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Skills and Professional Development



Chances are, through the course of the day, you'll receive at least one email message that will lead you to say, out loud and with complete sincerity, "What an idiot."

And, considering this probability, someone today will likely read one of your email messages and have the same reaction.

Written words dominate our lives. We spend hours hunched over our laptops and smart phones, clicking away, trying desperately to stay above the flood of email, texts, and alerts. The joke is that we spend hours in electronic discourse with our colleagues, when often we could just lift our heads above the cubicle wall and have a simple, short conversation.

I openly rely on the email crutch. Why pick up the phone or walk to another office when I can send a terse (or dribbling) message and feel like I have done my job? Why run the risk of an uncomfortable conversation — or painful small talk — when I can just tap a note and be done with it?

The reason, of course, is that your written message may be misunderstood, misinterpreted, or misjudged. The risk is that your email will be one of billions that will cause someone to roll their eyes or grimace in disgust.

It wasn't always this way. Written discourse used to be thoughtful, considerate, and contemplative. But that was a time when writing was time-consuming and costly, relative to the spoken word. Writing required an investment for both the sender and reader; it had intrinsic value.

Not anymore. Everyday written communication is now the base form of dialogue. It is cheap, easy, and abused. For most of us, writing has become merely an exchange of words, not a discussion and certainly not a conversation.

The obvious solution to this problem is to rely more on spoken exchanges instead of email or text. It is not as efficient, but if your message is important it's worth the extra time. You are far less likely to be misunderstood if you deliver the message live.

And as a side benefit, if you speak instead of write, others will think you're more intelligent.

Research supports the intellectual value of speaking over writing. Professors Juliana Schroeder and Nicholas Frey at the University of Chicago ran several experiments in which they measured the impression made by fictional job candidates with potential employers, either in writing or in recorded speech. They compared how potential employers viewed the intelligence and general impression of the candidates, as well as the likelihood they would hire that candidate, based on their method of delivery.¹

1 Schroeder, J. & Epley, N., "The Sound of Intellect: Speech Reveals a Thoughtful Mind, Increasing a Job Candidate's Appeal." *Psychological Science*. 29 April 2015.

The data are clear and consistent: when you present information verbally you come across as more intelligent, give a more positive impression, and are more likely to be hired than if you present the same information in writing. Interestingly, the experiments conducted by professors Schroeder and Frey did not show a statistical difference between audio and video presentations. Both audio and video recordings, however, were statistically more effective than written text in making an intelligent impression.

And this is not terribly surprising. When we speak, we present not just words but subtle added meaning in our cadence, diction, and intonation. Psychologists refer to these as "paralinguistic cues" and no written text can duplicate their effect.

To defenders of the written word, do not despair. There is still a role for written communication, even in today's corrupted world. And the standard for good writing is now very low. It takes only a bit of effort to create a clear, concise, and cogent message. Your thoughtful prose will stand out in the morass of glib, clumsy, and confusing messages.

In the end, however, you will usually create a more positive impression if you speak instead of write. So, when you write, make sure it causes the least amount of damage possible.

The pen is mightier than the sword. But if you live by the pen, you die by the pen.

[Bill Mordan](#)



General Counsel and Company Secretary

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