

Writer's Credo: Be Kind to Your Reader

By Marnie McLeod Santoyo

Writing's a personal thing. We all approach written assignments differently. In our house, my husband, Gus, and I – both writers – couldn't be more different.

He might spend an hour staring at a blank computer screen, waiting for inspiration to arrive. If words don't sound right in his head, he won't jot them down. The most he writes to prepare an assignment is an outline. However, the minute the perfect opening line appears in his mind, watch out. It won't take long before a masterpiece unfolds.

Watching him drives me crazy. Me, I just write. First thing or image that pops into my head – related to my subject matter, of course – I type it. I need to see words on the page to hear how good – or dumb – they sound. I'll write and delete a lead several times, but when the right cadence and tone hit the page, I keep going. (Yes, I drive him crazy too!)

Strangely enough, if you look at two things that Gus and I have written, you would never know we took different roads to our respective final product. Sure, our style and tone differ with each piece we develop. But each time we sit down to write, we follow the same critical rule of writing: Be kind to the reader.

Just think of articles or e-mails you find easy to read. More than likely, they get to the point, don't mince words and aren't weighed down with jargon or complex words.

So next time you sit down to write an e-mail, press release, presentation or report, remember these basic rules:

1. **Keep it simple.** Don't use 10 words if you only need five. Your reader, who is more than likely strapped for time, will appreciate you.
2. **Use periods often and break up long sentences.** Shorter sentences are easier for readers to understand. Unsure if it's too long – Read it aloud. If you run out of breath half way through, you need a period.
3. **Use an active voice whenever possible.** "Jane chased down John." grabs your attention faster than "Jane is going after John."
4. **Avoid SAT vocabulary.** Save those 10-cent words for cocktail party conversations or creative stories or poems.
5. **Avoid jargon.** I know – we live in Silicon Valley. Jargon permeates our corporations. But you'd be surprised how many of your colleagues wonder what all those acronyms really mean. If you can say it simpler, do so.

Follow these simple rules and your readers will thank you.

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