

## **Columbo: What Can a Bumbling, Inarticulate Los Angeles Cop Teach Us about Effective Communication?**

by Philip Yaffe

Decade after decade, perhaps the most popular type of television program has been the detective story, the traditional "who dun it?", presumably because people enjoy being held in suspense. It is therefore instructive to note that one of the most popular TV detective shows of all time has no suspense to it whatsoever.

Remember "Columbo"? Reversing the conventional format, this show tells us exactly "who dun it" within the first five or ten minutes. The remainder of the show then invites us to accompany the dishevelled, seemingly bumbling Los Angeles cop (played by Peter Falk) as he bit by bit exposes the murderer's errors until the culprit has no option but to confess.

If people love being held in suspense, why has this decidedly un-suspenseful series been so unflinchingly successful? Because people also love clarity. If they are going to be led on a journey, they want to know where they are going and why they are going there before they set off.

You are probably now wondering, "Where is all this TV nostalgia leading me?" Quite simply, to a crucially important principle about writing and public speaking.

"Creative" writers, i.e. those who produce short stories, novels, television scripts, film scripts and other forms of entertainment have a choice. They can be mysterious at the beginning, revealing all only at the end (the conventional approach). Or, like Columbo, they can reveal all at the beginning and then delineate the process that leads to the denouement.

"Expository writers", i.e. those of us who produce memos, reports, proposals, newsletters, textbooks, training manuals, research papers, etc., don't have this choice. Unless we tell our readers or listeners exactly where we are taking them and why they should want to go there, they are unlikely to come along.

This is because fiction and non-fiction serve two very different purposes.

By simplest definition, the fundamental purpose of creative (fiction) writing is to amuse and entertain. In other words, people come to a work of fiction expecting to be drawn in and are willing to help you in the task. After all, who doesn't want to be amused and entertained?

This is the conventional "who dun it" approach.

The fundamental purpose of expository (non-fiction) writing is to inform and instruct. Most people don't relish being informed and instructed. In general, they would prefer to be doing something else. If you want them to follow where you lead, you must make it worth their while from the very beginning. In short, you must be certain that they know almost instantaneously where you wish to lead them and what benefit they might get from coming along.

This is the Columbo approach.

In practice, this means that before you type a single word, you need to answer a fundamental question: "Why the hell would anyone want to read what I am going to write, or listen to what I am going to say?" If you can't give at least one or more good answers to this question, you have no business striking a key.

But caution. Don't fall into the trap of saying, "Well, they should want to read this or listen to this because it's important to them." This is viewing the world from your point of view, not theirs. In general, you cannot force people to read what they don't want to read or listen to what they don't want to hear. To be truly successful, you must demonstrate to your audience that what you have to say is important, not simply shout it. Once they decide to follow you of their own free will, success is almost guaranteed.

This crucial point is perhaps best expressed in what I immodestly call Yaffe's Law.

"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, they are likely not to accept anything at all."

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