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.

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.