By: Dr. John Gump

WRITTEN COMMUNICATIONS

Choosing Words Wisely

Word choice is important in achieving the two objectives of business writing: (1) communicating clearly and completely the specific goal of the message, while (2) projecting the goodwill aspect of the writer and the company through the tone and phrasing of the chosen words. Care in word choice helps us adapt the message to the reader and reduces the chance of miscommunication.

Clear and precise communication can be a challenge, and written communication is often more challenging than face-to-face communication. If a reader becomes confused, the writer is not physically present to clarify the message.

Improve and strengthen your writing by using words (or phrases) that are concrete, specific, simple, active, positive, short, concise, conversational, familiar, and direct.

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Causes of Miscommunication

Even though the dictionary is a good source for word meanings, the real meaning of what we write is not in the words (or symbols) themselves but in the mind of the writer. If successful communication is to occur, the words used in the message must stand for the same thing in the minds of both the writer and the reader.

This task is complicated because the perceptions of individuals differ. Think of an accident witnessed by five people. Will everyone give the same report about the accident? Probably not. We cannot see or perceive everything that is happening at any one time in our sensory world, and what we do see is affected by our specific location and our own experiences and knowledge base. How, then, can we reduce the chance of miscommunication?

The Principle of Adaptation

Adaptation means fitting the symbols (the words used in a written message) to the specific reader or readers. Try to visualize your reader. What do you know about him or her? If you can estimate age, educational background, possible experiences, familiarity with the topic of the message, and so on, you can choose wisely the words you use to communicate your message. Two medical specialists discussing a case, for example, will use different words than the physician who explains the treatment to the patient.

Another hint that will help with the principle of adaptation is to put yourself in the reader's place. How would you like to have this message written if you were the reader? Would you understand? Did you explain everything clearly, or did you take too much for granted?

Objectives of Business Writing

Each written communication has two objectives, a primary objective and a secondary objective. The primary objective is to accomplish the specific goal or purpose of the message. Why are you writing the message? Are you explaining a procedure, announcing a change in benefits, requesting information, or evaluating an employee's performance? Be sure the message is orderly, clear, and complete. The secondary objective is the public relations goal or the goodwill factor. This objective means that the tone of the message should gain the trust and credibility of the reader. The tone should be warm and sincere.

Preferences in Word Choice

Since the words chosen must have the same meaning in the minds of both the writer and the reader for successful communication, guidelines on the preferred word choice are very helpful.

Words that are concrete, specific, simple, and so on decrease the chance of miscommunication. The following sample sentences will help to show the improvement when the words chosen are the type listed under the "use" column. In each set, the second is the better sentence for clear and precise communication.

Rather than	Use
abstract	concrete
general	specific
complex	simple
passive	active
negative	positive
long	short
wordy/unnecessary	concise
formal/stiff	conversational
unfamiliar	familiar
roundabout	direct

Abstract versus Concrete

Abstract words are vague and imprecise in meaning. Concrete words are more precise, specific, and definite. How can we achieve agreement with an abstract word like "sizable"? What is sizable to me may not be sizable to you.

The company made a sizable profit.

The company made a 22% profit.

General versus Specific

"Contact" (How?) and "soon" (When is soon?) are both general words. The meaning for each of those words will probably differ from one person to another.

I shall contact you soon for your answer.

I shall telephone you on Thursday, March 2, for your answer.

Complex versus Simple

Depending on the educational background of the reader, words like "acceded," "proposition," and "terminate" could all be complex words. "Agreed" and "quit" are simple words.

They acceded to the proposition to terminate business.

They agreed to quit business.

Passive versus Active

Since active voice shows someone or something acting, active sentences are bolder and more direct and usually shorter than passive sentences. Active sentences bring life to the writing and make it interesting. Emphasis is on the actor and the action.

The new process is believed to be superior by the investigators.

The investigators believe the new process is superior.

However, sometimes passive voice is preferred. Here are three such cases:

1. When you do not know who performed the action and you want to avoid the vague "someone" in your reference.

2. When you do not want to name the person because you are talking about a problem or an error and you do not want to point an accusing finger.

3. When you want to de-emphasize the role of the actor because no one should be getting the credit or taking the blame.

Notice how the second sentence (passive voice) is better than the first sentence (active voice) in the next set of examples. Now the emphasis is on the problem rather than on who caused it.

You put too much bleach in the water.

Too much bleach was added to the water.

Negative versus Positive

Readers will accept positive statements easier and faster than negative statements. Positive statements also enhance the tone of the message. Tell your reader what you can do rather than what you cannot do. "Sorry" and "unable" have negative connotations.

We are sorry that we shall be unable to compile this information for you in less than one week.

We shall be glad to compile this information for you, and we can have it ready in one week.

Long versus Short

Long means that the sentence may have a long word when a short word would be better. For example, "based" and "belief" are shorter, easier, and faster words to read and understand than "predicated" and "assumption." Also, "losing money" is a better bet for clear communication than "operating at a financial deficit."

The action was predicated on the assumption that the company was operating at a financial deficit.

The action was based on the belief that the company was losing money.

Wordy/Unnecessary versus Concise

Unnecessary means that many sentences are cluttered with a lot of extra words or long phrases that can either be omitted, revised, or shortened. With the tempo of today's business world, conciseness (within reason, of course) is the goal for written communication. To protect the tone of the message, we cannot be curt, blunt, or tactless. Notice the improvement in conciseness in the next sentences (from 19 words to 11 words) while keeping a pleasant and grateful tone.

In the event that any further information comes to your attention, we shall appreciate your sending it to us.

We shall appreciate your sending us any further information you receive.

Wordy	Concise
do not fail to bear in mind	remember
issue instructions to	tell or inform
are in a position to	can
in line with your suggestion	as you suggest
for the reason that	because
with reference to	about
for the purpose of	for
please do not hesitate to call	please call
in the event that	if
at the present time	now
at a later date	later
in the early part of the coming month	early next month

Formal/Stiff versus Conversational

Sometimes writers think that they need to write in a very formal and stiff manner to appear businesslike, educated, and reserved. Here's an example of the old language of business:

"This is to advise that we deem it a great pleasure to approve subject of your request as per letter of the 12th instant."

What is the writer saying? Let's put the message in everyday, conversational language.

"Yes, you certainly may use the equipment you asked about in your February 12 letter."

Imagine that your reader is sitting across the desk from you and write the message as if you were talking to your reader.

> *We appreciate your informing us of this shortcoming on our part and thereby affording us an opportunity to make amends.*

> *Thank you for telling us about this mistake and for giving us a chance to correct it.*

Unfamiliar versus Familiar

We communicate best with words that are familiar to our reader. However, words familiar to one reader could be unfamiliar to another. But even with a technically sophisticated audience, an overly technical vocabulary can lull the reader to sleep. Also, beware of business jargon and clichés that have become so common they are virtually meaningless. Readers tend to skip right over terms such as these: interface, track record, viable, frame of reference, prioritize, strategic decisions, scenario, time frame, dialogue, and so on. The first sentence in the set below is loaded with big words that could be unfamiliar to the reader: ascertained, perusal, pertinent, and lucrative.

> *The conclusion ascertained from a perusal of the pertinent data is that a lucrative market exists for the product.*

> *The data studied show that the product is in good demand.*

Roundabout versus Direct

Think of roundabout as coming in the back door, which is usually farther away from the driveway or sidewalk (more roundabout), rather than coming in the front door, the direct way. The direct route in writing leads to a sentence that is shorter and easier to understand.

> *The department budget can be observed to be decreasing each new year.*

> *The department budget decreases each year.*

Also, roundabout sentences often have words ending in *-ion*, *-tion*, *-ing*, *-ment*, *-ant*, *-ent*, *-ence*, *-ance*, and *-ency*. Most of these endings change verbs (which are the strongest words in our language) into nouns and adjectives, which are then called "camouflaged" verbs. You will strengthen your writing if you get rid of camouflaged verbs. "Implementation" is the camouflaged verb in the first sentence of the next set. Keep the pure verb "implemented" to have a strong and direct sentence.

> *The manager undertook implementation of the rules.*

> *The manager implemented the rules.*

> Remember: Meaning is in the mind and not in the symbols (words).