

Concise writing key to effective communication

Let's play "Count The Overused Business Words & Phrases." How many can you spot in the following? (Answer appears at the bottom.)

Optimized, scalable, measurable solutions, built-out to synergize with your systems.

More importantly, what do they mean?

Nothing. And that's my point.

Our language is infected with the rampant overuse of en vogue business terms that sap our power to communicate effectively. The illustration above may be extreme, but such indecipherable language abounds.

Good writing is marked by clarity, economy and energy.

Check out a top columnist, like Gail Collins in *The New York Times*. Her columns feel like a worldly, dry-witted best friend whispering in your ear. Then go back into the *Times* archives, say 30 years, for a William Safire column. Although the topics are dated, you'll find language every bit as fresh, conversational and free of cliché as Collins'.

Effective writing is timeless.

Why does it matter that we "write right" in business?

Business success depends upon our ability to communicate effectively. Those who study such things estimate we spend 50 percent of our time on the job communicating — regardless of your position. The higher up one goes in an organization, the more complex and consequential communication and interpersonal challenges become.

Do your business units operate in silos, each speaking a technical language that excludes others and inhibits understanding and competitiveness? How about your business as a whole? Your industry? Once we look, we can begin to see how costly ineffective business

communications can be.

So why do we employ those hollow clichés in business communication?

A big reason is we're lazy. It takes time and effort to write well. We settle for quick, familiar words and phrases because writing doesn't come easily or naturally.



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Maybe we plug-in a trendy phrase-of-the-moment with the mistaken belief it makes us seem clever or even cutting edge. But when we default to such usage, it instantly diminishes our message — to customers, employees, vendors, and stakeholders.

Your message dissolves into a big, bland stew.

Empty business language is everywhere. So that makes it OK?

Before you answer, let's consider the case of the humble chocolate chip cookie. Grocery shelves are brimming with enticing packages of cookies. How does opening a bag of store-bought chocolate chip cookies compare to popping a homemade cookie loaded with morsels into your mouth? A colleague makes legendary holiday cookies that I look forward to all year long. When was the last time you craved or raved about a mass-produced chocolate chip cookie?

My cookie story is meant to emphasize how investing time and effort on your business writing creates substantial benefits. It also aims to demonstrate a powerful, but underused writing device: analogy. A good analogy can illustrate abstract concepts, establish common ground with the reader, and bring technical language down to earth. A well-crafted, relevant analogy can reinforce a key point by entertaining or even shocking. Whatever the intent or mode, when we effectively use a tool like an analogy, it beats a cliché every time.

Here are some other pointers to help you write more effectively.

■ Go back to basics. Roger Ailes, communications master and au-

thor of "You Are the Message," says leaders must do four things to communicate effectively: Be prepared, comfortable, committed to what you are saying and be interesting — let it reflect your personality.

■ Identify your audience and your key message. Then, reduce it to as few words as possible. Even for something formal like a proposal or white paper, think how your major point or conclusion would read as a headline. Avoid the common mistake of waiting until the end to land your point. Start early, and reinforce your key message throughout — repetition wins. Even as you repeat it, refresh your message with relevant and active language. Avoid the hackneyed, but avoid creativity for creativity's sake alone. Use plain English.

■ Have a voice, and use it in everything you write — from the business letter to the simple e-mail and everything in between. The writing I admire most reads like a conversation. If you're stuck, say it first. Free associate into a voice recorder like the one in your cell phone; you may be pleasantly surprised how easily your sound bites transcribe to great, written copy.

■ Modifiers can greatly improve business writing. Modifiers "essentially ... breathe life into sentences," as the grammar-lover's site, www.chompchomp.com, so aptly puts it. So use modifying words, phrases and clauses to provide descriptive life to your sentences.

■ Know your weaknesses and delegate. If writing doesn't come easily to you, then collaborate with a talented colleague, or hire a professional to help for big, important projects. If you are the author, read, re-read, edit — then repeat — before hitting send or print. Each successive version will improve.

The Department of Homeland Security is urging every police and fire department to use simple, clear language in their day-to-day operations, instead of the long standard confusing code systems. Simple

example: saying, "I understand" instead of "10-4." The idea arose out of events like Hurricane Katrina, where response time and coordination were found alarmingly hampered by different municipalities' inability to understand one another's codes. The idea is finally catching on.

It gives me great hope. If Washington bureaucrats and local governments can agree to eliminate jargon, just imagine what business can do.

ANSWER TO QUIZ: The example contained seven overused terms: optimized; scalable; measurable; solutions; built-out; synergize; systems.

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