

LEE LEFEVER

the art of explanation

making your ideas,
products, and services
easier to understand



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explanation

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LEE LEFEVER



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Published by John Wiley & Sons, Inc., Hoboken, New Jersey.
Published simultaneously in Canada.

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data:

LeFever, Lee, 1973-

Art of explanation : making your ideas, products, and services easier to understand / Lee LeFever.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-1-118-37458-0 (pbk.); ISBN 978-1-118-41731-7 (ebk); ISBN 978-1-118-42069-0 (ebk);

ISBN 978-1-118-43429-1 (ebk)

1. Interpersonal communication. 2. Comprehension. 3. Explanation (Linguistics) 4. Business communication. I. Title.

BF637.C45L45 2013

302.2-dc23

2012022700

Printed in the United States of America

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

For Sachi

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PREFACE

Chances are that you explained something recently—why dinner tastes the way it does, why you were late for a meeting, what an article means to your company. We explain so many different things so frequently that we take the art of explanation for granted. This is a tragedy because a great explanation can make our ideas come to life, invite people to care and be motivated to learn more. However, we lose the opportunity to do this unless we recognize that explanation is an essential skill we can learn and master.

Imagine the potential that better explanations have for both your personal and professional interactions. What if your boss, accountant, team member, or mother could suddenly explain ideas in a more understandable way? What if they could put themselves in your shoes and make their ideas clear in a way that acknowledged your perspective? That is the goal of this book. I want to help you and the people around you become better explainers because we desperately need better explanations. Although this book is primarily aimed at professionals, it is meant for everyone, and intended to make the world a more understandable place in which to live and work.

The Art of Explanation is built on my years of experience in creating explanations for organizations and educators. My company, Common Craft, is known around the world for making complex ideas easy to understand in the form of short videos. Through projects with companies such as Google, LEGO, Intel, and Ford Motor Company and the creation of our own library of video explanations, we have been students of explanation for many years. We have experimented and studied the explanation process and seen what is possible. Our videos have been viewed more than 50 million

times online, and no other brand is better known for explanations (<http://commoncraft.com/videos>).

This book, however, is not a series of case studies and exercises or an academic exploration of “the science of explanation.” More than anything, it is a manifesto based on our experiences as professional explainers. We believe deeply in the power of explanation and see this book as an invitation to recognize that power by looking at explanation from a new perspective. When you do, you will see that it represents an unexplored part of your communications, a skill you can understand, practice, and improve.

The various ideas, approaches, and models I provide in these pages are secondary to a simple, higher-level goal: to make explanation a priority. This means thinking about how you explain ideas and how you can put explanations to work to accomplish your goals. It requires that you use explanation as a strategy in problem solving. You must also introduce others to the idea that explanations can create positive change.

It is this overarching perspective that matters because, as the title suggests, explanation *is* an art. Although there are tools, tactics and ideas that help, we all explain differently, and that is the beauty of it. Explanations do not follow a set of specific steps and rules. They are effective because of the perspective and intent of the explainer. Looking at a problem through the lens of explanation can reveal challenges that may not have been visible before. When the intent is to create an explanation to address these challenges, we all have the potential to use the ideas in this book to build explanations in our own way.

Many of these ideas and concepts are introduced via short, fictional stories of individuals who discover the challenges and potential of explanation in various situations. These stories reflect what we believe is one of the most powerful aspects of explanation: presenting ideas from a person’s or group’s perspective. They also serve as an antidote to endless bullet points and lists, and provide you with an entertaining way to absorb and remember ideas.

Multiple examples of our own explanations are included, all of which have corresponding video scripts or links to videos on our website. These scripts give concrete examples of our approach to specific explanation problems that have a record of success and are a model for your own explanations.

The book is organized into three parts that align with the basic process of creating explanations—Plan, Package, and Present:

Part 1: Plan



This part of the book is meant to build a solid foundation for the idea of explanation. To create successful explanations, we need to answer such basic questions as:

- What is an explanation?
- What makes an explanation successful?
- Why do explanations fail?

The answers to these questions help us see that an explanation answers a specific kind of question—one that challenges us in many ways. We look at the factors that cause explanations to fail and where they originate.

The last chapter of this part introduces the idea of explanation problems and provides a simple model to plan and introduce explanations. We'll see how one startup company discovered an explanation problem and used the Explanation Scale to explore it and address it.

Part 2: Package



This part of the book moves from planning to production. After becoming familiar with the basics of explanations and explanation problems, we dive into ideas and strategies that can help to solve them. The big idea is to think about an explanation as a way to package ideas into a form that makes them more understandable. Elements of packaging include:

- Context
- Story

- Connections
- Descriptions

The chapters in this section introduce specific strategies and examples that present complex ideas in a way that accounts for the audience's needs. They refer to the Explanation Scale and discuss how to create “stepping stones” to better understanding. These chapters also explore concepts such as constraints and simplification as ways to approach packaging.

Part 3: Present



Explanations are not meant to sit on a shelf—they are meant to be shared. Therefore, this part will examine how we put explanations to work in organizations, and will explore the various media that can give explanations power to reach your audience.

The essential points from the first two parts are put to work here in a story about an organization that discovers the power of packaging ideas into explanations. Other chapters discuss the potential of combining explanations with a communication strategy that amplifies the impact of an explanation by making it sharable inside and outside an organization. We close the book with a forward-looking chapter entitled “Your Life as an Explainer” that describes real world examples to show how explanation skills can benefit your company, career, and even your profession.

The Art of Explanation is for anyone who wants their ideas, products, and services to be easy to understand. However, it is more than that; it is a *perspective*. If we can improve explanations even a little, the positive potential for ourselves, our organizations, and the people around us could be tremendous. I invite you to take the first step.

AUTHOR NOTE

Using QR Codes with your Smartphone

Throughout this book, I reference a number of short Common Craft videos. The videos are on our website and can be viewed for free with most smartphones.

To access the videos quickly, we've provided QR (Quick Response) codes. These codes are like links on a website, but instead of clicking them, you point your camera phone at them and use an app to scan the code, which opens the corresponding web page on your device. This makes it quick and easy to watch as you read without typing long URLs.

To use QR codes, you need a smartphone and a free app. Search your device's app store for "QR Reader" and download it. Then open the app and follow the instructions to scan a QR code.



You can test this process using the code above. Once the code has been scanned, select "Go to URL" (or something similar) and the web page will appear. Just click "play" to watch QR Codes Explained by Common Craft.

To see a complete list of the Common Craft videos referenced in the book and their URLs, see the Links to Common Craft Videos section at the end of this book.

INTRODUCTION

For most of my life (especially in school), I struggled to grasp some of the subjects I was supposed to be learning. Although I grasped subjects such as science and history fairly easily, topics such as math and accounting consistently proved to be challenging. In my mind, these subjects were made up of thousands of rules that I had to memorize to solve the associated problems. The ideas seemed to float around in my head without any foundation or place.

As so many students who struggle do, I felt inadequate at the time, as if my brain was not wired for solving these problems. I became a person who said “I’m not good at math” and avoided anything related to it. The notion of trying to memorize rule after rule frustrated me, and I wondered how others did it with such apparent ease. Were they simply more skilled at memorization? What was I missing?

At the same time, however, I knew I was a capable student. Along with science and history, writing came easily to me. But as much as I wanted math and subjects like it to work for me, it seemed like the light bulb never went on.

However, I learned to work with this apparent limitation throughout my years of education. I eventually earned a graduate degree in health administration and moved to Seattle, where I currently live. It was during this phase of my career that I identified the underlying cause of my struggle with subjects like math and started to see how the same problem affected others. When I looked back, it seemed like there were some people in my classes who could look at a set of rules or details and naturally see the big picture—in other words, the *why*. They seemed to be able to understand math and accounting at a higher level, whereas students like me were getting so mired in trying to memorize the *how* that the *why* faded into the background. We could still pass tests

and make good grades, but we did it by memorizing facts, not by developing a true understanding of the material.

The more I thought about this, the clearer the solution became. My learning style meant that I needed a way to approach new ideas in a unique way. I needed to see the big picture first, the foundation of the details. Therefore, to understand accounting, I needed to understand business basics first. To understand math, I needed to understand the reasoning behind it first. I needed to see the *forest* before the *trees*.

Soon enough I realized what was missing: I needed better explanations. My learning style demanded that I see the *why* before the *how*. This revelation became a part of my communication style. I became a student of communication and watched my friends and peers explain ideas. I began to recognize how people got confused or lost confidence in their ability to understand something completely. This experience made a deep impression on me.

But it was not until I got involved in the technology industry in 1998 that this realization became a part of my work. I was hired as a data analyst at a healthcare software company in Bellevue, Washington. Within two years I met my wife and business partner, Sachi, and I developed a strong passion for the idea that customers should be able to communicate and get support using message boards on the company website. What is now known as social media was called *online communities* in 1999, and I wanted to be the online community manager.

As you might imagine, this was not an easy sell inside the company. Most of my colleagues had never considered the potential of an online community and were naturally risk-averse. But I had a plan: I would explain my way into creating this program. So I set up meetings with product managers and created materials that supported my ideas. I educated my colleagues in the way *I* had wanted to be educated throughout my life.

I provided a foundation by building context and discussing big ideas—the forest. I helped them feel confident that they fully understood what I wanted to do before talking about any details—the trees. I planned my explanations and told stories that highlighted how this online community had the potential to be a rich source of customer information. It could even become an early warning system for product teams.

I asked them to imagine a world in which customers could solve each other's problems. I explained the idea to executives and connected it to the company's

strategy and goals. Slowly but surely, the stakeholders saw the potential, and most became advocates.

Soon enough I was the online community manager—a job I held until 2003, when I left to found Common Craft. I launched it as an online community consulting company aimed at helping organizations understand and implement their own online communities. My job as an explainer was just beginning.

My role as a consultant was to influence my clients and help them see and understand new opportunities. I soon realized my clients were experiencing difficulties very similar to those I experienced when attempting to understand certain subjects in school. Their view of social media was like my view of accounting: they knew the words and had memorized the features of various tools, but they had no foundation. They were stuck with countless trees, but no forest, and like me, they could not fully apply what they were learning.

This gave me an idea.

I decided to take subjects such as wikis and RSS feeds—topics that had proved challenging for my clients to grasp—and write my own explanations using the tagline “in plain English.” The idea was to help solve a problem for my clients and to create something interesting for the Common Craft blog. This was the first time I realized that my unique perspective on explanation could be a useful business tool. I had developed the ability to put myself in other people’s shoes and create media that helped them feel confident. They loved reading the blog posts and I enjoyed writing them, but it would be a few years before they would be called into action.

At around the same time, I put my explanation skills to the test. A few companies sponsored what they called “The Perfect Corporate Weblog Pitch Contest.” The idea was to explain the value of corporate weblogs in the time it takes to ride an elevator (under 160 words). When I saw this contest, I thought to myself, “Man, I am all over this!” It was true. My award-winning pitch read as follows:

First, think about the value of the Wall Street Journal to business leaders. The value it provides is context—the Journal allows readers to see themselves in the context of the financial world each day, which enables more informed decision making.

With this in mind, think about your company as a microcosm of the financial world. Can your employees see themselves in the context of the whole company? Would

more informed decisions be made if employees and leaders had access to internal news sources? Weblogs serve this need. By making internal websites simple to update, weblogs allow individuals and teams to maintain online journals that chronicle projects inside the company. These professional journals make it easy to produce and access internal news, providing context to the company—context that can profoundly affect decision making. In this way, weblogs allow employees and leaders to make more informed decisions through increasing their awareness of internal news and events.

My goal was to convey the value of weblogs in a way that would appeal to the judges; however, I learned something else from this experience. For the first time, I felt that explanation was not simply a tactic or way of approaching communication. It was something that excited and motivated me. I specifically remember my heart beating rapidly when I drafted the corporate weblog pitch. It made me feel like I had found my calling, like I was born to make ideas easier for others to understand in the form of explanations.

I came to realize over the next few years that the consulting clients with whom I worked were not unique in their thoughts about technology. The general public also struggled to see the value of these new online products and tools. Most people were constantly caught up in the features and details. They wanted to stay ahead of the curve but were cautious about wasting time on a product they did not fully understand.

The tragedy from my perspective was that the tools were often free, easy to use, and could have a positive impact on people's lives. However, people weren't adopting them because of how they were *explained*. The technologists were doing the explaining, and doing it poorly.

We came to call this an *explanation problem*, which is when the biggest barrier to adoption is not design, features, or benefits but communication. And the problem was epidemic. Thousands of life changing tools and ideas were not being used because they lacked clear explanations of their value.

When Sachi joined me at Common Craft in 2006, we set out to solve this problem. It was the year YouTube went mainstream; suddenly, anyone could easily publish videos to the Web. We started to experiment and looked for ways to make video part of Common Craft. After feeling awkward trying to be the guy standing in front of a

whiteboard, Sachi had the idea to point a camera straight down onto a whiteboard and use hands, markers, and paper cut-outs to tell a story.

Common Craft videos were born in 2007, and we created our first video based on a blog post for my clients from years before, entitled “RSS in Plain English” (www.commoncraft.com/video/rss). We shot the video in our basement with no expectations or video production skills, and it showed. We lit the whiteboard with the strongest portable lights we had: bedroom lamps. And for the narration, I spoke directly into the microphone on the camera. As it turned out, this three-minute video changed our lives.



Sachi with our second generation studio setup, summer 2007.

We posted it on YouTube in April, and it became a viral hit. It was viewed tens of thousands of times the first day and we received a torrent of e-mails, comments, and blog posts about our work. People contacted us and encouraged us to make more videos. It was one of the most exciting days of my life. Our explanation was a hit because it solved the RSS explanation problem and invited people to use it by helping them see it from a new, more understandable perspective.

The next question became: can we do it again? We published our second video about a month later, which was also based on a previous blog post. This one was called “Wikis in Plain English” (www.commoncraft.com/video/wikis), and was received in a similar way. People seemed to love our videos and want more.

By the end of the summer of 2007, we had published four more videos and started making custom videos for products and services. In August of 2007, we decided that Common Craft would become a video production company that specialized in video explanations. We redesigned our website, and our tagline became “Our Product Is Explanation.” One of our first custom videos, called “Google Docs in Plain English,” hit the web that fall (www.commoncraft.com/google-docs-plain-english). We were on our way.

Since that time, people around the world have come to know Common Craft for our explanation skills. We have made more than 100 video explanations in the same format as the first video on RSS—what is now known as Common Craft Style. Our videos have been viewed more than 50 million times online and we have worked with companies such as LEGO, Intel, Google, Dropbox, and Microsoft to explain their products and services. Further, teachers and students are now creating their own video explanations in classrooms and calling them “Common Craft Style Videos.” Perhaps no company is better known for video explanations than Common Craft.

Now more than ever, I am a believer in the power of explanation, and not just for product and service videos. I believe it is a skill that everyone can learn and improve upon, and one that is needed to help people grasp ideas in a useful and productive way. This book is designed to give everyone an opportunity to rethink how he or she explains ideas, and learn to package them into explanations that work.

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