

Strategies of Containment in Recall Notices

Interface

—Feature by
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Terry Eagleton,
Criticism and Ideology.
London, U.K.: Verso, 1976.

Fredric Jameson,
*The Political Unconscious:
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Ithaca, NY: Cornell Univ. Press, 1981.

Index Terms—Indirectness, strategies of containment, style, tone.

While professional communicators know that the word "partial" can mean either "incomplete" or "biased," many may be unaware of how these two meanings overlap in the work of some Marxist literary critics. In contemporary Marxist criticism, the "partiality" of a text refers not only to an omission but also to the reason for the omission: partiality means that information has been left out **because** the writer's best interest would not be served by including it. When Terry Eagleton, in *Criticism and Ideology*, refers to the "not-said" of a text [1, p. 89] and Fredric Jameson, in *The Political Unconscious*, discusses a text's "nondit" [2, p. 49], they both attribute these significant silences to a writer's personal investment in the world represented by the text. Jameson asserts that writers, sometimes consciously but often unconsciously, employ "strategies of containment" in an attempt to control the meanings available to readers [2, p. 10]. However, these strategies often mark a text's structure and render its message incoherent or contradictory, so a discerning reader can use these flaws as indicators of the suppressed information. Recognizing this possibility, Eagleton suggests that a function of criticism is "to articulate that of which the discourse speaks-without-saying-it—or, more precisely, to examine the distortion-mechanisms which produce the ruptured discourse" [1, p. 91].

Although Jameson and Eagleton do not explore how strategies of containment are used in professional communication, their insights can prove useful for both writers and readers of business

documents. In fact, insofar as the motives of business writers are easier to discern than those of belletristic writers, the strategies of containment in business correspondence usually are easier to identify than those in literary texts. To demonstrate how the insights of Marxist critics can be applied by professional communicators and by consumers, the balance of this article identifies three ways in which writers can manage information in an attempt to limit readers' interpretations. These three strategies of containment are illustrated in an analysis of a recall notice distributed by an automobile manufacturer. This analysis demonstrates how consumers can read both the "said" and the "not-said" of recall notices.

THREE STRATEGIES OF CONTAINMENT

To understand how strategies of containment operate in recall notices, a writer or reader must first consider two goals that these notices attempt to accomplish. The first of these goals is obvious: a well-constructed recall notice entices a consumer into returning a defective product to the manufacturer, allowing the manufacturer to repair or replace the product. The second goal, while somewhat less obvious, is equally important: the recall notice controls damage to the manufacturer's reputation. Faced with the unpleasant task of recalling a product, the manufacturer can use the recall notice to mitigate its responsibility for the defective product and to demonstrate its concern for the consumer.

With these two goals in mind, the writer of a recall notice would

consider two questions as s/he decides whether to include or omit particular information:

Question #1: Is the information essential? (Can the recall-and-repair process be completed without communicating this information to the consumer?)

Question #2: How will the information influence the consumer's perception of the manufacturer? (Will the information enhance the manufacturer's reputation, detract from its reputation, or have no influence on its reputation?)

Depending on the answers to these questions, the writer can select one of the following strategies of containment:

Strategy #1: When information is not essential to the recall-and-repair process, omit the information if it could damage the manufacturer's reputation.

Strategy #2: When information is essential to the recall-and-repair process, include the information even if it could dam-

age the manufacturer's reputation. However, use phrasing that obscures the manufacturer's responsibility for the defect in the product and that downplays the danger or inconvenience to the consumer.

Strategy #3: When information creates a positive impression of the manufacturer, include the information even if it is not essential to the recall-and-repair process. Furthermore, use phrasing that emphasizes the manufacturer's role in performing actions beneficial to the consumer.

How a writer can use these strategies—and how a consumer can recognize the strategies—is best demonstrated in an analysis of an actual notice.

ANALYSIS OF A RECALL NOTICE

A recent recall notice issued by Chrysler Corporation will serve to illustrate all of the strategies of containment described above. An excerpt from this notice is contained in Fig. 1.

In order to understand the strategies of containment operating in Chrysler's recall notice, one must consider not only the information that it contains but also the information that could have been included. The information can be divided into three categories, each of which is focused on one time period:

- **PAST FOCUS:** information concerning the causes of the product's defect and information explaining how the defect was detected.
- **PRESENT FOCUS:** information concerning the current danger to the consumer.
- **FUTURE FOCUS:** information concerning steps to be taken by the consumer and the manufacturer in order to repair the product.

If readers search for these three types of information in the excerpt from the recall notice, they may observe how the writer has employed the three strategies of containment:

Fig. 1. Excerpt from a Chrysler Corporation recall notice [3].

<p>Chrysler Corporation has determined that a defect which relates to motor vehicle safety exists in some 1995 Dodge and Plymouth Neon vehicles.</p>	
<p>The problem is...</p>	<p>The lower steering column coupler on your Neon (identified on the enclosed form), may separate after a hard underbody impact. This could result in a loss of steering control and cause an accident without prior warning.</p>
<p>What Chrysler and your dealer will do...</p>	<p>Chrysler will repair your Neon free of charge (parts or labor). To do this, your dealer will replace the lower steering column coupler. The work will take about one hour to complete. However, additional time may be necessary depending on how dealer appointments are scheduled and processed.</p>
<p>What you must do to ensure your safety...</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Simply contact your dealer right away to schedule a service appointment. Ask the dealer to hold the parts for your vehicle or to order them before your appointment. • Bring the enclosed Owner Notification Form with you to your dealer. It explains the required service.

- The excerpt does not contain any information concerning the cause of the defect (nor is such information included anywhere else in the notice). This information is not essential to the recall-and-repair process; however, the consumer may assume that the writer would have mentioned the cause if doing so would have demonstrated that the manufacturer was not responsible for the defect. Therefore, the consumer may conclude that the writer has used the first strategy of containment: s/he has omitted information that could damage the manufacturer's reputation.
- The notice contains information concerning the detection of the defect. Although the information does not actually explain how the defect was identified, it does attribute credit to the manufacturer ("Chrysler Corporation has determined"). Like the information concerning the cause

of the defect, the information concerning its detection is not essential to the recall-and-repair process. However, the writer has taken advantage of an opportunity to show the manufacturer acting to protect the consumer's safety. In this passage the consumer may recognize the third strategy of containment: the writer has included nonessential information that enhances the manufacturer's reputation.

- The notice contains information concerning the danger posed by the defect. This information is essential, since without it the consumer may ignore the notice and avoid the inconvenience of bringing the car to a dealer. However, neither the manufacturer nor the consumer is mentioned in any sentence describing the defective part or the danger it poses. One sentence attributes an important action to the defective part ("*The lower steering column coupler*

. . . may separate"), another sentence buries an important action in a nominal phrase ("*This could result in a loss of steering control*"), and a third sentence uses the passive voice to avoid assigning responsibility for service delays ("additional time may be necessary depending on how dealer appointments are scheduled and processed"). These stylistic traits are strikingly different from those used elsewhere in the notice, and the shift in tone allows the consumer to recognize that the writer has used the second strategy of containment: s/he has downplayed not only the manufacturer's responsibility for undesirable actions, but also the danger posed to the consumer. (For a more detailed explanation of how a writer can control a reader's perception of the performer and performance of actions, see lessons three and four in Joseph M. Williams's *Style*:

Fig. 2. Analysis of a Chrysler recall notice.

<u>Type of Information</u>	<u>Impact on Manufacturer's Reputation</u>	<u>Importance in Recall Process</u>	<u>Status in Text</u>	<u>Containment Strategy</u>
Cause of Defect (Past Focus)	Negative	Not Essential	Omitted	#1
Detection of Defect (Past Focus)	Positive	Not Essential	Included (w/ clear responsibility)	#3
Nature of Danger (Present Focus)	Negative	Essential	Included (w/o assigning responsibility)	#2
Consumer's Role in Recall Process (Future Focus)	Negative	Essential	Included (w/ hedges)	#2
Manufacturer's Role in Repair Process (Future Focus)	Positive	Not Essential	Included (w/ clear responsibility)	#3

Ten Lessons in Clarity and Grace) [4].

- The notice contains information concerning steps that the consumer must perform ("Simply contact your dealer right away"). This information is essential; however, it describes an action that may be inconvenient for the consumer. To reduce the consumer's feeling of inconvenience, the writer has included a "hedge" ("Simply") to suggest that the requested action is not onerous. Also, the need for immediate action is reduced by not using bold type for the words "right away." Here again the writer is using the second strategy of containment to downplay the inconvenience and danger to the consumer.
- The notice contains information concerning what the dealer will do to repair the

car. Some of this information is essential, but some is not: although the consumer needs to know that the defect will be repaired without charge, s/he does not need to know how the defect will be corrected. However, the information shows the dealer acting to ensure the safety of the consumer, so the writer has phrased it in sentences that call attention to the activities of the manufacturer and dealer ("*Chrysler will repair*" and "your dealer will replace"). These passages signal that the writer has used the third strategy of containment: s/he has included nonessential information that creates a positive impression of the manufacturer.

For an overview of the types of information and the strategies of containment in the Chrysler recall notice, see Fig. 2.

Although a discerning reader can identify the "not-said" in the Chrysler notice, most readers probably would not take time to analyze the notice. I will not speculate concerning how readers are influenced by such a notice, but I will note that writers seem committed to strategies of containment: I have observed the same pattern of strategies in other recall notices issued by several manufacturers. If asked whether the use of these strategies is deliberate, a Marxist critic probably would argue that the issue is moot: a writer's interests shape his or her discursive strategies even when the writer does not consciously register what those interests are. Nevertheless, the ability to use strategies of containment—and the ability to resist them—may increase if writers and readers become aware of the strategies.

References

- [1] T. Eagleton, *Criticism and Ideology*. London, U.K.: Verso, 1976.
- [2] F. Jameson, *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell Univ. Press, 1981.
- [3] Chrysler Corporation, "Safety Recall to Replace Your Vehicle's Lower Steering Column Coupler," Undated Letter Accompanying Service Notification #741.
- [4] J. M. Williams, *Style: Ten Lessons in Clarity and Grace*, 4th ed. New York: Harper Collins, 1994.

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