When I began my career as a copywriter, I viewed rules with disdain. I wanted nothing to interfere with the creative process. Nothing to stand between me and a big idea. You know, the whole “live free or die” thing. It’s a philosophy the young and inexperienced find especially appealing.

Now, 30 years into my career, I have a different view.

It’s not that I’ve become a conformist. Hardly. It’s that I understand the liberating nature of constraint. The tighter the box in which you force me to work, the more likely it is that I’ll find a way to produce a big idea.

I was reading an article somewhere, I no longer remember the publication, when I came across the following three words:

Rules inspire creativity.

They got me thinking about the creative brief. Because the brief is a document filled with rules. You might even say constraints. These constraints are imposed on the brief writer for a reason. The brief is designed to be an act of reduction, of summarizing as succinctly as possible, the very essence of a product or service’s most desirable attributes.
You, the creative brief writer, are forcing your creative team to live inside a box. The size of that box, big or small, is in your hands. No matter how you look at it, you’re a box builder. You’re creating rules for the creatives to follow (and, one hopes, about which they feel liberated not constrained).

So why not approach the task with the sense of possibility?

To write an inspired creative brief requires you to bring creativity to the task. It requires you to dig a little deeper, research a little more, ask pertinent questions (maybe even impertinent questions now and then). In short, to write an inspired brief requires the same things of a brief writer that creatives need to produce great work.

Rules may seem like speed bumps, but only to the uninitiated and inexperienced. The challenge of identifying to whom you are addressing the communications can either be phoned in, and the result is a list of bullet points that mean nothing. Or you can be inspired and create a persona, a word-picture of Mr. or Mrs. or Ms. Brand User with the same attention to detail as a short-story writer or poet (more on this up ahead). It’s up to you.

You can cut and paste the client’s suggestion for the key message and let the creatives figure it out. Or you can put your mark on the project from the beginning.

Creatives, the really good ones that is, use rules to help them. To inspire them. To liberate them from perceived constraints.

Brief writers have the same opportunity. You can let the apparent constraints of a brief template smother your creativity. Or inspire it.

I think you know which option I recommend.