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I'm 'full of crap' and trying to change



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For Metro | Halifax
OPINION

"Tell me why I'm full of crap, over coffee."

That's the title of a post I made to Halifax's Reddit page, a social media platform.

There is a large group of people online who excoriate just about everything I write. It would be easy enough to ignore, except for one inconvenience: I would like to change minds. If I don't understand people who disagree with me, I will only get better at convincing folks who think like I do — which accomplishes nothing.

Happily, three people — Tyler, Grant and Peter — graciously agreed to meet up at Tim Hortons to tell me why I'm full of crap.

The first thing I learned is that my haters are likeable. They were about my age, highly opinionated, but thoughtful. And they gave me the goods: totally frank criticism.

The most valuable thing I learned is how I turn people off before I even get started. "Frequently, there's just the advocacy," Tyler tells me, "But you don't see the other side. It makes it harder to take seriously than if both sides were presented."

I've never understood what people meant when they said



Metro Halifax columnist Tristan Cleveland talks to the haters and learns a thing or two. JEFF HARPER/METRO

this online, since I write opinion pieces, not two-sided news stories. But all three made the same point, and it sunk in. By at least recognizing there are other legitimate points of view, it will make it easier for those who think differently to digest my arguments.

"It doesn't sound like you're talking with the reader," Grant told me. "It sounds like you're talking at the reader."

My choice of words can also identify me as being part of an in-group, which turns off anyone who doesn't identify with that group.

In my piece on the Burnside Expressway, I wrote that we can't reduce traffic by "encouraging people to drive more." To Pete, this seemed like, "dog whistling," or speaking in code to like-minded people, as if I'm saying we should punish

drivers. Tyler says my words have "a tone of derision" towards drivers, and it sends him straight to Reddit to post angry comments.

I do not think everyone who drives are jerks, or I would think myself and most of my friends are. I do, however, believe that if everyone drives more, it is bad for everyone, because it creates more traffic, pollution, infra-

structure costs, and health problems. Both beliefs are compatible.

So here's the challenge: to make the case, without it seeming like a diss, that we should make walking, biking and transit better options, and yes, that we should not spend money on encouraging people to drive more.

My intention is only to make a case for good policy,

but as long as I seem like just some urban dude in the way I write, it may always seem like I'm disparaging the way of life of commuters. That won't lead to progress.

Many readers will feel satisfied Tyler gave me this what-for:

"Where do you live? So you don't drive from Sackville into the city everyday? Because we have a lot of people who do. You say we don't need highways. Well, I challenge you to drive in everyday for the next six months, then tell me we don't need highways. You're telling me how to make my commute better, but you don't even make that commute."

Of course, it shouldn't matter who I am or what I do, but what the evidence says works. A doctor doesn't need to have cancer to treat it.

But it's not really possible to consider the evidence if people feel I am disparaging their values.

Hopefully, with the help of my haters, I can learn to promote good ideas without creating walls based on who I am.

It may always seem like I'm disparaging the way of life of commuters. That won't lead to progress.