Some years ago, I taught a course in communication fundamentals to college freshmen. If you’ve never tried it, it’s a challenging exercise! I found that teenage brains weren’t wired the way mine was, so teaching them how to proceed in a deliberative fashion was difficult; it didn’t seem to matter if they were learning how to make a presentation or write a paper, they seemed to innately know that everyone else would just “get it” even if the paper (etc.) lacked any organization or direction.

How to make them understand that authors and readers have different perceptions about what’s actually communicated in a piece of work was difficult. I finally decided to try a tapping exercise created by Dr. Elizabeth Newton, a psychologist, that I found mentioned in a book called *Made to Stick* by Dan and Chip Heath. In this exercise, students are paired off and assigned tasks: one is a listener, and the other is a tapper. The tapper’s job is to tap out the rhythm of a familiar song (such as Happy Birthday, America the Beautiful, etc.) and see if the listener could correctly deduce the song from the taps. Tappers were asked in advance to predict how successful they would be in getting the song across to the listeners. Most guessed that they’d be successful about half the time. In actuality, however, the tappers’ success rate was only 2.5%! (My results were very similar when I tried this experiment with my own students.) The reason for the high failure rate in the tapping exercise is that the tappers know something that the listeners don’t. They can hear the melody in their heads as they’re exercising their fingers, but the listeners found it very difficult to understand what was being transmitted.

I’m writing about this experience because a lot of us, professional researchers and teachers, successful in our fields of study, really aren’t much better at communication than my students. How many times have you picked up an article to review and just slugged your way through it, flipping back and forth between the pages to figure out just what the author did? In my own experience the answer is—pretty often.

We were all probably taught early in our careers to write in three steps: tell what you’re going to write about, tell the tale, then tell the reader what you told him. Journal articles are structured in much the same way—the Abstract serves as the prelude to the main tale, and the Conclusions section tries to wrap everything up neatly. The only problem is, no one ever gets really good instruction about how to write that middle portion! When we write, we need to be aware of the same problem that the tappers faced. We need to be careful not to skip over “obvious” logic, and we need to make it easy for someone to figure out what we’re writing about without frustration or puzzlement. No one is going to understand what you’re writing about unless you tell them.

It comes down to this: Learn to tell a story. That’s all. Just tell a story! Write your article like you’re telling it to your 8-year-old neighbor. The words don’t have to be quite as short, the sentences don’t have to be quite as simple, but try to arrange your story into short, well-organized,
comprehensible sections and make it easy for the reader to follow your train of thought. Be generous with your use of headings. Figures are stories too, each of them a self-contained piece of the author’s consciousness, and they need to be easily understood too.

See you in the funny pages!

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