Write Colorful E-Mails
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The human eye can take in billions of bits of data in a glance. The information is encoded and decoded as a pattern rather than a linear stream of data. Humans have learned to simulate this remarkable system by tricking the eye and brain such that, looking at rapidly moving dots on a screen, our brains integrate the array into an image. That's how a television works. As we watch a ballet or the news, we forget that what we are really looking at is a dot flying across the screen in tiny rows hundreds of times a second. We interpret all that data as a picture. By contrast, encoding information by the juxtaposition of letters into words is incredibly slow and linear. Writing information, even over the internet, is really an inefficient way to communicate.

We can see embryonic steps in the direction of "typeless" input with voice detection. Andrew Cantor, a nationally syndicated technology writer, said, "Someday we're all going to have devices the size of paperback books and they won't have keyboards. That means either handwriting or voice recognition technology has to improve." Once computers can reliably encode the human voice through artificial intelligence, we will finally be freed from the incredibly archaic keyboard. We will simply speak, and the computer will understand and spell everything correctly.

It is hard to believe as I type this book, that the layout, and even size, of the keyboard is the same one we have had since the 1870s. It is high time for a more efficient means of inputting information. In the meantime, since we are stuck with a keyboard, it is important to be as efficient as possible at conveying information. Rather than being confined to discrete bundles of thought, try to communicate online in terms of pictures.

Use words as surrogates for the paintbrush and actually let images flow into your words like paint onto a canvas. The idea is to use analogies, as I just did with the paint. Analogies allow us to span the crevasse between ideas that is created by the limitations of words.

Here is a great example. A student was asked if the US was wise to invade Iraq from a systems perspective. That is a complex question. The student used an analogy to simplify his analysis:

> Think of the Middle East as a big pond; every pebble that is dropped into the water creates ripples that spread across the surface. The ripples bounce off rocks, trees and the shore and return as "echo" waves coming in all directions (events in response

to the original action). Some small pebbles make little waves; an action like a national invasion might be like a huge rock dropped into the pond that causes big waves, sending echo waves in all directions and changing the shape of the pond forever. Now consider that the international political landscape of the whole world is part of this pond. A systems POV considers the rock's effect on the whole pond, other rocks in the pond, trees, the shore, etc. Now, what will happen when we remove the rock from the pond (withdraw from Iraq)?

Someone once said, "use colorful words." What are colorful words? Well, "color" is a great colorful word. We can see in our mind's eye the difference between flat black and white information and full color. We hardly ever think about the complex interplay of hues that surround us every day.

Take a moment now and look around your current environment. Notice the colors, textures, and shapes. We are so used to viewing these things that we take them for granted.

When you write, try to liven up the text with word descriptions that tickle the senses of your readers. If I use the word "pretty" to describe a scene, it will send a certain message. Using the word "breathtaking" magnifies that message like looking at a panorama through a telescope. I can either "mow the lawn" or I can "shear the aromatic fescue." I can "take a breath," or I can "breathe in the giant pines." I can "be glad it is spring," or I can "welcome the first robin on the lawn."

You can use colorful images to convey emotions and events in the business world. You can say "he was angry" or you can say "his flared nostrils and clenched jaw were obvious." You can say the meeting was "good" or you can say "the meeting was incredibly refreshing." Next time you want to compliment someone on a fantastic performance, you can say "Congratulations, you did really well on that," or you can say, "You must have felt like you caught the winning touchdown pass in the Superbowl."

How can you use more colorful language? One way to broaden your vocabulary is to make good use of a thesaurus. In every note, try to send out a word that is unusual for you, but more accurate to the situation than the word you would normally use. One caveat: be careful not to overdo the analogies or use of colorful words. It can be annoying if you take it too far. For example, here is a colorful note followed by a similar note with too much color.

Good colorful language

- "You were refreshing in that meeting. Your points were crisp and helped the group from becoming stuck on trivial issues. Nice going. We need more people like you who can think clearly and not become distracted by petty gripes."

Overdone colorful language and use of clichés

- "Your performance in the meeting was magnificent. Your discussion was as clear as a mountain stream and you kept the group out of the quagmire of repetitious arguments. People like you are as scarce as hen's teeth. You have the unique ability to keep people from complaining like a nagging backache all the time."

In developing colorful language, try to avoid the use of hackneyed expressions and clichés. There is an art to weaving words into a cohesive note. A good e-mail should have a directional flow without the need to double back on some issues. If you find yourself writing, "as I said before..." you need to go back and revise the flow.

*The preceding information was adapted from the book **Understanding E-Body Language: Building Trust Online**, by Robert Whipple. It is available on* www.leadergrow.com.

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