

# Do you need a proofreader or a copy editor?

**What are you trying to accomplish?**

Recently, I saw a query on a listserv looking for a copy editor. The author said she needed a “basic proof” done for spelling, grammar, and for the “missed half sentence in the middle of a paragraph.” In fact, she didn’t need a copy editor—what she needed was a proofreader. Proofreading is a different skill than copy editing. While copy editors can be proofreaders, that is not their main function.



**How to get your writing from draft to finished product**

When you are creating any type of written work, you should follow these steps:

1. Write a rough draft
2. Review and rewrite
3. Copy edit
4. Incorporate edits
5. Produce final document
6. Proofread
7. Publish

### **What is copy editing?**

Copy editing reviews your work for clarity, consistency, style, and accuracy. This can include everything from fact checking to rearranging copy for flow to flagging duplicate content. Copy editing allows your thoughts to be expressed in the clearest way possible. A thorough copy editing job will shore up your thesis by making sure your main points are clear and supported.

### **What is proofreading?**

Proofreading checks your copy for errors, such as typos, misspellings, and missing punctuation. The best proofreaders will fact check to make sure dates and numbers are accurate, and names are spelled correctly. Proofreading does not rearrange your copy unless it is a spacing issue. More importantly, proofreading is not designed to make your writing clearer but to ensure your copy is error-free.

Keep in mind that using your word processor's spell check is not the same as proofreading. Spell check checks the spelling of a word, not its usage. For example, you could've typed "fair" instead of "fare" in an article about subway prices, and though the word is spelled correctly, it is not used correctly.

### **So many (preventable) mistakes**

Too many folks skip the copy editing and think that they can get by with doing a proofreading. For sure, you should always

proofread, since it prevents your work from being riddled with typos and other embarrassing mistakes. A copy edit would improve the content.

Here's a sampling of errors I've collected over the past few days. Proofreading before publishing would've prevented these:

Using the word **isles** instead of aisles in an article in today's *Washington Post*.

A email subject line that says "Stay on top of the governor's **rack**" (instead of race).

Or an email that tells me to "**Pre oreder** your set today."

Or a survey (from a professional editing association, no less) answer option that says "Professional **Devlopment**"

And so many more. It's as if most organizations have given up on proofreading. Perhaps they don't think it's worth the time, effort, or cost.

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Bottom line: If you take your work seriously and want to give it credibility, spend the effort required to get your work both copy edited and proofread before you publish.

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## Unforced errors (in the copy)

Unforced copy errors are errors (i.e., typos, misspellings, grammatical flubs, etc.) that would have been caught if either you gave yourself enough time to take a second (and third) look at what you were doing; or you had someone else check

your copy.

Many people don't notice or even care about copy errors. But if you are like me, errors just jump out at you, no matter where they are—on the TV chyron, on a menu, in the newspaper, in a book.

Errors can reflect poorly on you and your organization. Errors in printed or published copy show that you either didn't care enough or didn't know enough to notice. When you are producing marketing materials or anything that will have a longer shelf life than a social media post, errors will last and you must be careful to eliminate them.

Following are four examples I found in the past ten days:

### **Program flyer**

Error: Headline does not match with body of flyer. Whoever produced this flyer, copied the previous flyer from the January program, put in the description of the February program featuring journalist Ruth Marcus, not Ambassador Susan Rice, and then neglected to update the headline.

Talk of the Hill with Bill Press featuring  
Susan Rice, former UN Ambassador  
Tuesday, January 18, 7 pm

Award winning journalist Bill Press talks to Ruth Marcus, a deputy editor of the Washington Post editorial page and regular columnist. With a law degree as well as her journalism credentials, Marcus was perfectly situated to write "Supreme Ambition: Brett Kavanaugh and the Conservative Takeover," which The New York Times called "impressively reported, highly insightful and a rollicking good read."

**Bill Press** is host of the nationally syndicated "Bill Press Show" on talk radio, and his weekly column is distributed by Tribune Media Services. A well-known political commentator, Press began his career on KABC-TV and KCOP-TV, both in Los Angeles. Over the course of his career, he has received numerous awards for his work, including four Emmys and a Golden Mike Award. Press is the author of six books: "Spin This!", "Bush Must Go!", "How The Republicans Stole Christmas", "Trainwreck", "Toxic Talk", "The Obama Hate Machine", and his latest, "From the Left."

Error: A man is not “them.” If you know the gender of the person, there is nothing wrong with using the right pronoun, in this case, “him.” It seems that this story was updated when it became known that the victim was male, but the writer did not bother to read the rest of the sentence.

Montgomery County firefighters are seen on the tracks of Metro after rescuing a woman from under a Metro train. (Courtesy Montgomery County Fire and Rescue)

Share This Gallery:

A man suffered life-threatening, traumatic injuries after a Metro train struck them not far from the Rockville, Maryland, station Tuesday morning.

Metro Transit police said in a tweet that the man had climbed a fence next to the Metro tracks in Montgomery County.

The train struck the man about a quarter of a mile from the Rockville station around 5:40 a.m., according to Montgomery County Fire and Rescue spokesman Pete Piringer.

Firefighters rescued the man from under the train as passengers stayed on board.

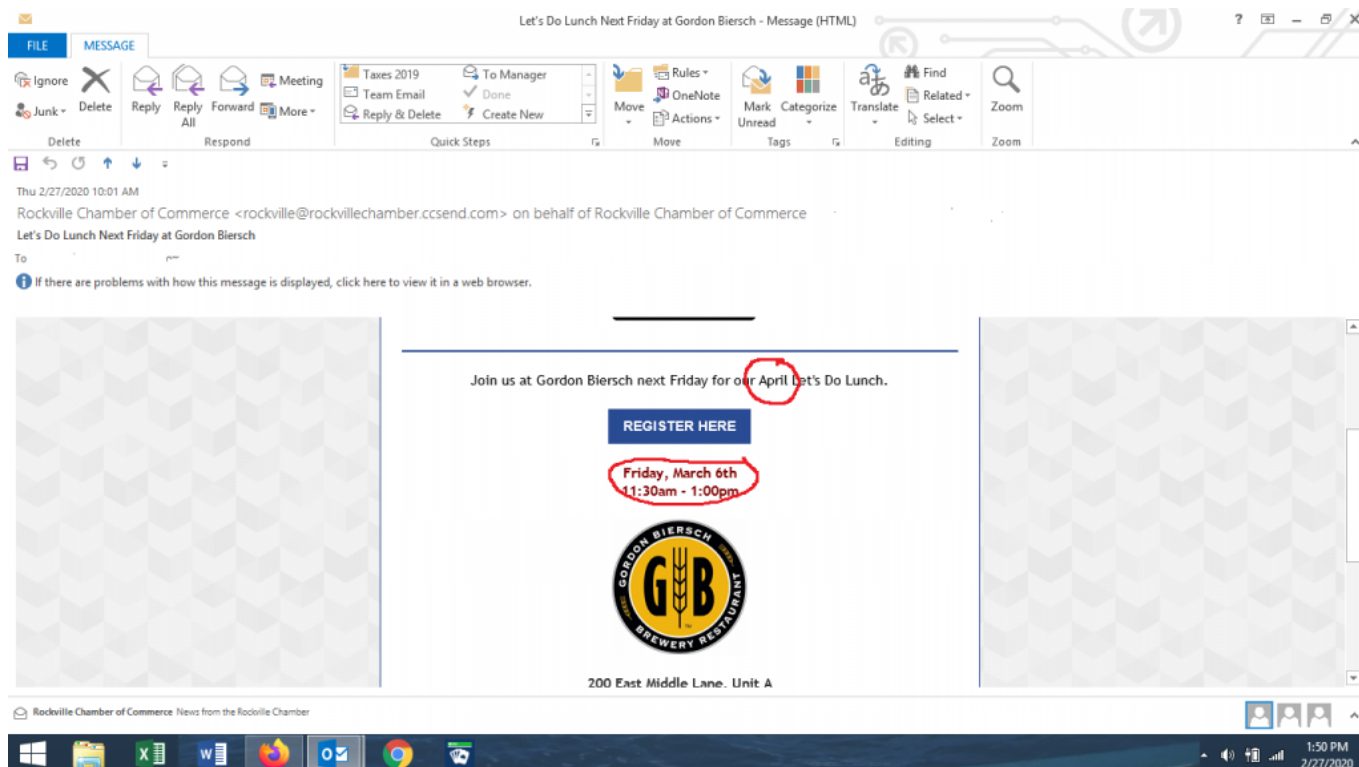
Backyard Band performs at DC go-go bill signing

Deposit \$25,000 today and EARN

## Email invitation

Error: This email is an invitation to a program taking place in March, yet calls it the April program. The organization sent out a corrected email a few minutes later. I would bet speed was the main culprit here. Instead of making this task take less time, the speediness ended up taking more time and effort to correct. Is this a fatal mistake? Not nearly, but it is increasingly common to get emails listing the wrong dates, locations, days of the week, etc.





**Words that sound the same don't mean the same...**

Error: The owner of this Twitter profile used "principle" instead of "principal." This person wrote the description years ago when first setting up the Twitter account and has never bothered to review it.



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**Bottom line:** All of these errors are small, unforced and most importantly, *avoidable*. Next time you are writing something that will be public-facing, take a breath, slow down, and hit pause before you publish. Always read over what you wrote (I like to read out loud so I can hear the errors) or ask someone else to take a look. If you made a mistake and it has already been publicized, fix it if possible.

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# Don't let your story go off the rails

## A disjointed lecture

On Monday night, I attended a lecture put on by a local education nonprofit. The topic was interesting, and based on her biography, the speaker seemed knowledgeable. She started her talk by plunging the room into darkness and playing a video. Then, she got up and without preamble, started talking. She showed photographs of the subjects of her book, and talked about the people without context. She even brought up a guest who was related to one of the subjects in the book, and talked as if the room should know the person. The speaker barely talked about the subject of her lecture, making it the most disjointed and uninformative lecture I've been to in a long time.

## Why so bad?

What went wrong? I am not sure what made the speaker give such a poor presentation. It could have been that she was having a bad night or that she hadn't prepared enough or that she's bad



presenter.



Story time

Photo by Lina Kivaka from Pexels

## Always seek best practices

One thing I know for sure: This presentation could have been much better if the speaker followed the following storytelling rules:

### ***1) Have a beginning, middle and end***

Avant-garde cinema often plays with these elements (starting at the end, etc.), but in traditional (and clear) storytelling you start at the beginning and conclude at the end. That's a story arc that is easy to follow.

### ***2) Don't make assumptions***

When you are the expert, you may assume that everybody knows what you know. But that is not so. You have to fill in details

and information for those in your audience you may not know everything there is to know about your subject.

### **3) Focus**

It's easy to meander when telling a story. There are also sort of side stories and interesting details about your main topic. But before you can go down a side path, you have to clear the main path. In other words, focus on the main story before you start telling tangential stories.

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Bottom line:

Sure, there's more to effective story telling than this. But before you embellish a story, start with the basics.

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## **Are you persuasive?**

Have you ever argued passionately with a friend and neither of you changes the other's mind even one little bit? That difficulty in getting someone to change how they think is the central problem in marketing communications. Whether a company is trying to get you to buy a new brand of shampoo or a nonprofit is vying for your donation dollars, marketing communications is at work trying to persuade you of why you should do what they want.

I picked up (and read) *Writing to Persuade* by Trish Hall to see if I could learn how to make my work more effective.

Hall's persuasion bona fides are that she was an editor of the *New York Times* op-ed page. The *New York Times* op-ed page regularly attracts high-profile and controversial viewpoints,

and due to its influence, receives a high volume of submissions. Those submissions need to be culled and edited, and that was Hall's job. Having to make decisions on what pieces to run made Hall more aware of what makes an interesting and readable piece.

In the book, Hall discusses both what makes a persuasive op-ed, and presents writing tips.

To be persuasive, Hall says a piece should:

- Have a specific and strong point of view
- Tell a story, and personalize it
- Show knowledge of your audience and really listen to what they say
- Find common ground where possible
- Play on feelings more than statistics and facts
- Show empathy
- Not be argumentative.

Hall suggests that your writing should:

- Have proven/checked facts to bolster your viewpoint. Hall says you should always use reliable sources of information and have more than one source.
- Be specific
- Avoid jargon
- Cut unnecessary words.

The book is quite repetitious and is really geared toward op-ed writers looking to have their pieces accepted for publishing. Hall's writing tips are not really about being persuasive, but rather about being clear, something I endorse (I especially like her insistence on avoiding jargon). Hall discusses the psychology of persuasion in the last part of the book, something that would have been better put up front.

Although I found that Hall presents some solid ideas about persuasion, she gears it very specifically to submitting op-

eds, even discussing how to butter up editors. I thought this book could have easily been a long article. Instead, she pads the book with the story of her journey to becoming a journalist/editor.

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The bottom line is that I am not persuaded that this book should be your guide to better or more persuasive writing. You will pick up some good tidbits though. If I were recommending whether you should buy or borrow this book, I say definitely borrow it. That's what I did!

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## **Be a more effective writer: Think BLUF**

### **What is BLUF?**

I only recently learned about BLUF, which stands for "bottom line up front," from a woman who works in project management at a computer/software company. In her line of work, she says, she has little time to wade through a morass of details, and needs to know the bottom line first (i.e., what is the project is going to cost).

**TL, DR**

It's not much different in any type of writing. I am sure you've seen people post articles with the disclaimer "TL, DR," which stands for "too long, didn't read." People don't have time to read long, detailed articles or emails, *especially if they are reading them on a mobile device*. People want to know what it's about, and then read it slowly when they have time. This is why subject lines and headlines are so crucial—that's your BLUF for emails and articles. Say what it's about.

### **Don't bury the lede!**

With news releases, it is imperative that the first paragraph carry the important information. The rest of the release is filled with the details and quotes. The same holds for news articles. In journalism, when you don't provide the crucial information up front, it's called "burying the lede."

Take this article from Eater DC: "HipCityVeg Brings its Vegan Versions of Fast Food Favorites to Dupont Circle." It's about the opening of the restaurant's second location in Washington, DC, and yet, I have to read through **NINE** paragraphs about how and why HipCityVeg does what it does before I find out the exact address of the new location. The address should have been in the first paragraph, so that somebody who want to actually visit the restaurant, knows where to find it.

### **What does the reader *need* to know?**

When writing a marketing piece, a blog post, an email, do yourself a favor and think BLUF: What is the most important thing your reader has to know? Being bottom line-oriented and putting the important stuff up front, will make you a better, more effective writer.

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# What's in it for me?

## It's Copywriting 101

If you ever looked at any basic copywriting advice, you'd probably have seen the bit where they tell you to talk about the benefits of whatever it is you are writing about. Benefits is what is in it for the audience. Perhaps they get a good price, or look younger, or help save the world. You are always supposed to highlight what the audience gets from the good or service or organization you are promoting. It's Copywriting 101.

## But spammers don't take copywriting classes

The other day I got a spam email (meaning it was from someone I don't know, who probably harvested my name from the internet, and is trying to sell me something). I got the same email again yesterday. Here's what the email said:

*Hi Deborah,*

*I just came across your blog [madmimi.com](http://madmimi.com) and wanted to reach out to you. I am reaching out because I was wondering if you would post a 500 word article that contains 2-3 links that would be relevant to the article topic. The article would also need to be written .*

*Please advise on the cost for this service and if you offer a bulk pricing package.*

*Have an awesome Thursday,*

*Thanks,*

*[name withheld]*

## So many questions



Okay. Let's start with the blindingly obvious problem. I don't have a blog called madmimi.com (I do, however, used Mad Mimi for my sadly neglected newsletter).

Let's go on to the next part of the email: I'm being asked to post an article, presumably on my blog, about a non-disclosed topic, and include two or three links, but to where exactly? The article "would have to be written," presumably by me. Then the writer wants to know the cost for this service.

### **But really there is nothing in it for me**

I'm supposed to conclude, only guessing here, that this email's writer is willing to pay me to write an article about whatever I want to post on my own blog. But of course, that makes no sense. The email writer must have a subject in mind. And really, why would I post an article about any random subject on my blog, and charge someone for it if there is nothing in it for them, and it is not clear what is in it for me? I already have an established blog (you are reading it right now), where I have been posting articles written by me for the past 10+ years.

It seems that what the email writer is really trying to do, quite in-artfully, is to get me to respond asking for more information or perhaps check out the website associated with the writer's email address. That's why this is spam.

### **Answer "what's it in it for me?"**

If you want anything you write to succeed, start with how your audience benefits. What will they get from it? Imagine if this spammer would have said exactly what he/she meant (i.e., we'll pay you to promote our product/service on your blog), I may have been more interested. Instead, I wrote a blog post about how bad these spammers are at selling. Perhaps it was a win after all.

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# Not just what you say, but how you say it

Recently, I came across this article on ThriveGlobal: “3 Communication Mistakes that Lead to a Toxic-feeling Workplace.” The article addresses interpersonal communications, but I think the first mistake, not paying attention to how your message is being received, applies to all communications. This is what the article says:

## *Not being mindful of how your words land*

*A large portion of what we say stems from how we read the present situation, and our sense of self-awareness plays a vital role in our everyday conversations. According to a recent study conducted by a group of psychologists at the University of California, Davis, many people don't realize they're being rude when they're perceived as such, suggesting blind spots in our self-insight that can prompt miscommunications at work. The study's findings highlight the importance of listening to yourself when you're talking to others. If you hear what you're saying and think you might be offended if someone said the same to you, it's worth rephrasing and communicating your point differently.*

**Because it's not just what you say, but how you say it.**

I am sure we all have experienced people saying things to us in an awkward or rude way that made us feel not so great. We may have gotten angry or offended. And I think that what these people say is not the problem so much as how they say

it. Yes, it comes down to how you present something.

### **This applies to all communication**

When writing marketing materials, you are concerned with the words you choose, the messages you deliver. But you should also be concerned with tone and presentation. How is your message coming across? What kind of emotions are you engendering?

### **How is your messaging “landing?”**

If you want your message to resonate with your audience, you must assess how you are coming across, and be careful in how you are saying what you are communicating.

### **4 items to consider before you write your next marketing piece:**

1) Humor needs context and sometimes, tone of voice: Avoid inside jokes or weird humor unless you know the audience will absolutely get it. Remember that humor is hard to express in a written format.

2) Mind your sarcasm: Ask yourself if you are being flippant or sarcastic, and remember that tone of voice is not easily conveyed in written materials. Also, some people don't understand sarcasm, and may take it literally.

3) Mind your manners: I heard somewhere that having manners is about putting others at ease. When you follow conventions, people know what to expect. So ask yourself if your communication is being rude or abrupt.

4) Be empathetic: Ask yourself if how and what you are saying could be causing negative emotions (anger, frustration, embarrassment) in your audience. For example, perhaps you are trying to berate your audience for missing a deadline. Most likely, berating your audience will cause embarrassment or even anger.

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Thinking carefully about how you say and present your message will lead to better communications.

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## 3 ways to tighten up your writing

My job as a copy editor is to tighten up other people's writing so that it is more easily readable, clear, consistent and accurate. Often, I come across the same three issues that make writing harder to read and more unclear. These issues include having sentences that are too long and stuffed with extraneous words and phrases; writing in the passive voice; and using unnecessarily big words.



If you want to make your writing sharper, and your meaning clearer, here are three ways to achieve that goal:

## 1. Use active voice

By eliminating passive sentences, you are immediately tightening up your writing and getting rid of useless words. Your sentences will be more direct and punchy.

*Passive:*

The actress Jane Doe was awarded an Oscar by the Academy for her performance in *The Movie*.

*Active:*

The Academy awarded an Oscar to actress Jane Doe for *The Movie*.

Jane Doe won an Oscar for *The Movie*.

## 2. Get rid of the extras

Using extra words and phrases may have made your college essays reach the magic page number needed, but in marketing and business writing, these just make your work wordy and/or redundant.

*Instead of this*

Use this

*As well as*

and

*In the afternoon hours*

In the afternoon

*The reason why is*

Because

*Came at a time when*

Came when

For more examples, check out this list of 50 redundant phrases.

### 3. Cut out the big words

Using big words when small ones would do makes you look like you are trying too hard, and does nothing to enhance the writing's readability. And p.s., using big words can sound pretentious.

<i>Bigger word</i>	<i>Smaller word</i>
Utilize	Use
Physician	Doctor
Reside	Live
Purchase	Buy

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Have you come across these in your writing or in work you are editing? Which one is the most common?

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## What writers, journalists, and PR/Comms people need to watch

Over the weekend, I finally got to see *Obit*. This documentary should be required viewing for anybody who writes for a living, and for anybody who work with or within the news media. It's also for anybody who is thinking about what makes a life matter.

With print newspapers on the decline, it's likely many people



don't even read the obituary section. I don't have access to the statistics, but I'd bet there's huge spike in readership of *online* versions of celebrity obituaries. Just in the few weeks, we've seen tremendous interest in the deaths of Senator John McCain and Aretha Franklin, and a likely increase in online reading of their obituaries.

Perhaps most people don't think a lot about what goes into writing an obituary, but it takes a special skill. Writing about someone who has died takes sensitivity and a sense for what is newsworthy. A good obituary is informative and interesting, while giving you an overview of the person's life and achievements. Generally, long-form obituaries are only written for politicians, artists, inventors, celebrities and other notable people. Just yesterday, I read an obituary in the *Washington Post* for Mel Elfin, who was the long time Washington editor for Newsweek Magazine. Elfin was not a celebrity *per se*, but his decades of in Washington political and news circles probably touched lots of DC insiders (which is why this obituary appeared in the *Washington Post* and not the *New York Times*).

Among the many questions and issues that the featured obituary writers in *Obit* deal with are these

- What and how much detail to include
- What the lede (first paragraph of the article that includes the most important facts) should be
- What questions to ask to the relatives, and how much to fact-check what they say
- Importance of verifying facts
- How to follow the arc of a life that has fits and starts
- Importance of graphics, and of finding the best image to illustrate a life

There's a lot in the documentary about the news process: editorial meetings, pitching, finding images, fact-checking, and working on deadline. This is why this should be required

viewing for public relations practitioners, who need to understand news judgement, and how things make it into the news cycle.

Finally, what writing (and reading) obituaries does is make people think about mortality and how they want to live their lives. You think about what you will be remembered for, what you've done here that is "newsworthy." So do yourself a favor—watch *Obit*. It's available streaming on demand, and on Kanopy.

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## It's easy to notice bad writing

Last week, I went to a panel discussion about user experience (UX) design. The whole idea behind UX is that websites should be designed with the users/readers in mind, so that they can easily find what they are looking for. One of the panelists said this:

*It's easy to notice bad design.*

Why? She went on to say that if something is easy to use, then you don't notice it.

Right.

The same is true for writing. If something is written well, you don't notice anything wrong. You understand what is being

said. Conversely, when something is written poorly, then you don't understand what the writer is trying to communicate.

On Friday, I got a very odd email from a local brew-pub with this subject line: Curtain Call-[XX] Brewhouse

The body said this (although I have redacted the name and location of the brew-pub):

*We are honored to have been a part of your community and your history.*

*When we opened [XX] Brewhouse in March of last year, we sought to give a piece of [city]'s history a home in the West End and provide a community gathering place to relax and enjoy the company of friends and family. While this chapter in [XX] brewing history may seem short-lived, it will remain with us for the entirety of our lives.*

*In realizing the changes to the surrounding landscape, we pushed for appropriate changes to our lease agreement, which were temporarily provided by the landlord. However, permanent change could not be achieved. We did everything in our power to sustain the company it for as long as possible, which is why we are sharing the conclusion to this chapter with you today.*

*Whatever the future holds, keep us in your thoughts, drink really great beer and hold family dear.*

When I read this email, I was confused. Had the brew-pub closed? If so, when would they stop serving? What would happen to the employees, the beer, the brand? And that last sentence, about holding family dear, gave me a sense of dread. Did someone die? (Plus, the use of the word curtain the subject line made me think of Agatha Christie's book *Curtains*, in which her main character, Hercule Poirot, dies.)

Why am I so confused? Because this email is poorly written. It

lacks basic information, creates more questions than it answers, and makes too many assumptions about the reader's knowledge. I am left wondering what changes were they trying to make? Why were those changes not implemented? Why do they mean about a short-lived chapter? Does it mean there are more chapters coming?

And then, there are the mixed metaphors. The subject line talks of a curtain (I assume, as in a theater's curtain call) but the body of the email talks about chapters as in books, and not about acts in a play.

In sum, this email is a mess. You notice how bad it is because it was not written for the reader. It did not take into consideration what the reader may or may not know about the brew-pub. It doesn't even spell out the basic news, which is that they are closing. The reader does not know if this has already happened or will happen, since no date is given for the closure.

If I were to rewrite this email I'd start with a clear, unambiguous subject line: XX Brewhouse will close on [DATE] or XX Brewhouse has closed.

Then, I would write something like this:

*It's with heavy hearts, that we are writing you, our supporters, today to let you know that we will be closing XX Brewhouse as of [DATE]. We thank you for your support, and we are honored to have been part of the [city's] community and history.*

*We are closing because we could not reach a permanent agreement with our landlord regarding our operations. Our location needed [whatever this was]. Without permanent arrangement, we weren't able to operate the way we needed to continue to bring you our high-quality beer and food.*

*For now, we do not have plans to re-open in a different*

*location, but please stay tuned.*

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Before you write anything, think of your readers. What do they need to know? Why are you sending them this information?

**Make your communications easy to use and understand. If you do that, you will be noticed for what you say, and not how you said it.**