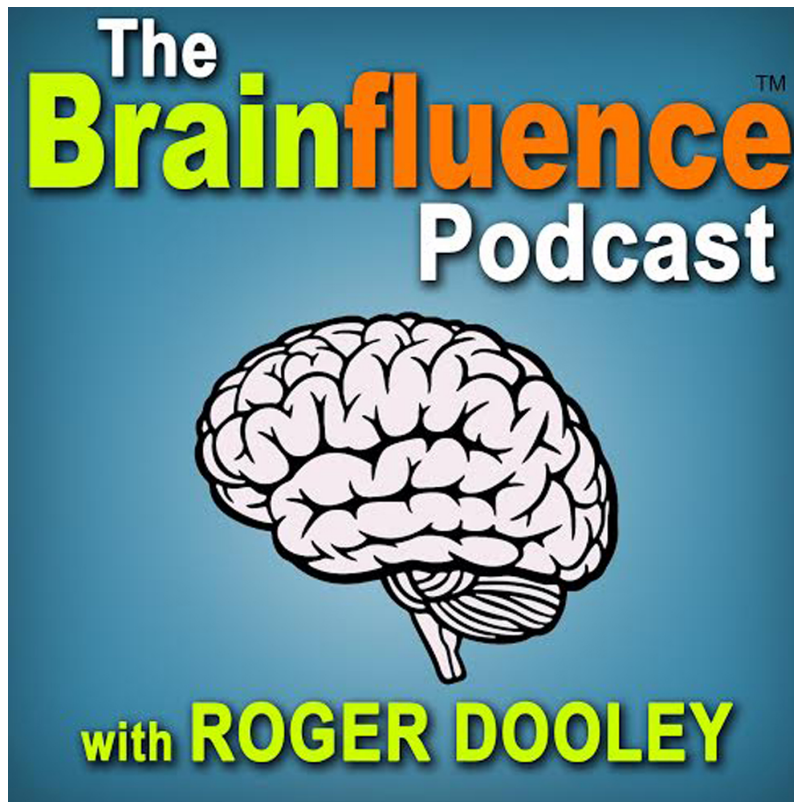


How to Stop Writing Bullshit, with Josh Bernoff

<https://www.rogerdooley.com/josh-berhoff-bullshit>



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Roger Dooley

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Welcome to the Brainfluence Podcast with Roger Dooley, author, speaker and educator on neuromarketing and the psychology of persuasion. Every week, we talk with thought leaders that will help you improve your influence with factual evidence and concrete research. Introducing your host, Roger Dooley.

Roger Dooley: Welcome to The Brainfluence Podcast. I'm Roger Dooley. As you can imagine, I read a lot of books, probably 50 or so per year just to prepare for the podcast, and at least that many for research, or actually, hard to believe, enjoyment purposes. I have to admit, as often as I admire the insights and thinking of the authors who wrote those books, it's quite rare that, before I even finish reading the book, I'll actually start to take advice from the author and make changes in the way I do things. And one book that had that effect was *Writing Without Bullshit: Boost Your Career by Saying What You Mean*. I was just a few chapters in, and I started looking critically at what I was writing and immediately began revising. Today's guest is Josh Bernoff, bestselling author, prolific blogger, and of course, the person who wrote the book I just described, *Writing Without Bullshit*. Welcome to the show, Josh.

Josh Bernoff: Hi, it's great to be on with you.

Roger Dooley: Great. So Josh, you spent a lot of years at Forrester Research. I guess you probably saw a lot of writing in those years and did some yourself?

Josh Bernoff: Yes. I mean, there's sort of two ways that that happened. One is, of course, as an analyst at Forrester Research, we would typically get many, many press releases and presentations from vendors, and I got to see an enormous amount of bullshit in that context. Also, we had to create content that people paid a lot of money for, and those

The Brainfluence Podcast with Roger Dooley

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reports had to be extremely punchy and have exactly the right insights for people. So we spent a lot of time learning how to write exactly what we needed to, to give the most value to the people who were paying for those reports.

Roger Dooley: Mm-hmm (affirmative), yeah. Well, you mentioned the reports that you create. And that's, I would guess, a major source of income for Forrester, is selling those reports. You know, if you want to know the outlook for smart home devices for the next five years, they probably have a report for that. But is there a tendency, not specifically at Forrester, but just sort of in the report industry in general, to write with a lot of padding and jargon to make them seem more authoritative and profound? I mean, on the one hand, you'd say, "Well, if I just paid \$500 for a report on something, I want to be able to get the actual elements very quickly." But on the other hand, there's probably a reaction that, "Wow. You know, I paid \$500 for this, and it's only four pages long." So how does that balance out?

Josh Bernoff: Well, we didn't get paid by the word. People didn't tend to pay for reports in general. They paid for subscriptions to the reports. And as a result, the concentration was on trying to add as much value as possible. And if you could do that in a two-page document, you would do that. Now, I've looked at an awful lot of research content since leaving Forrester, white papers that vendors create and research reports that various people have put together, even internal reports that people are working on. And you're exactly right. There is a tendency to try and make yourself sound more important by putting as many jargon words in as possible. And the problem with that is that it creates what I call an insider syndrome, where there's a small number of people who imagine that they understand the jargon; and then a much larger group, which is your

The Brainfluence Podcast with Roger Dooley

<http://www.RogerDooley.com/podcast>

How to Stop Writing Bullshit, with Josh Bernoff

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real audience, who is sitting there scratching their heads, saying, "What the heck is he talking about?"

So that's one of the elements in my book, is to talk about how to escape that insider syndrome and actually write in a direct and clear way that's not quite so full of jargon.

Roger Dooley: Mm-hmm (affirmative). Josh, what convinced you to pull the plug and strike out on your own?

Josh Bernoff: Well, I had been at Forrester for a long time, and I had done a lot of interesting things there. I became the top analyst in the field of television technology, which enabled me to get on television myself a lot and get quoted. I switched gears, and I actually started to write books there, persuaded the CEO to allow me to write books. So I co-authored three different books when I was there, including Groundswell, which was a bestselling book on social technology with Charlene Li. And at the end of my time there, I was actually mentoring other people, regarding their ideas and helping them to elevate those ideas to be as powerful as possible.

But in the end, I knew that this wouldn't go on forever. And I wanted to do something other than business strategy. And when I decided it was time to go off on my own, what I realized was, the thing I knew most about was how to write in a clear, powerful, and direct way. And I wanted to take all of the things I'd learned in the 20 years at Forrester and in the 15 years I'd had in the technology business before that and put it together in one place so people could learn how to write in a way that was as effective as possible, for a world where people read everything on a screen.

The Brainfluence Podcast with Roger Dooley

<http://www.RogerDooley.com/podcast>

How to Stop Writing Bullshit, with Josh Bernoff

<https://www.rogerdooley.com/josh-bernoff-bullshit>

Roger Dooley: Mm-hmm (affirmative), yeah. So speaking of reading on screens, Josh, you write a blog post every day. That must really take some discipline. What's your process for doing that?

Josh Bernoff: Well, I'd like to tell people that it is extremely disciplined, but in fact, like most things, once you do it a lot, you get very adept at it. So yes, I've been writing a blog post every weekday since March of 2015. We're up to 800,000 words of content, because it's typically about 1,000 words a day, and over 2 million views on my blog, which is, if people are shy about typing WithoutBullshit.com, they can just type my name, Bernoff.com, and get to the same place.

And what I try and focus on is the written word. What are people writing? And is it effective or ineffective? And there is so much content, whether it's content in politics, or whether it's content in business, or emails. One of my most popular posts recently was, I actually analyzed a letter I'd gotten in the mail, which was an attempt to blackmail me for bitcoin. Yeah. And it was extremely well-written. I was like, "Okay. Let's look at this letter and decide why it's effective." Obviously, it was a scam.

But for example, today I wrote about the responses from Republicans to Donald Trump's performance in Helsinki, Finland, as he connected with Vladimir Putin. And this was really the first time that Republicans had been seriously critical of the president for his performance. But as you look at it, you can see people equivocating, and you can see them making excuses. And you sort of realize that, yes, this just sort of sounds powerful; but in fact, there's all sorts of loopholes in here, and these people are not serious. And the exceptions were senators

The Brainfluence Podcast with Roger Dooley

<http://www.RogerDooley.com/podcast>

How to Stop Writing Bullshit, with Josh Bernoff

<https://www.rogerdooley.com/josh-bernoff-bullshit>

who are either leaving, aren't going to be reelected this year, or are dying.

Roger Dooley: A small subset-

Josh Bernoff: So you're either dying, you're leaving, or you're equivocating. And that basically, you can see that in the writing. And that's what I'm trying to do is, to get people to understand how they can look at writing, and take it apart, and understand what it's doing, and how they can use those techniques effectively for themselves.

Roger Dooley: Mm-hmm (affirmative). So if your posts average 1,000 words, I'm sure it varies, but how long does that take, typically?

Josh Bernoff: It typically takes me about an hour and a half. And it's, you know, anyone who blogs will tell you, there's a lot of thinking ahead of time. I do that maybe the night before. You know, when I was seeing those statements from the Republicans, I was like, "All right. This is what tomorrow's blog post is going to be about." There is the writing, and then there's the promotion. So once you've created something, I put it on my Facebook page for my book page, and also on my Twitter feed, which has 25,000 followers, or at least did until that recent purge. I lost a few.

Roger Dooley: Yes. And how I managed to get through that without really being hurt too badly, I was surprised. But-

Josh Bernoff: I lost like 300 people out of 25,000. So I didn't feel like-

Roger Dooley: Right, yeah. Right.

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How to Stop Writing Bullshit, with Josh Bernoff

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Josh Bernoff: But this is, it's all part of a process. And one of the things ... I've had posts that got a million views, and I've had posts that people said, "Well, that was terrible and lame." And you don't know until you do it, which ones are going to be popular and which aren't. I had no idea that the post on the bitcoin blackmail stuff would end up being so popular. But every time someone got a letter, they searched online, found my post, and said, "Oh, all right. This guy's ... written about the same letter. He got the same letter I got."

Roger Dooley: Right. And maybe many of those shared it, too. So yeah, that's ... You really don't. I've had the same experience, both on my own blog at Forbes, where you know, you write something you think is really good and it never gets noticed. Another time, you jot a few quick thoughts down in a hurry, and suddenly it catches fire. That's why what you're doing is good. And I wish I was as disciplined, because if you keep writing every day, statistically, probably a few of those will catch fire; where it's like, if you don't buy a lottery ticket, you're not going to win the lottery. If you don't write those posts, you're not going to get one that takes off.

Josh Bernoff: Let's hope they're not lottery tickets. It's more of a passion for me, because I read stuff, and I say, "People don't realize what's going on here." And there's a lot of examples of bad writing. One of the things I love to take apart are apologies. You know, "I'm so very sorry that I behaved inappropriately towards all the women I've ever worked with." Hmm, okay. As well as-

Roger Dooley: Or that they interpreted my actions in a way that they found offensive, yeah.

The Brainfluence Podcast with Roger Dooley

<http://www.RogerDooley.com/podcast>

How to Stop Writing Bullshit, with Josh Bernoff

<https://www.rogerdooley.com/josh-bernoff-bullshit>

Josh Bernoff: Right, yes. And that's, you see all of the various ways that they equivocate and avoid blame. Whether we're talking about food poisoning at Chipotle or a sexual harassment, the blame avoidance techniques, you know, the passive voice and the sort of non-apology apologies, "I'm sorry if you were offended," are pretty visible.

But I also point out examples of really good writing. One of my most popular posts was about what Tim Cook wrote when they were refusing to break the encryption on the iPhone that had belonged to the San Bernardino terrorist. And that's a very controversial situation, you know? It's like, "Wait, you're protecting terrorists? Why are you doing that?" But that was a complicated issue that they explained in a very simple, and direct, and clear way. And if you think, when you write about complicated things, you have to write it in a complicated way, you have to look at what Tim Cook did there and say, "All right. If he can do that, I can do that. And how did he do that?" And that's what I really did was, to try and take that apart and say, "He talks directly to the user. He explains things. He doesn't use any more jargon than he needs to. He uses active voice. He uses words like 'we' and 'I.'" And that just makes you really want to believe what he's saying more than most of the bullshit that passes for corporate communication.

Roger Dooley: Mm-hmm (affirmative). I want to get onto some of the stuff in the book, Josh. But I'm going to ask for one piece of advice here, since you're clearly a more efficient blogger than I am. One problem that I have when I write a post is, I keep thinking of ways to make it better; you know, digging up another research study to support the point, or turning a three-bullet post into a five-bullet post or a seven-bullet post. Do you ever fall into that trap?

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How to Stop Writing Bullshit, with Josh Bernoff

<https://www.rogerdooley.com/josh-bernoff-bullshit>

Josh Bernoff: No.

Roger Dooley: Or how do you avoid it, if you don't?

Josh Bernoff: Well, I do some heavily researched posts that I might actually be working on for a week or two. But for me, the long-form content is the book, so that's where I'm actually going to be spending the time doing that research. And these posts, if you look at my book, I'd say half of it has been published in one form or another on my blog first. So the blog is sort of like the Off-Broadway tryout for the content. I put it up there and see how people react to it.

The other thing is that you need to recognize that less is more, that 1,000-word blog post is probably going to be more effective than a 2,000-word blog post, everything else being considered. Now, sometimes you have to get to more, but if you've already proven your point, the question is, what's the best way to prove it; not, can I keep throwing more stuff in there?

And so one of the things I very strongly recommend to people, I mean, I have a whole chapter called "Write Short," if you can believe it. When I run workshops for corporate people, for teams of writers, I spend an hour on how to write short and get to the point, which sounds like an oxymoron, but it's actually what ... It's not so easy to do. But when you understand things like the average amount of time that the average person spends on a news article online is 36 seconds, well, if they're only going to be reading news articles for 36 seconds, how long are they going to spend with your content? And that means you need to start with an idea of the word count, and stick to it, and put only the best stuff in there that will most effectively communicate what you're trying to say.

The Brainfluence Podcast with Roger Dooley

<http://www.RogerDooley.com/podcast>

How to Stop Writing Bullshit, with Josh Bernoff

<https://www.rogerdooley.com/josh-berhoff-bullshit>

Roger Dooley: Yeah. I've certainly found that my writing is better when, for some reason, I'm artificially limited; you know, I have to do something in only 500 words. And I start off with 700, and I say, "Oh, man. I really can't do that." But by the time I've trimmed it down, and cut the fat, and realized, "Okay, that is better." But the problem is, most of us don't do that. You know, we don't have an artificial constraint. If it runs longer, hey, it's longer, not so much better. But, hey, let's get onto your book, Josh, first, I guess, the title. It was published by Harper Business. When you suggested, I assume you suggested Writing Without Bullshit as the title, did you get any pushback on that?

Josh Bernoff: A little bit. There were some trailblazers before me, the guy who wrote The No Asshole Rule insisted that that be the title. There was a popular book around the time I was pitching this, called The Subtle Art of Not Giving a Fuck, which was like, "Hey, mine's a lot less offensive than that."

Roger Dooley: Right, right. I think they did use a star in the title, though.

Josh Bernoff: Yes, yes. But when I thought about what I was trying to talk about, I realized that the stuff in writing that doesn't carry any meaning, there's no better word than bullshit to describe that. And I knew that it would catch people's attention, but I also knew that not calling it what it was was a form of bullshit itself. So I wrote a proposal that way. And I told my agent, and the agent told the people who were bidding on the book, that the title had to include that word. And when I talked to Harper Business, which is a great publisher, and I know the people there from way back, they said, "Well, we read the proposal, and we realized that that had to be the title." So they basically went along with it.

The Brainfluence Podcast with Roger Dooley

<http://www.RogerDooley.com/podcast>

How to Stop Writing Bullshit, with Josh Bernoff

<https://www.rogerdooley.com/josh-berhoff-bullshit>

One publisher, they said, "Well, Amazon doesn't allow you to promote books with bad words in the title." So I asked, when I closed with Harper Business, I said, "Can you check that?" And they said, "Oh, yeah. We checked that, and that's wrong."

Roger Dooley: I think the appropriate response would have been, "That's bullshit."

Josh Bernoff: Yeah. Well, I'll tell you a quick story here. This is actually true. I was recently doing one of these workshops at an organization in New York City that serves a wide variety of different kinds of people. So what you want to imagine is a bunch of writers in a room, but that room is often used for other things. And people were used to walking right through it from the lobby and getting into the lady's room, which was on the other side. So as I'm setting up, I have my projector there, and you know, my opening slide says "Writing Without Bullshit" on it. And this little old lady, like 90 years old, is coming in with a walker and somebody helping her. And she's, you know, toddling along.

And she looks up at the screen, and I'm feeling pretty embarrassed. And she looks at it, and she says, "Writing Without Bullshit. Yeah, right." And she just kept going. And I realized she knows that that's what people need to do. People understand that that's the truth. And there may be a small number of people who are offended, but there's a much larger number of people who say, "Oh, yeah. That's what I need to know about."

Roger Dooley: Right. Well, I think it's a powerful title and a good choice. So let's talk about the opposite of that. You identify, I don't know, maybe a half a dozen, or a couple more, things that

The Brainfluence Podcast with Roger Dooley

<http://www.RogerDooley.com/podcast>

How to Stop Writing Bullshit, with Josh Bernoff

<https://www.rogerdooley.com/josh-bernoff-bullshit>

people should not do in their writing in the first section of the book. And to me, that was what really got me thinking and immediately re-looking at what I was writing. And the opposite of your title, I guess, is what you call weasel words. Now, these aren't the kind of weasel words that you might get from a politician who's accused of a crime, who's trying to find that sort of right legalistic response to, you know, avoid taking responsibility for it. But what do you mean by weasel words? What are some examples? And what's the problem with them?

Josh Bernoff: Well, when I talk about weasel words, I'm talking about modifiers, that is, qualifiers and intensifiers, that are vague.

Roger Dooley: Right. And these are things we use every day, all of us do.

Josh Bernoff: Yes, yes. So you know, the simplest example is a word like "very," which doesn't actually mean anything. If I say to you, "You have a good podcast," and then I say, "You have a very good podcast," well, that actually means exactly the same thing.

Roger Dooley: I'd prefer you call it "very good," though.

Josh Bernoff: Yeah. Well, I ... "Deeply" is my favorite. Whenever you hear anyone say the word "deeply," whatever follows that is bullshit, because the difference between ... You know, I love these companies that are like, "We have a deep knowledge of social media." And I'm like, "Okay, no. You're just saying that, when it doesn't actually mean anything."

And you can't get very far without using words like this. But the question is, how many? And once the density

The Brainfluence Podcast with Roger Dooley

<http://www.RogerDooley.com/podcast>

How to Stop Writing Bullshit, with Josh Bernoff

<https://www.rogerdooley.com/josh-berhoff-bullshit>

becomes high enough, you really have something that just comes off as bullshit. And I published in the book and on my blog an analysis, for example, of Marissa Mayer's internal email that she sent around when Verizon acquired Yahoo. And it's full of how incredibly wonderful everyone is doing, and the incredible tools that they're using, and the incredible progress that they've made, and how exciting it is. And you just, you know, by the time you've gotten to the fourth "incredible," you're like, "Come on." And remember, this is a company that had been sucking wind for like seven years before that, so it can't have been that incredible.

Roger Dooley: Well, all those "incredibles" make the content literally incredible.

Josh Bernoff: Yes, that's right. When you get to a certain density of these words ... And it also includes qualifiers, you know, like "sometimes," where people are attempting to evade saying anything with precision ... you just read it, and you're like, "I don't believe this." So you have to have an antidote for this. And in many cases, you can just remove the word altogether. Like, I say, "You have a good blog." There you go. It said what it needs to say. But you also can replace them with precision, right? Instead of saying, "Well, we have a deep knowledge," you might say, "We've been studying social media for 25 years, and our product analyzes 17 different platforms." Okay, that's impressive, and it actually means something. 17 platforms is better than 3 platforms, whereas a deep knowledge is not really necessarily any different from regular knowledge.

Roger Dooley: You know, and the passive voice also kind of falls into that same category of inexactness. You know, we all are

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<http://www.RogerDooley.com/podcast>

How to Stop Writing Bullshit, with Josh Bernoff

<https://www.rogerdooley.com/josh-bernoff-bullshit>

told, "Don't use passive voice." If you have Microsoft Word's grammar checker turned on, you'll find it underlining uses of the passive voice, which usually, you say, "Well, how else are you going to say that," when you look at it. What is the problem with passive voice, in terms of you being credible and persuasive?

Josh Bernoff: Well, it's usually an attempt to dodge responsibility. And people have, because they read so many pieces of literary criticism or scientific work when they were in college, both of those are full of passive voice, they don't even realize they're doing this. And again, just like with the weasel words, the problem is not that you use it. The problem is that you overuse it. And if you're going to say things like, "The department must be reorganized," well, you've evaded the responsibility for who's going to reorganize it and how they're going to reorganize it.

The classic example is, you know, "Taxes must be lowered." Well, you know, let's talk about the legislature, or whoever it is that's actually supposed to be lowering the taxes, because it's easy to imagine things should happen or have happened without actually talking about who did them. I have a great test here in the book. I didn't make it up, but it's a fantastic test because it's hard for people to spot sometimes. But if you can use the words "by zombies" after the verb, then it's passive voice. So if you say, "Mistakes were made," well, who made them? Hmm, let's see. We'll give it the test. "Mistakes were made by zombies." Ah, see? That works, and that means it's passive voice. And the question you have to ask is, "Okay. Well, who made the mistakes? Let me rewrite the sentence to talk about who actually made the mistakes."

The Brainfluence Podcast with Roger Dooley

<http://www.RogerDooley.com/podcast>

How to Stop Writing Bullshit, with Josh Bernoff

<https://www.rogerdooley.com/josh-berhoff-bullshit>

Roger Dooley: Mm-hmm (affirmative), yeah. You know, I think, well, passive voice can help sort of consciously diffuse the responsibility. If I'm delivering bad news, like, "Staff reductions are going to have to be made," that's better than saying, "I'm going to have to fire 20% of you," even though the truth is the latter.

Josh Bernoff: Is it? Is it? Do people really feel a lot better about that?

Roger Dooley: No, no. But I think that from the speaker's mind, maybe-

Josh Bernoff: I mean, I document in the book a case where Stephen Elop, the former president of Nokia, who had become the head of division at Microsoft when they acquired Nokia's mobile group, he had 24,000 people working for him, and they ended up having to lay off 12,000 people. And he sent an 1,100-word email. And three-quarters of the way through it, it says, "There will be 10,000 positions, so staff reductions must be made." And it's just like, you know what? Why don't you just tell us, up front, what you're doing, instead of hiding it three-quarters of the way through an 1,100-word email? It's absurd, and it didn't fool anyone. Obviously, the word got around. And at that point, all of the 1,100 words were completely irrelevant as people were talking about the fact that half of them were losing their jobs.

Roger Dooley: Mm-hmm (affirmative), yeah. Well, that was ... Read that part in the book, and it was really a masterpiece of obfuscation; I mean, just so much irrelevant content in there, when basically, all that people want to know is, "Am I going to have a job tomorrow," and so much doublespeak. I think the other thing, or other reason people use both weasel words and passive structures is because it's easy. It doesn't take a lot of work. Like, if I'm

The Brainfluence Podcast with Roger Dooley

<http://www.RogerDooley.com/podcast>

How to Stop Writing Bullshit, with Josh Bernoff

<https://www.rogerdooley.com/josh-bernoff-bullshit>

writing a blog post, I could say, "It's often been said that psychology is an inexact science," okay? And now, that's probably a double negative there, or a doubly bad statement. But you know, it's more or less true. And if I have to dig up a quote from Daniel Kahneman about, you know, that sort of verifies that statement or agrees with it, that's going to take some research. Or you know-

Josh Bernoff: Sure. Or you could write it shorter and say, "Yes, psychology is an inexact science." There you go. You're done, and you've used-

Roger Dooley: I've used my own authority in that case.

Josh Bernoff: Well, this is the thing, is I want people to say what they believe. And if you don't believe it, why is it even in there, you know? If you're going to set up something as a strongman and tear it down, and you're not going to say who said it, that's dishonest. So I'm sorry if I'm picking on stuff that you're writing here, but this is the deal. Really, the iron imperative in my book, the central thesis, is that you must treat the readers' time as more valuable than your own. In a world where people spend 36 seconds on the average news article, you don't have much time to get to the point. And the best thing you can do for your readers is to decide what you're going to say, say it as clearly and directly as possible, say it as precisely as possible; start with a conclusion up front, write, as they say in the military, a bottom line up front; and then justify what you're saying. And your readers will thank you for it, and they'll respect you for it.

Roger Dooley: Mm-hmm (affirmative), yeah. Well, I think one of the important takeaways for me was to, you know, if you're going to make a statement, and you're pretty darn certain

The Brainfluence Podcast with Roger Dooley

<http://www.RogerDooley.com/podcast>

How to Stop Writing Bullshit, with Josh Bernoff

<https://www.rogerdooley.com/josh-berhoff-bullshit>

it's true and accurate, and you agree with it, then, as you just used in your example, just go with the statement, rather than somehow weaseling out and saying that, you know, "Many scientists say this," or some other sort of vague allusion, to sort of water it down or diffuse the responsibility. Just take responsibility for the statement yourself, and so be it. And if somebody disagrees, well, then fine. They can disagree.

Josh Bernoff: Yeah.

Roger Dooley: And if you're wrong, you can admit it eventually.

Josh Bernoff: One of the things I learned at Forrester, very valuable lesson, was that if you are timid in the way you present something and you're wrong, or if you are bold and direct and you're wrong, the penalty is exactly the same.

Roger Dooley: You're wrong, either way.

Josh Bernoff: So, and people are afraid. The reason that they write wimpy stuff is because they're afraid. But if you're going to say something and you're a little nervous about it, you're much more effective if you say it as clearly and directly as possible. And really, if they're going to chop your head off, they're going to chop it off for saying it timidly or boldly, so you might as well go down being bold. And who knows? They might respect you.

One of the things that surprised me as an analyst was that when I was wrong, I would often have clients say, "Well, I disagree with you, but you made me think, and that was worthwhile." And in the end, they respected me more, even in the cases where I was wrong, and especially in the cases where it turned out I was right and they were wrong.

The Brainfluence Podcast with Roger Dooley

<http://www.RogerDooley.com/podcast>

How to Stop Writing Bullshit, with Josh Bernoff

<https://www.rogerdooley.com/josh-bernoff-bullshit>

Roger Dooley: I think that's really an important takeaway, because it's so easy to include a few modifiers in there, and they do nothing for your own credibility. So I know everybody in our audience sends email, and probably, they get way too many emails, too. What are some things that people can do to write better emails?

Josh Bernoff: Well, the first and most important thing is to put what you mean and what you need in the subject line. And I just did this, for example, this was pretty effective. So I'm trying to interview someone who's doing some interesting work that I want to write about, but the person doesn't know me. And I don't start with some obscure subject line. I start with, "I would like to interview you for my next book." And then they know what they're getting, and not only that, that will stand out in their inbox when they're looking for it again. So don't hide what you're asking, because people will just ... That assumes that they'll eventually read it anyway, and they probably won't.

And then you want to get to the point quickly, right? If the email is about the fact that everyone has to upgrade to the new version of Windows because of security reasons, then the subject line and the first line should basically say, "You're all going to have to upgrade your systems to the new version of Windows. We need to do this for security reasons." Then, of course, there's lots of questions. "Well, when? How hard will that be? How disruptive will it be?" Well, you get your chance to explain that. But most people would start that by saying, "Security is an important thing here at such-and-such company." And they're like, "Snore, snore. Oh, wait a minute. Maybe there's something important in here." So get to the point quickly.

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The other thing that I can't believe, in this day and age, people don't remember, is that email has all the same tools available to you that Microsoft Word or Google Docs do. So you can use bullets. You can use subheads in email. You can put graphics in email, and I don't mean cute, little graphics. I mean like a little diagram. And you can also put links in, which is very effective. You say, you know, "This is, if you need to know more, have a look at our privacy policy." You highlight it, type Control-K, and put a link in to anything on the internet. And if you put a little bit of effort into creating that sort of structure, it's much easier for people to consume than paragraph, paragraph, paragraph, paragraph. Is there something important in there? Maybe, but I didn't notice it because it was halfway through the fourth paragraph.

Roger Dooley: Yeah. Also in that sort of cold outreach email that you started talking about, Josh, where will you go once you started the text? Would you have to introduce yourself first? Or would you go with a topical approach first and then explain who you are?

Josh Bernoff: You know, I just sent one of these, so I'm going to pull it up on my screen here and see if I can tell you exactly what I said.

Roger Dooley: Yeah, because I have to send these things, too. So I'm going to learn from you.

Josh Bernoff: Okay, okay. So this is what I did. I wanted to interview this guy. So the first thing I said was, "I read articles about the work that you're doing, and I'm very impressed with it." And I included links to the article so that they knew that I had done it. And in fact, they had been interviewed by a friend of mine on video. And I said, "You know, I

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especially liked listening to what you said to Michael Krigsman over here, because he's a friend of mine." And then I said, "As for me, I'm the author of four books, including a bestseller. And all of my books are about business strategy. And when we write about people, we generally write about best practices that they've done."

And then, this is really crucial when you're doing these cold emails ... Your email to me included this, by the way, which I thought made it effective ... you don't send the same thing to everybody. Every one of these emails should be handcrafted, you know?

Roger Dooley: Oh, yeah. Well, I'm on the receiving, as you might expect, I'm sure you are too, on the receiving end of many, many, many of these things, that are, "Loved your," insert random blog post, you know, and then follow up with some totally irrelevant message, or not even include that. But you can tell the auto-fill was-

Josh Bernoff: Right, yes. "We would really like to feature our content on WithoutBullshit.com." Yeah, right, sure you do. But when you read someone, and someone says, "Well, I read your book, and in chapter three, you talked about this. I found that to be particularly useful, and I think that would great for us to talk about on my podcast," it's like, okay, sure. You put a little bit of effort, energy into this, and you've described why it's important. And I have, there's probably like 25 people like this person I just contacted that I'm trying to get ahold of. And I prioritized them in terms of which are more important, and then I reach out in an individualized way. And they respond.

And you might say, "Wouldn't it be easier to send 100 of those emails and have them all be the same?" Well, you'd

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be 0 for 100. It's much better to send 10 that are handcrafted and end up, you know, 6 for 10, in terms of the interviews you're getting.

Roger Dooley: Yeah. I think the same thing applies to press releases, Josh. I get so many totally generic things that are irrelevant to my interests, and clearly ... And I feel sorry for some of the people, because I think they're often smaller businesses that have bought a list from somebody who said, "Yeah, these are all great journalists. They'll all want to write about your product. Just send them an email." And so they blast out this generic thing. And of course, it just goes straight into the trash. And where, had they just spend maybe 10 minutes on 10 good prospects, 10 minutes each on 10 good prospects, they could do exactly what you're saying. They could show how their release is relevant to what that person writes about.

Josh Bernoff: Yes, I think you're right. So yeah, I mean, that's not the only kind of email, but I think any sort of generic email is not likely to succeed. And you know, there are newsletters and stuff like that. But even that, if you're trying to get somebody's attention, what you write should be proportional to the importance of the person, the amount of effort you spend on it. And that's the same whether it's going to your boss, it's one important person, or you're sending it to 1,000 people. Man, you really shouldn't waste the time of 1,000 people.

Roger Dooley: Mm-hmm (affirmative). Let me ask you one last question, Josh. Do you have any writing tools that you recommend? Like, I mentioned Microsoft grammar checker in Word. And are there others that people should think about? Or better, even, have you thought about somehow

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incorporating your own approaches into some kind of a checker tool?

Josh Bernoff: I talked to a company at one point about doing that, but a lot of what I talk about is hard for a machine to comprehend.

Roger Dooley: Yeah, yeah. That's the tough part.

Josh Bernoff: But I-

Roger Dooley: But it would be great to say, "Hey, your bullshit index is 9.3. Tone it down."

Josh Bernoff: Yeah. I mean, yes, it would. And I've heard of apps, like Hemingway App, that do that sort of thing. I'll tell you something which we haven't talked about, and that is that a lot of the problems don't occur in the writing. They occur in the review and revision process. And the process of collating these reviews and then putting them together in a way that maintains the coherence of what you're working on is important. And I recently co-authored a book with two other authors. And we found that Google Docs was really helpful, because we could see each other's comments and comment on the comments. You know, "I think you should take this out." "Oh, well, I disagree with him. I think you should leave it in." "Well, here's the reason I want to take it out." "Well, maybe we could compromise and do it this way." And that's much better than getting two contradictory sets of comments from people, and then pulling your hair out trying to keep both of them happy.

So that's one tool that I think people can look at, is to use the suggesting mode in Google Docs. I've found it to be pretty effective for collaboration.

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Roger Dooley: Mm-hmm (affirmative), yeah. And even for people who don't have co-authors, often, there is some kind of a review step; you know, either marketing needs to check it out, or a supervisor needs to check it out, or something. So that's a good tip.

Josh Bernoff: Mm-hmm (affirmative), yes. That's right.

Roger Dooley: Well, let me remind our audience that we're speaking with Josh Bernoff, author of *Writing Without Bullshit: Boost Your Career by Saying What You Mean*. If you read that book, you'll be a better writer, I guarantee it. Josh, how can people find you?

Josh Bernoff: Well, I'm pretty easy to find. As we mentioned, I blog every day at WithoutBullshit.com. And if you're having trouble getting to that because of some corporate firewall, just type in "Bernoff.com." And you can follow me on Twitter, @JBernoff; everything that I write, I talk about there; or join my Facebook page, which is Josh Bernoff Books. You can just search that and find that pretty easily.

And I have lots of followers on Instagram, but I don't actually post there. They're all there because they got suckered in, because I was friends with them on Facebook. So don't look for me there.

Roger Dooley: They're waiting for you to start posting.

Josh Bernoff: Look for me on Twitter. Look for me on Facebook. And especially, look for me at WithoutBullshit.com.

Roger Dooley: Okay, great. We will link to all those places, to Josh's book at Amazon, and to any other resources we mentioned, on the show notes page at

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RogerDooley.com/podcast. And you'll find a text version of our conversation there, too. Josh, thanks for being on the show.

Josh Bernoff: Thanks. It was really great to speak with you.

Thank you for joining me for this episode of The Brainfluence Podcast. To continue the discussion and to find your own path to brainy success, please visit us at <http://www.RogerDooley.com>.