

Speeding up reader comprehension

Roger Akelius, 2008-10-08

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Summary

The reader has to understand your message in an extremely short time. Your main tool is a crystal clear message communicated via the headline plus a summary as an introduction.

Use the layout to help the reader but do not attempt to execute anything overly artistically ambitious.

Define the message

- The main argument
- Good arguments
- Mandatory facts
- Nice package
- Request for action

Text

- Use short, active sentences
- Use short paragraphs
- Express the benefits for the user, not what you are offering
- Use realistic examples
- Use up-to-date, simple but adequate words
- Use informative images

Eliminate the following from your text:

- Beautiful, fantastic, high, nice
- Roughly, about, more than
- Mathematical signs. Use precise numeric values for important values
- Parentheses, except when used in financial reports.
- Exclamation marks
- Full stop in headings
- Abbreviations
- Repetition
- Information and images of significant value
- Your company name more than three times per page

Your dear colleagues will be more than happy to kill fifty per cent of your words.

Layout

Our reader will distinguish letters better when you use black lettering on a yellow background.

- No BLOCK LETTERS
- No text less than twelve point font
- No underlining except for web addresses or using a pen in a brochure
- Use your best arguments for headlines and image captions
- Use left-aligned texts
- No negative letters like light blue on dark blue background.
- Do not use an image as a text background.

Measure the result

Make the grandmother test.

Measure the cost per new client and the cost per answer. Comparisons are only valuable if the measurements are done under exactly the same circumstances.

Updates

You need a plan to ensure your information does not get out of date. Try to put varying data onto a few pages of your website.

Marketing: work on headlines, intro and action

Your business idea may fail due to bad marketing

The single highest correlated quality or character among top level managers is their ability to express themselves both in oral and written form. Their ideas will simply fail if they do not express these ideas and instructions such that others understand what they mean right away.

The cost for marketing may be ten times higher than needed due to irrelevant information.

Your clients have to use your website much more. They get faster responses and the company saves money. The real estates companies are behind the airlines in this regard. Do not force your clients to spend any seconds more than necessary.

A big mistake is to market your products and your company when clients are visiting your page looking for fast service.

Examples

You want to change your departure time for a flight via Internet. You want to do that without any interruptions such as reading the marketing text for cheap trips to other destinations. Your clients will look at your website in the same way.

A tenant wants to give a message to the supervisor that a window has been broken in the house. Help your client to do that – and nothing else.

A young couple wants to rent an apartment in Hamburg. Let them have your proposals. Avoid all irrelevant information.

If you try to give visitors or clients a lot of information you will end up with showing them what you have rather than giving them what they are looking for. There is a huge difference between the information you have to give to a banker compared to a person searching a flat or a tenant looking for service.

On the other hand, you may lose possible clients by providing information indiscriminately. There are facts which are important for some people but not for others.

Years ago enthusiastic designers of websites used many colors, oddly designed letters, music. They tried to make their site funny and interesting. Users did choose nice, funny avatars, but it turned out to be an indication that they were teenagers.

A common mistake by residential real estate managers is to show pictures of pleasant, young smiling kids with their father having a child on each knee. Airlines never show a baby in the airplane because they know that the prime association when seeing a child other than your own children is the intolerable sound of constant wailing. Some readers have gone through a divorce and may have very bad associations. Old people normally stay away from all kids except their grandchildren. I would personally be more attracted if I see two old gentlemen in a silent, sunny garden playing chess. Show realistic, informative pictures with a broad appeal.

Texts for the Internet

As a manager or an upcoming manager in the real estate business, you have to show initiative to augment the quality of texts originating from your company. Here is a checklist for tasks to be performed

Homepage

Construct your website so each visitor will find what he or she is looking for extremely rapidly.

There are three main groups of persons who visit the homepage of a residential property company. The first page is the place to show each group the directions to where they want to go.

- Presentation of your product, search for apartment
- Service to current tenants, reporting problems
- Information to bankers, shareholders and others who need up-to-date information of the company

Present the product

How can a person find and "fall in love" with an apartment or a commercial unit very quickly?

Show large-format, attractive and professional photos. Photos work better than text. Provide relevant information. Skip all information on your company.

How to search for an apartment?

Avoid using a search filter for entering number of rooms, number of bathrooms, balcony, a certain specific region or price range. A search filter will remove all the other almost-perfect solutions.

A client indicates that he or she would like a three room apartment. The program filter will take this information, consider it as absolutely true and dump any proposals that have 2.5 rooms, or four rooms.

The number one rule for a salesman is to find out what the client wants and then propose the most similar item he or she has in congruence with those wishes.

Imagine a barman not answering a client who demands a Coca Cola because the bar only has Pepsi Cola.

Berlin has twelve subregions. If clients are given a chance to select, they will probably select the most centrally located area: "Mitte". That answer, however, excludes all other nearby subregions.

A client enters the city of Gothenburg. He or she will have no opportunity to get a nice flat in nearby places such as Kungälv, Partille, Mölndal or Lerum.

Help the client to list your proposals in various sequences such as price, number of rooms or postal code.

A filter will be good if you have more than fifty entries. If, however, you always have fifty or more vacant apartments in a city such as Berlin, the solution is more likely a change of management.

You need large photos of interiors, exteriors and the surroundings, a floor plan, a map of the location and a description without any superlatives.

Images are more essential than text

There are Internet dating companies earning a lot thanks to the simple fact that they know the basics of marketing. The response rate is at least ten times higher for entries with relevant photos than without a photo. The same applies to real estate dealers. A prosperous real estate dealer uses a professional photographer and displays thirty pictures.

Make the action easy

Do not demand mandatory information from the presumptive client such as telephone number, e-mail address or income.

You may indicate that the application will be given priority treatment if the visitor or client provides information regarding income, previous address, etc. Tell the visitor what he or she can do to get preferential treatment.

Service to current clients

- Report damages on the house.
- Payment questions.
- Forms and instructions when a client moves in or moves out of an apartment.
- Specific instructions for each house such as rules for common areas.
- Sell extras such as security door, insurance for the apartment, white goods for the kitchen, parquet.

Information to bankers, shareholders and business partners

- A seller needs to know about your company's capacity for paying.
- Other real estate companies want to give you an offer for selling or buying.
- The people living in a community have to be satisfied with your company in that community.

- You send current information to your banks every quarter. Your

bankers may need to study old financial reports, or study specific houses.

- Stock market companies have to inform all shareholders. The Internet is a medium which saves postage and time.

Texts for marketing

Define the message

The main argument

Formulate each of your strong arguments using few but adequate words.

These arguments are based on pure facts and so strong that the presumptive reader can immediately decide whether or not he or she wants to read more.

Formulate the entire message succinctly. Do not use more than seven words. The primary headline must cover the main selling point or the primary informational content. It is not easy to make the headline simple. But you have to try.

The primary headline should be reserved for the main argument.

Find out which facts in your offer are *unique*.

Compare these two headlines for dating advertisements:

"Charming, nice man wants a wife"

with

"Architect, 180 cm, 37 years, Berlin"

Companies in the retail business have experience on selling. You have certainly seen pamphlets with short headlines using black big letters on a yellow background stating:

Meatballs 2.25

Carlsberg Beer 0.99

Hot Dogs 3.45

The text arguments and corresponding layout is not haphazard. Compare this version with a design of a less educated variety. Why not announce in brightly colored letters, small in size on an attractive background like the one below?

"ICA has 37000 products in 40 towns and works on long term with good service"

Freie Wohnungen in Berlin

is the perfect header to attract people looking for an apartment in Berlin. If you just used "Freie Wohnungen" without "in Berlin", this would result in a lower number of relevant answers. That additional fact attracts the people you are looking for.

Potsdamer Platz, 410 euros

will attract relevant clients.

The best argument for an investment or for a savings account is usually the dividend or the interest rate.

Your savings earns you 6%

This message contains enough information for the reader to decide to skip what follows or continue reading.

You succeed when you find the specific argument for a single presumptive reader.

With regard to your main argument: do not try to be funny, or to attract readers using sex appeal, or via images of the surroundings, or by who the seller is.

Good arguments

Some arguments are top arguments, but only a few make the headline.

These extra arguments may be essential for some of the readers but will disturb others.

To attract students to this MBA course, the main argument is likely the result. The student wants to know what he or she will receive after this course of study – such as higher salary, a new job with higher status, better skills for acting as a manager. The following are also effective arguments, as they make the course of study easier to handle: that is seven students per class, studying in four different countries, fellow students are professionals.

Select your arguments. Ask yourself why an argument is really good. The shorter it is, the more effective it will be. Skip arguments which are not of top priority. Place valuable arguments where your reader will look first:

- as a text to an image
- as headlines of size number two
- a PS in a letter
- pencil underlined text within a letter
- as a group of three, each marked with a bullet

Mandatory facts

For some products, especially for medical drugs and for investments, you have to publish certain phrases. On German websites, for instance, one has to publish who is legally responsible for the website.

The *label* contains the name of the company, address, telephone with office hours, Internet address and e-mail address. The facsimile number is of no use.

Background texts

You may indicate that your company is big, safe and works for the

environment with a text such as:

Akelius has 40,000 apartments and is the forerunner in applying new systems for saving energy.

But do people really care about this? Some people might think that the text suggests the apartments are too cold.

If you do not have enough real arguments you have to play on the emotional level of the client. Take the Coca Cola approach, presenting young people under a waterfall in the Caribbean; or the evocative images of Marlboro Country.

A real estate company may demonstrate its size and stability by providing information on the total number of flats, or by listing all its affiliates as well as the total number of clients. Normally these facts are of greater interest for employees than for clients. If you want to rent an apartment in Berlin, you are not really concerned whether the owner has one or hundreds of flats. It is nice to know, but it is not essential for a client. But for your bank, it is essential.

Your praiseworthy humanitarian donations are not sales arguments either. Your client or your employee may think that you are earning too much of their money. Such information is positioned better in a company description.

Request for action

In a sales text you may add a sentence that the presumptive buyer has to act before a certain date. This generates more new clients.

If the client acts before a certain date, he may get a gift. But this system has been used too much. It is probably more efficient to state a date and deliver gifts to all current clients as a surprise.

You have to specify exactly how the client has to act. Make the first action extremely simple. Be careful of requesting more information than the client's name, e-mail address or postal address. Do not force the client to provide information upon the first encounter.

The end of the body of text is where to place the demand for action. But just before that you may remind the client of the beneficial essentials.

Texts for informational purposes

Message in headlines

Like an article in a newspaper

Newspapers such as the *Aftonbladet* in Sweden or *Bild* in Germany have extensive statistics on how layout and text have to be produced to obtain more readers. Their main business idea is to get income from companies paying for marketing. They know how to make information attractive. They have the best knowledge on how to transmit information to you rapidly.

The headline comes with facts – never with the opinion of the journalist.

The headlines are so essential that the journalists themselves do not write them. The headlines are written by specially trained managing editors. They know how significant a headline is. By judging the headline content, the managing editor decides the number of printed copies.

The headline is never "Big Catastrophe",
but hard facts:
"18 killed in Gothenburg car crash".

Use an introductory summary after the main headline of the article. The reader may continue reading to get a repetition of the information and for more details.

There is one message per article in a newspaper.

To make a long article more readable one paragraph is no longer than five centimeters and the paragraphs will have small headlines showing the essential message.

The width of the column with a corresponding number of letters is optimized for quick reading. This size is not coincidental. We write to fill a line on a sheet of A4 paper. This is not a relevant criteria. To read and understand quickly use 32 characters – including blanks. Do not exceed 72 characters per column.

The professionals of the newspaper industry can teach us the following:

- The main headline will contain the whole message

- The summary or the introduction will give the reader all important information
- The text body will describe the subject in more detail – nothing else.
- The layout in a newspaper is optimal: headline, summary plus body texts with small headlines. The layout is easy to read thanks to an optimal number of letters per line. All images are relevant. No images are simply for decoration.

Text body

Sentences

Use short, active sentences

Write the phrase in this order:

1. who, subject
2. is doing, verb, action
3. what, object

That means:

The dog bites the man.

not:

The man is bitten by the dog.

Use short paragraphs

Avoid any text longer than seven centimeters.

Write the benefits for the user

Formulate what the client gets – not what you are offering.

Use realistic examples

Do not use funny names, or funny things. Stay down to earth and use real figures.

Use up-to-date, simple but suitable words

Each language has a set of old-fashioned bureaucratic words and phrases. Avoid this style of writing.

Examples in Swedish:

Försälja, avyttra heter sälja

Prefix be- kan oftast tas bort, som i bedriva.

Prefix för- förstärker handlingen och kan ibland tas bort:

fördelas blir delas

förhindra blir hindra

däremot ska man inte ändra förgifta till gifta.

Avge blir ge

Utgörs blir är

Utöka blir öka

Ej blir inte

Kostnadsfördelar ; blir billigare

e-mail blir e-post

”Det går således att finna kostnadsfördelar som ej beaktats i förvärvskalkylen.” blir ”Det kan bli billigare”.

Gräsmattan får ej beträdas.

Blir

Gå inte på gräsmattan

Images

There is no need to fill up a page with irrelevant text or with images for purely decorative purposes. Only use images if they offer information.

What information do you intend to transmit by showing your company in conjunction with the following imagery:

- a beautiful lady on the phone.
- staff sitting near a computer.
- a real estate company with real estate.

- board members wearing ties.
- an elderly couple sitting near a lake
- a beautiful group of islands, lakes or appealing images of a picturesque village.

- children at play
- snow in northern Sweden
- Brandenburg Gate in Berlin

Skip all that.

Find the right picture to communicate what you want to say.

The eyes of a CEO or a broker looking right into the camera aim to suggest: "Trust us."

Having good photos communicating information is an essential.. Use relevant photos. Skip the others.

Show only images that provide information. Add text or captions to each image to make the images even more valuable.

In the right order

Put the essential search argument first and then supply the answer: ie, "The *store room for bikes* is in the cellar."

not

"In the cellar, there is a storeroom for bikes."

The above example should be switched around if you are describing the cellar.

Nouning disease

Avoid using a noun when there is a verb: ie,

Calculate

is better than

Make a calculation.

Clean the text

Beautiful, fantastic, very, nice

Do not use superlatives. Let the client judge for themselves what they consider to be great or fantastic.

The client is smart enough and will be happy to understand any benefits him- or herself.

If you relate that such and such features are outstanding and the client sees things differently, this generates a negative vibe between you and the client.

Access to the freeway is only five hundreds meters away.

This is a non-starter argument for a person without a car.

Roughly, approximately, more than

Berlin has approximately 3.4 million inhabitants.

Leave out "approximately". People are aware that this number is constantly changing.

Akelius has more than 38,000 apartments.

Avoid "more than".

Mathematical signs, exact numerical values except when vital

We are open from 9 – 17.

Why use the sign for minus?

The profit was 20%.

Write: "twenty per cent" unless the profit was exact 20 per cent.

One bike / person.

Write; One bike per person

Use words for numerals from one to and including twenty.

Write with letters the numbers from one to twenty, thirty, forty to one hundred, two hundred to one thousand. You write;

Five hundred persons.

If the value is important, like the price of a house or a number of a page, write with numeric signs like

400 000 US dollar.

And there are widely accepted examples where numerals are preferred: such as people 60+

Parentheses, exclamation marks

Do not use parentheses. Use commas.

The manager (Paul from Berlin) will arrive late.

Parentheses takes up too much space and the text is therefore slightly more difficult to read.

The manager, Paul from Berlin, will arrive late.

Three bedrooms and a garden!

Never use exclamation marks. Let the clients find out for themselves what they like.

No full stop in headlines.

There is no need for a full stop, a period in the above headline.

Abbreviations

Do not use abbreviations other than extremely well known ones such as UN, YTD.

Repetition

- a) Do not refer to previous words using pronouns. Repeat them.
- b) Make the text shorter by providing one piece of information in one place only.

Information and pictures without significant value

Skip all text and pictures which do not facilitate reader understanding.

Your company name more than three times per page

How often does the client need to read the name of your company?
Do not write "Akelius offers" but "You will get"

Company visions and other nonsense

Visionary-type slogans were popular among consultants in the 1980s but have never contributed to client satisfaction. What is the use of phrases of the following type: "The client will be the center of our attention" or "The client is always right" or "Flexible solutions" or Presentations, Speeding up reader comprehension

"We try harder" or "Our clients are our guests".

All such visions are standard in practically any company around. No one will be impressed. Use facts.

How about:

"If we do not manage to fix a broken window or a leaking tap within two workdays, you will get a discount of 100 euros on your next rental bill".

The closing sentence contains hard facts.

Take away fifty per cent of your text

The most essential aim is transmitting facts. It is difficult to detect your own mistakes.

Be aware of verbiage. Your colleagues may help you to take away fifty per cent of text mass. Removing fifty per cent of your holy text may sound like a sacrilege and a villainous desecration of something of cultural value. However, it turns out to be right.

Your friend or your manager may read your text and provide suggestions. You are the one responsible and have to decide which corrections or modifications you will make. If you agree to all suggestions, you may end up with a mess.

Layout

Each reader should be able to read

Your reader has no time, has a foreign mother tongue, is seventy years old, tired, colorblind, has dyslexia and thick and grimy glasses. He or she may be using an old, twelve inch, slow laptop on the balcony.

Your designer is young, without glasses and uses a high resolution wide-screen monitor.

Do testing using older monitors.

The battle with the art designer

There is a problem using professional art designers for your layout. You will definitely get well composed and balanced pages with attractive colors and very nice pictures.

The only problem is that you want to transfer your message. Do not yield to the designers. Your message is what is most important.

Carpenter design or golden ratio

Ask any carpenter to put up an oil painting above your sofa. He or she will make measurements and determine a point that deviates one millimeter from the center.

Always skip the division by two.

The easy rule is to try one third. Do not take a snapshot with your camera where the horizon divides the sea and the sky into equal halves. Move to one third from above or from below. The same applies to people. Place the person one third from the left or from the right side.

The most popular design in the western hemisphere is called the golden ratio. Anything else will appear odd to you. This is why art books do have unusual formats generally. You can observe this ratio between the long and short side as in the golden ratio of the Parthenon in Athens, windows, and the dimensions of sheets of paper A4, A5 etcetera.

The golden ratio has a ratio approaching two thirds.

That means:

- a) Use three columns – never two.
- b) A picture may occupy one third or two thirds.

Make the letters readable

- The eye can most easily distinguish black letters on a yellow background. Black letters on a white background are almost as good.
- Do not try to write letters above a picture no matter what your designer tells you.
- Use the same number of letters per line as newspapers do
- No BLOCK LETTERS
- No font size less than 12.0 point
- No underlining except for web addresses or with a pencil in a brochure

- Use your best arguments for headlines and image captions
- No negative letters such as light blue on a dark blue background.
- Avoid using an image as text background.

- Use left aligned texts. Never insert centered texts.
- Use a variable right margin. It takes 7% more time to read right aligned texts.

Measure the result

A person unfamiliar with your message has to make an effort to understand your message. Take the “grandmother test” with a stop watch. Put your hands on your back and don't say a word. Your aim is to observe and notice why your grandmother would have problems understanding your text. You may normally use other persons than grandmothers.

Measure the cost per new client and the cost per answer. Comparisons are only valuable if the measurements are done based on the exact same circumstances. That means you may have three different texts randomly distributed at the same time.

Prerequisite

Who is the reader

What knowledge does the reader have of the subject?

Which media

Will you be using a website, e-mail, letter, book, radio or something else?

You want to advertise a new job as a Regional Manager. You will save money by using large headlines or arguments in the newspaper or on the newspaper website. You ask the reader to click for further information or ask him to obtain further details on your Internet site. This combination of media is cheaper and you can provide a lot more detail on your own site.

What is your estimated response?

Are you aiming for one hundred new clients investing an average of 10,000 euros?

Are you aiming to have forty per cent of all incoming claims to your real estate company to be handled automatically online?

Direct marketing generally entails a response rate at or around one per cent. You may obtain a higher response rate addressing your clients.

Is the written word the most effective?

You want to find out what clients think? Calling fifty persons is more effective than sending printed material to ten thousand. And it's faster, cheaper and your results will be better.

You will need to consider delivery time and number of issues.