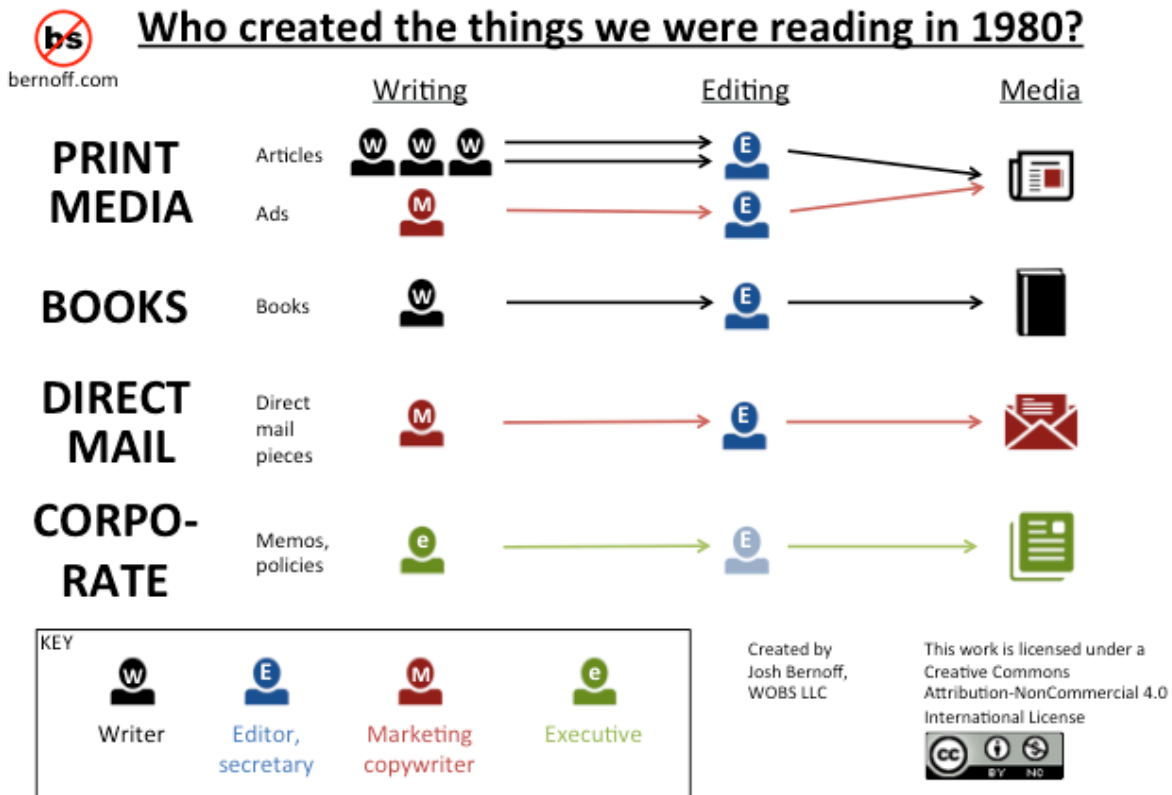
Who creates that content? Everybody. That's the supply. And therein lies the problem — few of the people who create what you read are professional writers.

It wasn't always this way. Think back to the world of 1980. The average consumer or businessperson at that time had no email, and there was no Internet. What we read was printed: newspapers, magazines, books, and the occasional memo.

Of course there was bullshit in 1980, just as there is now. Politicians and stupid managers existed then, too. But our reading material came from media companies that mass-produced printed material and distributed it to hundreds of thousands of magazine subscribers, book readers, and direct mail recipients. Professional writers or marketing copywriters produced it. Since it was expensive to create, it went through an experienced editor who reviewed both

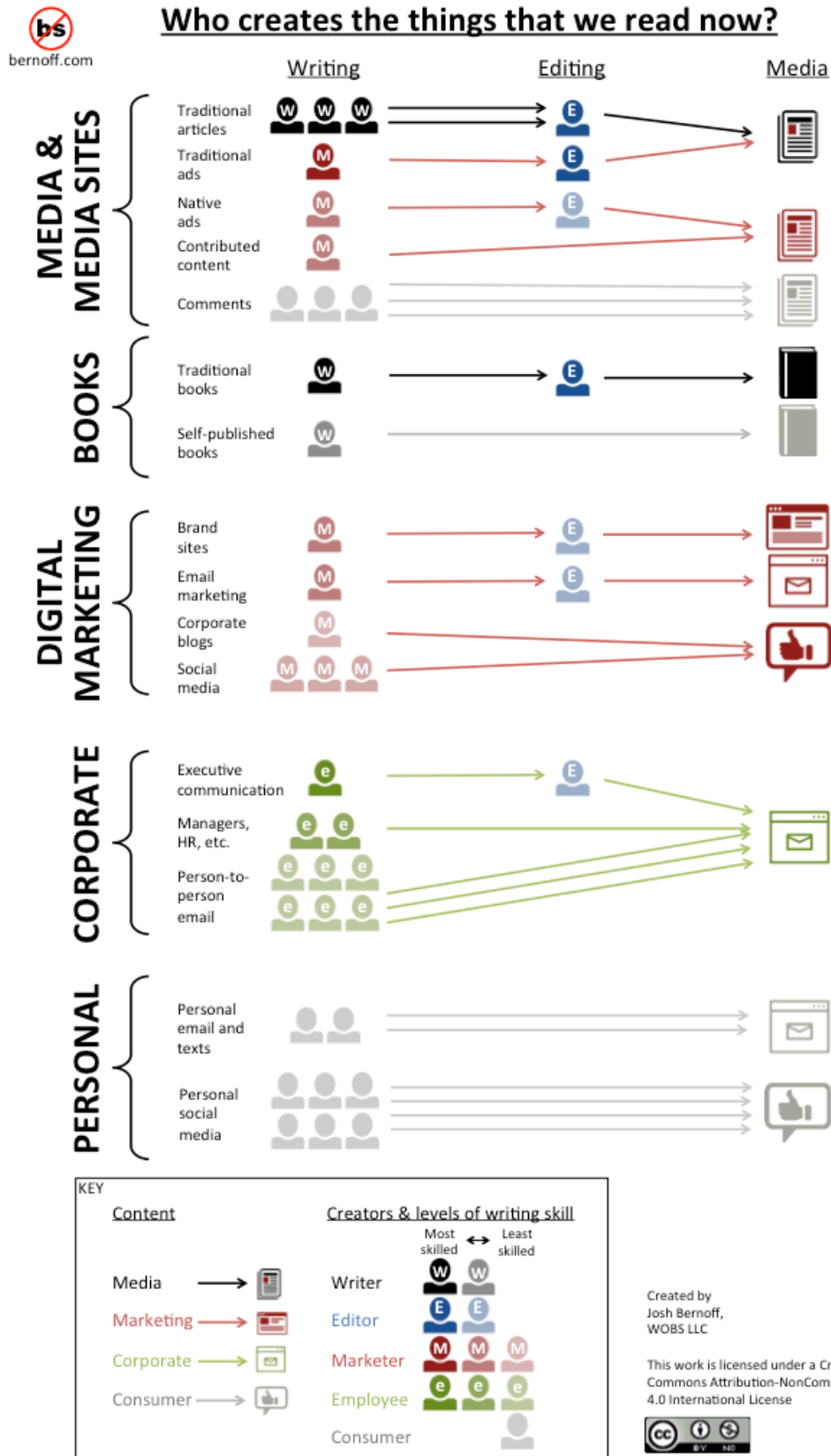
content and language (see Figure 1). In the workplace, executives who wrote memos had secretaries to type them, and the secretaries prevented the executives from saying anything too stupid.

Figure 1: Who created the things we were reading in 1980?



The picture now is vastly different. Any idiot can type and distribute content to dozens or even thousands of people, and many do, whether through email or a blog. Most of what you read comes directly from the fingertips of the person who wrote it to your eyeballs, with no editorial process (see Figure 2). I don't just mean editing for grammar — no one is editing for content, either. Recall that I defined bullshit as any form of communication that does not communicate clearly and accurately. With no editors, clarity and accuracy are hit or miss.

Figure 2: Who creates the things we read now?



Today's reader still reads a lot of highly edited media and ads. Even in media sites, however, that content is mingled with native ads (ads intended to look like editorial content) and contributed content (articles submitted by companies and published as content). That material doesn't get the same editorial scrutiny as regular media.

Media outlets like *The Huffington Post* don't adhere to the editorial standards of traditional media. *Forbes* has a whole slew of bloggers publishing unedited content alongside what its writers create. And every article now comes complete with a set of unedited comments.

What about books? Traditional book editing is much less rigorous than it used to be (ask any author); self-published books get very little review.

Marketers must now fill a vast set of communications channels including Web sites, emails, Facebook pages, Twitter feeds, and Tumblr blogs. Inexperienced writers create much of this content and often publish it with little supervision.

Inside your company, the communication model is completely different from what it once was. There are very few secretaries; people communicate directly with each other, unmediated. Your inbox is filled with a random variety of first-draft emails from colleagues, managers, HR departments, and executives.

If we properly trained all of these writers to write clearly, then we wouldn't be mired in so much bullshit. But the authors of all this material learned to write from rigid, test-focused high school writing teachers and humanities professors enamored with the academic tradition of the passive voice. Insecure writers buttress their prose with hedges, vague qualifiers, and jargon. There's rarely a penalty for writing too long. In case some clarity were to sneak through, there

are always a few colleagues ready to offer helpful suggestions, and the easiest way to make them all happy is to muddy up the text enough to satisfy all of them.

That, my friends, is a recipe for bullshit: Inexperienced, poorly trained writers and editors who are so eyeball-deep in the stuff that, even if they once knew what good, clear writing was, they have forgotten it. Our vast appetite for written content and the fragmented channels on which we read it guarantee that most of what we read will be crappy.

Do not be depressed. We don't need to shut down the Internet and return to 1980. For you, there is opportunity here. Amidst this vast fog of mediocrity and confusion, clear, powerful writing shines like a beacon. Learn it and your emails, your Web sites, and your media will stand out from the rest. Have faith. It's not that hard to be brief, clear, and not boring. You just have to care about quality.

Chapter 9: How to write boldly when you are afraid

Let's get to the root cause of why people write bullshit. It's fear.

Fear makes people use jargon since they think it makes them sound more knowledgeable and sophisticated.

Fear makes people write in passive language to hide who's responsible for problems and who must act.

Fear makes people use qualifying words like "nearly all" and "often" because they provide an out in case the statement turns out not to be true.

Unfortunately, fear also makes you seem like a coward. Feeling fear in the workplace is normal; there are certainly risks in everything you write. But writers who write from fear will unconsciously project their uncertainty. Rather than protecting you, the hedges that you include will simply reveal that you're a wimp.

The trick is to write boldly even though you are afraid.

When you deliver difficult news boldly, at least your readers will perceive you as honest. Deliver it weakly, and even if makes you feel better, you will infuriate your readers.

Let's look at an example. You're the service manager for a company that installs and services machinery at customers' locations. A machine has malfunctioned, and the customer is furious. Here's the kind of email most people would send in this situation:

From: Ted Jones, service manager
To: Sales and Service Management Committee
Re: Analysis of service situation

As you know, I make a monthly review of the state of our service. I'll refer you to past reviews that have always shown excellent results. Our service personnel are generally considered the highest rated region across the company.

In my detailed analysis of service for the last quarter, I found that things remained generally quite good. Unfortunately, among the positive results, there is one negative. One machine was unrepaired, and the customer went ahead and used it anyway. Regrettably, considerable damage was caused at the customer's site. If you are wondering who the customer was, it's Randco. We did everything possible to retain the customer, but retention may not be possible. I am hopeful that this will not end up causing legal issues, but there is the possibility of getting sued for the damage.

Please keep in mind our excellent service reputation with the other customers. I hope to be able to maintain those relationships. A review has also been undertaken to determine the cause of this issue, and to prevent a repeat of the problem.

I appreciate your attention in this matter and wish you a good end of quarter.

Ted is not fooling anybody. At this point, the recipients of this message are steaming mad because they had to work so hard to figure out what is actually happening. If you plant daisies around a pile of poo, it still stinks. Why not just point out the poo so we know not to step in it?

If you've had to write an email like this, maybe you've fallen into some of the traps that Ted did. Let's see the techniques that Ted used to make himself feel better, but which actually make the readers cringe:

- **The non-committal subject line.** "Analysis of service situation" doesn't clue the reader in to bad news or even indicate that this is an important email. Ted is leaving that for later.

- **The slow warm-up.** The whole first paragraph immediately tips us to the fact that something bad is coming. Impatient readers' blood pressure starts rising right here.
- **The head fake.** "I found things remained generally quite good" is a non-statement; words like "generally" don't measure anything. But they tell the reader that something bad is about to come next. As soon as they read the next word, "Unfortunately," any remaining goodwill instantly evaporates.
- **Passive evasions.** Phrases like "damage was caused" and "a review has been undertaken" hide responsibility. Words like "retention may not be possible" and "possibility of getting sued," while not grammatically passive, similarly hide who's going to act. Writing passively insulates you from the action you describe, but leaves the reader wondering who to blame.
- **Weasel words.** Meaningless intensifiers like "generally," "considerable," and "excellent," don't actually mean anything unless they're connected to some sort of statistic. They're filler. Business communication has to come straight to the point; extra words get in the way.
- **"Friendly" closing.** Ted still is so afraid of ending on a bad note that he has to include, basically, "have a nice day." It's about as effective as a cashier telling you that after they've dropped the groceries on your foot. It could be worse — at least he didn't use an emoticon like :-). Face it: Cheery closings make you, the writer, feel better, but they do nothing for the readers, especially after they're done reading about a big problem like this.

Let's get real here. Ted's in trouble. So long as his managers are going to hold him responsible, he may as well gird his loins and tell the truth boldly. This starts with the subject line, which should immediately tell the recipients that there's a problem, and continues with

statements that indicate who is responsible and what they're going to do. Here's what Ted should write:

From: Ted Jones, service manager
To: Sales and Service Management Committee
Re: Randco service problem and consequences

There is a problem with Randco, one of our biggest customers. On a service call, one of our techs failed to repair one of their machines. The customer was unaware of the problem and used the machine, causing several hundred thousand dollars worth of damage.

We have taken the following actions:

- Dispatched a senior salesperson to attempt to retain Randco as a client.
- Alerted legal to the possibility of a lawsuit for the damage.
- Reviewed the tech's service record, which was spotless except for this problem. As a result, I have issued a warning but did not discipline the tech further.
- Reviewed our processes. Based on that review, this is not part of a pattern. Our current processes will prevent it from recurring. This is consistent with our 98% quality rating in past quarters.

If you interact with Randco, be aware of the incident. Sales staff can continue to be confident about our overall service quality.

If you have any further questions, please let me know.

Now Ted has put the problem at the top. He's taken responsibility for actions to remedy or mitigate the problem. He's used bullets to make it easy to scan. And the positive news intended to make people feel better is at the end, where it actually does some good, including an actual metric (98% quality) to put this in context. In the closing, Ted has told people that he's available for follow-ups.

Here's what you can learn from this. If you have bad news, deliver it clearly and without evasion. Don't make readers work to find the problem. Indicate who's responsible with clear, active-voice statements. And use facts and numbers rather than vague qualifiers.

You can't hide from trouble. Tell the truth boldly. Your audience will respect you for it. And if you get fired, at least it won't be for bad writing.

Chapter 14: Write shorter: the brutal art of editing yourself

Use fewer words.

Of all the ways to improve your ability to communicate boldly and powerfully, this is the most effective. Remember, whatever you write, people are reading it on a screen. Their inboxes are full. You must get to the point quickly, deliver your message, and let them get on with the rest of their day. Remember the Iron Imperative:

Treat the reader's time as more valuable than your own.

So why are you still wasting people's time with writing that is too long? Insecurity. You're afraid to get right to the point; you need to warm up. You say the same thing several different ways since you're not sure which is best. It takes you a while to figure out what you're saying. You add words to hedge.

Your ideal should be tight writing. Eliminate everything you don't need. The tighter you write, the more persuasive you will be. Don't just trim the fat. Lop off the stuff you liked but that isn't helping enough.

While an editor can help you with this, you must learn to do it yourself. You won't have an editor to read every blog post, tweet, or email you send. You must learn the habit of writing short.

How? I've organized a few tricks for you. These start with the broadest advice and go down to the word editing level. Use them in order on anything you'd like to make shorter.

- **Edit everything.** Make it a habit. No one writes tight prose on the first draft. You need time and effort to get the words out of your head and onto the page. Admit your imperfection. Write, and allow time to self-edit. With practice, your drafts will get tighter, but you'll always need to edit.
- **Aim for a word count.** Your emails should be under 250 words. Your blog posts should be under 750. Learn the feel of a 100-, 300-, 500-, or 1,000-word hunk of prose. Imagine that words cost \$10 each. How much can you afford to spend, and where can you economize? A word count makes brevity a concrete goal.
- **Say what you really mean.** Sometimes you have to draft a whole piece to understand what you really mean. That's ok, as long as you go back and get rid of the parts that no longer apply. *Get rid of text that doesn't support your main point.*
- **Start boldly.** Introductory text is wasteful — scrap it. Your first 50 words should intrigue the reader. Start boldly: “We need to rethink the way we do customer service,” or “Are we ready to expand geographically?” Never start with a hedge or an apology. Start with a bold statement. I know it feels unnatural to write this way, but it's what will make your writing stand out. If you can't start cold like that, then write whatever it takes to get you warmed up — and go back when you're done and delete the warm-up text.
- **Organize relentlessly.** Have you hit the same point in several paragraphs or sections? Pull them together and eliminate the redundancy. Reorganize your prose around the main points and pull the material that supports those points together in one place. The result is not just shorter; it's easier for readers to comprehend.

- **Prune sections and arguments.** If you've got five sections, could you make do with three or four? Could you cut a whole paragraph without weakening the argument? Have you given four examples when two would suffice? The point is not to show how much you know, it is to *save the reader time*. Removing material that is weak or redundant makes your whole piece stronger. Cut. Cut more. If you can't stand it, get someone else to edit and tell you which parts are weakest. Remember, adding words to a weak argument makes it weaker. Getting rid of it altogether may be an improvement.
- **Use bullets or tables.** Lists written out in prose (e.g., "Firstly," "Secondly," or "On the one hand," "Alternatively") take up extra space. Where possible, convert to a bulleted list. Bold the first phrase or sentence to make things easier to parse. For information that's sufficiently structured, tables pack a lot of information into an easily understood package.
- **Use graphics.** A simple diagram is often easier to comprehend than a lump of prose. It allows you to make a statement and support it without having to go into extraneous detail. But keep the graphic simple; don't just replace tangled prose with impenetrable pictures.
- **Trim connective tissue.** All the "therefores" and "now, let's continue with" take up space, both on the screen and in the reader's brain. Look for long sentences and break them into shorter ones. This makes prose easier to digest. Transitions between sections need be only one sentence, such as "Now that we've addressed pricing, let's examine distribution."
- **Delete weasel words and qualifiers.** Every "very," "considerable," or "on the other hand" not only weakens your prose, it makes it longer. Review what you've written and get rid of qualifying words. Make specific, true statements rather than broad generalizations with qualifiers that invalidate them.

Let's look at a famous example. Microsoft acquired mobile phone maker Nokia in April of 2014. Stephen Elop, who was CEO of Nokia, continued to manage his part of the company as a division under Microsoft. About three months after the acquisition, he sent an impenetrable 1,100-word missive to all Nokia employees. Here it is. You don't need to plow through the whole thing unless you're a masochist:

Hello there,

Microsoft's strategy is focused on productivity and our desire to help people "do more." As the Microsoft Devices Group, our role is to light up this strategy for people. We are the team creating the hardware that showcases the finest of Microsoft's digital work and digital life experiences, and we will be the confluence of the best of Microsoft's applications, operating systems and cloud services.

To align with Microsoft's strategy, we plan to focus our efforts. Given the wide range of device experiences, we must concentrate on the areas where we can add the most value. The roots of this company and our future are in productivity and helping people get things done. Our fundamental focus — for phones, Surface, for meetings with devices like PPI, Xbox hardware and new areas of innovation — is to build on that strength. While our direction in the majority of our teams is largely unchanging, we have had an opportunity to plan carefully about the alignment of phones within Microsoft as the transferring Nokia team continues with its integration process.

It is particularly important to recognize that the role of phones within Microsoft is different than it was within Nokia. Whereas the hardware business of phones within Nokia was an end unto itself, within Microsoft all our devices are intended to embody the finest of Microsoft's digital work and digital life experiences, while accruing value to Microsoft's overall strategy. Our device strategy must reflect Microsoft's strategy and must be accomplished within an appropriate financial envelope. Therefore, we plan to make some changes.

We will be particularly focused on making the market for Windows Phone. In the near term, we plan to drive Windows Phone volume by targeting the more affordable smartphone segments, which are the fastest growing segments of the market, with Lumia. In addition to the portfolio already planned, we plan to deliver additional lower-cost Lumia devices by shifting select future Nokia X designs and products to Windows Phone devices. We expect to make this shift immediately while continuing to sell and support existing Nokia X products.

To win in the higher price segments, we will focus on delivering great breakthrough products in alignment with major milestones ahead from both the Windows team and the Applications and Services Group. We will ensure that the very best experiences and scenarios from across the company will be showcased on our products. We plan to take advantage of innovation from the Windows team, like Universal Windows Apps, to continue to enrich the Windows application

ecosystem. And in the very lowest price ranges, we plan to run our first phones business for maximum efficiency with a smaller team.

We expect these changes to have an impact to our team structure. With our focus, we plan to consolidate the former Smart Devices and Mobile Phones business units into one phone business unit that is responsible for all of our phone efforts. Under the plan, the phone business unit will be led by Jo Harlow with key members from both the Smart Devices and Mobile Phones teams in the management team. This team will be responsible for the success of our Lumia products, the transition of select future Nokia X products to Lumia and for the ongoing operation of the first phone business.

As part of the effort, we plan to select the appropriate business model approach for our sales markets while continuing to offer our products in all markets with a strong focus on maintaining business continuity. We will determine each market approach based on local market dynamics, our ability to profitably deliver local variants, current Lumia momentum and the strategic importance of the market to Microsoft. This will all be balanced with our overall capability to invest.

Our phone engineering efforts are expected to be concentrated in Salo, Finland (for future, high-end Lumia products) and Tampere, Finland (for more affordable devices). We plan to develop the supporting technologies in both locations. We plan to ramp down engineering work in Oulu. While we plan to reduce the engineering in Beijing and San Diego, both sites will continue to have supporting roles, including affordable devices in Beijing and supporting specific US requirements in San Diego. Espoo and Lund are planned to continue to be focused on application software development.

We plan to right-size our manufacturing operations to align to the new strategy and take advantage of integration opportunities. We expect to focus phone production mainly in Hanoi, with some production to continue in Beijing and Dongguan. We plan to shift other Microsoft manufacturing and repair operations to Manaus and Reynosa respectively, and start a phased exit from Komaron, Hungary.

In short, we will focus on driving Lumia volume in the areas where we are already successful today in order to make the market for Windows Phone. With more speed, we will build on our success in the affordable smartphone space with new products offering more differentiation. We'll focus on acquiring new customers in the markets where Microsoft's services and products are most concentrated. And, we'll continue building momentum around applications.

We plan that this would result in an estimated reduction of 12,500 factory direct and professional employees over the next year. These decisions are difficult for the team, and we plan to support departing team members with severance benefits.

More broadly across the Devices team, we will continue our efforts to bring iconic tablets to market in ways that complement our OEM partners, power the next generation of meetings & collaboration devices and thoughtfully expand Windows with new interaction models. With a set of changes already implemented earlier this year in these teams, this means there will be limited change for the Surface, Xbox hardware, PPI/meetings or next generation teams.

We recognize these planned changes are broad and have very difficult implications for many of our team members. We will work to provide as much clarity and information as possible. Today and over the coming weeks leaders across the organization will hold town halls, host information sharing sessions and provide more details on the intranet.

The team transferring from Nokia and the teams that have been part of Microsoft have each experienced a number of remarkable changes these last few years. We operate in a competitive industry that moves rapidly, and change is necessary. As difficult as some of our changes are today, this direction deliberately aligns our work with the cross company efforts that Satya [Microsoft CEO Satya Nadella] has described in his recent emails. Collectively, the clarity, focus and alignment across the company, and the opportunity to deliver the results of that work into the hands of people, will allow us to increase our success in the future.

Regards,

Stephen

How would you feel if you worked for Nokia and received this? It's incomprehensible, and, worse yet, about 80% of the way through there's a little note about 12,500 people leaving their jobs, which has to be close to a world record for burying the lead. The main message, inadvertent though it may be, is "I'm head of your division, and I'm full of bullshit."

If you were Stephen Elop (or someone advising him), how would you fix this?

Let's start with the target word count, which ought to be about 250 words for an email this important. Keep it short, and you'll be sure everybody reads it *and* you'll make sure you focus on the most important messages.

In the "Say what you really mean" department, the main messages of this missive are:

- We're laying off 12,500 people, and we have a plan to communicate that.
- Our focus is on devices that support Microsoft's software goals.
- We're changing the management structure.

- We're changing where we do engineering.

So our rewrite will focus on these four issues. We can cut whole paragraphs that don't support the main message. We can combine the stuff about the layoffs and the places where Microsoft does engineering. And for what remains, we can do some surgery, deleting redundant text and passive voice for a clearer, more direct message.

Here's a far better email:

Subject: Significant changes in the Microsoft Devices Group

As I'm sure you expected, our organization must change to be an effective part of Microsoft. In this email, I'll describe our goals, our future staffing levels, and our new management structure.

The driver behind these changes is our new role within Microsoft. While Nokia focused on selling hardware, now we must focus on adding value to Microsoft software and experiences including Windows Phone software on our Lumia devices.

We need to be more efficient. We will put Jo Harlow over a single phone business unit. We will concentrate our phone engineering efforts in Salo, Finland (for future, high-end Lumia products) and Tampere, Finland (for more affordable devices). We will ramp down engineering work in Oulu, Beijing, and San Diego. We will continue application software development in Espoo and Lund.

Combining these engineering reductions with cuts in manufacturing, we will cut 12,500 factory direct and professional employees over the next year.

Today and over the coming weeks, leaders across the organization will hold town halls, host information-sharing sessions, and provide more details on the intranet, including informing those whose positions have been cut and explaining severance benefits.

As difficult as some of our changes are today, this direction aligns our work with the cross-company efforts that our CEO Satya Nadella has described in his recent emails. I expect to explain these directions further as the company moves forward.

Regards, Stephen

That's 240 words. Yes, it leaves many questions unanswered, but Elop's rambling original message didn't answer those questions, either. It's far better to cover the subject matter clearly and leave the rest for a follow-up. We've cut the warm-up paragraphs, focused on the

actual message, written in a clear and direct way, and indicated what will come next. As difficult as a change like this is (and at Nokia, it was incredibly difficult), a tight message communicates that you know what you're doing and will follow up in an appropriate way.

For your reference, Table 1 summarizes what you need to know about strategies to keep writing short and tight:

Table 1: Tips for writing shorter

Tip	What to do	Why it helps	Why it's hard
Edit everything.	Always self-edit what you write.	After the draft is done, keep only the best bits.	You don't set aside editing time.
Aim for a word count.	Determine target word count before you start.	It makes your brevity goal concrete.	Hard limits cramp your style.
Say what you really mean.	After drafting, figure out your true meaning.	You can rewrite to make that meaning clear.	You must cut cherished stuff that's off topic.
Start boldly.	Get rid of introductory "warm-up text."	It's more powerful to get right to the point.	It's uncomfortable to open without an intro.
Organize relentlessly.	Combine related points, cut redundancy.	Result is shorter and easier to comprehend.	Reorganizing and rewriting is hard work.
Prune sections and arguments.	Delete extra sections, arguments, examples.	Three strong points beat four or five weak ones.	You want to show off how much you know.
Use bullets or tables.	Replace prose with lists or tables.	Lists make structure visually explicit.	It forces you to think in rigid structures.
Use graphics.	Replace text with simple diagrams.	Pictures are easier to comprehend.	You're a writer, not an illustrator.
Trim connective tissue.	Reduce linking words and transition text.	Connecting words make wordy, noisy prose.	You like to show when you're shifting gears.
Delete weasel words and qualifiers.	Get rid of qualifiers like "very" and "generally."	Qualifiers make writing mushy.	You're worried you might be wrong.

Chapter 23: Getting value from edits

Editing is a lot more than just putting a document out for review. When you request edits, you need a clear idea of where you're going and what you're trying to accomplish. The parable of Ray's Helicopter illustrates just what can go wrong if you take the wrong approach.

The parable of Ray's Helicopter

Once there was a man named Ray who was the CEO of a company that made helicopters.

In his youth he had been an avid pilot. Soon after, he started the company with a few friends. Over time, Ray's Helicopter, as the company was known, grew rapidly to command an impressive share of the world market. Every day he was happy to go to work, and most days his job energized him even more. His workers respected his passion for quality and by and large were quite happy to work for his company.

One morning Ray's cofounder and chief of strategy visited his office. "Ray," he said, "we need to reinforce with everyone, inside and out of our company, who we are and what we stand for. We need a statement of purpose to keep everyone inspired." Ray thought this was a good idea. Quality had always been the ideal that drove Ray and his workers, so his first thought about the purpose statement was "We make great helicopters." But Ray knew he needed his executive team's buy-in, and they would probably have other good ideas.

He visited the office of his chief operating officer. She pointed out that the company made much of its money from its extensive distribution network and service operation. So Ray changed the statement of purpose to "We make, distribute, and service great helicopters."

Then he ran into the chief financial officer. The CFO reminded Ray that making and selling helicopters wasn't what made shareholders happy. Because the company was well-managed, it made a healthy profit. So Ray added "profitably" to the statement.

He had lunch with the head of research and development, who was an old friend. She was very excited about the company's upcoming foray into the market for unmanned drones. "We don't just make helicopters any more," she said. But the head of R&D didn't want drones in the statement, because they weren't announced yet. They settled on changing "helicopters" to "flying machines," since that covered everything they would conceivably make.

Word had begun to get around about the purpose statement. The head of human resources and the chief marketing officer showed up in his office. "We need to recognize that our strength comes from our people," said the head of HR. "And we need to get our new ad tag line in there somewhere," said the CMO. The ads for Ray's Helicopter said that the company had "machines with edge."

Finally, Ray emailed the remaining members of his executive team. His head of sales was in India with a client. He responded by saying that he couldn't get to this right away, as he was closing sales at the end of the quarter. The chief information officer didn't respond, since he didn't see how this statement affected his department. And the corporate counsel emailed back with concern about the word "great," which might be perceived as some sort of guarantee. She thought "excellent" would be a safer word.

Ray put together all the suggestions and wrote this on his whiteboard:

At Ray's Helicopter, our global team makes, distributes, and services excellent flying machines — machines with edge.

This didn't feel very inspiring, but Ray decided to think about it for a while. It was Friday evening, and he was looking forward to dinner with his wife, who had just come back from a professional conference. Talking to her always made things seem clearer to him.

They had ordered dinner from their favorite delivery restaurant, and sat down to dine by candlelight. Ray's wife noticed that Ray was uncharacteristically quiet and preoccupied. When she brought it up, Ray explained what had happened that day with the purpose statement.

"Ray, you started this company, and you are its heart and soul. If you aren't happy with the statement of purpose, then you shouldn't settle. Who forced this statement on you?"

Ray was about to blame his chief of strategy, but realized that he had made all the changes himself, at the suggestions of his top managers. So he really had no one to blame but himself.

"What do you really think is your purpose?" his wife asked. "Well, we make great helicopters," he answered. "They're the greatest passenger helicopters in the world." And once he had said this, he felt much better.

He became determined to resolve the problem as soon as work started on Monday. So he called his leadership team into a meeting on Monday morning. On the whiteboard he had written the statement from the week before:

At Ray's Helicopter, our global team makes, distributes, and services excellent flying machines — machines with edge.

“What do you think?” he asked his team. Everyone looked down at their smartphones and tablets and laptops. “Does this inspire you?” he prompted. Finally the chief marketing officer spoke up. “It sort of dilutes the brand,” he said. “And I don't think that's the best way to use our tag line.” As soon as the CMO had spoken up, the room began to buzz. It was clear that no one was very satisfied with the statement.

Ray erased the statement and wrote this on the board.

We make the greatest passenger helicopters in the world.

He could feel the mood in the room change. His cofounder and chief of strategy was smiling. So Ray started polling his staff one-by-one. The chief operating officer said that the statement about being the greatest in the world would inspire the service and distribution operations, even though it didn't mention their roles by name. The head of human resources agreed that this kind of statement was the reason the workers loved working for Ray. And the head of sales said that his salespeople usually said something like this anyway, because the company made a great product. The CFO said that short-term investors looked only at the numbers and wouldn't care, and long-term investors would probably be happy with the statement, so long as the results backed it up.

The head of R&D agreed that, by far, the main product the company made or would make would be helicopters, and that her best designers worked on those projects. Except for the chief information officer, who nobody listened to and who rarely said anything in these meetings, this left the general counsel and the head of marketing.

Ray asked the counsel if there was any risk in this statement. “There is always risk,” she said. “Anyone can sue you for anything.” But she admitted to Ray that the chances of a successful suit were low because “greatest,” while inspiring, is not a statement that requires proof. Ray decided this level of risk was not a problem.

The CMO still had a sour look, though. “What’s the problem?” asked Ray. “I can’t help but think that our statement of purpose should have the customer in there somewhere,” said the CMO.

“Who do you think is the customer?” asked Ray.

“It’s the buyer,” said the head of sales.

“It’s the pilot,” said the head of R&D.

“It’s the passenger, too,” said the CMO.

Could the company really have gotten so large without everyone agreeing on who the customer was? Ray doubted it. “What do these customers think of us?” Ray asked.

“The buyers love us, because we create a great buying and service experience. Ours is way better than the competition,” said the head of sales.

“The pilots love us, because our product design keeps improving, making a better product experience for them,” said the head of R&D. “We really understand flying.”

“The passengers love us,” said the CMO, “because we design and build the helicopters for them, not just for the pilots.” He was quoting the marketing materials, but he knew it was true.

“Could we all agree that we create a great experience for buyers, pilots, and passengers?” Ray asked. Everyone nodded their heads. (“We could call them ‘stakeholders,’” said the head of HR, but her suggestion didn’t catch on.)

Now the text on the board said this:

We make the greatest passenger helicopters in the world. For buyers, for pilots, and for passengers, the Ray’s Helicopter experience is the best you can get.

Ray felt a lot better now, and so did everyone else in the room. He asked the CIO to put the new text at the top of the Web site; the CIO said it would take three months to make the change. So Ray fired the CIO and moved the Web site under marketing, which was much more responsive. He also put the statement onto the company intranet and at the bottom of all his emails. Morale remained high, and the workers did all they could to live up to the promise of the purpose statement. And they all lived profitably ever after.

How to work with editors without losing your soul

If you ask for reviews but have no framework for using the resulting feedback, you’ll be lost. That’s what happened to Ray. While he was working on a very short piece of writing, it was an important one; too important to leave the editing process to chance. In the end, he took control of the process and succeeded.

When you ask for edits on what you’re writing, here’s the key principle to keep in mind:

Editors exist to reveal what you cannot see, not to tell you what to do.

This is a crucial distinction. If you just do everything the editor tells you to, you are not a writer, you are a stenographer.

When you are seeking and addressing feedback, follow these four steps:

1. Be clear about your vision.
2. Choose editors to match what you need.
3. Use edits to gain insights.
4. Apply the insights to your rewrite.

Let's work through them one by one.

Be clear about your vision

If you know where you're going when you set out to write, you won't lose the way as Ray did.

As we described in Chapter 22, you must be clear about your Readers, your Objectives, the Action you are striving to create, and the iMpression you want to leave (remember ROAM?). Try to think as concretely as possible. As Barak Kassar, who heads up a successful digital branding and communications agency in San Francisco explains: "I try first to imagine the audience. And I really try to literally imagine an actual living breathing person."

Write down your objectives, action, and desired impression and include a photo that represents the person you are writing for. Then post them on the wall in front of you as you write.

You need a clear vision, not just to improve your writing, but also to confirm your sense of direction when you receive suggestions. You're less likely to get lost if you have a map and a compass.

Choose editors to match what you need

Editing is like going to the dentist — nobody likes it, but you'll avoid a lot of pain and ugliness if you get the right help at the right time. And you need to pick the right intensity of editing to match what your writing needs; you can't fix a toothache with just a cleaning.

In my experience, there are five levels of edits, from spitballing big conceptual ideas to correcting nit-picky details. Apply these distinctions carefully when working on a nonfiction piece of at least 5,000 words. (On shorter pieces, you can combine some levels.). One piece of advice applies regardless of what level of review you're seeking: Always set a deadline so you're not waiting around wondering where the reviews are.

Here's the list of levels:

- **Idea development.** Before you start, you need an idea. Then you need some pushback on your idea. This is idea development, and it was my job for my last five years at Forrester Research. You need someone who can tell you if your idea is amazing, trite, or weak and how you might improve it. Fixing the idea before you write can save you from wasting huge amounts of time. Write a "treatment" of your idea: a summary, less than one page, of what you will write. Find a person or two who are great with ideas and beg them to bat around the idea for 30 or 45 minutes.
- **Structural edit.** Some writers try to write from beginning to end and find themselves stuck with a bad structure or storyline. Others stitch pieces together and wonder how to make it all

fit. We all end up with wonky structures and insecurity. This is where you need a structural (or developmental) editor. They'll be most useful if you've got a full draft with some holes, but they can also work with an outline that's got some meat on the bones (also known as a "fat outline"). Structural editing shouldn't scare you; it just means rearranging and combining your ideas. But it does require you to tell the story differently from how you've been thinking about it. Restructuring a piece once or twice, regardless of the reason, inevitably makes it better because it gives you a new perspective.

- **Paragraph or word edit.** Once the story works, write it. Since you're not perfect, you'll have some parts that sound great and other parts full of bloated sentences, passive voice, and other flaws. Most of good paragraph- and word-editing is cutting. Get used to seeing lots of red ink or markup. This is also where you can fold in reviews from people with technical or legal expertise. Remember, asking for word edits on a fragmentary, incomplete draft is a waste of time. That incomplete draft is going to change a lot before you've completed it. Those word edits will apply to language that you'll delete or rearrange, making them worthless.
- **Copy edit and fact check.** The draft is done. Sort of. But you know it's not perfect. You need copy edits and fact checks. Copy editing is a specialized skill. Copy editors can read anything and spot the inconsistencies, grammatical errors, and embarrassing language. They're a breed apart: They love perfection and finding little errors. Bad copy editors remove the life from language. Fight them. Good copy editors save you from your flaws. Reward them (preferably with chocolate). Fact checking happens around this time too. It's when you make sure that if you say there are 3 billion Internet users, you're not just making it up. This

is a great job for an associate level staffer who can check and make sure you're not making a fool of yourself or inviting a lawsuit.

- **Proofread.** Every change you make has the potential to introduce another error. The proofread stage is where you catch those little errors. You can dispense with this stage (or shrink it down to nothing) if you've got a short piece and trust the copy editor.

Use edits to gain insights

The purpose of the editor is not to tell you what to do. You're the writer, and you have the vision. Their job is to show you what you cannot see. As author James McQuivey puts it: "Editors somehow have the ability to see in what you wrote something that you either didn't realize was there or were trying to set free but could not. This makes them indispensable."

An editor doing idea development can help you to clarify your vision. A structural editor can suggest frameworks in your writing that weren't visible to you. A word editor can show you what to cut to make things stronger. *But none of them know the topic the way you do.*

Nobody loves criticism. But it's a lot easier to take if your attitude is, "What can I learn from this?"

If you're not stuck on defending your flawed writing, you can learn a lot. This is where your vision comes in. With that vision clear in your mind, you can see which edits can make your writing more effective.

If you're not sure what a particular critique is saying, talk to the editor who shared it with you. If you make it clear that you're seeking insights, they'll be happy to work with you.

Apply the insights to your rewrite

Once you've gained the insights from your reviewers, use that knowledge to rewrite and improve your piece.

For each suggested edit or piece of advice, regardless of how big or how small, you should take one of three actions:

- Accept the edit and do what the editor says.
- Learn from what the editor suggests, and use that knowledge to make the writing better.
- Reject the edit, but because you have a good reason.

Bad writers lacking confidence accept all edits and lose control of their writing. Overconfident bad writers reject all edits and gain nothing from editing. Smart writers consider each edit carefully, mixing all three approaches. They find ways to harmonize conflicting advice from different reviewers, a skill that often leads to a more profound truth. That's what the CEO of Ray's Helicopter did.

Some insights require a major rewrite. Knuckle down and do it. The result will be better than what you've got now.

What if you don't choose your editors?

When others assign writing to you, your editors pick you, not the other way around. But all these principles still apply.

You still need clarity about what level of editing is happening. If you're seeking word editing and your editor gives you structural suggestions, you're going to have problems.

You also still need to make your own decisions about what to address and what to ignore. When you're dealing with obligatory editors (like your boss), you must address all their suggestions, even if you don't make all the changes they suggest.

Your piece will be still be stronger if you maintain your vision throughout the process, treat editors as sources of insight, and look for the broader truth that comes from combining sometimes contradictory points of view. You'll be happier with the result if you maintain that vision. So will your editors.