

Yaffe's Law vs. Murphy's Law: A New Look at an Old Problem

by Philip Yaffe

For most educated persons, Murphy's Law is the fundamental law of the universe, even more important than birth, death and gravity.

In its purest form, Murphy's Law says: "Anything that can go wrong, will go wrong." There is an important but often neglected corollary: "Many things that can't go wrong, will go wrong anyhow."

I am now pleased to report a loophole. In at least one important area of human activity - expository (non-fiction) writing and public speaking - Murphy's Law does not have total coverage. This is because it can be counteracted, at least partially, by a rival principle that I recently discovered and immodestly call Yaffe's Law

Yaffe's Law states: "If you give people what they want first, they are likely to accept anything else you want them to have. If you give them what you want first, chances are they won't accept anything at all."

In short, in a text or a speech if you quickly and securely engage the audience's interest, any significant missteps later on will be muted, if not completely counteracted.

There is of course nothing new in this idea. It is just another way of saying that for best effect, you should write or speak starting from your audience's point of view. Nevertheless, Yaffe's Law is revolutionary because its new formulation focuses attention on this fundamental principle of persuasive communication as never before.

Applying the principle implies that you know the audience's point of view. If you are inclined to think this is virtually impossible because point of view can change so very much from subject to subject and audience to audience, you would be making a serious mistake.

In most cases, readers or listeners share a single overriding concern: Will this text or presentation sufficiently reflect my interests and apprehensions that I should pay any attention to it? They want this question answered virtually instantaneously; otherwise they will stop reading or stop listening.

In short, your first job, even before deciding what you want say, is to determine what your audience wants to hear. In other words, give them what they want first, i.e. a positive answer to this universal question. If you then continue positively answering it, your audience will follow you almost anywhere.

Here are a couple of examples to demonstrate how the idea works.

A Written Example

Below, the "Original" shows a text as it might have been written without Yaffe's Law. The "Revision" shows how it actually was written with Yaffe's Law.

Original

A piece of electronic equipment installed in automobiles could allow insurance companies to monitor the driving behavior of their customers.

Each time a motorist uses the car, the device will record the roads being traveled and the time of the journey, and send the information via satellite to the insurance company.

With this data, the company will be able to calculate the insurance premium for each individual journey based on the relative risk of crashes on the different roads at different times of the day. The motorist will receive a monthly or quarterly "usage statement", similar to a telephone bill, itemizing the insurance cost for each use of the car.

By agreeing to the system, motorists could save hundreds of dollars on their automobile insurance.

Because of the lower risk of crashes, trips on superhighways will cost less per kilometer than on city roads, while trips on country roads will also cost less per kilometer than on city roads because (the text continues)

Revision

Motorists could save hundreds of dollars on their automobile insurance by allowing their driving habits be monitored by a satellite-tracking device installed in the vehicle.

Each time a motorist uses the car, the device will record the roads being traveled and the time of the journey, and send the information to the insurance company.

The company will then calculate the insurance premium based on an assessment of the relative risk of crashes on the different roads at different times of the day. Motorists will receive a monthly or quarterly “usage statement”, similar to a telephone bill, giving the insurance cost for each journey.

Because of the lower risk of crashes, trips on superhighways will cost less per kilometer than on city roads, while trips on country roads will also cost less per kilometer than on city roads because (the text continues)

The “Original” was clearly written from the point of view of the insurance industry. However, simply moving the fourth paragraph of the “Original” to the first paragraph of the “Revision” charges everything. Who wouldn’t want to know how to save hundreds of dollars on their automobile insurance?

By giving the readers what they want first, a text that might have been of interest only to “techno-nerds” suddenly becomes interesting to virtually everyone. Moreover, even if the rest of the text is not superbly written, people will probably continue reading anyhow, because it is in their interest to do so.

A Spoken Example

With regard to Yaffe’s Law, the written word and the spoken word are exactly the same. Nevertheless, speaking allows use of techniques that simply would not work on the printed page.

The following speech was delivered on the subject of integrity in politics. Once again, the “Original” shows how it might have been written without Yaffe’s Law. The “Revision” shows how it actually was written with Yaffe’s Law.

Original

I want to talk to you this evening about a man I admire very much. His name is Julius Nyerere and he was the first president of Tanzania after it gained independence from Britain in 1961.

Julius Nyerere was born in 1922 in Butiama, a small village in what was then Tanganyika. He was the son of Nyerere Burito, a Zanaki tribal chief. At that time schools in Tanganyika were in very short supply. Julius began attending Government Primary School at the age of 12, which he completed in three years instead of the standard four. He did equally well in secondary school and won a scholarship to Makerere University in Uganda, then the only university in all of East Africa.

When he returned to Tanganyika, he worked for three years as a secondary school teacher of biology and English before winning a scholarship to attend the University of Edinburgh, where he obtained a Masters of Arts Degree in history and economics. This is also where he began developing the ideas and tactics that ultimately helped him lead Tanganyika to independence from Britain and become the country’s first president. Unlike many other independence movements, Nyerere achieved independence without a single drop of blood being shed. (The speech continues)

Revision

We live in a cynical world where the values of truth, honesty and integrity seem to be in short supply. We are therefore always looking for examples of such values in action, especially with regard to politicians.

I would like to offer you such an example from Africa. You have probably never heard of this man, but for me he stands as a true model of integrity. Can you guess who he might be? (Speaker pauses a few moments). No, it is not Nelson Mandela, as I imagine many of you were thinking. However, I am certain Mr. Mandela would be more than pleased to be considered in the same light as this person.

His name is Julius Nyerere. Julius Nyerere was the man who led then Tanganyika, today called Tanzania, to independence from Britain in 1961. Unlike many other independence movements, this one succeeded without a single drop of blood being shed.

I had the privilege of living two years in Tanzania shortly after independence. Being a city boy, for me Tanzania was quite a revelation. I virtually lived in a mud hut, suffered through a drought, saw leprosy, and experienced both malaria and dysentery. All of these things affected me. But getting to know Julius Nyerere as a political leader was truly a life-changing experience.

When Nyerere became head of state, he was so popular that he could easily have taken on the trappings of a king or potentate. But he did exactly the opposite. He chose to live very modestly, because that was his nature.

More importantly, he inspired confidence in everyone, and never betrayed that confidence, because that also was his nature. He of course had political enemies, but they were critical of certain of his ideas and policies—but never the man. The worst I ever heard anyone say about him was, “President Nyerere is doing all the wrong things for all the right reasons.” (The speech continues)

At this point the speaker could insert all the information about Nyerere’s background and education, which seemed so tedious in the “Original”. Why? Because instead of tedious, the audience would now find it instructive and integral to understanding the man in whom their interest has been effectively ignited.

So does Yaffe’s Law pardon poor writing and poor speaking? Absolutely not!

Poor writing is still poor writing, and poor speaking is still poor speaking, so you must constantly be alert not to fall into bad habits.

On the other hand, by strongly focussing your attention on giving the audience what they want first, when you start giving them what you want, it will be in a context that appeals to their most basic instincts. This, of course, is what persuasive communication is really all about.

Philip Yaffe is a former reporter/feature writer with The Wall Street Journal and a marketing communication consultant. He currently teaches a course in good writing and good speaking in Brussels, Belgium. His recently published book *In the “I” of the Storm: the Simple Secrets of Writing & Speaking (Almost) like a Professional* is available from Story Publishers in Ghent, Belgium (storypublishers.be) and Amazon (amazon.com).

For further information, contact:

Philip Yaffe

61, avenue des Noisetiers

B-1170 Brussels, Belgium

Tel: 32 (0)2 660 0405

phil.yaffe@yahoo.com

About the Author

Philip Yaffe is a former writer with The Wall Street Journal and international marketing communication consultant. He now teaches courses in persuasive communication in Brussels, Belgium. Because his clients use English as a second or third language, his approach to writing and public speaking is somewhat different from other communication coaches. He is the author of *In the "I" of the Storm: the Simple Secrets of Writing & Speaking (Almost) like a Professional*. Contact: phil.yaffe@yahoo.com

Source: <http://www.tntarticles.com>