

Stiff

WRITING GUIDE

The Case for Character

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INTELLIGENCE



CONVICTION



HUMILITY



EMPATHY



Humanizing language

In the past year, many of us returned to work in person the first time since the pandemic began.

With that came an unspoken, if not expected, return to the old way of doing things: productivity over compassion, jargon over feelings. No thanks. Let's take the human values we relied upon during the lockdowns and bring them with us to work and into all our communication.

How? We spend hours every day collaborating with colleagues, clients and suppliers via email, Slack and other platforms. Add to that client emails, assessments and proposals, web and social copy, presentations and reports—that's a lot of writing. And every word is an opportunity to reveal why you should be valued. Every word is an opportunity to reveal good character.



Establish trust

It's good character, and not fact alone, that persuades. Communication that shows good character builds trust. It also forges connection, paving the way for your audience to pay attention, fully grasp your ideas and follow your lead. This trust and connection occurs only when character shines through in writing.



Show character

Character is broken down into four attributes: intelligence, conviction, empathy and humility. We express these qualities when we're at our best. We recognize them in the people we're friends with. We look for them when we seek advice from others. We trust people and what they tell us when their balance of character is appropriate to the subject, occasion and medium. People who show these qualities of good character attract us, guide us, inspire us.



Be human

When you take this approach to communication, you can go much deeper than simply adopting writing tricks. You can show your best self.

We'll share critical details that make up each of these qualities of good character: the values each brings to life. The markers each sets out. The ways each is revealed—ways you've likely shown yourself, or seen in others, as the pandemic stripped away the corporate from communication. Welcome back.



Four characters of persuasion

1. Intelligence

Readers trust that an intelligent writer is likely to draw sound conclusions that are rooted in reason, not emotion. Writers with intelligence wield authority, evaluate evidence and provide balanced assessments and instill confidence.

2. Conviction

Conviction reveals that a writer strongly believes in the value of his or her arguments. Readers will trust that proposals are achievable, beneficial and worthy of endorsement. Conviction shows that a writer's conclusions are deeply felt, not merely academic.

3. Humility

Humility ensures sincerity. Readers trust a humble writer because his or her arguments will not be clouded by arrogance. Humble writers are open-minded, appreciative of the wisdom of others and invite readers into the discussion.

4. Empathy

Truly empathetic writers show that they understand their readers' feelings, circumstances and challenges. Empathy cannot be falsified: it stems from a genuine desire to work with readers in pursuit of a common goal.

Every time we write, we make a choice—deliberate or inadvertent—to represent the four qualities of character. The degree to which you exhibit each is critical. As always, all four must be present to the right degree and in the right balance to suit the issue, the audience, the occasion and the medium. Any quality that is under- or over-represented will put readers off.

Too much ↑	Condescending	Fanatic	Subservient	Invasive
	Disconnected	Arrogant	Naive	Inappropriate
	Plodding	Myopic	Doubtful	Presumptuous
	Intelligence	Conviction	Humility	Empathy
↓ Not enough	Uninformed	Tentative	Inexperienced	Unaware
	Simplistic	Offhand	Cocky	Ambivalent
	Illogical	Deceitful	Close-minded	Heartless

01 Intelligence: Evidence and wisdom

Corporate speak (rife with jargon and buzzwords) is hated for the very same reason it's used by so many: it allows the writer to sound intelligent or authoritative while not actually saying anything at all. It is opaque and unapproachable. It intentionally hides a clear message or sound thinking. It deliberately shrouds bad news in clever verbiage. In the end, it's the opposite of intelligent and honest.

So, how does a person write to sound smart and trustworthy? Usually, compelling arguments are well-thought out and delivered with clarity. They are based on evidence. Their reasoning is specific. They want you to understand precisely what it is they are trying to say and how it matters to the discussion at hand.

Conversely, if every message from a speaker is just about maximizing potential, leveraging assets and driving productivity on a go-forward basis, it's hard to know if they're trying to say anything at all. (Spoiler alert: they usually aren't.)

Putting intelligence in your writing

Writing is hard. It takes work to back up your facts. It takes effort to deliver your message in as few words as possible.

Intelligence is the first of the four qualities of character for a reason. Displays of conviction, humility and empathy are vital for making a connection, but it's hard to communicate anything substantive without intelligence.

This raises an important point about good character. We never exemplify just one trait. Depending on the event, the issue, the venue and the audience, we strike a careful balance of all four. In the time of COVID, for example, powerful communication has been empathetic above all, yet intelligent, humble and seasoned with conviction to a lesser degree.

Balance is also vital. Too much intelligence risks sounding condescending or disconnected; too little and your audience dismisses you as uniformed or simplistic.

The power to persuade

Intelligent communicators spend their lives in search of knowledge. They become experts in their fields. Then they share their wealth of information with others. They give us observations about the way things work. They offer detailed advice about which direction to follow. They draw connections between seemingly unrelated elements.

We meet these paragons of intelligence at many different points in our lives. We get to know them as elders, parents and accomplished professionals—but also as self-educated people of humble means. They appear at the front of classrooms, at the apex of businesses, at the controls of construction equipment. We meet them everywhere, learning from what they say, do and write.

01 Intelligence: Evidence and wisdom (Cont.)

The extent of their knowledge means they can persuade us to change our beliefs and habits without reference to any other quality of character. That is the persuasive power of intelligence.

Values to live by

Three values are key to building and displaying intelligence:

1. **Learning:** Embrace all forms of learning—from close observation of daily experiences to formal education and training. The devotion to learning lessens the likelihood of ignorance and error.
2. **Precision:** Take the time to define terms, expectations and results, because advancement is not possible without this level of accuracy.
3. **Logic:** Use clear thinking to sort sense from nonsense.

Markers of intelligence

Overt	Subtle	Advanced
Cite formal education	Build simple structure	Find a creative organizing principle
Describe long experience	Use precise diction	Use unexpected diction
Offer depth and breadth of content	Make all content concise and material	Prefer understatement
Advance original thoughts	Manage generality and specificity	Display wit with irony and wordplay

Habits that undermine intelligence

- Typographical errors
- Overgeneralization
- Jargon and cliché
- Vagueness
- False logic
- Dubious sources

Use rhetoric to demonstrate intelligence

- Order with **parallelism**
- Elevate with **hyperbaton**
- Emphasize with **climax**
- Liken with **simile**
- Teach with **analogy**
- Defend with **procatleipsis**

02 Conviction: The mark of confidence

Is anything worth doing if it doesn't have purpose? How many times have you left (or started) a meeting certain that its goals could have been met with an email? No one should participate, let alone listen, if there is no discernable point.

Why then, without a clear idea backed by any conviction, would we expect anyone to trust or honour anything we say, do or share? To believe in something so strongly that you want to win over others is rare. To share your ideas widely and have others bring them to life is remarkable. And without conviction, neither is possible.

Have you ever encountered a client who is unable to tell you that their business, product or skills are the best? From a business perspective, most of us won't invest time or money in an endeavour that is just okay.

Whatever your professional or personal motivation—sales, recruitment, investment, dating (no judgement)—if you don't believe that yours is the best option, then no one else will.

Quiet confidence

Often, the word conviction evokes a grandstander. The loudest person in the room. A s'plainer. But believing your idea to be true doesn't require shouting. Conviction isn't arrogant or alienating. Conviction is the tool of confidence. When presented quietly, great truths can be seen, understood and believed from a distance.

To persuade, not just inform, conviction needs these three values:

1. **Vision:** To see with clarity what has been, what is now, and what will be.
2. **Faith:** Abiding trust that what you see is the truth.
3. **Courage:** A fearless determination to make the truth real.

Commit to certainty

You have vision, faith and courage, now what?

Find arresting statistics. Prove the urgency to do something. Criticize previous inaction. And when everything is put together, you will have defined an irrefutable call to action. One that will withstand the closest scrutiny.

02 Conviction: The mark of confidence (Cont.)

Markers of conviction

Overt	Subtle	Advanced
Declare an intent to persuade	Use language of emotion and certitude	Remove nuance
Voice clear recommendations	Rally with original slogans	Employ unusual word order
Outline impact of action and inaction	Cite other courageous campaigns	Break plans into simple steps
Adhere to the persuasion hierarchy	Repeat to show dogged intent	Show resolve and act alone

Habits that undermine conviction

- Ambiguity
- Vagueness
- Trivia
- Protest
- Pleading
- Threat of reprisal
- Premature call to action
- Needless repetition

Use rhetoric to demonstrate conviction

- Defend with **procatalepsis**
- Stress with **anaphora**
- Inspire with **protherapeia**
- Exalt with **hyperbole**
- Build to **climax**
- Expose with **rhetorical questions**

03 Humility: The power of vulnerability

While it can be mistaken for weakness, the vulnerability of humility attracts. We can trust someone who admits their frailties, who expresses gratitude, who shows a willingness to be open to different ways of thinking. Those who are humble aren't at all afraid of recognizing and championing others.

There is an unmistakable correlation between humility and self-confidence. You see it in people who may know all the answers but turn to others for their insights, ideas and input. This display of humility is one of the quickest ways to make others feel seen and to build trusted relationships.

Don't fake it

To err is to be human, right? We are all flawed, and we each have good and bad days. So, we tend to doubt others who cannot admit their own errors or imperfections.

But false humility is usually easy to spot and is seen as a form of BS that tarnishes credibility and trust. As always, humility needs intelligence, conviction and empathy in play—each balanced specifically to the needs of each audience, event or context.

Honesty, gratitude, curiosity

The seeker, learner and listener traits of humility place value on:

1. **Honesty:** Transparency of motive: "What you see is what you get—no more, no less."
2. **Gratitude:** Binds together all people, in all cultures, at all times to create meaningful relationships.
3. **Curiosity:** Fundamental to the search for knowledge to base judgments and decisions upon.

Plain is powerful

Humility respects the time and needs of others. Enter plain language communication, which guides us to:

- Lead with main points
- Stress critical facts over non-critical nuances
- Iron out syntax into subject-verb-object order
- Simplify punctuation to clarify logic
- Cut lengths of sentences to 20 words maximum
- Favour single-syllable over multi-syllable words
- Remove all jargon, buzzwords and trendy phrases
- Write headers to be informative

03 Humility: The power of vulnerability (Cont.)

Markers of humility

Overt	Subtle	Advanced
Admit frailties and errors	Prefer plain language	Structure to meet the needs of audience
Openly admire others	Remove all spin	Be thorough with nuances
Give thanks to others	Make questioning routine	Interpret actions of others generously
Understate accomplishments	Invite feedback through a mechanism	State that you expect fairness

Habits that undermine humility

- Overconfidence
- Overstatement
- Bragging
- Verbosity
- Cynicism
- Presumption
- Profanity
- Servility

Use rhetoric to demonstrate humility

- Minimize with **meiosis**
- Downplay with **litotes**
- Soften with **euphemism**
- Examine with **hypophora**
- Defend with **procatleipsis**

04 Empathy: Communicating love and respect

Everyone yearns to be understood. To have their motivations admired. To have their contributions acknowledged. When people feel misread, undervalued or overlooked, it is impossible to strike a connection. Empathy is active listening. Its intent is to gauge how people are feeling to forge engagement.

Finally lauded as a critical leadership trait, empathy took centre stage over the past few years. Everything about the way we work changed. We were regularly seen through screens into our personal spaces. And for many of us, too often distracted by family (kids!), pets, deliveries and laundry, a little empathy went a long way.

Collectively we were forced to become vulnerable. And that's a good thing. We have a greater appreciation of people's challenges and that we're mostly just tired. Why then would our call, email, DM—or existence—be anyone's greatest priority on any given day of the week?

It has never been more important to be considerate. Before we reach out, we need to anticipate how people may be feeling to get our message right. Is the tone appropriate? Is there a clear benefit? Is now the best time?

How it is done

Often confused with sympathy, where pity for a person's situation is shown, empathy seeks to understand how people feel. Being openly empathetic relies on these three qualities:

1. **Insight:** Celebrate the potential of everyone we see. Look deeply inside a person or group of people and trust what lies there—often hidden to others less willing to empathize.
2. **Loyalty:** Have an abiding confidence in others. People sense this confidence as loyalty that protects and defends, exalts and inspires. This empowers authentic action, without fear of censure.
3. **Ambition:** Believe that people will become their very best versions. This expectation encourages others to do whatever is necessary to improve. It reminds people that their progress is now being observed, but not judged.

04 Empathy: Communicating love and respect (Cont.)

Markers of empathy

Overt	Subtle	Advanced
Define linkage	Emphasize mutual benefits	Cite sources close to the audience
Validate audience bias	Honour audience achievements	Use we not they
Declare shared ambitions	Name a common enemy	Recite anecdotes that resonate
Pledge ongoing support	Defend your loyalty with fact	Adopt audience terminology

Habits that undermine empathy

- Doubt
- Dismissal
- Sarcasm
- Emphasizing differences
- Overreaction
- Overgeneralization
- Presumption

Use rhetoric to demonstrate empathy

- Teach with **analogy**
- Liken with **simile**
- Lead with **enthymeme**
- Inspire with **protherapeia**
- Warm with **prodiathorsis**



All together now

To speak is to strike the right balance of many things: tone, pitch, facial expressions, body language, environment and posture and to convince your listeners of what you're saying. We aim for the same with writing, but we have fewer tools at our disposal. The softness of your voice doesn't translate to the page. The step you take towards your audience isn't replicated with a paragraph break. Emphasis on a rallying cry isn't covered with just an exclamation mark.

We work in a time where text messages and emails replace phone calls. Annual reports replace annual general meetings. Memos communicate crucial workplace changes. In short, we write a lot. In fact, most people spend 50 percent of their day writing. It would be a grim future if we resign ourselves to more communication with less effect.

Our character series has explored one set of tools to teach you how to make your message come alive on a page as it would in an auditorium. The goal is lasting human connections. Humans are full of nuance and contradictions. This last step of our character series is to look at all the traits together. Every audience needs a different balance of each.

Pair context and outcome

When you write a sentence, you make a choice. These decisions are often somewhat haphazard. For effective communicators, these choices are deliberate.

All four qualities of good character—intelligence, conviction, humility and empathy—must be expressed the right amount for each audience, subject, context and objective. For example: When a judge reads a police report, the prevailing quality should be intelligence. The facts must be solid, the logic faultless and the conclusions clear.

The other qualities—conviction, humility and empathy—are not needed in explicit ways to clearly communicate the message.

On the other hand, a charity that's fundraising would be less successful if their messaging was built on intelligence alone. In that scenario, a mix of empathy and conviction is probably more persuasive given their desired outcome—donations—and what they do—care and advocate.

A mix of traits

Keep in mind that any part of good character under- or over-represented will turn your audience off.

Under-represent intelligence and you run the risk of looking uninformed. Under-represent the conviction and you will appear tentative. Fail to show a glimmer of humility and you might seem close-minded. Leave empathy behind and you could appear heartless.

On the flip side, over-representation of these qualities can alienate your readers. Too much intelligence seems condescending. Too much conviction comes across as arrogant. Too much humility appears naïve. And too much empathy strikes readers as presumptuous.

The art of communication is something we spend our lives honing and refining. It's a uniquely human skill—one that can't be replaced by AI or machines. It takes continuous work and attention to get it right.



The 3Rs: Revisit, revise and rewrite

The editing process is invaluable to strike the right balance. And that comes with a willingness to try and fail. Practice does make perfect. We must be careful enough to write to the best of our abilities, and humble enough to rip it apart. The editing process is invaluable to the development of clarity.

We believe in the editing process so much that we developed a system to guide it. Our Backdraft system teaches you to look *back* at your *draft* and develop clear, intelligent and thoughtful communication.

Everyone is a writer, because everyone writes. For anyone wishing to be a better writer, we're here to help.

Backdraft

Weak writing is the result of only 36 common errors. Backdraft is the writing-training system that teaches you how to spot, name and fix them all. Self-paced and web-based, Backdraft is designed by writers for everyone. It gives your writing the clarity and impact to connect with audiences—no artificial intelligence required.

backdraft 

Get in touch at backdraft@stiff.ca to learn more about plain language and our Backdraft system.



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