Writing Without Bullshit

Boost Your Career by Saying What You Mean

JOSH BERNOFF

Contents

Part Four   Change What You Produce

1

Transcend Bullshit

The tide of bullshit is rising.

Your email inbox is full of irrelevant, poorly written crap. Your boss talks in jargon and clichés. The websites 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 drivel.

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. Customers would respond to your marketing copy. 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 offices 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 college, you learned to write verbose prose 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'll show you 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 motivational roadblocks that are stopping you. Once you understand that psychology, you'll be on your way to making a far more powerful impression.

I will give you the courage to say what you mean.

Then 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.

If you have good ideas and express them well in writing, you'll get credit for those ideas and their clarity. You'll also get credit for your candor and integrity. Not only is that good for your career, but it feels good, too.

The Iron Imperative

Let's agree on one principle. This principle powers everything else in this book. I call it the Iron Imperative:

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

That couldn't be simpler. And yet everything that's wrong with the way businesspeople write today stems from ignoring this principle.

A marketer creates a website to describe her company. She's on a deadline and has to get input from multiple people. Eventually she gives up and cobbles together some prose that has everybody's fingerprints on it. Is her top priority the reader's time? No, it's getting the text into the site by the deadline.

A coworker emails you and a dozen others about a problem in your department. He puts down the elements in the order that they occur to him. The subject line is "I was just thinking." He's been very efficient with his own time. Is he respecting your time, too? Nope.

An analyst assembles a report to justify the actions that a city should take. He knows there will be lots of objections, and he doesn't want to sound stupid, so he includes as many justifications as possible and couches everything in passive language

that hides who's responsible for any actions he recommends. He has covered his ass in a very sophisticated way. Has he considered the reader's time? Not a chance.

These people aren't inherently selfish. They're just busy. When you're busy, you worry more about yourself and your deadlines. You create text to fill spaces and do jobs. It turns out that it's not so easy to just write clear, bold prose every time. So you do the best you can.

Unfortunately, each small step toward expediency erodes your own sense of integrity. You are no longer saying what you mean. That takes a moral toll on you even as it wastes your readers' time.

This waste is even worse than it appears because we're all reading nearly all the time now. We're continually consuming massive amounts of this indifferent prose, and we're doing so on glass screens that don't make reading easy. We're surrounded by distractions.

That's why the world seems to be so full of bullshit—because we're drowning in text that was slapped together without a focus on meaning and directness.

The Iron Imperative sounds like a good idea. But even if you accept it, how can you actually put it into practice?

Measuring Meaning

When you read something that is meaningful, you learn something. You could learn what Elon Musk thinks about artificial intelligence, how much rain is going to fall in the next 24 hours,

or what database strategy makes sense for your company. Meaning makes you smarter.

When I talk about bullshit, I have something very specific in mind. It's prose that makes you go, "Huh?" Bullshit is communication that wastes the reader's time by failing to communicate clearly and accurately. While that includes outright lies, lies are not the biggest problem in business communication. The biggest problem is lack of clarity. Jargon, overuse of qualifying words like "very" and "deeply," confusing passive sentences, poorly organized thinking, and just general rambling on: that's bullshit. Those are constructions that hide meaning rather than reveal it.

Because of this definition, I can actually measure bullshit. To do this, I take any passage of text and identify the words that have no real meaning. Let's take a look at an example.

Inovalon is a healthcare technology company based in Maryland. On its website, under "Who We Are," is this description:

> 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.

To everyone outside Inovalon (and, I suspect, many inside the company), this is pretty hard to parse. But just how bad is it? Let's highlight the words that don't have meaning for most readers. I'll use bold to highlight the qualifying words that don't have a precise meaning, such as "very" and "leading." I'll also highlight words and phrases that are basically just decoration to make the description sound more impressive, such as "utilization" and "across the healthcare landscape." As for the jargon that's bound to confuse most readers, I'll use bold italic to highlight that.

Now the passage looks like this:

> 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.

While you can quibble about the specific words I've chosen to highlight, we can agree that there is just too much jargon and meaningless verbiage in this passage. How much? We measure that with the meaning ratio:

$$\text{meaning ratio} = \frac{\textit{meaningful words}}{\textit{total words}}$$

There are 92 words in this passage. I've marked 38 as not meaningful, which means only 54 are meaningful. The meaning ratio of this passage is 59%.

That's dreadful.

Nearly half of these words are getting in the way rather than helping.

An ideal passage, of course, would have a meaning ratio of 100%. A passage with a meaning ratio of 80% is readable. But once you get below 70%, you're in bullshit territory. This passage reads as bullshit because nearly half of it is not communicating anything useful.

I'm going to poke fun at lots of awful language in this book. But I'm actually out to solve the problem, not just laugh at it. So imagine for a moment that Inovalon has hired you to make its mission statement better. You might come up with something like this:

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

We've reduced 92 words to 54. By using words like "we" and "you," Inovalon tells its customers what the company does and

how it helps those customers. Ordinary humans, even health-care information professionals, can easily understand what "gaps in care, quality, and data integrity" are. We've restored the missing meaning by getting rid of the bullshit.

One Woman's Path from Powerful, Direct Communication to Success

Can writing without bullshit boost your career? Intuitively, we'd like to be the kinds of people who say what we mean when we write. But does it make a difference?

I've been lucky to interact with dozens of great communicators in my career. I'm not talking about professional writers, either. I'm talking about intelligent, hardworking folks who found that candor was their ticket to success.

For example, there's Diane Hessan. Diane got an MBA and then went to work at General Foods, where she was a product manager for Brim coffee. She took what she learned and joined a small training company called the Forum Corporation as product manager for their sales training product.

At Forum, a mentor named John Humphrey taught her how to communicate as efficiently as possible. His key principle in any discussion was simple: "Net it out in three clear points." In other words, what does the reader or listener really need to know, and let's not get mired in the details. Hessan learned that with impatient colleagues and skeptical customers, you have to get to the main point quickly. Taking this principle to heart, Hessan quickly grew the sales training product into a large, successful business.

She also got a reputation.

She told me about a team of people who were working late on a proposal for a client and asked to run the proposal by her. It wasn't quite up to snuff. Before offering her opinion, she asked, "Do you want to know what I really think?" The room burst out laughing because everyone knew they didn't have a choice. "That was a turning point," Hessan told me. She realized that a reputation for frankness was part of her success. "I can save myself and my team a lot of time and aggravation by being as direct as possible."

In 20 years at Forum, Hessan rose to the executive vice president level and became one of the top three executives in the company.

When she left in 1999, she launched Communispace (since renamed C Space), a company that helps generate insight from online communities. That service was a great idea, but it proved hard to explain to corporate clients—at least until Hessan figured out the plain language to explain it. "I just told them we did focus groups on steroids," she recalls. Marketers understood focus groups, and learned how online communities could quickly and continuously deliver insights from hundreds of people, not just a dozen. Communispace took off, eventually generating 40% growth for five years in a row and growing to 500-plus employees with over 250 prominent brands as clients.

While I've made it sound like Hessan and C Space took a path straight upward, anyone who has worked at a startup knows that's not how it goes. Hessan had to deal with challenges including an early cash crunch and a salesperson who got caught forging contracts. But she took on every challenge with direct, clear, and informal but bullshit-free communication. For example, in

2008 the company was coming off a great year, but Hessan was concerned about the future. Here's how she shared this in an email to her management team:

To: The Management Committee
From: Diane
February 1, 2008
Subject: We Are Not Succeeding Yet

Now that our final numbers are in for 2007, we should be mighty proud. We have doubled in size and in numbers of clients, beat our budgets by a long shot, and importantly, our retention rates are off the charts. Bravo!

Before you all go out and spend your big bonus checks too quickly, please start to think about two issues: a big problem and a big opportunity.

The problem: our people are exhausted. You hear them talk about the "crazy train", and I don't believe this is about their paychecks alone. What can we do to keep them fresh and motivated?

The opportunity: Our largest account is $1MM/year. What would a $5MM client look like? How could we go out and create a whale of an account with quintuple the impact?

I would like to talk about both of these issues at Monday's meeting. Our 2007 was outstanding, but I think we can all agree that some day, we want to look back on this past year and say, "Awww, remember 2007 when we thought we were big and successful? Ha!"

Have a good weekend, and on Monday, the champagne is on me.

This is informal but direct. It challenges her management team without undermining their credit for doing a good job. And it worked. Sales rose 50% in the next year and shortly thereafter, Communispace closed its first $5 million sale—because Hessan had helped them lay the groundwork for growth.

In 2011, the global ad agency Omnicom bought C Space for more than $100 million. Hessan went on to lead her next venture, the Startup Institute, a company that trains the next generation of startup workers.

Boost Your Career by Saying What You Mean

Could you succeed as Diane Hessan did? I've run across lots of people who have turned clear and powerful communication into career success.

Tom Cunniff failed to make it big with his band, and then joined an ad agency in the production department. To get the attention of the ad guys who needed to approve his work, he wrote them funny notes. They thought the notes were clever, so they sent Cunniff to school to learn to write copy. Eventually he left the agency and spent ten years writing short, punchy descriptions for the J. Peterman catalogue. Now he's the owner of a consultancy that helps companies with business-to-business marketing strategy. Writing is central to his success; as he says, "If you can't write clearly, you can't think clearly." He asks the simple questions that get to the heart of his clients' problems. As Cunniff sees it, "The problem is that writers don't want to get to the point, they want to show off. But it's all TL;DR [too long; didn't read]. We are all scattered on all of our devices."

Cunniff's writing about marketing stands out. In a recent blog post called "Ten Heretical Thoughts About Advertising," he bluntly states, "There is no such thing as an advertising audience anymore. Attention has been permanently scattered to the four winds. This will only get worse." And "The most important marketing activity today is to get the PRODUCT right. If you have it wrong, you can't fix it in advertising anymore." This kind of clarity attracts clients, which is one reason why Cunniff is successful.

Success through boldness and clarity isn't just for marketers. For example, consider Lionel Menchaca Jr., who started in technical support for Dell. The public relations department poached him because they needed a techie who could speak the language of their customers. He started writing press releases and, eventually, working with corporate public relations—the intermediaries between the press and senior managers like Michael Dell. In 2006, those managers tapped Menchaca to launch and write Dell's blog, one of the first corporate blogs on the Internet. Menchaca applied his technical knowledge, courage, and ability to tell the plain truth on the blog, and Michael Dell backed him up. Dell began to track direct revenue from Menchaca's blog posts; in one two-week period, it traced $125,000 in revenue to the blog. Menchaca kept blogging at Dell for seven years and has turned that experience into a director position at W2O, a digital agency. "I've learned that being simple and straightforward will always pay dividends," he says. "Taking that skill and applying it changed the trajectory of my career."

In the 1990s, Esther Schindler owned a computer store in Maine and was active on CompuServe. She learned to write

clear sets of instructions, transitioned to a successful career writing articles and books, and became a pioneer in the field of "content marketing"—writing helpful online content to draw attention to companies and their products. Her philosophy fits today's distracted on-screen reader perfectly: "Always put the most important thing at the top, then back it up."

Writing isn't just for writers anymore. Everyone writes email. Every small business needs a web page. People write product descriptions, reports, and position papers. Every manager needs to present with slides. As Ann Handley says in her really useful book *Everybody Writes*, "We are all relying on words to carry our messages. We are all writers."

Businesses are now global and asynchronous. You may be working with a supplier in India one moment, a colleague in Dubuque the next, and a customer in his home office the moment after that. Chances are, they'll interact with you through the words you write.

I'd like you to start building the discipline of bullshit-free communication right now. I want you to unlearn the bloated, jargon-laden style you've been steeped in so far and switch to an impactful, direct, clear, and engaging way of communicating. You should adopt the successful habits of people like Diane Hessan, Tom Cunniff, Lionel Menchaca Jr., and Esther Schindler, because the more noisy our environment gets—the more crap that's out there—the more essential it is to respect the Iron Imperative. Don't waste your readers' time. Boost your career by saying what you mean.

Join Me on a Journey to Clarity, Candor, and Integrity

Here's what's coming in the rest of this book.

I'll spend the next short chapter explaining how we got into this mess. Unless you know what causes bullshit, you'll never escape its gravitational pull.

After that, I'll describe some principles you can use to write without bullshit in your work. I'll show you how to eliminate passive voice, weasel words, and jargon. I'll demonstrate how you can front-load your communication so it gets to the point quicker. I'll explain how best to use statistics, graphics, and other tricks to make your writing easier to skim. And above all, I'll show you how to write shorter. Shorter writing that respects the reader's time is central to the Iron Imperative. That's all in part 2.

To write this way, you'll need to change the way you write, edit, plan, and collaborate. So, next I'll describe some habits, principles, and techniques you can use to generate better ideas, write more fluidly, and get value from editors and collaborators. That's part 3.

Then you'll learn how to apply those principles in the most common forms of business writing: emails, social media posts, blog posts, press releases, and reports. That's part 4.

In the epilogue, I'll explain how you can change the bullshit culture in your company.

Like all writers, you are about to embark upon a voyage. Your objective is awareness of your own habits and why they exist. With that awareness and some tips on ways to do better, you can

improve. The goal is not perfection; no writing is perfect, including this book. The goal is to understand what it takes to be better and to create content that stands out from the ordinary bullshit-laden writing that surrounds us all at work.

Learning to write this way will feel like learning yoga or skiing. You'll learn new ways to do things that will feel a little weird. You're going to have to unlearn some of what you learned about writing, which will slow you down at first. Not only that, once I've sensitized you to the forms of bullshit around you, you're going to hear my voice in your head every time you read something.

But very soon after, you'll begin to internalize these techniques. You'll be able to write shorter and faster. As you put this new, bold content out into the world, people will notice you. They will thank you for your clarity and directness. You will both feel and reflect integrity. And you might even get some of your work done a little quicker.

Wouldn't you rather be like that than be a bullshitter?

Please join us on the side of meaning. It's sunnier over here, and it smells a lot better.