

ADAM GREENFIELD

Welcome to The Great Communicators Podcast presented by The MIT Office of Graduate Education, a professional development podcast expressly designed to bring lessons from the field to our graduate student researchers.

My name is Adam Greenfield and a majority of you have probably spent countless hours already writing research papers or grant proposals or other forms of communication. So it's probably no secret that there's nothing easy about it.

But what if I told you there are things you can do to make your written communication process not just easier, but better in its effectiveness? No, there's no magic involved. Neither I nor today's guest are that good. Just solid advice and a reminder that what you're writing is more than just a list of ideas and points, and also what you should be focusing on when you're short on space and time.

Our guest is a writer who, like previous guests in this series, stresses audience engagement but in his own way that he's honed over time. Oh, and his writing career started in the punk rock music scene.

JIM RULAND

And I still do that, by the way. I still write for punk zines, even though I don't get out to as many shows as I used to.

ADAM GREENFIELD

That's Jim Ruland, a San Diego based writer whose name and voice is well established in the literary scene.

JIM RULAND

I write a lot of different things. Professionally, I'm a copywriter, that's my day job, I work in advertising, and I've been doing that for over 20 years. And I also do a number of other kinds of freelance types of writing, writing book reviews, columns, cultural columns. I also do some ghost writing, editing, I collaborate with people, help them get their stories out into the world. And, lastly, I do writing for myself,

fiction and nonfiction.

ADAM GREENFIELD

Along with novels and short-stories, Jim's work involves co-authoring books with Keith Morris, the well-known and outspoken singer of punk rock acts such as Black Flag and Circle Jerks, and also Scott Campbell, Jr., a controversial figure on the Alaskan crab fishing show, Deadliest Catch.

Because of Jim's experience helping others tell their story effectively and engagingly through writing, Jim also advocates for good storytelling and even pushes back some on the notion that scientific research is just listing a bunch of numbers and facts. When you write, you have a purpose behind bringing those numbers and facts to the table.

JIM RULAND

You're reciting facts but there's a desired outcome, and, the desired outcome, whether "give me or my university a bunch of money" or "publish these findings in your journal" or "share this information with your colleagues so that we can continue," whatever that desired outcome, that's what you're writing towards. That will inform how you open your piece and also how you close it. In advertising we call it a call to action. You always- you never write something without trying to give the reader a path for them to take or inspired them to take some kind of action, whether it's clicking a link or picking up a phone or booking a reservation at a hotel or airline or whatever it might be. There's always a path.

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Now, of course, every path has boundaries to sort of keep you on the path. Feel free to wander but beware of getting lost. At least at first.

Early on in your writing you may be tempted to put all your research and data and thoughts and theories on the page. While this is not recommended for several reasons, one is sometimes you will have limited amount of space and time to communicate, such as a character count or word limit. Jim is certainly not new to that territory and in turn picked up a few bits of knowledge that have helped him along the way.

JIM RULAND

This was a big challenge for me when I first started writing book reviews, in that I would engage in all the necessary throat clearing, saying here's the book, here's the author, here's the setup, here's what it's about, and then I would smack up against the word limit and realize I hadn't really said the things that were most meaningful, that if I were to come up to you in a bookstore and you asked me to recommend this book, I hadn't said the things that I might say to you in a 15 second conversation. And so I paid attention to that. Like, ok, I can't be a slave to the format. What is it you really want to say? What is it you want to communicate to the people? And so I keep that in mind first. I think it's a really good practice to always know what's the thing you most want to say, make that your starting point, even if that's in your headline. Then you're free to meander.

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Ok, I want to dive just a little deeper into this one because sometimes it can be difficult to know what should be kept and what should be cut when editing a written piece of communication. Even if you have no character count or word limit, a well-structured story is typically more effective and consumed in its entirety by the reader than a rambling tale or grocery list of items. So how does the writer make it easier for that to happen for the reader?

According to Jim, have intentions and goals in mind of what you're trying to communicate. That's a good starting point to knowing what is extraneous information and can be left on the cutting room floor, and also what is important to the story.

Jim also provided a great example of a very effective writing tool: The hero overcoming conflict.

JIM RULAND

In narrative storytelling, you're always generating conflict so that your hero can overcome adversity or succumb to it and then give them an opportunity to reflect and rejuvenate and try again. But you're always generating conflict in narrative. And so even when it's something like a nonfiction account or even a book review, for example, you might be looking for, well, what

was the book's path to publication, if they had a really long journey, that's a form of conflict that might be interesting to talk about. If their person is writing in field that's very crowded yet enjoys success anyway, that's a kind of conflict. Or if it's something trailblazing and new, and you have to kind of convince people this is the kind of storytelling people should be paying attention to, that's again another form. So, like, I think it's funny, most writers would say, in life avoid conflict wherever possible. But on the page, we seek it out.

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Where writers may be picky or hesitant about when to be the hero, scientists are usually pretty eager to head in the direction of conflict in hopes of either resolving it or at least coming to a better understanding of it.

I mean, scientists aren't running towards burning buildings, which is definitely a highly respectable way of resolving a problem, but they are tackling some significant issues in the world, like cancerous tumors or prosthetics for children or conquering mathematical and engineering feats no one thought possible.

It's inevitable there will be conflict in the research you are writing about. In the hero narrative archetype Jim is talking about, you are the hero and the conflict is the problem you are trying to solve. However, whether you solved it or not is not the priority when it comes to writing. The bigger goal is to make sure your reader understands what the conflict is and how the hero arrived at the current state or result of the research.

Jim's pretty sure if you, the scientist, can do all that, learning to effectively communicate through writing can definitely be done and may even have an added bonus.

JIM RULAND

If you're one of those people that says, "I'm a scientist, I'm not a writer," I think you need to scrap that way of thinking. Writing is just like anything else, it's a tool, it's a craft. Some people write at a level where it's art, where they practice it like art, but it's something that can be learned. The desire to communicate effectively can take you to some really interesting places and put you ahead of your peers who lack the

willingness to go there. Things are- as technology moves forward, what's interesting to me is that even though we see more video in advertising and more video in our online experience, it still works. All of that stuff is written and if you can express yourself in a way that's engaging and interesting, you'll be ahead of the game, ahead of the competition.

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So when it comes to writing, there are tricks of the trade that you can use to ensure effective communication and keep your audience engaged.

First, remember you're trying to get your audience to reach the same level of understanding and desire to do something with that information. As Jim put it, writing, in many instances, is a call to action.

There's also the potential for having a limited amount of time or space to communicate everything you want your audience to know. In this case, get the most important bits of information and knowledge out first, then fill in around it.

And finally, always remember writing is a craft to be honed and mastered over time. You may feel like you're better off with numbers or analyzing data, and to start you may very well be. However, that doesn't mean you can't be an effective written communicator. Just as you spent years gaining the knowledge from your research, the same applies to honing your skills as a communicator.

Thanks for listening to The Great Communicators Podcast brought to you by The MIT Office of Graduate Education. My name is Adam Greenfield, and feel free to talk amongst yourselves.

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