

Simply Said Says It All

Simply Said: Communicating Better at Work and Beyond
Jay Sullivan (Wiley 2017), 271 pages

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“News flash: Your audiences don’t care about you.”¹ Your audience cares about how *your content impacts them*.² To communicate effectively, *focus on how your content is helpful to others*, not on you or your message.³

I’m a fan of cut to the chase straight shooters. So is Jay Sullivan, former attorney whose bona fides include Skadden Fellow, in-house counsel for Covenant House, and corporate attorney for Lloyds of London. Sullivan now leads Exec-Comm’s Law Firm Group where he “help[s] lawyers improve their communication skills.”⁴

Simply Said succeeds in simplifying effective communication strategies. With a substantial focus on content, oral and written communication, *Simply Said* readily applies to legal education and the practice of law. *Simply Said* is logically divided into five sections: *Your Content*, *Your Oral Communication Skills*, *Your Written Communication Skills*, *Your Interactions*, and *Your Leadership*. Each section is then divided into three to four easy to read chapters with intriguing invitations to learn more, like “What Do You Mean by That?” or “What If They Ask You Something You Don’t Know?” *Simply Said* provides helpful examples and illustrations of each recommendation and skill, outlines for structuring content, and helpful visual cues.

Simply Said crystallizes concepts for legal educators so law students can better grasp and articulate complex concepts to various audiences. For

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¹ JAY SULLIVAN, *SIMPLY SAID: COMMUNICATING BETTER AT WORK AND BEYOND* xiv (2017) (acknowledging that focusing on your audience is hard to put into practice because writing and speaking are self-focused activities).

² *Id.*

³ *Id.*

⁴ *Id.* at 15.

lawyers, *Simply Said's* communication strategies may not be revolutionary, but provide a useful, user-friendly guide to sharpen communication skills with easy to incorporate practical tips.

The first three sections on effective content, oral communications skills, and written communication skills are the most immediately applicable to legal writing and legal education. *Your Content* and *Your Oral Communication Skills* applies directly to oral communication and oral advocacy and *Your Written Communication Skills* applies directly to both formal legal writing and informal email writing.

In *Your Content*, Sullivan provides concrete suggestions for structuring a key message based on the audience's needs, crafting engaging stories and analogies to reinforce key points, and organizing content for maximum impact to educate or persuade your audience.

In Chapter 1, *Conveying a Clear Message*, Sullivan suggests "focusing on the needs of the person or people with whom we are communicating."⁵ I envisioned immediate utility for oral research report assignments, client counseling and negotiation, oral arguments, and so much more. Sullivan proposes we ask ourselves, "What's the key take-away for your audience?"⁶ Envisioning a high-stakes game of telephone, Sullivan cautions the impact of your message often depends on the *recipient's* ability to convey your message *to someone else*. Lawyer to Assistant General Counsel for client; Assistant General Counsel to General Counsel; all the way up to the Chairman to Board, and so on. If your message is clear, your message will be conveyed consistently.⁷ Sullivan knows sophisticated professionals (lawyers!) often showcase their smarts, relying on verbosity and legalese, muddying our messages.⁸

Don't be clever, be clear. In multiple contexts, Sullivan recommends bottom-line up-front, keep your message short, easy to understand, and focused on your audience's needs.⁹ Always ask yourself, "How does this audience need to use my content?"

In Chapter 2, *Telling Engaging Stories*, Sullivan recommends using engaging stories, analogies, and examples to persuade or convince others. I'm a terrible storyteller and I can't tell a joke. Sullivan's recommendations for using analogies and examples to illustrate or simplify complex concepts, instead of stories, resonated with me, providing hope to similar sorry storytellers.

⁵ *Id.* at 3.

⁶ *Id.* at 4.

⁷ *Id.* at 5.

⁸ *Id.* at 7.

⁹ *Id.* at 6.

In Chapter 3, *Organizing Your Content*, Sullivan suggests organizing your content around the audience's needs, the key message for your listeners, and your purpose, whether to educate or persuade. Sullivan again recommends a bottom-line up-front approach putting your audience's needs in context, which tells your audience *how* to hear your message and plan accordingly. Imagine "Regarding Project X, everything is on track" or "Regarding Project X, we've hit a snag," immediately followed by necessary details for your audience to understand what you need them to do next.

Spoiler alert! Good lawyers and communicators are not mystery novelists. They don't save the big reveal for the end. Effective communicators tell their audience where they're taking them, so they'll understand the path more clearly.

Perhaps counterintuitively, we *deliver* content in a different order than we *create* it. Content creation is writer focused; we create content to understand meaning and understand our message. Content delivery is focused on the audience, not the speaker.

In *Your Oral Communication Skills*, Sullivan covers body language, listening to understand, delivering from notes and visuals, and responding to questions. The key to *presenting* well is to *be present* to your audience.¹⁰ We can *be present* by conveying a sense of commitment and presence through eye contact, voice, and body language. Sullivan recommends we look at one person at a time for a complete sentence to express a full thought. Connecting with one person for a full thought helps us relax, avoids distraction, and builds rapport with the audience.¹¹

Your voice is a powerful delivery tool. By varying your speed, volume, tone, and inflection, your voice bolsters your impact. Attention fast talkers! Audiences become overwhelmed by a speaker's fast pace and the absence of pauses between sentences.¹² Pausing between sentences is essential for an effective delivery because it allows your audience to *process what you just shared*.¹³

Oral Communication Skills includes effective *listening* skills. "Listening well is hard work."¹⁴ Good listening requires energy and engagement to learn what your audience's concerns are. Sullivan suggests simple engagement strategies: maintain eye contact when listening, put away distractions, and take notes. Good listeners ask open-ended

10 *Id.* at 42.

11 *Id.* at 44.

12 *Id.* at 49.

13 *Id.*

14 *Id.* at 65.

questions and are comfortable inquiring to uncover information *they didn't know they didn't know*.¹⁵ Good listeners confirm and clarify—confirming what they heard to stay on track and clarifying to ensure their understanding is accurate. For law students and lawyers, client relationship building is a learned skill and employers expect basic competency in building rapport and effective listening.

In *Delivering From Notes and Visuals*, Sullivan states your job is to make it as *effortless* as possible for the audience to receive your message. When delivering from notes, be both organized and conversational. Create a *delivery tool* called a “Spot Word Outline,”¹⁶ a set of notes sparse enough to glance at and “spot” the words you want to say by using white space and major topic headings organized around common themes. Use bullet points, not long sentences, to create “anchor word” phrases in your spot word outline. Visually connect with the spot word outline, make eye contact with an audience member, deliver the content, then visually return to the spot word outline, starting the process anew.

But wait! “What if they ask you something you don’t know?” Even experienced presenters fear such questions. Sullivan suggests listening to the entire question, gaining time to think, answering and reaffirming the main point, and moving on.

In *Your Written Communication Skills*, Sullivan covers communication in many writing modes including email and text. Sullivan divides this section into four chapters: editing for clarity, structuring your documents, creating reader-friendly documents, and writing emails that resonate. Again, Sullivan emphasizes the audience’s needs: Always start with the reader. Your writing is about the audience and what knowledge the audience needs, or what action they need to take.¹⁷ Sullivan recommends *editing* for stronger, more precise writing: cut clutter by eliminating zero words and wordy expressions; create stronger sentences by focusing on a central idea and strong verbs; prefer active voice, etc. *Simply Said*, “the longer your document, the less likely it is to be read.”¹⁸

Next, Sullivan tackles document structure to orient and direct readers. “Very few people care what you did to get to this point with this issue. They care about where they’re going from here.”¹⁹ “Often, [writers] think they need to build their case for the recommendations they are about to make.”²⁰ Again, Sullivan emphasizes a bottom-line up-front

¹⁵ *Id.* at 74.

¹⁶ *Id.* at 90.

¹⁷ *Id.* at 126.

¹⁸ *Id.* at 129.

¹⁹ *Id.* at 147.

²⁰ *Id.* at 149.

approach: tell the reader what needs to happen, provide some background, expand the message to explain the benefits of the recommended course of action, and end quickly. Sullivan advocates for reader friendly documents with short sentences, varying sentence length, and keeping paragraphs to a quarter of the page to avoid visually intimidating readers.

The last two sections, *Your Interactions* and *Your Leadership*, provide practical, professional suggestions for the practice of law, interviewing, networking, and leadership. Sullivan provides concrete suggestions for effective client meetings, delegating successfully, sharing meaningful feedback, giving toasts, handling introductions, facilitating brainstorming meetings, leading others, and showing vulnerability.

Overall, Sullivan's advice is approachable, yet tactical. *Simply Said*, we are more effective communicators when we focus on others and how our message impacts them.