EMOTION MOTIVATES writers—no doubt about it. In 1776, Thomas Jefferson composed the Declaration of Independence out of frustration over the “patient sufferance of these Colonies” at the hands of Great Britain’s King George III, whose “repeated injuries and usurpations” had as their end “the establishment of an absolute Tyranny over these States.” Nearly two centuries later, Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. wrote his “Letter from a Birmingham Jail” in 1963, at a moment of “legitimate and unavoidable impatience … when the cup of endurance runs over, and men are no longer willing to be plunged into an abyss of injustice where they experience the blackness of corroding despair.”

But powerful writing requires linguistic control as well as passion. Jefferson’s document, signed by fifty-six members of the Continental Congress, stands as a carefully worded indictment of a ruling government that turned its back on the people who trusted it to serve them. And King’s 7,000-word essay was actually an open letter in response to Alabama clergymen who believed that King-led demonstrations were “unwise and untimely.” Especially when considering the circumstances under which King wrote the letter (from a jail cell and by hand on whatever paper he could borrow), the document emerges as

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a precisely stated, smashing rejoinder to those who would forestall the engine of justice from running at full speed. Because of Jefferson’s and King’s facility with language, these writers crafted masterpieces of political literature that remain required reading for American history students.

**Distinguishing Writing from Speaking**

Anyone who has ever had a job knows that the workplace presents endless moments of high anxiety and outright outrage to clients and vendors, managers and subordinates. (Having played all four roles in my career, I have felt both emotions in each role.) Buyers launch threatening e-mails to suppliers when their shipments arrive late. Meeting coordinators roar through incendiary memos directed to unprepared or absent attendees. Information technology specialists fire off sarcastic instant messages to end users who just don’t seem to share their proficiency in technospeak. Managers erupt with *nastygrams* intended for subordinates who did not get with the program.

What these writers must remember, however, is that writing does not come across the same way as speaking does for at least three reasons:

1. **Writing does not sound like speaking.** To paraphrase Russell Baker, punctuation is to writing as intonation is to speech. We pause a whole rest for a period, a half rest for a semicolon, a quarter rest for a comma of division, an eighth rest for a comma of clarity, and so on. Sounds like speaking to me. Easy enough. But when we respond to a loved one’s humorous antics with an affectionate “you’re crazy,” or when we utter an off-the-cuff comment such as “what a mess” when offering feedback about a trusted colleague’s project or a thick-skinned subordinate’s proposal, we should know to avoid putting such statements in writing because they suggest a much more acrimonious tone in print.

2. **The meaning of the moment gets lost in the expanse of the response time.** The spontaneity that inspired writers to compose a message dissipates by the time they send it—let alone by the time their audience receives it. I remember receiving a memorandum from the office manager directed to an entire office staff of about seventy. He admonished us to speak in English to each other during the business day while on the company’s premises because some staff members might be offended by some non-native employees who speak in their native language. My biases awakened, I pictured who the offensive parties might be. Were they Rosa and Maria, Puerto Ricans from Finance who often conversed in Spanish in the staff dining room? Agnes and Lillian, Chinese immigrants from Information Technology who would review certain computer ap-
lications with each other in Cantonese? Gloria and Jose, Filipinos from Human Resources who occasionally chatted in Tagalog while walking down the hallway? When I asked the manager, he replied that he had written the memo in response to a lone employee’s complaint. Apparently the miffed co-worker believed that two unnamed employees behaved conspiratorially by speaking their native language in her presence. What was the result of the office manager’s memo? Useless speculation among the bystanders, false validation by the complainant, deep resentment among the offenders, and unproductive gossip among everyone—all because the office manager impulsively reacted to a peeved employee’s grievance by establishing a policy that was arguably unethical, possibly illegal, and certainly unenforceable. Here was an instance of some thoughts better not set down in writing. The office manager could have exercised many other options, including simply listening to the protester without acting or calling in the nonnative speakers and asking them to choose their language wisely in front of the protester. Instead, he chose the arduous process of composing a memo that probably took more than an hour of his time to no real effect.

3. Writing sticks. As a wise student in one of my writing courses once said, writing sticks in the mind like a mountain does in the earth. Her observation rings as true as the Chinese proverb “The palest ink is better than the best memory.” When we have the presence of mind to realize that we have said something upsetting to someone, we can immediately apologize and probably gain forgiveness; however, when we have written something hurtful about someone, we can apologize all we want, but the offense remains in writing. Often people tell me that they wrote an angry letter to their department store and achieved the results they wanted: a credit for their purchase or an exchange of merchandise. However, they are mistaken if they believe that the anger they expressed—and not the store’s goodwill or compliance with the terms of purchase—accomplished the desired result. True, squeaky wheels get the most grease—at first—but if they keep squeaking, they become scrap metal.

Burning Emotions to Fuel Purposeful Messages

Jazz pianist and vocalist Mose Allison’s song “Your Mind is on Vacation but Your Mouth is Working Overtime” would be an excellent theme song for writers who want to ensure that their audience focuses on their point and not on their emotional level. The world of work is more about thinking than about feeling. For the reasons I’ve mentioned and many more, I encourage students to write whatever they’d like—but not to press the send button until they have allowed a cooling-off period. The annoyance, anger, or antagonism that may
1. Remember that expressing anger should never be the purpose of a business document. People read work-related writing to know or do whatever the document tells them. Suppose Bob is annoyed at his subordinate, Eve, because at a public staff meeting she prematurely raised the confidential matter of relocating the business. His irritation will hasten his composing an e-mail, which in first draft may looks like this:

Eve,

What on earth inspired your faux pas about our proposed relocation during the town meeting? Whatever it was—sheer absent-mindedness, corporate sabotage, staff mutiny, a professional death wish—you have definitely dumped a load of grist for the organizational rumor mill, which I’m sure will linger ad nauseam. Just what we all needed: more late-nights of writing e-mails and early mornings of leading meetings for damage control over the ruckus your slip will have surely created.

Bob

Is Bob infuriated? You bet. Does Eve deserve to be the recipient of Bob’s wrath? Emphatically not. Picture yourself as Eve for a moment. If she knows that she has said something she shouldn’t have, she is probably already self-flagellating; if she is unaware of her rhetorical blunder, perhaps because no one told her that the issue was off limits, she needs to be made aware of the issue. Screaming at her for the sake of screaming does no one any good.

So what should Bob write? If he cools off for a moment, he would realize that most of what he has written is sarcastic, ridiculing, and purposeless. Eve may share this e-mail with her allies, who will thereafter think twice before ever sharing ideas with Bob for fear of facing his retribution. Interestingly, Bob would also find in the e-mail some information useful to Eve: the ideas that she leaked confidential information, that the leaked information leads to company-wide gossip and discontent, and that it causes management to divert attention to
damage control from more important business issues. Next, he may ask himself, “Why would I need to tell her these points?” The answer to that question would be his purpose—one he would feel more comfortable communicating and Eve would more willingly accept. Maybe he needs to tell her to stick only to the agenda in future meetings. Or maybe he wants to direct her to specific actions as a result of the leak. His second draft may look something like this:

Eve,

I realize that we often stray from agenda items during town meetings. Besides causing these meetings to run longer than they already do, raising non-agenda items result in wasting time on gossip and damage control. The mention of our proposed relocation today might have caused these problems, which is why I need you to attend to a short-term issue and a long-term one.

First, draft an e-mail—for my review before distribution—clarifying that our relocation is only being considered and not a *fait accompli*. I want to see the draft by this afternoon.

Second, adhere to our agenda-item-only rule in future town meetings. If you are not sure whether to raise a point before a meeting, then you should ask me before the meeting; if you are not sure during the meeting, then you should trust your better judgment and not raise the issue. If a staff member raises a non-agenda issue, we have two options: table the issue for a future meeting if it is of company-wide interest, or privately discuss the issue with the staff member after the meeting if it is a personal issue.

Eve, in no way do I want to discourage your active participation in future meetings. Your contributions have been valuable and appreciated by all staff, and I look forward to our company benefiting from your creativity, enthusiasm, and integrity. I will review the e-mail with you later today.

Bob

In keeping his purpose closely connected to his reader’s concerns and not to his high emotional state, Bob achieves four objectives:

- He immediately puts Eve to work on an e-mail to put out a fire.
- He offers a protocol for approaching future meetings to ensure that such gaffes do not reoccur.
• He praises her for past contributions at meetings to encourage future contributions and to ease the pain she probably feels over her error.

• He affirms his confidence in Eve to reinforce her trust in him.

2. Refrain from responding in kind to anger. If you are the recipient of an attack—especially an unjustified one—you may want to defend yourself in writing; however, this does not mean that you should respond to anger with anger, or to sarcasm with sarcasm. If you are right, then let the facts you present bear you out. An e-mail exchange I once had with a course participant illustrated this point well. He wrote to me:

Mr. Vassallo,

I will be traveling from Atlanta to attend your two-day writing class in New York on December 1 and 2. I know that you expect 100 percent attendance on both days, but I need to arrive an hour late on the first day and depart two hours early on the second day. My company is paying a lot of money for this class, so please work with me on this.

I. M. Snooty

I am usually reluctant to bend rules, particularly when the requesting party does not feel required to offer an excuse or when insisting that I should honor the request because it holds some financial authority over me. But the company hosting the course requested my flexibility in this case. So this is how I replied:

Mr. Snooty,

You may attend the course, and I would be willing to work with you during breaks at midday, after the first day, and before the second day to ensure that you learn the material you will miss.

I’ll see you on the 1st.

Philip Vassallo
Snooty responded in one terse sentence:

*You did not answer my question, which is, will I learn enough during the time I’m there.*

I decided not to respond to this e-mail for three reasons:

- His tone was caustic, probably driven by circumstances I knew nothing about.
- He would likely misinterpret anything I would write since he clearly misinterpreted my good intentions in the first e-mail.
- I had no interest in or time for an e-mail war with this stranger.

But I did decide to discuss the matter with him privately during the course. Our conversation, as best as I remember, went like this:

**Phil:** Since tone is an important part of this writing course, I wanted to point out that the tone of your e-mail to me would be read by most reasonable people as abrasive.

**Snooty:** I think your response had the tone problem.

**Phil:** (Pointing to a print copy of the e-mail string.) OK. Let’s see. In the first sentence, I grant you permission to attend the course and offer you help during my free time. In the second sentence, I close with a friendly “see ya.” Where is the tone problem?

**Snooty:** I wrote in the second e-mail that you never answered my question.

**Phil:** A question ends with a question mark. You never asked a question in the first e-mail, or in the second one for that matter.

**Snooty:** Hey, I don’t care what you say. My boss expects me to take this class for my professional development, and this was the only time I could fit it in my schedule. I’m on a lot of deadlines, which is why I had to come in late and leave early in the first place.

Just as I thought: His e-mail was fueled by pressures from his manager, his professional obligations, and his frantic schedule. In the two minutes I had with him before returning to the class, I knew this conversation would be going nowhere. He thought he had asked a question he hadn’t, was unaware of his heavy-handed tone, grew irritated when I didn’t answer his phantom question,
and carried a grudge to New York all the way from Atlanta. Speaking of high emotional content equating to zero useful gain!

While reviewing your draft, seek signs that suggest reluctance or hedging on the pusillanimous end, and outrage or bombast on the hyperbolic end. If you sense you may have a tone problem, so will your readers, who will dismiss the message, seethe among colleagues, or deploy a counterattack.

3. Beware of double entendres. A precise writer carefully chooses words because many have secondary or tertiary meanings contradictory to the primary one. For instance, when I say, “I’ll speak with you momentarily,” do I mean for a moment or in a moment? When you say, “I lack money,” do you mean you have none at all, or not enough? When we say, “We should call,” do we mean we must or we may? In all three situations, Webster’s Dictionary would support either definition. Such discrepancies may prompt puzzled reactions or angry retorts. I remember one e-mail I received from a friend and colleague, who was boasting about how he persuaded a particularly difficult client to employ him. In my response, I congratulated him for making a convert. This is what he fired back to me:

I resent your implication that I am professing some sort of religious ideology, which I certainly am not. If that’s your thing, more power to you. But do not project your views on me.

What the …? After recovering from a mild shock, I went to Webster to look up convert:

verb: 1. to bring over from one belief, view, or party to another 2. to bring about a religious conversion in.
noun: one who is converted.

This is how I responded:

I ask that you please look up the word convert. I meant its first definition, which implies convincing someone to a general belief, not a religious one. Also, I ask that in the future you first ask what I meant before you attack me for what I didn’t mean.

He apologized and remains my friend. But think of all that wasted energy. Both of us had far better things to do than to attack and counterattack over—literally—no issue. Did I deserve his assault? I think not. Could I have chosen
a better word than convert? Probably. At least I was reminded from this e-counter that we bring our personal history and biases to words depending on the situation and players in them.

4. Read your document aloud. This is energy well spent. Just as we would want to read our writing aloud to detect awkward phrasing, we might want to read a draft aloud to hear how much like our own voice we are actually writing. Once I was asked by my manager to write my assessment of a co-worker’s projection of an improbable ten percent sales increase in a difficult economy. This is how I started my first draft:

I think that Margaret’s projection of a ten percent increase in sales is chimerical.

Now chimerical might work in a scholarly article, but not in a business memo at this company. Besides, not only would I have insulted Margaret, but I would have sent her to the dictionary first. Yet in the private, audience-free world of my first-draft mindset, the word just popped out of my head, through my fingertips, and onto the screen. Then when I read the e-mail aloud, I realized that chimerical just didn’t sound right. (Have I ever actually said or heard chimerical or just written and read it?) My second—and sent—draft read:

I think that Margaret’s projection of a ten percent increase in sales is optimistic.

5. Have someone else read it. Here’s an old standby. Doctors hire doctors when they need to diagnose themselves, lawyers hire lawyers in their own defense, and artists view or listen to artists for inspiration. In the same vein, don’t trust yourself; trust someone else—especially someone who understands the context of the situation you are writing about. More than once, I have reviewed something I had written and felt that it was free of tone problems, only to have another person read it and correctly detect a slight here and a smirk there. Just as we lose focus on an object coming within inches of our eyes, we may lose focus on an issue and those affected by it, the closer it is to us.

Writing has two phases: a creative one and a critical one. The creative phase is rich with youth and energy on the positive side, and recklessness on the negative side; the critical phase is abundant in experience and respectfulness on the positive side and evasiveness on the negative side. Good writing requires a lot of both phases—all positive, please.