

Writing Plainly

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Writer

Chapel Hill, North Carolina

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Producing Informational Content Designed for Comprehension by Non-Specialist Stakeholders

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II.VI.MMXVIII

Why we care (1)

This matter of language is important.

Professional jargon—on Wall Street, in humanities departments, in government offices—can be a fence raised **to keep out the uninitiated** and permit those within it to persist in the belief that what they do is too hard, too complex, to be questioned.

Jargon acts not only to euphemize but to license, **setting insiders against outsiders** and giving the flimsiest notions a scientific aura.

Repeat the phrase “chain through the metadata” enough times and it sounds like a law of nature rather than a contentious policy. In the case of the intelligence world, where a high degree of insularity is essential, the cloak of language renders spooks and their civilian critics mutually alien.

— George Packer | March 7, 2016

THE
NEW YORKER

Why we care (2)

“Effective pedagogy”

vs.

good teaching

Why we care (3)



- ❖ At the federal level, it's the law.
- ❖ Plain Language Act of 2010.
- ❖ "... clear Government communication that the public can understand and use."
- ❖ The public is encouraged to contact federal agencies if the language is fussy.
 - ❖ (But they can't sue, blessedly.)

Why we care (4)

- ❖ It saves resources.
 - ❖ Investment in clear writing / communication can free up time later.
 - ❖ Fewer phone calls, fewer emails, fewer clarifications.
- ❖ Focus on the people who need the most need help.
 - ❖ (There will always be questions. Spend time on the high-value questions.)
- ❖ It makes people like you better.
 - ❖ Remind everyone that you're not a faceless institution.

Why we care (5)

Strunk & White *(The Elements of Style)*



Muddiness is not merely a disturber of prose, it is also a destroyer of life, of hope: death on the highway caused by a badly worded road sign, heartbreak among lovers caused by a misplaced phrase in a well-intentioned letter, anguish of a traveler expecting to be met at a railroad station and not being met because of a slipshod telegram.

Think of the tragedies that are rooted in ambiguity, and be clear!

When you say something, make sure you have said it. The chances of your having said it are only fair.

EXAMPLE:

People are frustrating

People are frustrating

How to apply

The good news: There is no separate application for the UNC Scholars Program. Every UNC Admissions application is carefully reviewed. Simply apply to Carolina.

The bad news: It's incredibly selective. Fewer than **6 percent** of UNC students earn a place in the UNC Scholars Program, making it a truly elite group.



THE UNIVERSITY OF NORTH CAROLINA
Scholars Program

People are frustrating; more info helps

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What we're looking for

Evidence of real curiosity about the world, and the drive to pursue it. Show us that you've gone beyond the bounds of your high school curriculum, that you've followed personal interests and created your own projects.

Show us that you've led or encouraged your classmates, revitalized a fledgling group or cause, or come back strong after a setback.

Show us that you genuinely care about things, whether big or small, and have the energy to do something about it. Show us that you'll make Carolina a deeper, more exciting place.

People are frustrating; not always fixable

“I simply do not understand how you made such an awful mistake.”

— Parent, last week,
on our decision not to give his child a merit scholarship



THE UNIVERSITY OF NORTH CAROLINA
Scholars Program

What you're up against (1)

- ❖ Declining attention spans.
- ❖ Instant first impressions.
- ❖ Widely varying levels of education.
- ❖ Mental habits honed by advertising.
 - ❖ [amazon.com](https://www.amazon.com) has buttons you can push to order stuff
 - ❖ Cognition, like water, flows downhill. Path of least resistance.



What you're up against (2)

- ❖ Newspapers generally aim for an 8th-grade reading level.
- ❖ online-utility.org/english/readability_test_and_improve.jsp
- ❖ “Inverted-pyramid” style: summarize up top, detail below.
 - ❖ Background info comes *later*, never first.
- ❖ News stories have been getting shorter over time.

What you're up against (3)

Trump Sanctions Stance Angers Both Russia and Its Foes

By NEIL MacFARQUHAR and PETER BAKER 1:20 PM ET

The administration outraged lawmakers by not imposing new sanctions while upsetting Moscow by releasing a name-and-shame list of top Russian officials and oligarchs.

2 Comments

- F.B.I. Official Leaves Under Pressure After Trump Attacks
- How to Get a Wiretap to Spy on Americans

Silvio Berlusconi's Astonishing (and Unsurprising) Return

By JASON HOROWITZ

A master of reinvention, the three-time former prime minister Silvio Berlusconi is poised to win in Italy's election despite, well, everything.



65 Comments

Hawaii Worker Sent Alert on Purpose, in Misunderstanding

By CECILIA KANG 33 minutes ago

The mistake, which caused widespread panic, happened when an emergency services employee misinterpreted

Widely used in other countries, a variety of the cannabis plant is providing contractors with more efficient construction materials for houses and other structures.

By ADAM POPESCU

Americans Are Staying Home More. That's Saving Energy.

By KENDRA PIERRE-LOUIS

A new study suggests that tech-fueled lifestyle changes that encourage Americans to travel less are saving energy. But the full picture may be murkier.

34 Comments



Many See Him as Iraq's Abe Lincoln. Can He Win Election?

By MARGARET COCKER and FALIH HASSAN 11:31 AM ET

Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi is considered a national hero, but in Iraq's tricky sectarian system, that doesn't mean he will win the election.

Comments



'Beirut' Trailer Was Meant to Thrill. Instead It Offended.

By SOPAN DEB 17 minutes ago

A trailer for the new movie, starring Jon Hamm, has been the subject of scathing criticism. Detractors say it stereotypes and dehumanizes Arabs.

Comments



Watch the Super Blue Blood Moon on Wednesday

By NICHOLAS ST. FLEUR

A red blue moon? On Wednesday morning, Earth will cast its shadow over the blue moon (the second full moon of the month), turning it red in a lunar eclipse. Here's how to see it.

Comments



Latinos Find Ties Where Indian Slavery Once Thrived

By BRONKHORST

service it introduced last month for children as young as 6.



January 29, 2018

16h Two police officers **fatally shot a Bronx man** chasing his landlord in the street with a knife, the authorities said. Their body cameras recorded the episode.



17h The Vatican asked two **"underground" bishops in China** to cede their positions to Beijing-approved clerics as part of a Roman Catholic effort to end a nearly 70-year schism.



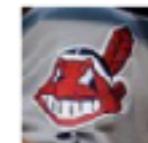
17h Some tickets to President Trump's annual address to Congress were reissued after several politicians **pointed out a glaring typo**: It's not the "State of the Unicorn."



18h The Los Angeles Clippers **shook up the N.B.A. by trading Blake Griffin**, a star forward and the face of their franchise, to the Detroit Pistons.



18h The Cleveland Indians will **stop using the Chief Wahoo logo** in 2019. Major League Baseball pushed the team to stop using the image, which many see as racist.



18h New Jersey's governor joined Democratic colleagues in moving toward charging or taxing power plants for **carbon emissions**, even as federal policies are dismantled.



1d **A Toronto landscaper killed at least five men** and hid some of their remains in planters where he worked, the police said. Several victims had ties to a gay neighborhood.



What you're up against (3)

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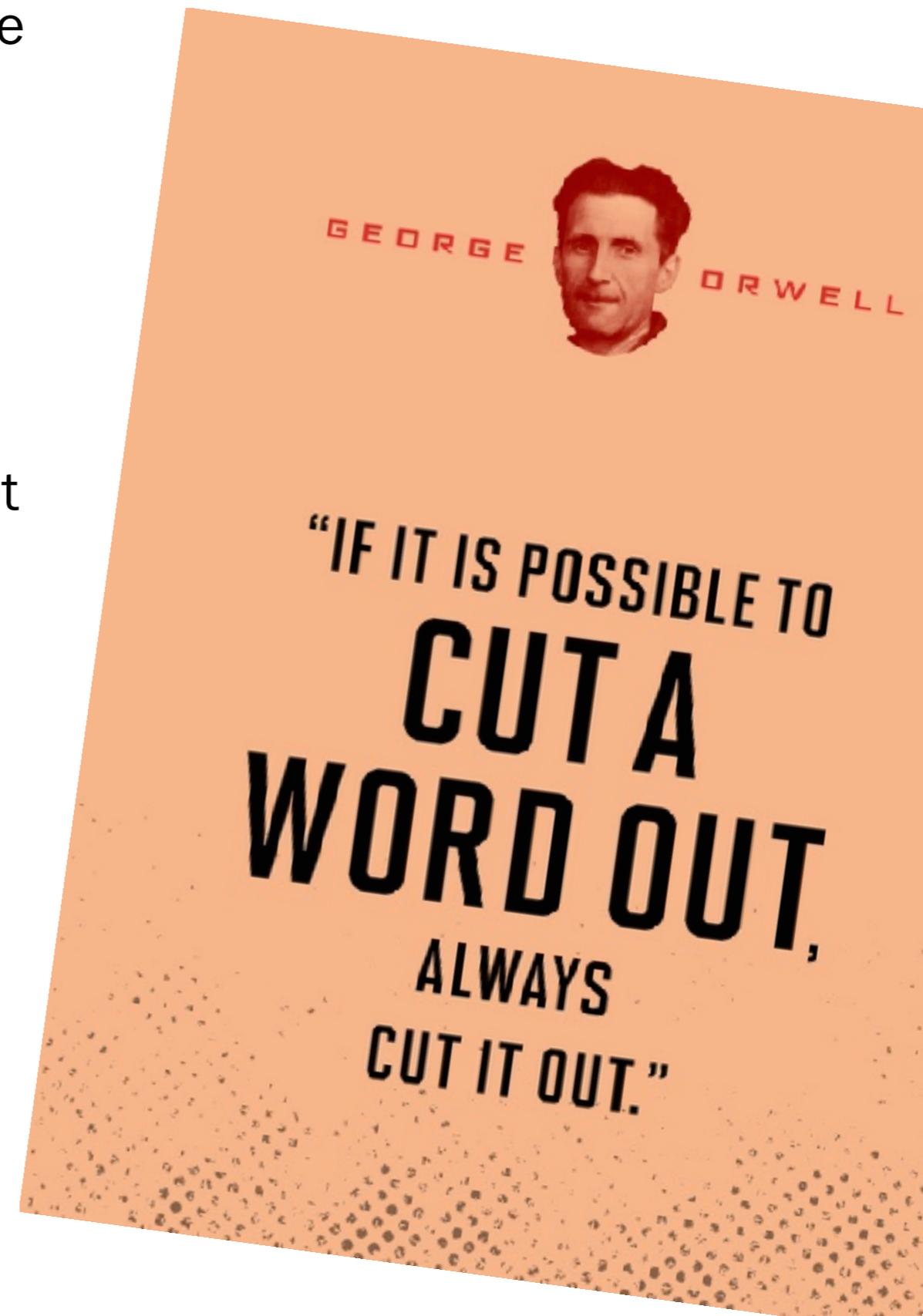
The administration outraged lawmakers by not imposing new sanctions while upsetting Moscow by releasing a name-and-shame list of top Russian officials and oligarchs.

■ [2 Comments](#)

- ❖ Massively complicated story of global and domestic politics
- ❖ 25-word summary pretty much covers it.
- ❖ Original story was 1,500 words long (including some Tweets translated from Russian)... and had an 11th-grade reading level.

Orwell's rules *(Politics & the English Language)*

- (i) Never use a metaphor, simile, or other figure of speech which you are used to seeing in print.
- (ii) Never use a long word where a short one will do.
- (iii) If it is possible to cut a word out, always cut it out.
- (iv) Never use the passive where you can use the active.
- (v) Never use a foreign phrase, a scientific word, or a jargon word if you can think of an everyday English equivalent.
- (vi) Break any of these rules sooner than say anything outright barbarous.



Assume nothing

The curse of the expert;
empathy for the novice



How to assume nothing

- ❖ Could you have understood this when you started this job?
- ❖ If this weren't about aid/enrollment, would you comprehend it? Would you even read it?
- ❖ Could your neighbor understand this? Your mother?

“You sound like an ass,”

or

why my Dad previews my op-eds

How to assume nothing – ask others

❖ Student Aid Advisory Committee feedback:

“I took a look at the letter – it all looks fine to me. My biggest suggestion is to include the definitions of words such as “Institutional grant”, “work study”, and other financial aid jargon that a parent or other individuals who may read this letter may not understand. Thanks!”

Talk like a human;
write like a human

Talk like a human (1)

This is an automated message, so please do not Reply to it. For further assistance, contact the Office of Scholarships & Student Aid at (919) 962-8396 or visit 111 Pettigrew Hall.

We're happy to answer your questions.

Email is easiest (aidinfo@unc.edu), or you can call us at 919-962-8393, or visit us at 111 Pettigrew Hall.

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Talk like a human (2)

Based on a review of your the financial information provided on your 2014-2015 FAFSA, you have met the criteria for eligibility in the Carolina Covenant Program, which offers a financial aid package comprised of grants, scholarships, and federal work-study funding to meet your full demonstrated financial need.

Congratulations! You're a Carolina Covenant Scholar.

This means you'll have the opportunity to graduate from UNC without student debt.

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Acronyms are off-putting

- ❖ People trip over acronyms.
- ❖ Can you use a spoken-language alternative?
 - ❖ EFC = how much we estimate you can pay for college
 - ❖ FWS = work-study job, *or* campus job
 - ❖ COA = college costs
- ❖ Even if the sentence is longer, it's more readable.

Bureaucratic language is not mandatory;
you can (usually) write normally.

Is this a requirement?

- ❖ We often think dense language is legally mandated language.
- ❖ Make the lawyers prove it.
- ❖ Always ask: Is it a requirement, or just the way we've always done it?

Is this a requirement? Example 1.

The income you reported on your 2014-2015 FAFSA appears insufficient to support the number of people in your household. Please complete this form to clarify how you/your spouse were able to live and support your family during 2013.

We need to ask a few more questions about the income reported on your FAFSA. Check over the possible income sources listed below and provide information wherever it applies to you.

Is this a requirement? Example 2.

Records indicate that you have failed to meet Satisfactory Academic Progress standards for the foregoing semester. Satisfactory Academic Progress (SAP) standards are federal requirements that must be satisfied in order to maintain eligibility for Title IV student aid funds. Failure to meet SAP standards may result in the suspension of federal aid funds until such time as a student returns to compliance.

You're at risk of losing financial aid.

Contact your academic advisor immediately to discuss improving your grade point average or course completion rate. Otherwise, your aid funding could be put on hold.

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Don't revise; rethink

Don't revise; rethink

- ❖ Don't just edit.
- ❖ Whenever possible, start with a blank sheet of paper.
- ❖ Give yourself permission to begin at the beginning.
- ❖ What do I need to communicate?
- ❖ Do I have to say it that way?

Don't revise; rethink

- ❖ “Will it fit on the slide?” is the wrong question.
- ❖ If you're struggling to communicate, you're probably in the wrong medium.
 - ❖ Should this be a brochure? A web page? A form?
 - ❖ Do I need visuals? Graphics?
- ❖ *What* you need to say drives → *how* you need to say it.

EXAMPLE:

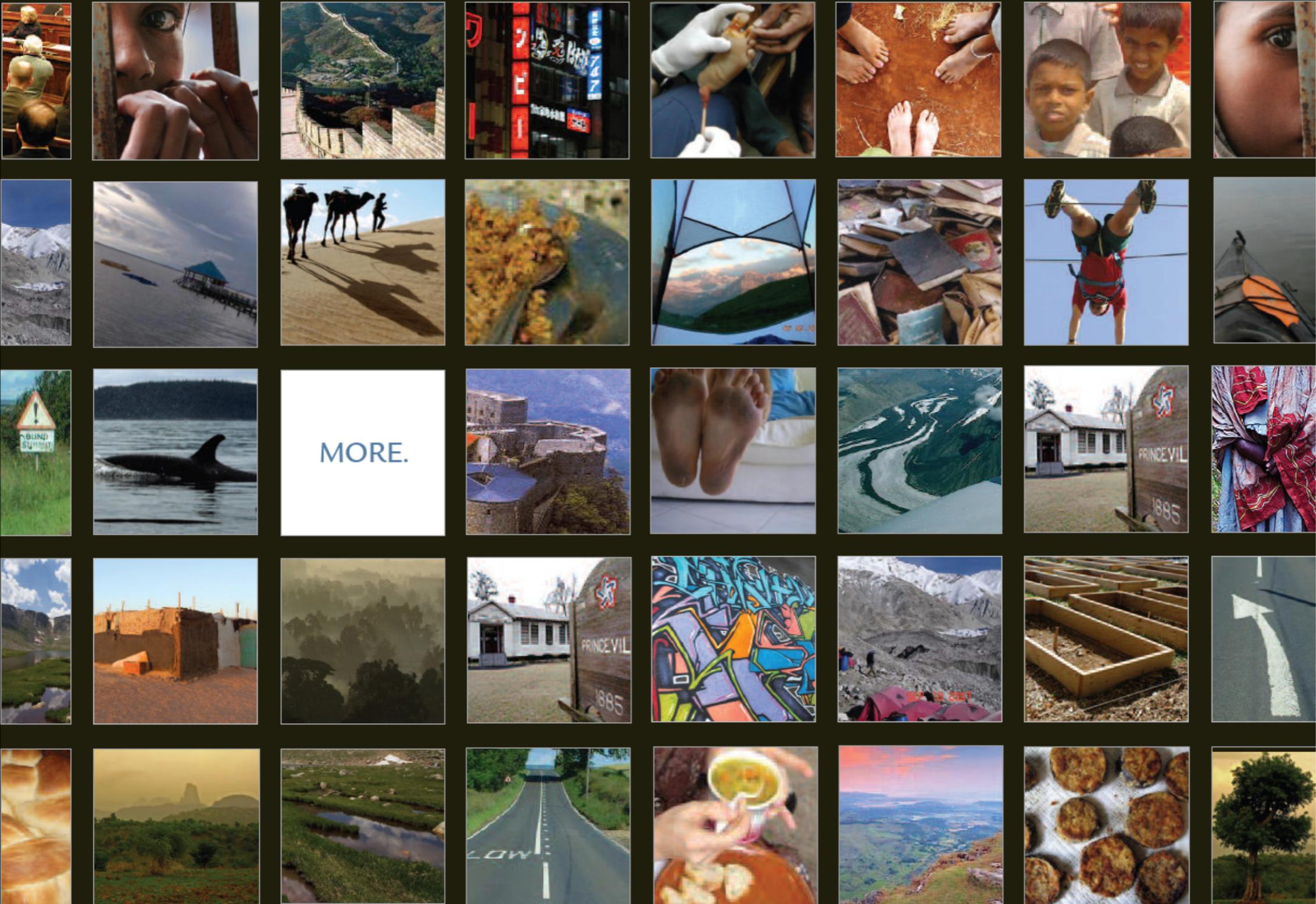
Scholarship Lifestyle

Editing vs. rethinking

The Morehead-Cain Summer Enrichment Program provides experiences that many students might not be able to arrange or afford on their own. With the full resources of the Morehead-Cain Foundation staff, Morehead-Cain Alumni, and friends of the Program behind them, scholars have practically limitless opportunities at their fingertips. They receive stipends each summer to cover expenses, and benefit from a legacy of alumni who are eager to help the next generation of scholars in their journeys.

Editing vs. rethinking: rethought

THE MOREHEAD-CAIN



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[FOR COUNSELORS](#)

[FOR SCHOLARS](#)

[FOR ALUMNI & FRIENDS](#)

[NEWS](#)

[ABOUT THE FOUNDATION](#)

[CONTACT](#)

What's the end goal?

What's the end goal?

- ❖ Communication is meant to accomplish something.
 - ❖ Don't write just to fill the space.
 - ❖ “Why are we having this meeting?”
- ❖ What do you want the reader to do?
- ❖ You have enormous power to guide them. Use it wisely.
 - ❖ What's the default option? Where does the design push people?

Give me what I need to know.

Not more.

It is not your job to make someone an expert.

Your goal is to help a non-expert.

Serving the non-expert

- ❖ Wrong question: “What do I want to say?”
- ❖ Right question: “What does the reader / student need to know right now?”
- ❖ Education is a secondary goal, at best.
 - ❖ Someone should be able to know *as little as possible* about the financial aid and college enrollment and still navigate the process.

The Financial Aid Process

FAFSA PROFILE
PRIVATE SOURCES

Non FAFSA Filers

START HERE

FAFSA
(FREE APPLICATION FOR FEDERAL STUDENT AID)

FEDERAL CENTRAL PROCESSOR

EFC
(EXPECTED FAMILY CONTRIBUTION)

SAR
(STUDENT AID REPORT)

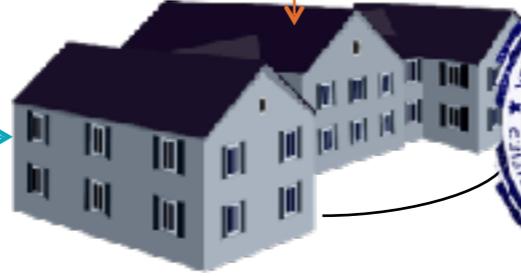
FEDERAL AND STATE GRANTS & LOANS

CSS
FINANCIAL AID REQUIRED BY SOME COLLEGES

COLLEGE SCHOLARSHIP SERVICE

PRIVATE SCHOLARSHIP AND GRANT APPLICATION

PRIVATE SCHOLARSHIPS & GRANTS



TARGET COLLEGES



YOUR FINANCIAL AID PACKAGE



What's action are you trying to prompt?

Send your completed FAFSA/Profile to colleges.

They will use that information to make financial aid offers.

Compare those offers to see how much each school will cost for you.

What do I want to say?

The Office of Student Financial Planning works diligently to assist students in their pursuit of postsecondary education. We work not only to assist students, but also their parents and members of the University community. We are anxious to get to know each student well and to understand their unique needs and challenges in funding their college education. **We will work with students each step of the way to maximize their resources**, and help determine if other resources exist from which they might benefit.

Although the financial aid process can be complex, our staff is well trained and highly qualified to make your experience with Student Financial Planning a positive and rewarding one.

What do they need to hear?

We look forward to working with you to make college affordable.

What do I want to say?

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Words: 110

Reading Level: 14

What do they need to hear?

We look forward to working with you to make college affordable.

Words: 11

Reading Level: 7

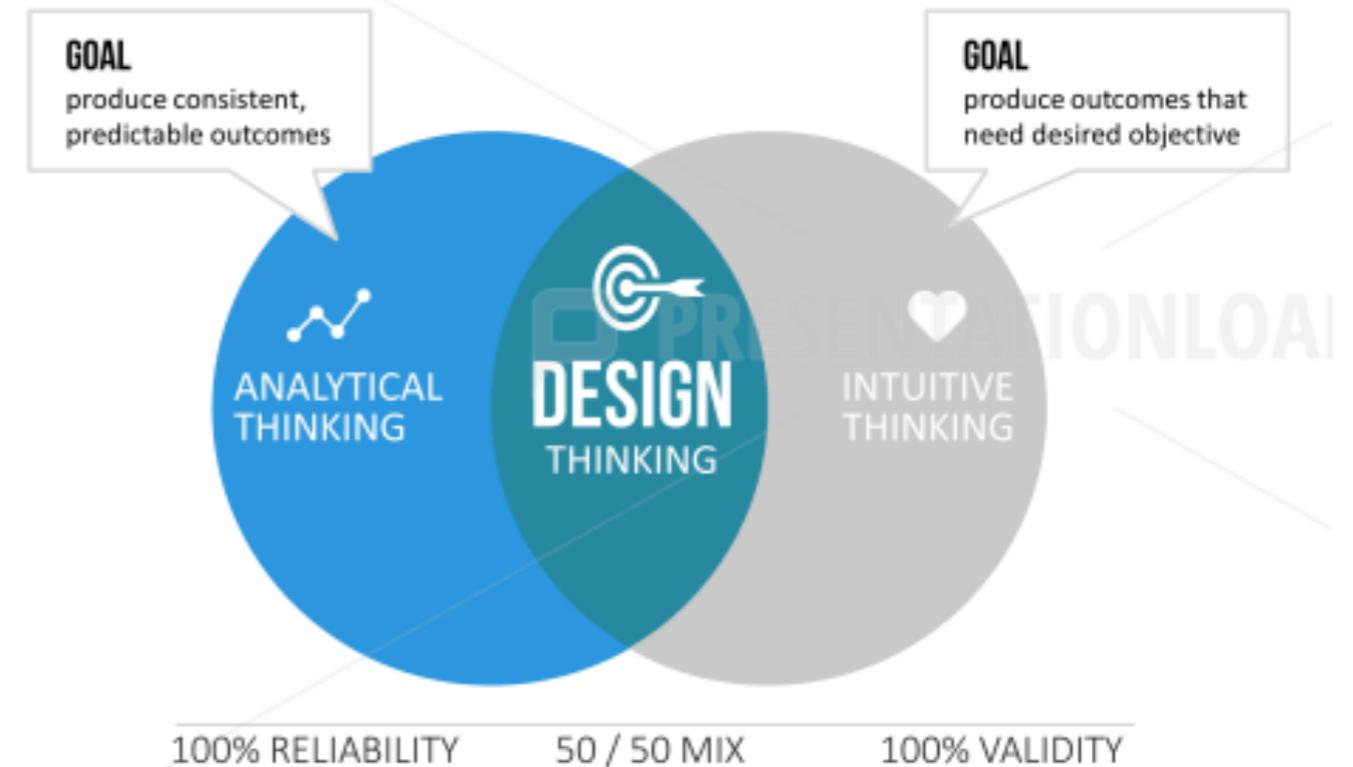
Design Matters

“Design Thinking”

- ❖ Very trendy.
- ❖ NYT *Style* Section articles, massive NYer profile of Jony Ive, etc.
- ❖ Stanford D. School, “makerspaces,” etc.
- ❖ Basically, it means applying your brain to workaday stuff.

DESIGN THINKING

Design Thinking is the result of combining analytical thinking and intuition



“Design Thinking”

- ❖ You are all design thinkers.
- ❖ I will prove this.

“Design Thinking”

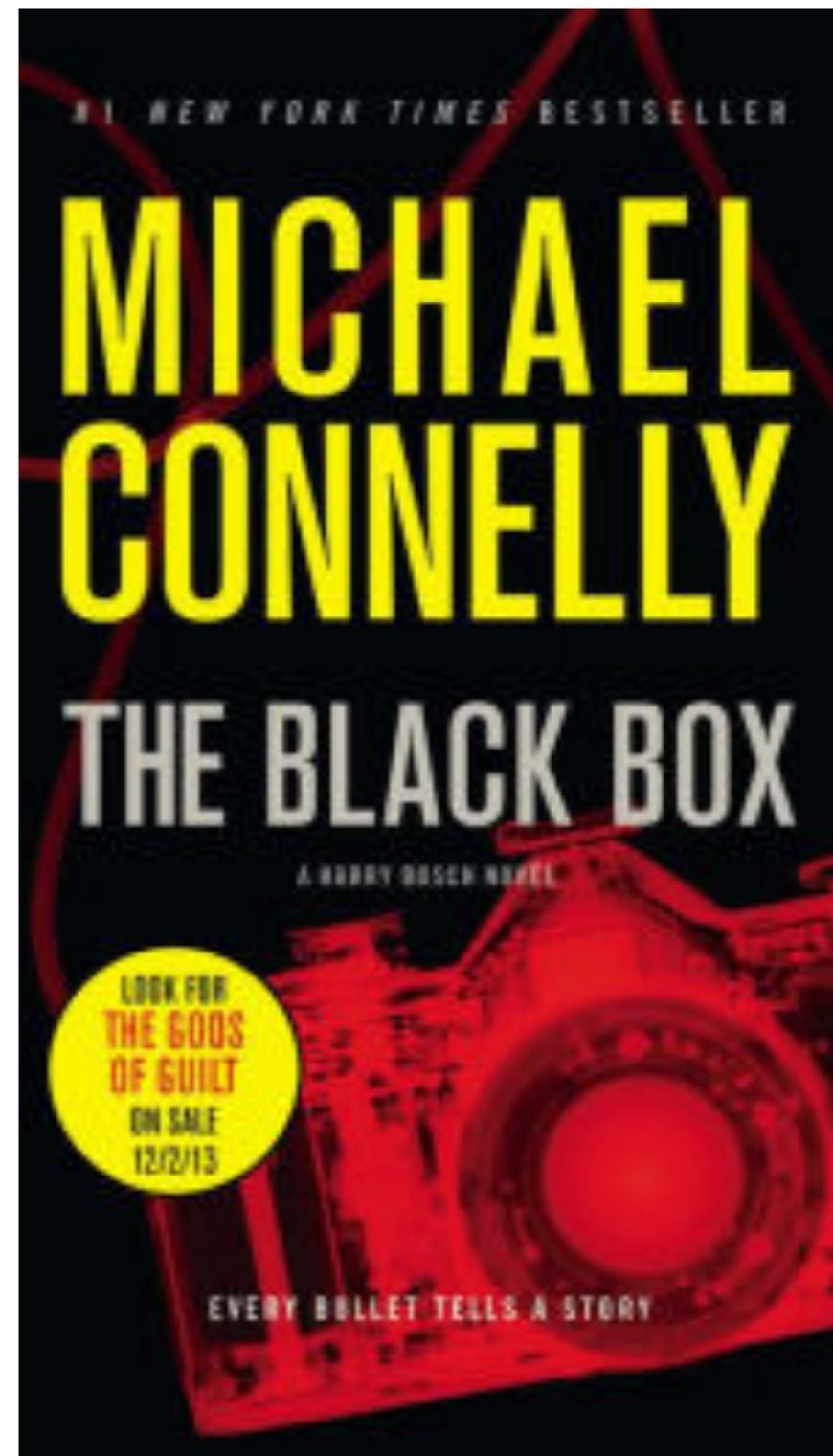
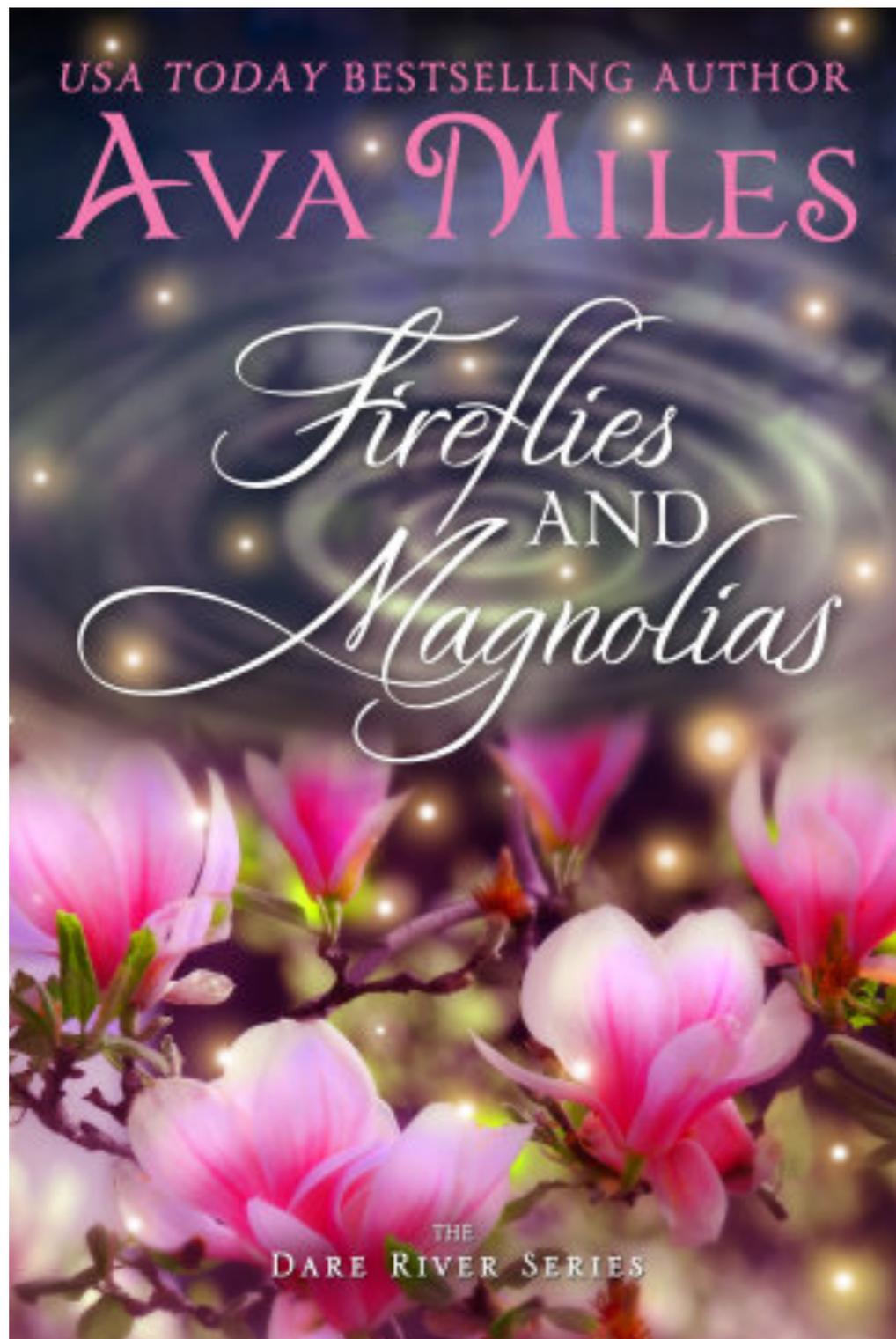
Four score and seven years ago our fathers brought forth on this continent a new nation, conceived in Liberty and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal.

“Design Thinking”

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EXAMPLE:

Books





EXAMPLE:

White House Website

Welcome to the White House

**Executive
Branch**

**What's
New**

**The First
Family**

Publications

Tours

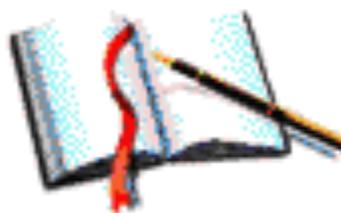
Comments



An Interactive Citizens' Handbook



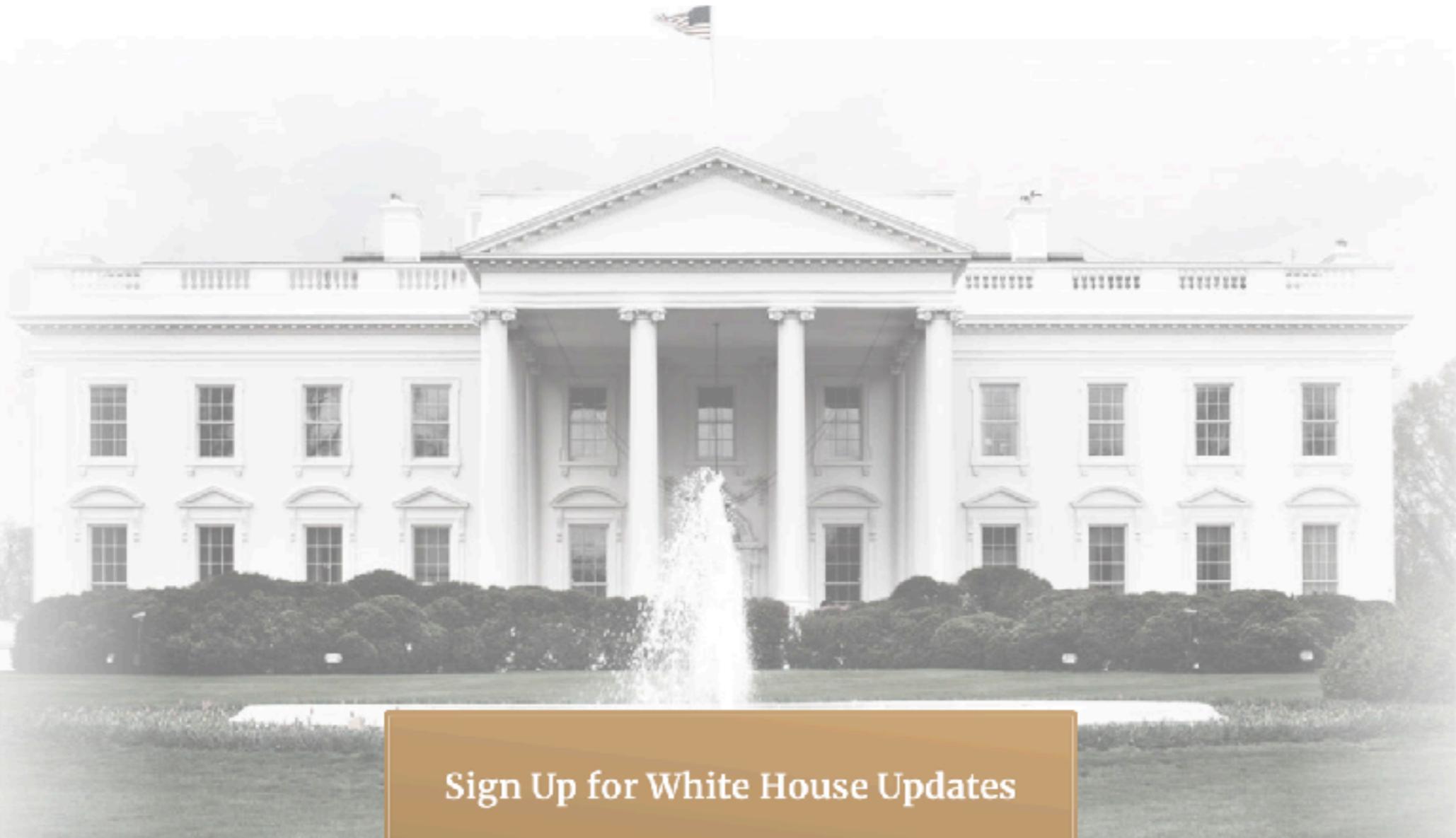
**President's
Welcome Message**



Guest Book



**Vice President's
Welcome Message**



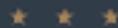
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EXAMPLE:
Aid Brochure



Financial Aid and Scholarships

HOW FINANCIAL AID WORKS

When you apply for aid - preferably by March 1 - we review your financial information to estimate how much you and your family can afford to pay for college.

If you can't afford the full cost, we help make up the difference with grants, scholarships, loans, and work study. No matter your income, financial aid can help put UNC within reach.

\$\$\$ Grants and Scholarships
For low-income students, most aid comes from grants and scholarships - money that never has to be paid back.

LOAN Loans
Some students will be offered modest, low-interest loans - money that has to be paid back after you leave school. Carolina students have some of the lowest debt among major universities.

WORK-STUDY

← matches →

YOUR INTERESTS

giving you unique experience in your field, from communications to biology

Laptop grants

UNC requires you to have a laptop. Aid applicants are automatically considered for grants to help cover the cost.

HOW TO APPLY

Aid applications are available in October. March 1 is the deadline for best possible awards, but earlier applications are strongly encouraged.

Mark Your CALENDARS →
FAFSA & CSS Profile **DEADLINE**

You'll need to fill out two forms:

- The Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) fafsa.org | UNC code **002974**
- The CSS PROFILE (for UNC grants and scholarships) student.collegeboard.org/prcfile | UNC code **5316**

Each form covers detailed information about your family finances, which helps us calculate your financial aid.

Many families can use the IRS Data Retrieval Tool to link tax information directly to the FAFSA, saving time.

Extra documents are sometimes needed, so check your UNC email account regularly. Early aid applicants can expect an award offer shortly after admissions decisions.

THE CAROLINA COVENANT

THE CAROLINA COVENANT OFFERS THE OPPORTUNITY FOR A DEBT-FREE EDUCATION FOR ELIGIBLE LOW-INCOME STUDENTS.

If your family's income is at or below 200% of the federal poverty level (\$47,100 for a family of four), you may be eligible for the Carolina Covenant. The program offers financial and academic support services to help scholars get the most out of their Carolina experience.

There is no separate application. Simply apply to Carolina and turn in your aid documents — the FAFSA and CSS PROFILE — by March 1.

Learn more at carolinacovenant.unc.edu.



“WITHOUT FINANCIAL AID AND HELP FROM UNC, I WOULDN'T HAVE BEEN ABLE TO ATTEND THIS EXCEPTIONAL UNIVERSITY.”
— NICHOLAS, '17



THE UNIVERSITY
of NORTH CAROLINA
at CHAPEL HILL

OFFICE OF UNDERGRADUATE ADMISSIONS
www.admissions.unc.edu

@UNCAdmissions

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- Loans: Some students will be offered modest, low-interest loans - money that has to be paid back after you leave school. Carolina students have some of the lowest debt among major universities.

- Work-Study: matches your interests giving you unique experience in your field, from communications to biology

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"Without financial aid and help from UNC, I wouldn't have been able to attend this exceptional university." — Nicholas, '17

Not just,
what information?

But also,
where is the information?

And
what does it look like?

Move the boilerplate to the bottom
(or layer it. “Click here to learn more.”)

Layering detail

Laptop Grant

Carolina requires you to have a laptop. As a Covenant Scholar, you'll get a grant to purchase a computer through UNC's Student Stores.

If you want a fancier model, you are free to combine the grant with your own money. But take note: if you leave Carolina *without* graduating, we keep the computer.

[Details on laptop grants.](#)

- ❖ Make information available, but make it optional.
- ❖ Lead with the summary, use technology/attachments to cover boilerplate and extras.

White space is your all-caps.

Make use of white space

One of the most common errors in creating forms and public documents is the overuse of tools like *italics*, underlining, **bold**, and CAPSLOCK to emphasize something that the writer finds crucial for the reader to know. Frequently, large blocks of text will be littered with bolded instructions because previous users of a form or set of guidelines will have consistently missed something that the agency finds significant. **THIS IS THE WRONG WAY TO DO IT. BOLDING AND CAPSLOCKING THINGS IS THE TEXT EQUIVALENT OF YELLING AT A PERSON.** Not only is it ineffective, it's also extraordinarily off-putting. If you have something important to say, for example that a person's flood insurance is no longer valid or that their financial aid award has been rescinded, set it apart from the rest of your text. This is the most reliable way of getting something noticed.

Make use of white space

One of the most common errors in creating forms and public documents is the overuse of tools like:

italics | underlining | **bold** | CAPSLOCK

Bolding and capslocking things is like yelling at a person. Not only is it ineffective, it's also unpleasant.

Give important stuff room to breath.

Setting text apart is the most reliable way of getting it noticed, and no one feels like you're shouting.

Contact me

Eric Johnson

ericjohnson@unc.edu | oldnorthnc.org

P.O. Box 132, Chapel Hill, North Carolina 27514