Section IIb Focusing on Your Community

These chapters discuss the essential skill of focusing your attention on your community. In this section, you will learn how to:

- Connect with your readers' humanity
- Improve your storytelling skills
- Write for an increasingly diverse readership

Note: If you have not already tried the Writing Workout in Chapter B, "Engage your specific readers," do so now. It will be especially helpful to you in this section.

4 Connect on a person-to-person level

You and I — and others in values-driven organizations — share the bottom-line goal of making the world a better place. Even if your focus is animals, or natural resources, or art, or media, or food, or technology, or any number of other subjects, at the root of it all is *people* and how we treat each other and our environment.

After all, humans are social animals. We live and breathe in community and will wither away without it.

As a writer, you need to take this knowledge to heart. People want to read about people. They also give to other people in many ways (money, time, contacts, and other resources). For your readers to want to listen to you, or for them to be moved by your piece, they need to relate to you — and those you are writing about — as people. They have to know, like, and trust you.

That is, your readers want to see how you, your organization, and your clients share their human-centered values.

Your job is to invite your readers to see how your material relates to their own experiences. The more your readers personally identify with your presentation, the more they will feel connected to your words and ideas. They will feel understood and plugged-in.

Personally speaking

I chose to write this book in a conversational style because I wanted to cultivate a personal connection with you, my reader, on a topic that you may normally consider a bit…shall we say…dry. I wanted to engage your interest, inspire and support your writing process, and invite you to join me on a journey of community outreach through self-expression. I use many idioms, anecdotes, popular culture references, analogies, and other devices to make myself good company along the way.

That person-to-person connection, that rapport, is what you are striving to create — as consistently as possible. To do that, you need to be a good conversationalist on paper. Use as intimate and dynamic a voice as you can get away with, given whatever parameters you have to work within. And keep in mind your reader's expectations!

This chapter offers you some ways to establish and maintain connection.

MEET YOUR READERS WHEREVER THEY ARE

If you have read Part I, especially Chapter B, "Engage your specific readers," you probably already have a good sense of your readers and their contexts. And since they are reading your documents, they have already demonstrated some interest related to your work or your issues.

Your readers have taken the first step by being open to hearing from you. It is now your turn to reach out to greet them. By making it easy to engage with you, it is more likely that they will come closer, stay a while, come back again, and want to be involved with you over the long term.

Like the family doctor of yesteryear who made house calls, go to where the customers are. Only use your words and not a stethoscope.

Ask yourself: *How can you use your knowledge about your readers to improve your pieces?*

The short answer: Tie your work to their specific needs, interests, and concerns.

FOCUS ON ONE READER AT A TIME

The good news is that your document will, most likely, be read by one person at a time. In a sense, you and your reader will create a private world together. That means that you can write toward only that one person.

So, try to visualize a typical reader (or maybe two or three). You might even want to post a picture of that person in your writing space to serve as a constant reminder of whom you are talking to. You want to make sure that what you have to say is going to be understood. While each reader will interpret your words differently, you can do your best to make it easy for her or him to integrate what you are saying.

A simple way to start adopting the mindset and voice of a copywriter is to think and write in terms of "you" (the reader) more than "we" (the organization you are representing). Remember that your job is to make your piece beneficial to your readers, even as they are reading it. You are not writing it to hear yourself talk.

Most organizations have an "About Us" section on their websites, in their brochures, etc. But why not add a bit that is about your *readers*?

EXAMPLES

1. *With an environmental educator in mind, you may write something like:*
As a middle-school science teacher, you are always looking for fresh, up-to-date material on today's pressing issues. With diminishing resources in our public schools, you may find it increasingly difficult to keep up with the times. On the Ecokids website, you will discover a wealth of high-quality classroom resources updated every semester to reflect changing frontiers in the environmental sciences. Get teaching materials that will inspire your students with dozens of lively class discussion starters, coupled with engaging and educational indoor, outdoor, online, and offline activities.

2. *With a vacationer in mind, you could write:*
When you go on vacation you want to be free of concerns and worries. You want to enjoy yourself in whatever way feels best. But let's face it: There simply is no escape from this interdependent and globalized world. Your actions—wherever and whenever they may occur—do indeed affect other people and the planet.
Now our socially responsible eco-tourism company makes it easy to let your concerns take a hike while your feet do too! We worry about the ecological footprint you're making so you don't have to.

3. *1% for the Planet has socially responsible businesspeople in mind as it presents this piece in its website's "About Us" section:*
To be perfectly honest, it's not about us. It's about businesses recognizing that industry and ecology are inherently connected. It's about realizing the positive effects of connecting businesses, consumers and nonprofits through philanthropy. And it's about understanding that the true cost of doing business can be mitigated by a simple pledge to the planet.
Since 2002, 1% For The Planet has inspired members of the business community to contribute 1% of sales to environmental groups around the world. In return, this growing alliance of companies is given the opportunity not only to see their self-worth rise, but their net worth climb as well. *(www.onepercentfortheplanet.org)*

RELATE TO YOUR READERS' EMOTIONS

I cannot emphasize enough that your reader will remember how you make her or him *feel*—the emotions you elicit—more than anything else you say or do.

Let's try a little thought experiment.

Think back to the last time you read the materials of another community-benefit organization. It might have been a website, a brochure, a newsletter, a fundraising letter, a thank-you note, an opinion piece, whatever.

Ask yourself: *What were you feeling?*

"Writing, when properly managed, is but a different name for conversation."
— British writer Laurence Sterne

On an emotional level, you probably wanted or needed the writer to conjure up some of these:

- Appreciation
- Belonging
- Compassion
- Dignity
- Empowerment
- Encouragement
- Excitement
- Inspiration
- Joy
- Love
- Safety
- Well-being

If you felt some of that good stuff, you probably stuck around to continue reading. It made you feel hopeful about yourself, your community, and your world (i.e., it offered you emotional benefits). Those positive strokes fed your soul and gave you the motivation to read on, maybe even act on what you read. Without those positive strokes, there would not have been much to spur you on.

"Find a subject you care about and which you in your heart feel others should care about. It is this genuine caring, not your games with language, which will be the most compelling and seductive element in your style."
— Kurt Vonnegut

Now, as a writer, remember that your readers are seeking these very same things. Your task is to reflect your personal understanding and experiences of these common human feelings, and then relate them to your organization.

EXAMPLE

You want your young children to be safe and healthy. You drench their bare skin with sunscreen and they never leave home without warm clothes on. You always use seat belts. You avoid lead paint.

But have you ever thought about the pesticides that contaminate the school playground your children use every day? Parents for Playgrounds has! Let us tell you about what we have found in our community…

BUT BALANCE OUT EMOTIONS WITH AN INTELLECTUAL TOUCH

You are not only trying to appeal to your readers' hearts. You are also interested in reaching their minds.

We all know people who like to wrap their heads around hard facts. They are reading your piece to learn more about your issues, including the historical context and current trends, political controversies, how your work fits into today's world, and other verifiable information. They may want to know about the academic or philosophical theories behind your perspectives.

Even those people, however, need an emotional component to their understanding.

It is up to you — the writer — to strike a balance by providing a blend of facts and feelings. Most of the press strive to do this by including a variety of news, features, human-interest stories, editorials, personal columns, and analysis. Some media outlets, such as *The Daily Show*, serve up a healthy dose of entertainment along with up-to-date information. Each person can then choose the mix that feels right.

ASK QUESTIONS

Have you every noticed how much public-interest writing these days appears in the form of a question? That is because asking written questions is our equivalent of the dialogue that can be so irresistible in great fiction or in person.

As psychologists know, human beings are hard-wired to solve problems and will automatically try to answer whatever questions are asked of us. We will either answer silently to ourselves or listen or read on to see if the answer is provided for us — or both.

Questions to your readers simulate person-to-person interaction.

EXAMPLES

1. *Original:* The recent squabble over whether the Transportation Authority can afford a people-mover to the airport is only the latest in the local transit debate.

   Suggested revision: Can the Transportation Authority afford a people-mover to the airport? That question is only the latest in the local transit debate.

2. *Original:* Our organization, Climate Crisis, is collecting the community's comments on climate change, and will soon share the feedback with our legislators. If you would like to have your voice heard, please fill out this form.

   Suggested revision: Want to have your say about climate change? Climate Crisis and your legislators are all ears! Just fill out this form.

This is the idea behind the ubiquitous Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ) documents on the web and elsewhere. In fact, writers have been asking and answering questions for quite some time. Question-and-Answer interviews and advice columns are examples. Why has this technique stuck around so long? Because it works.

Ask yourself: *What questions keep coming up in phone conversations, in face-to-face meetings, at events, and at other times you interact with clients, members, volunteers, and other stakeholders?*

Also consider what questions you ***wish*** your stakeholders would ask. If you stay away from the simple yes or no answer, you will elicit more thinking. Try to ask questions that begin with words such as: how, why, how much, which, where, when, what, and who (and not: do, can, will, and should).

Your questions should sound realistic — as if someone could or did really ask them at that moment. You might want to keep a file of these questions as they pop up, and ask others in your organization to do the same.

EXAMPLES

- "How can young people be part of your planning process?"
- "When was the last time you needed a helping hand?"
- "Which candidate would you choose?"
- "What do you mean by that?"
- "Hey — who's in charge here?"
- "What can one person do?
- "How does this work?"
- "Where do we go from here?"
- "Why is this so important?"
- "What if you still are not clear?"

After asking a question or two, you are not obligated to answer right away. It is fine (at times, a good idea) to continue the suspense, encouraging your reader to stay with you. You can use phrases such as "Before I tell you the answer…" to fill in some background information. But always make sure to deliver on your promises before you wrap it up.

By the way, questions often make great headlines (see Chapter 9, "Start with a punchy opening") and can also contribute to the flow of your document (see Chapter 14, "Keep your piece flowing smoothly").

While I recommend including questions and answers to enhance your piece's conversational tone, pay attention to how you use this technique. Ask questions and provide answers in a simple and straightforward manner. That is, avoid questions or answers that lump together more than one concept at a time. Phrasing questions in the negative can also lead to confusion. For instance, take a look at these questions and their answers:

1. Let's say you asked your readers this question:

   "If you knew a product on your bathroom shelf may cause cancer or damage your reproductive system, you probably wouldn't use it, right?"

   You assume that your reader will answer that question with a resounding "NO." Your follow-up might then be:

   "Of course not! But that, unfortunately, is exactly what millions of Americans do every day."

   But wait a minute: that answer is quite confusing! While you mean that millions of Americans are using harmful personal care products without knowing about their potential danger, you are actually saying that they are using harmful products even though they know about the risks they are taking. Re-read it and you will see what I mean.

   Instead, separate the two concepts in the answer to arrive at some clarity:

   "Of course not! And neither would millions of other Americans. But, unfortunately, they aren't aware of the potential dangers lurking in their bathroom cabinets."

2. In the 1985 film *Clue,* Colonel Mustard asks the butler:

   "Am I right in thinking there is nobody else in this house?"

   That question starts an avalanche of confusing back-and-forth questions and answers. Notice how he asks about two things at once: the correctness of his thinking and if there is nobody else in the house. On top of that, he does not ask if *anybody* is in the house, but he uses the negative pronoun instead.

   He eventually gets around to the simplified version of his question:

   "Is there anybody else in the house?!"

   And he gets a straight answer: "No!"

RELAY YOUR PERSONAL EXPERIENCES

Because you and I work in community-benefit organizations, we have a special opportunity — if you like, an obligation — to express great enthusiasm for our work. Yes, we need to be able to rattle off statistics, citations, and relevant facts and figures about why our efforts are important. But we also can infuse our writing with personal passion for the great work we do.

Ask yourself: *What makes* you *most passionate and inspired about your work?*

Have you ever stood in awe of the tremendous things your organization can and does accomplish — and the fact that you are a part of it? Have you ever found

yourself aglow as you share a profound moment with a successful client whose heartfelt smile is contagious? What about those times when you finally win a battle that you and your colleagues have been fighting for years or decades? Sometimes a personal reason for being involved in your organization is what keeps you going.

Let that excitement, exhilaration, energy, and commitment shine through. It is one of the special gifts you can share with your readers. They will tune in to the feelings in your voice and be drawn to listen.

In fact, all your personal experiences can provide fuel to feed your writing fire. And your readers are likely to share some of those experiences — or at least relate to them on a personal level. Highlight that common ground, and you will be on your way to establishing a genuine relationship.

EXAMPLE

Eva Paterson, Founder and Executive Director of the Equal Justice Society, loves jazz. She pens a blog entitled "Eva Paterson Riffs on Civil Rights." In an entry in support of the legalization of same-sex marriages, she wrote of her personal experience:

"This epic battle has personal relevance for me. In 1970, I fell in love with Gary Paterson, who is white, at the height of the Black Power movement. Our love antagonized both black and white people … When we decided to marry, Gary's parents were so appalled that first we eloped to Hawaii and then settled in Oakland. Gary did not speak to his parents for almost seven years. We had epithets yelled at us in public. What gay men and lesbians are experiencing now as they seek to marry feels very familiar to me. *(www.evapaterson.com)*

Even if you have not personally experienced a particular event or circumstance that you know your readers have, you can still use this technique. How? Simply become the ghostwriter or editor for someone else in your organization (staff, volunteer, client, investor, customer) with a story to tell.

TALK ABOUT YOUR SHARED SOCIAL CONTEXT

You and your readers no doubt share some of the same social context. Identify these components and underline that similarity. "We're all in this together," as the saying goes.

For instance, your context could include a shared locality or event, a culture or history in common, or a socio-economic hardship you all are living through. You can also empathize with the realities of your readers' everyday lives. Examples might be the chronic rushed feeling of never having enough time to get everything

done, or frustration with traffic jams, or disappointment with politicians or other high-profile figures.

Because of the cultural and socio-economic diversity of your readers, finding experiences that resonate may seem difficult. You can find common denominators if you stick to images that appeal to the senses or to widely held core values and beliefs. (For more on these strategies, see Chapter 6, "Write with reader diversity in mind," and Chapter 10, "Show, don't just tell.")

EXAMPLES

1. *Let's say your organization promotes dental checkups as part of essential healthcare. But everyone hates going to the dentist. You might want take a hint from Bill Cosby, who found a way to talk about this common experience in his routine,* The Dentist:

   Dentists tell you not to pick your teeth with any sharp metal object. And then you sit in their chair and the first thing they grab is an iron hook! Now the dentist pulls out a needle. This is to deaden the pain. So you open up…"

2. *I began a newspaper opinion piece about my complex ethnic heritage by recalling an experience whose outlines are common to most adults who went to school in the U.S. (that is, my likely readers):*

   It was an early autumn morning when my seventh-grade homeroom teacher passed out the forms. "Race/Ethnicity — check only one." I was confused.

   Maybe the choices were the four that the U.S. Census Bureau has traditionally used: White, Black, Asian/Pacific Islander, and American Indian/Alaskan Native. I'm sure that Hispanic was included in some way. But there was definitely *not* a place to check "other" or even "mixed."

   I still have trouble with such categories. So do many other people I know.

   My mother was born in the U.S. and is Jewish, and her parents were immigrants from Eastern Europe. So what would I consider to be her ethnicity?

   Then there's Dad. He's from Iran and has rather dark skin and hair. His complexion isn't black, but it isn't white either. And his home country is in Asia, last time I checked.

   "Just write down *white,* Dalya," my parents told me that night many years ago….

Check out the ***Dilbert*** comic strip, ***New Yorker*** cartoons, any good stand-up comedy routine, *This American Life* on National Public Radio, or "Life in These United States" in *Reader's Digest* to see this technique in action.

ADMIT THAT YOU ARE HUMAN TOO — AND WE ALL MAKE MISTAKES

While you want to accentuate the positive aspects of your work, it is okay to occasionally share struggles or weaknesses too. By writing about both your successes and challenges, you can encourage your readers to see your organization as one made up of genuine, down-to-earth people like them.

The key here is to show how those lessons are always leading you to a better tomorrow.

For instance, perhaps your board or staff lacked a specific skillset or important understanding a year ago — but you are now working to get up to speed. Or maybe your office recently experienced a break-in and you lost the data you needed to efficiently communicate with your readers — but you have implemented an improved security system to prevent the problem in the future.

Admit your mistakes, share your lessons learned, and explain how you are moving forward. Your readers will recognize and appreciate your integrity.

EXAMPLES

Most people find true confessions utterly irresistible. How many times have you stopped to hear about the misdeeds of someone you admire, and what she or he learned from the experience?

Popular books along these lines include John Perkins' *Confessions of an Economic Hitman* and Richard Bitner's *Confessions of a Subprime Lender: An Insider's Tale of Greed, Fraud, and Ignorance.*

In an article I excerpt in Chapter 6, "Write with reader diversity in mind," I confess to my personal gaffe concerning racial stereotypes and snap judgements.

WRITING WORKOUT

Use this exercise to start thinking about the types of people you would like to connect to and how you will do so.

STEP 1: Choose someone you know personally (an acquaintance or friend) who is not yet involved in your organization, but who is part of your intended audience. You may want to refer to your Reader Inventory from Chapter B, "Engage your specific readers," for some suggestions about whom you might focus on.

STEP 2: Notice the particularly compelling characteristics of that person. Take your time — preferably over the course of a couple of days. Observe and keep notes. Do your best to pretend you are a fly on the wall. You are looking for evidence of the person's talents, unique style, personal history, sense of humor, doubts or unresolved internal conflicts, likes and dislikes, habits, eccentricities, communication style, facial expressions, preferred tone of voice, fashion sense (or lack thereof), etc. Look especially for indicators of her or his values, motivations, and emotions.

STEP 3: Now picture that person in a relationship with your organization (as a client, donor, customer, volunteer, etc.). What challenging issues in your chosen character's personal or professional life could your organization be part of resolving? And how can you — as an individual — relate on a human level to him or her? Jot down your thoughts, implementing at least two of the techniques from this chapter.

STEP 4: Repeat the above process as often as you can. The more practice the better, as your intended audience will grow and change over time.

Note: *This Writing Workout fits well with the one at the end of Chapter 5, "Share stories."*

> *"Once in East Africa, on the shores of an ancient lake, I sat alone and suddenly it struck me what community is. It is gathering around a fire and listening to someone tell us a story."*

— Bill Moyers