Communication Insights

Writing Tip: Observe the Rule of Three

The Latin phrase *Omne trium perfectum* translates to “everything that comes in threes is perfect.”

The rule of three is an interesting concept that has always fascinated me. You start seeing it everywhere once you begin to look, particularly as applied to visual design.

• In photography, most professionals divide the frame into three sections, and work to place the subject in the left or right third of an image, leaving the other two-thirds more open.

• For interior decorating, standard rules say a color should be repeated at least three times to provide that “pop of color” people look for, or else the color just looks out of place. Same is true for knickknacks. Candlesticks or decorative bottles, for instance, will look better if they are of various shapes and grouped in threes (as opposed to a group of two).

• In the landscape design world, three is considered more visually appealing than two. An odd number of plants can be arranged in an irregular cluster, which looks more natural than a straight line or block shape.

Why is this the case? There are many reasons. Human brains like to easily puzzle things together. With three elements, the brain can always find the center point and balance. Once you get past that, the brain has to work harder, which means the brain naturally starts to resist. Also, when you see an odd number of things, the eye is forced to move around more, which makes for a more interesting visual experience. Three is the smallest number of elements required to create a pattern, and research shows that we can recall just three to four items from our short-term memory.

The rule of three also plays an important role in communications, both written and verbal. In our zest to communicate, we often pack in as much information as possible, often to the detriment of the messaging.

Continued on Next Page
More words (and overly designed layouts) are usually less effective, as too many elements can result in the components competing for attention, as opposed to all of the elements working in harmony. You need to break it down into smaller, more memorable chunks.

Do any of these ring a bell?

- “Government of the people, by the people, and for the people.” – Abraham Lincoln
- “Be sincere, be brief, be seated.” – Franklin D. Roosevelt
- “I came, I saw, I conquered.” – Julius Caesar
- “See no evil, hear no evil, speak no evil.” – Japanese proverb

And of course, there’s this: Three Blind Mice, Three Little Pigs, The Three Musketeers, Three Wise Men, and Goldilocks and the Three Bears. The Three Stooges. Snap, Crackle, and Pop. Comedians use the rule to craft three-part jokes (set up, build anticipation, punch line), and screenplays generally follow a three-act structure. It’s a pattern the brain likes.

All tried and true rules in design are made to be broken, but in truth, those who successfully break the rules are usually true masters of their craft. The rest of us are probably better off if we follow the rules. Here are some examples of how the rule of three might be useful in your work life.

**Speech writing.** Think of your speech as having 1) an introduction, where you set the stage and make your main point; 2) a body, where you provide the examples or facts that help make your point; and 3) a conclusion, where you bring it all home. Just dividing the speech into three distinct sections will help alleviate the topic creep that has random points being made in random places. Having an orderly arrangement will help you stay on point and help your audience understand the point.

**Strategic plans and corporate values.** For strategic plans and internal and external messaging, everybody likes to have input, which is a good thing. Let your mission statement be as long winded as it needs to be in order for everyone to feel good about it. But then cut it down to something people can actually remember and rally behind. (“We stand for the environment, commerce, and the protection of special places.”)

**PowerPoints.** No surprise here. Keep each slide to three bullets max. Three short bullets. While you are at it, before you begin writing the presentation, ask yourself what three takeaways you want for the audience. Arrange your presentation around these three things.

**Adjectives and examples.** This point alone should provide the value you need for reading this article to the end. When you find yourself using words or phrases in a series, both in writing and verbally, stop at three. Any more than that and you run the risk of overloading your audience.

Think you can do this? Ready, set, go!

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Communication Product of the Month

Featured product: “Visualizing the Biomass of Life”

Source: visualcapitalist.com/all-the-biomass-of-earth-in-one-graphic

Submitted by: Caitlyn McCrary, Lynker for NOAA Office for Coastal Management

What it is: There are over 8.7 million species on our planet, and it’s often difficult to truly appreciate the scale of this diversity. This infographic breaks it down in an easy-to-understand visualization.

Why we chose it: 8.7 million species is a lot of species. And it’s hard to comprehend that the smallest organisms make up the largest biomass. This infographic does a fantastic job of quantifying large amounts of information in a very simple manner. As you scroll down, you realize just how small a part of the planet’s biomass is made up by humans, and then how small animals are in the full picture of the planet. The graphics of the animals and creatures sitting on the blocks help to drive the point home and make the infographic inviting and fun.

(Please note: this is not an endorsement of the designers, websites, or any proprietary tools, but simply this writer’s opinion on a good communication product.)
**Outreach Tool Spotlight – Tsunami Aware**

One of the most important tools you can have at your disposal is the ability to easily and effectively communicate hazard information. This online information system provides interactive maps of tsunami evacuation zones, as well as related information, allowing users in Hawaii and Guam to learn and share critical facts with ease. Access it here: coast.noaa.gov/digitalcoast/tools/tsunamimap.html.

**Upcoming Social Media Campaigns**

Join us in celebrating the 50th anniversary of the Coastal Zone Management Act all year long. Use #OceanandCoasts50 and get social each week with the following themes:

- August 1 to August 5: Go on a virtual dive
- August 8 to August 12: Visit your local aquarium
- August 15 to August 19: Visit a coastal park
- August 22 to August 26: Know your coastal management laws
- August 29 to September 2: Teach your kids to love their ocean and coasts

**Digital Coast Topics Page**

From offering data on the coastal economy or the nation’s water quality to shareable literature on natural infrastructure, the Digital Coast’s topics page—home to 10 coastal management topics, each leading to dozens of tools, trainings, and products—is a buffet of information. It’s also the one-stop information shop that often helps answer the question, “where do I begin?” Find it here: coast.noaa.gov/digitalcoast/topics.

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**Fast Facts – Tourism and Recreation**

This is one of the many graphics and facts available for your use in presentations and handouts. Grab this one at coast.noaa.gov/states/fast-facts/tourism-and-recreation.html.

If you have an idea for a new group of fast facts or illustrations, please let us know.

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**Ocean Tourism and Recreation**

**The Top Five Contributors**

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<th>State</th>
<th>Number of Workers</th>
<th>Gross Domestic Product</th>
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<tr>
<td>California</td>
<td>441,000</td>
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<td>Florida</td>
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<td>Illinois</td>
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