

## The New York Times

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# How to Get Every Email Returned

Or at least how to try.

**By Trish Hall**

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We’re all writers now. We fling words out into the universe through text, email, Facebook and more. Even people who hate writing have to do it, because you need to text your husband back, write your boss a condolence note and do better on Tinder than “hey.”

On average, American adults are texting about 30 times a day, twice what they did back in 2011. Not so long ago, these people would have made a phone call; now no one does that except telemarketers who wake you in the middle of the night. On Facebook, more than half a million comments are posted every minute.

So many words. And too often, they are neither convincing nor entertaining. There are ways, however, to write persuasively in your everyday life. To break through the clutter, to get attention and even to bring people over to your side.

In the course of doing research for a book on how people actually change their minds, and what gets them to say “yes” rather than “no,” I was distressed to find that I knew much less about it than I thought I did. I figured that my nearly five years as the New York Times Op-Ed editor gave me a pretty strong vantage point on what worked and what didn’t. It did — but I didn’t always know why. What I sensed intuitively about effective writing turned out to rest on some deep psychological truths. Understanding them provides tactics that can be exploited in both personal and written interactions.

Some of these rules can be used both in writing and in real life. Until we’ve banished written communication entirely, we’re going to have to keep doing it — so you might as well get your text messages returned.

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## Tell the Truth

This is a weird one. Facts don’t matter all that much as a tool in persuasion. Research going back decades, confirmed again and again, shows that people have a preference for the information that matches what they already believe, and they avoid facts that might disabuse them of their

notions. In general you cannot rely on facts to make your case — more important by far is emotion. On the other hand, people get angry if you mislead them. If you use an anecdote in your argument, make sure it rings true. If it doesn't, you will instantly lose your reader. Truth telling applies to personal interactions, too.

### **Texting**

**No:** Subway broke down! See you soon!

**Yes:** 15 minutes late. So sorry. First drink on me.

**Why:** Accuracy matters. If you repeatedly lie, even about small things, people will stop trusting you. If you blame the subway or traffic, it means you didn't leave early enough. Offer an accurate time frame and present a peace offering.

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## Be Quick About It

Most daily communications are too long and rambling. Get to the point. People are busy. They don't want you to go on and on.

### **Dating**

**No:** I'm looking for a man who loves fun and can keep up with me. I ski black diamonds, do triathlons, speak five languages, volunteer for hospice and on weekends make five-course meals. Please be interesting in the morning, engaged to the fullest in your work life, and both fun and relaxing in the evenings, always eager to go to the newest play, the newest restaurant and the nearest gallery opening.

**Yes:** I like to read novels until 3 in the morning, binge watch TV on weekends and walk aimlessly through the city. I know. Riveting!

**Why:** Honest, direct and short.

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## Just Ask

People underestimate the value of just asking for what they want. Research shows that even strangers are more willing to help than we expect. Don't apologize, and be direct. If you do ask and you're rejected, you've lost nothing. People are loath to ask for help because they fear rejection, they're anxious and they're embarrassed — but humans are wired to want to help. It's not hard to understand the psychology — just look at yourself. When someone asks you to attend a party or give them a ride, you probably make an effort to do it, even if you don't really want to.

## Getting someone to show up

### No:

Dear Everyone,

I'm involved with a group that gives scholarships to young people and I am hoping that some of you might be able to attend our celebration next Monday. Let me know if you can.

### Yes:

Dear Trish,

I'm involved with a group that gives scholarships to young people and I am hoping that you can attend our celebration next Monday. A number of people you know, including John and Jim, will be there. Can I leave your name at the door? It's at 6 p.m. at the Historical Society Building.

**Why:** It's personal, so you have to answer — there would be a social cost in skipping a reply.

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## Know Your Audience. That Means Listening.

To reach someone, ask questions and really listen to the answers. We're persuaded by people who make it clear they understand us, that they relate to our concerns. So seek out those opportunities for connection. If you are warm and friendly and seem like you've tried to understand me, I'll be more likely to go along with you. Think about this in everything you write. What does your audience, whether one person or 50, really want to hear?

### A condolence letter

#### No:

Dear So and So,

I was so sorry to hear about your father. It's very hard to go through that. I'm thinking of you.

#### Yes:

Dear So and So,

I was so sorry to hear about your father. I remember the time he came to my Thanksgiving, and you and I imagined for just a minute what it would be like if he got together with my mother. He was kind and charming, like you, and I am glad I got a chance to meet him.

I am thinking of you.

**Why:** Always make it personal, to show you know your audience and what will make them feel connected to you and appreciative of the note. Think about what the person would want to hear.

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## Banish Jargon

If you're talking to someone in your field, you can theoretically get away with phrases like "optimize opportunities" and "maximize the cost-effective strategies," but it doesn't make you sound smart. It makes you sound like a robot. Actually, worse. Even Alexa uses conversational language.

### **Writing to someone who just interviewed you for a job**

**No:** Thank you very much for taking the time to talk today. I am certain that I will be able to contribute a great deal to your organization, especially by optimizing your relationships with the media, employing the multilevel skills I have developed over the years. I look forward to hearing from you.

**Yes:** Thank you so much for taking the time to talk today. I have some additional thoughts on how you could get more media attention without adding any more staff members. For one, I think you could do more with Instagram stories. I am happy to send more details if you would like that. Looking forward to hearing from you.

**Why:** All the gratitude, none of the jargon.

No matter the audience, write simply and clearly. That takes longer, but the effort will pay off. You're not looking for a long answer in return — just an answer, and ideally, a "yes."

Trish Hall is the author of the forthcoming "Writing to Persuade: How to Bring People Over to Your Side," and a former Op-Ed editor of The New York Times.

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