

Persuade xor Discover

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When meeting people you don't know very well, the convention is to seem extra friendly. You smile and say "pleased to meet you," whether you are or not. There's nothing dishonest about this. Everyone knows that these little social lies aren't meant to be taken literally, just as everyone knows that "Can you pass the salt?" is only grammatically a question.

I'm perfectly willing to smile and say "pleased to meet you" when meeting new people. But there is another set of customs for being ingratiating in print that are not so harmless.

The reason there's a convention of being ingratiating in print is that most essays are written to persuade. And as any politician could tell you, the way to persuade people is not just to baldly state the facts. You have to add a spoonful of sugar to make the medicine go down.

For example, a politician announcing the cancellation of a government program will not merely say "The program is canceled." That would seem offensively curt. Instead he'll spend most of his time talking about the noble effort made by the people who worked on it.

The reason these conventions are more dangerous is that they interact with the ideas. Saying "pleased to meet you" is just something you prepend to a conversation, but the sort of spin added by politicians is woven through it. We're starting to

move from social lies to real lies.

Here's an example of a paragraph from an essay I wrote about labor unions. As written, it tends to offend people who like unions.

People who think the labor movement was the creation of heroic union organizers have a problem to explain: why are unions shrinking now? The best they can do is fall back on the default explanation of people living in fallen civilizations. Our ancestors were giants. The workers of the early twentieth century must have had a moral courage that's lacking today.

Now here's the same paragraph rewritten to please instead of offending them:

Early union organizers made heroic sacrifices to improve conditions for workers. But though labor unions are shrinking now, it's not because present union leaders are any less courageous. An employer couldn't get away with hiring thugs to beat up union leaders today, but if they did, I see no reason to believe today's union leaders would shrink from the challenge. So I think it would be a mistake to attribute the decline of unions to some kind of decline in the people who run them. Early union leaders were heroic, certainly, but we should not suppose that if unions have declined, it's because present union leaders are somehow inferior. The cause must be external.

[1]

It makes the same point: that it can't have been the personal qualities of early union organizers that made unions successful, but must have been some external factor, or otherwise present-day union leaders would have to be inferior people. But written this way it seems like a defense of present-day union organizers rather than an attack on early ones. That makes it more persuasive to people who like unions, because it seems sympathetic to their cause.

I believe everything I wrote in the second version. Early union leaders did make heroic sacrifices. And present union leaders probably would rise to the occasion if necessary. People tend to; I'm skeptical about the idea of "the greatest generation."

[2]

If I believe everything I said in the second version, why didn't I write it that way? Why offend people needlessly?

Because I'd rather offend people than pander to them, and if you write about controversial topics you have to choose one or the other. The degree of courage of past or present union leaders is beside the point; all that matters for the argument is that they're the same.

But if you want to please people who are mistaken, you can't simply tell the truth. You're always going to have to add some sort of padding to protect their misconceptions from bumping against reality.

Most writers do. Most writers write to persuade, if only out of habit or politeness. But I don't write to persuade; I write to figure out. I write to persuade a hypothetical perfectly unbiased reader.

Since the custom is to write to persuade the actual reader, someone who doesn't will seem arrogant. In fact, worse than arrogant: since readers are used to essays that try to please someone, an essay that displeases one side in a dispute reads as an attempt to pander to the other. To a lot of pro-union readers, the first paragraph sounds like the sort of thing a right-wing radio talk show host would say to stir up his followers. But it's not. Something that curtly contradicts one's beliefs can be hard to distinguish from a partisan attack on them, but though they can end up in the same place they come from different sources.

Would it be so bad to add a few extra words, to make people feel better? Maybe not. Maybe I'm excessively attached to conciseness. I write code the same way I write essays, making pass after pass looking for anything I can cut. But I have a legitimate reason for doing this. You don't know what the ideas are until you get them down to the fewest words.

[3]

The danger of the second paragraph is not merely that it's longer. It's that you start to lie to

yourself. The ideas start to get mixed together with the spin you've added to get them past the readers' misconceptions.

I think the goal of an essay should be to discover surprising things. That's my goal, at least. And most surprising means most different from what people currently believe. So writing to persuade and writing to discover are diametrically opposed. The more your conclusions disagree with readers' present beliefs, the more effort you'll have to expend on selling your ideas rather than having them. As you accelerate, this drag increases, till eventually you reach a point where 100% of your energy is devoted to overcoming it and you can't go any faster.

It's hard enough to overcome one's own misconceptions without having to think about how to get the resulting ideas past other people's. I worry that if I wrote to persuade, I'd start to shy away unconsciously from ideas I knew would be hard to sell. When I notice something surprising, it's usually very faint at first. There's nothing more than a slight stirring of discomfort. I don't want anything to get in the way of noticing it consciously.

Notes

[1]

I had a strange feeling of being back in high school writing this. To get a good grade you had to both write the sort of pious crap you were expected to, but also seem to be writing with conviction. The solution was a kind of method acting. It was revoltingly familiar to slip back into it.

[2]

Exercise for the reader:
rephrase that thought to please the same people the first version

would offend.

[3]

Come to think of it, there is one way in which I deliberately pander to readers, because it doesn't change the number of words: I switch person. This flattering distinction seems so natural to the average reader that they probably don't notice even when I switch in mid-sentence, though you tend to notice when it's done as conspicuously as this.

Thanks to Jessica Livingston and Robert Morris for reading drafts of this.

Note: An earlier version of this essay began by talking about why people dislike Michael Arrington. I now believe that was mistaken, and that most people don't dislike him for the same reason I did when I first met him, but simply because he writes about controversial things.

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