

ANNAGRAMMATICA'S LITTLE
Book of Practical Writing

by MARY CAMPBELL



Annagrammatica's Little Book of Practical Writing

by Mary Campbell

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*The person who
has learned to
write with candor,
clarity, and plea-
sure can be a healer
of the planet.*

Image: <http://mahavidya.at/integrales-yoga/archiv/meditationen/>

Dedicated with love to Ryder, who seeks to serve



Annagrammatica's Little Book of Practical Writing

Writing—the art of communicating thoughts to the mind, through the eye—is the great invention of the world. Great in the astonishing range of analysis and combination which necessarily underlies the most crude and general conception of it—great, very great in enabling us to converse with the dead, the absent, and the unborn, at all distances of time and of space, and great, not only in its direct benefits, but greatest help, to all other inventions.

—Abraham Lincoln

Introduction



Hyphenatic



Eloquence is the power to translate a truth into language perfectly intelligible to the person to whom you speak. —*Ralph Waldo Emerson*

Forty years ago, I signed on as a part-time editorial assistant at the University of Arizona. The mother of three, I preferred short workdays and made a little money on the side writing poems, stories, and essays. Literary journals usually paid in copies, but I won contests now and then, earning as much as a hundred dollars for a sonnet or story. Still, even with my husband's income as a country-club golf pro, money was tight, so when I was offered a full-time-editor job, I jumped on it.

At the U of A, I was responsible for production of the general catalog. I spent about half my time processing new academic programs and trimming the fat from hundreds of bloated course descriptions that landed in my IN box—unofficial carbon copies followed weeks later by the “originals.” The process gobbled up paper and time, requiring arbitrary and redundant levels of approval befitting the secession of four or five states from the union. The truth is, nobody ever read the stuff before it reached my desk, arriving in pristine condition except for assorted stamps and signatures... no bite marks, no sign of having



Victoria copying machine,
Le Bureau Moderne, 1913

been stapled, mutilated, or spindled.

I tried and failed to eliminate the carbon-copy component of the process. The carbons were supposed to hurry things along, on the assumption that we could do the editing and data entry while waiting for the official approvals. Our doing so, however, only brought battalions of outraged department heads and deans to our office, miffed that we were undercutting their authority... even though most of the documents dealt with minor changes to course descriptions, not counting a protracted debate over the heady issue of *ground water* versus *groundwater*, with



Mary and I entered catalog data on CRT terminals connected with a computer like this DECsystem 10. Since the entire University of Arizona shared time on the computer, during busy weeks such as registration we arrived at work before 7 A.M. to avoid horrific login queues.

The DEC 10's original processor, the KA10, had a maximum main memory capacity of 256 kilowords, equivalent to 1152 kilobytes. Today's Galaxy C8 phone has memory capacity expandable to 256 gigabytes—more than 220,000 times greater than the KA10's.

Photo: Joe Mabel

the “ground water” proponents arguing for consistency with the parallel phrase *surface water*.

The work could have been tedious, especially in certain abstruse disciplines where a hot topic might involve “Backus normal form and metalanguages of metalinguistic formulas.” Even basic proofreading can be troublesome when you’re not familiar with a subject’s quirky vocabulary. Sometimes I suspected that it

was all a joke and “Backus Normal Form” was an overcoat outlet for Big & Tall Men.

On the other hand, a few of the biggest bigwigs in U of A administration were committed to Catalog Excellence. These men (there being no female V.I.P.s at that time) weren’t satisfied with mere accuracy, clarity, and consistency. They wanted the catalog to sing. Every program description should flow with lyrical prose. Ours should be the *King Lear* of university catalogs, elegant throughout in style and tone. Until you’ve tried it, you can’t know how difficult it is to apply the same degree of authenticity and cadence to courses on (a) Emily Dickinson, (b) Materials Science of Art and Archaeological Objects, and (c) the Honeybee.

Eventually I mastered the art of creating small literary masterpieces, lucid yet scholarly-sounding enough to satisfy sensitive egos, out of academic raw material, whether it came to me dry and sparse and bullet-pointed or lavishly embellished with strings of modifiers derived from French and Latin. A stem or leaf that you and I might describe as “green” was rendered “verdant” in course-descriptionese. My colleague

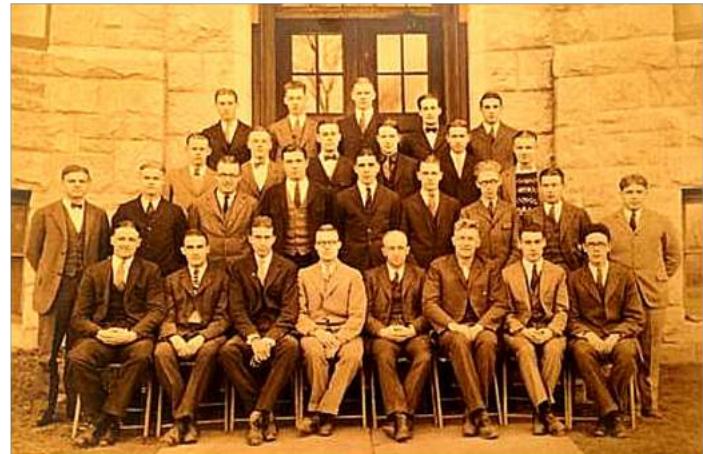
Mary Lindley or I promptly made it green again. If anyone complained, we could always cite the inflated cost of printers' ink.

Mary was cheerful, capable, dependable, and ludicrously overqualified. She and I ended up re-writing most of the course descriptions and offending half of the faculty, who tended to express themselves like this:

History of the English Language (3) I II The student will be required to present evidence of a mastery of knowledge and understanding of the introduction, expansion, progression, transformation, and, where relevant, decline of English-identified sounds, English inflections, and English vocabulary. The time period studied by the student will encompass the era of the earliest identification of a meta-dialect which was spontaneously organizing itself into a distinctive language group, through the intervening iterations of the language, until the present day. The student will be responsible for full and complete comprehension of the influence of cultural, sociological, and historical events and conditions upon the evolution of the language in its original regions and specific locales as well as in its export to English-controlled colonies and other areas of influence.

Dash it all!

I'm not proud of the person I became during my four years as catalog Nazi. My predecessor had marked up the documents with a discreet blue pencil. I, on the other hand, acquired Big Red, the William Howard Taft of markers. I wielded it with glee, drunk with power (or high on marker fumes), eager to find innocuous typos, sentence fragments, pronouns with dubious antecedents,



College faculty at unidentified institution, 1927

and call attention to them with obscene circles and accusatory arrows, praying that someone would invent sticky tape with flashing red lights. Sirens would have been helpful, too. I'd forgotten the purpose of language—to communicate, solecisms be damned.

Over time I learned to pick my battles on the principle that sometimes it's better to be happy than right. Meanwhile, my work was useful not only in humiliating the most pompous assistant professors but also in taming runaway clauses. To my credit, I was almost always right—tediously so.

I was particularly obsessed with the correct placement of hyphens, en dashes, em dashes, and commas. I could and did cite chapter and verse from no fewer than four authoritative style manuals.



Early on, I had identified two types of hyphen abusers: PAG (point-and-guess) and EOW (every other word). When writing anything at all, PAG-type abusers have an inner monologue like a broken record: "Must be 'bout time for another hyphen. Must be 'bout time for

another hyphen. Must be ‘bout time...,” although people who are clueless about hyphens usually call them “dashes.”

(For you youngsters: Once upon a time, "broken record" was a metaphor for saying the same thing over and over. Vinyl records, when chipped or scratched, often snagged the phonograph needle, causing a little section of the record to repeat, and repeat, and repeat, until someone lifted the needle arm and advanced it past the scratch, often creating another scratch in the process.)

Very special education

Once I accidentally renamed a special-education course via the substitution of a D for an F, so that

the course title became "Reading and Study Skills for the Dead." Mary, who was proofreading my document, laughed so violently that she concussed. A week later, fully recovered, she resumed proofing with the same course, and I thought she was going to require medical attention again, but she calmed down, and the two of us contemplated "overlooking" the mistake, reasoning that as typos go it was pretty cute and might improve employee morale.

I'd forgotten the purpose of language—to communicate, solecisms be damned.

Instead we decided to be grownups. It was a matter of catalog integrity. Besides, the special-education folks wouldn't have been amused. Some of the newer faculty were already insecure in their academic stature and became noisily defensive if they suspected they were being made fun of.

For the most part, though, I wielded Big Red with a heavy hand. It didn't make me any friends, but I had the consolation of feeling superior to people who made gobs more money than I did.



The new rules

I no longer believe that “bad writing” breaks the rules of grammar and syntax. Bad writing disturbs the peace. Its opposite is eloquence, which—according to Ralph Waldo Emerson—is the power to translate a truth into language perfectly intelligible to the person to whom you speak.”

Written materials produced by organizations are too often *not* intelligible. The “truth” they purport to convey gets lost in a jumble of jargon and a labyrinth of verbosity. I have come to see these shortcomings as going beyond communication failures. They reflect self-importance, intimidation, even outright hostility. I can fix spelling; I *can't* fix a snarky attitude... but I hope I can prove that it damages your writing.

Expressions that confuse and distance readers have infiltrated business, professional, and academic writing so thoroughly that plain writing can seem gaunt and awkward. Even the humblest message has a chip on its shoulder, as illustrated by this classified ad placed by a large medical center in search of a building mechanic:

Position description: Under general supervision, the Building Mechanic II position exists to maintain and address the air quality needs of our customer base as it pertains to air filtration and preventative maintenance of major and minor air handling and building mechanical systems. Our customer base includes but is not limited to patients, visitors, staff, researchers, administrators, and

coworkers. Areas of responsibility include all building mechanical systems (AHU's, pumps, exhaust fans, med gas, etc.). Building Mechanic I responsibilities are inclusive to this position. Position is dedicated to achieving excellence through the accomplishment of the medical center's mission/goals & objectives especially as they relate to customer service. Refer to Required Education and Experience. Refer to Preferred Education and Experience.

The medical-center maintenance managers are looking for someone who can maintain air-handling equipment. Why don't they just say so? Because “Wanted: Someone to maintain air-handling equipment” sounds flat and unimpressive. **But bare-bones writing is easily mended when writers learn to replace obfuscation with grace and courtesy.**

Social intelligence

Over time, this ad and its brothers, sisters, cousins, and sundry other relatives online, in print, and in broadcast media got under my skin and wouldn't crawl back out and skitter away. I sensed that I was dealing with something more malevolent than sloppy writing.

After years of research and reading weighty, lifeless prose, I began preparing a revised edition of my 2007 business-writer's manual emphasizing clarity versus jargon in writing and public speaking. My research indicated that the biggest problem in what I refer to as “communication with a public audience” (any form of public speaking,

business writing, journalism, and so forth) goes beyond lack of clarity to subtle hostility, an almost feral show of power, with ramifications at every level and in every sector of society.

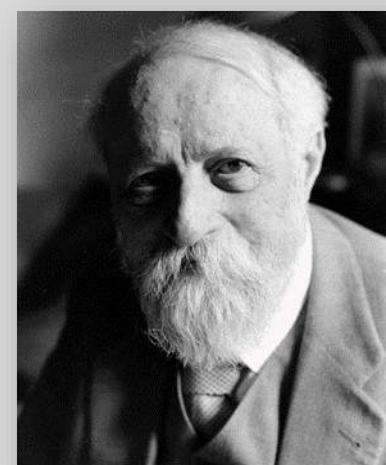
My new book addresses writing as a form of personal interaction to which the principles of "social intelligence" (as set forth in Daniel Goleman's excellent book by that title) should apply, as well as the ideals in Martin Buber's 1923 book *I and Thou*. **A key principle in social intelligence is to increase the number of people you categorize as "us" and decrease the number you regard as "them."**

Of particular concern to me are memes that slide into public consciousness due to the prevalence of "sweeping generalizations" and the abandonment of other journalism standards. But rather than wagging a finger at communicators and invoking their "responsibility," I suggest that the public interest and their own would be better served by an inoculation of truth and clarity, which might also allay the antagonism and polarity between groups who disagree so violently that they've given up even *trying* to reach consensus.

Grammarwise, you're safe with me

This book will not scold you about grammar, syntax, pronunciation, spelling, and so forth. This book might gently suggest—if, say, the word *ad-*

venturesome is part of your vocabulary—that "careful speakers or writers prefer *adventurous* or *venturesome*." This book will whisper such admonitions so as to convey sensitivity to your inalienable right to use *adventuresome* just for a lark or, alternatively, having given the matter a great deal of consideration and possibly prayer and contemplation, to be a whimsical, spontaneous, devil-may-care sort of speaker or writer... indeed, to be flat-out wrong if that's what you want and it's been one of those days and you might just drink a glass of strong ale and begin spewing double negatives in clauses containing the word



Martin Buber (1878-1965) was a prominent twentieth-century philosopher, religious thinker, political activist and educator. Born in Austria, he spent most of his life in Germany and Israel, writing in German and Hebrew. He is best known for his 1923 book, *Ich und Du* (*I and Thou*), which distinguishes between *Thou* and *I* modes of existence.... Buber characterizes *Thou* relations as *dialogical* and *I* relations as *monological*.

In his 1929 essay "Dialogue," Buber explains that monologue is not just a turning away from the other but also a turning back on oneself.... To perceive the other as an *it* is to take them as a classified and hence predictable and manipulable object that exists only as a part of one's own experiences. In contrast, in an *I* / relation both participants exist as polarities of relation, whose center lies in the between.

—Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy

ain't and even do something shocking with fricatives if you can recall what they are and isn't it something to do with Flanders, or are you thinking of frangibles or Frigidaire? ...because I now view other people's writing and public speaking as methods of communicating—not as canvases where I can show off my own writing-and-editing virtuosity—and I evaluate writing according to how well it communicates rather than by its adherence to the *old* rules of writing that I once took such pains to learn.

Welcome to the new rules of writing:

1. honesty
2. purpose
3. respect
4. clarity
5. enjoyment

How may I serve you?

Writing has long been an indicator of unease in the larger culture. [In documents dating back more than fifty years, there is...] evidence of widespread if largely unacknowledged doubt, fear and hostility... [as determined] when we analyze the imagery employed....

—Bernard Bowron, Leo Marx, & Arnold Rose,
"Literature and Covert Culture," *American Quarterly*, 9, no. 4, 1957, in <http://xroads.virginia.edu/>
—DRBR\bowron.txt, accessed July 28, 2012

I. Seek to Serve



THE WRITING WHEEL: Seek to Serve

Clarity

Honor the English language. Choose your words carefully and understand their meanings.

Purpose

Know what you want to say and why you want to say it. [Understand your USP (unique selling proposition).]

Truthfulness

Be honest and transparent. Don't use language to conceal the truth.

Enjoyment

Learn to love to write.

Respect

Understand and respect your readers (audiences).



Write for a Better World

If you want to...

- write joyfully and efficiently, and
- write in a way that is readable, informative, and engaging, and that supports your brand

...you do *not* need mastery of the English language and its mechanics. You don't even have to know how to spell. (If you are, however, hopeless when it comes to spelling, punctuation, grammar, and such, you probably need a good editor.)

The Five Essentials

To write well requires five things:

1. a clear purpose
2. an honest message
3. respect for the reader or audience
4. respect for the language
5. enjoyment of the task

Writing becomes an act of war...

- when writing is an ordeal, a burden, or a bore
- when the writing distances readers and hearers—through boredom, obfuscation, or intimidation

Obfuscation is not a well-known word, but it is the best term for “lack of clarity” when the murkiness is deliberate. Dictionary.com defines *obfuscation* as “making something obscure, dark, or

In an atmosphere of suspicion...
we may ... become unduly cau-
tious in our communication.

J. William Pfeiffer, *Conditions That Hinder Effective Communication*

difficult to understand.” Wikipedia takes it a bit deeper: “the willful obscuring of the intended meaning of communication by making the message difficult to understand, usually with confusing and ambiguous language.” Think Bill Clinton, Monica Lewinsky, and “It depends upon what the meaning of the word *is* is.”

Written language has the potential not only to build goodwill, promote understanding, and facilitate communication... but also to heal breaches planetwide and advance the cause of peace and prosperity. As the shadow side of that power, language can also be divisive, distancing, and inflammatory.

When words are a call to arms, there is a price to pay, and not just in lost sales and disgruntled employees. Hostility in the air has social costs.

It's not an exaggeration to suggest that the person who has learned to write with candor, clarity, and pleasure can be a healer of the planet. With more than four billion web pages at our fingertips, language is ubiquitous.* “Let peace

* <http://www.worldwidewebsize.com/>

begin with me” ceases to be an idealistic bit of fluff and becomes an inspiring possibility.

You will hate writing it you make it about “the rules”—grammar, syntax, punctuation, and spelling. Instead, first communicate with respect; then enjoy the motion—rhythm, flow, and cadence. The best way to learn these traits is by reading good writing and experimenting with them in your own writing.

The habit of helping

All writers would do well to cultivate the habit of curiosity, particularly when the object is “What can I do to serve you?” Do you know a better way to begin or energize a relationship than to hold in thought the question “How can I make your life better?”

Let’s set aside for now the distinctions among types of relationships—personal, social, familial, business, professional, and any others that are

Studies consistently show that human happiness has large and positive... effects on productivity. Positive emotions appear to invigorate human beings.

—fastcompany.com

based on roles. The Golden Rule doesn’t stipulate status, age, or gender. It doesn’t counsel us to “do unto other English-speaking American males above the age of 12 as you would have other English-speaking American males above the age of 12 do unto you.”

And we are, after all, talking about habits, which are so much easier to form if the behavior *always* applies. I recently overheard a discussion about whether you need to use your turn signal if yours is the only car in the intersection or if you’re in a left-turn-only lane. Is it really necessary to signal a turn if nobody’s watching, or if it’s *obvious* that you’re turning? On the other hand, it’s not exactly a hardship to press down on the turn-signal lever. Making a habit of something sets you free from the need to make a decision. Do you honestly want to have to decide whether or not to use the turn signal every time it might or might not be helpful, based on the lane you’re in or, perhaps, the presence of pedestrians in the crosswalk?

Seek to serve. Cultivate the habit of helping. It will magically improve your writing, even if you do nothing else.

When smart people can’t write

In over forty years as a writer, editor, and instructor, I’ve worked with men and women in the public and private sectors; small, midsize, and

There are three principles in a man's being and life, the principle of thought, the principle of speech, and the principle of action. The origin of all conflict between me and my fellow-men is that I do not say what I mean and I don't do what I say.

—Martin Buber

large companies; federal agencies and public universities; and a score of industries and professions, from architecture and broadcasting to science and technology. I'm still not sure why many intelligent, articulate people—strong leaders who are brilliant in their fields—communicate so clumsily in writing. I have a few theories, however.

Each industry and profession has its peculiar jargon, some of which is necessary—it's the language that colleagues and clients understand. But that doesn't explain why **media releases, annual reports, newsletters, and even advertisements are unfriendly and distancing, often in direct contrast to branding efforts meant to portray an organization as warm, caring, and trustworthy.**

Smart people sometimes defend their poor writ-

ing by saying that they were too busy becoming experts in their particular disciplines to learn the discipline of writing. But if that were really the problem, these smart people would also be mute, rendered unable to speak by the same pre-occupation.

Nonwriters naturally make mistakes in grammar, syntax, spelling, and punctuation—the mechanics of writing. That's why God made editors. But when writing fails to communicate, the cause goes deeper. It might signify

- lack of focus or disorganization. When writers aren't sure what they mean to say, they lose sight of the document's purpose and message.
- lack of concern for the audience—readers or listeners—who, for one reason or another, are being deceived or misled.

There's little I can do for the writer who has no message or whose motive in writing is something other than to serve (inform, inspire, comfort, or entertain) readers. Fortunately, about eighty percent of the time, the problem with poor writing is one I can solve:

Writers who don't like to write

Many unskillful writers believe that writing is fundamentally different from speaking. One of the most strikingly intelligent people I've had the



pleasure to know—an architect with a warm manner and a ready wit—goes into an altered state when he has to write something. One minute we're *talking*, the next minute we're *disintermediating*, and it's all downhill from there. Whatever the topic, it inevitably involves "harnessing relevant data, addressing critical elements, strategizing broad-based solutions, and optimizing tailored interactions."

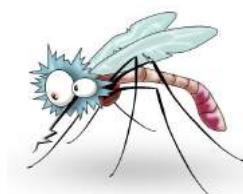
The sort of unwieldy writing we're talking about—the basic flaw being *too many words*—is said to have originated back in the day when lawyers were paid by the word. Legal documents do tend to be long-winded, often as an attempt to leave no loopholes unplugged—the CYA excuse. But this sort of overexplaining has splashed over into everyday writing, where it's really not necessary unless you think that everyone is out to sue you. They're not. If you believe that they are, you have a bigger problem than poor writing skills.

Can you speak?

One of the great fallacies about writing is that it is essentially different from talking. Perhaps you sit at the computer, hands poised above the keyboard, and your mind signals, "I am writing," as if you are wearing the Hogwarts Sorting Hat. Your brain goes into overdrive. Gears and pulleys clank into place, lumber into motion, and produce ponderous phrases and paragraphs you have no memory of composing:

The state-of-the-art virtuosity of Jumbo-Omni Systems' advance-intelligence meta-solution integrative strategies reconfigure the clients' multidimensional objective into positions compatible with fixed and liquid assets, human-resources skill sets, machine autonomy....

I've wondered if there's a virus—maybe originating in Washington, D. C.—carried by a mosquito that flies around offices looking for people who are about to write something. Maybe these people release an enzyme that makes the mosquito think "Dessert!" The virus's telltale symptom is a writing style that you'd expect from someone who was raised by a pack of patent attorneys. No one, as far as I know, has died from this virus—which doesn't mean that their colleagues or readers haven't wanted to poison them. In any case, *writing to serve* is a remarkably effective cure.



Why wait?

If you want to start writing better right now, take these simple steps:

1. Start reading the work of writers you admire. You don't need to study it; just read a lot of it. Their style will rub off on you with no effort on your part. (See Appendix: Reading List.)
2. Lighten up. Don't take yourself too seriously. Unless you're writing to communicate genuinely terrible news, don't take your topic too seriously either.
3. For every writing assignment, define your role; that is, ask yourself how you can serve your audience.
4. Clarify your purpose. You can make an outline if you want, although it's easy to get bogged down in an outline and sabotage your own progress.
5. Have fun writing your first draft. Let loose. Play with the language. Use interesting words and colorful phrases that occur to you, but don't force them. Do *not* edit as you go. Just write what you want to say, then set it aside for a while.
6. With a fresh eye, edit for content and style. Is your message clear? *Crystal?*
7. Proofread for mechanical errors—grammar, spelling, punctuation, and so forth.

8. If there's time, ask someone else to read your draft for content as well as correctness.
9. Write final copy and distribute.

Shitty first drafts

It's said that writing and editing are antagonistic processes using different parts of the brain. The right-brain/left-brain theory has fallen out of favor, but, for whatever reason, stopping often to analyze your work interrupts the creative flow. Write now, edit later.

Author Anne Lamott, a novelist and Christian writer who is celebrated for her irreverence, is a proponent of “shitty first drafts.... All good writers write them. This is how they end up with good second drafts and terrific third drafts.” (*Bird by Bird*, 1994)

The point here is not that you try to write badly but rather that you write freely, without evaluating as you go. Stay focused on your purpose. When you've finished your shitty first draft, you can pretty it up and make it more palatable.

Exercise

Write a brief biological sketch for yourself.

NOTES

Handwriting practice lines consisting of five sets of horizontal dashed lines for letter formation.

This is how you do it: you sit down at the keyboard and you put one word after another until its done. It's that easy, and that hard.

— Neil Gaiman



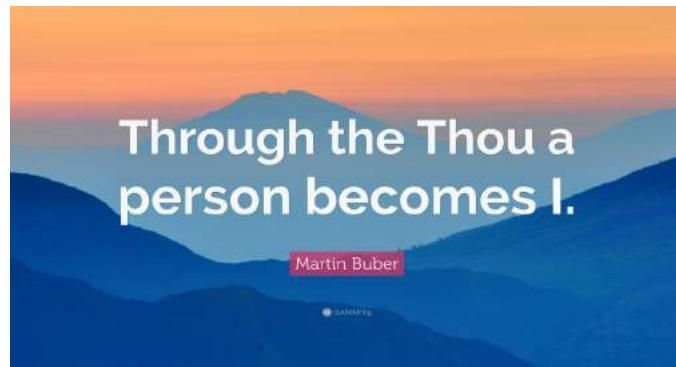
II. Show Up, Not Off

I and Thou

You can write with joy, efficiency, clarity, kindness, and style... while you support your organization's image and reinforce its brand... or you can bumble along, communicating awkwardly, putting off writing tasks or paying people like me \$60 an hour or more to do them *for you*.

Whether you are writing to

1. tell a story,



In his 1923 book *I and Thou*, philosopher Martin Buber urges human beings to treat one another not as objects or according to roles—customer to cashier, master to servant—but as sacred beings, each unique and irreplaceable. People are not to be used but to be honored. “Every person born into the world represents something new,” he writes, “something that never existed before, something original and unique. If there had been someone like [that person]... in the world, there would have been no need for her to be born.”

2. answer a question, or

3. solve a problem,

if you begin with respect for your reader (or listener), the job is half done. It really is that simple.

The flip side of *helping* is *hostile*. I'm not going to use this space to explain why we don't need more hostility in the world or why companies perceived as hostile tend not to thrive. Let's agree to agree on those points and move on.

You keep your readers at arm's length—or worse, put them off altogether—by being

1. untruthful
2. secretive
3. unavailable
4. incoherent
5. unfocused

I have been asked, as a marketer, to be all these things—to concoct a stew of jargon, half-truths, smoke, and superlatives and feed it to a skeptical public—usually to sell a product or service that was touted as “exciting” but barely achieved “ordinary.” In my experience, through dozens of marketing campaigns, we were more successful when our promises were realistic and our products were outstanding.

Tell the truth

I have sat in on at least a dozen meetings whose purpose was to design the message that callers



THE QUESTION: What should our customers listen to when they're on HOLD? **MY SUGGESTION:** Perry Como! Surely, callers who were listening to Perry Como wouldn't care if they ever got to talk with someone, at least not until the end of the song. Sadly, only one other person at the meeting had even *heard* of Perry Como, and that person thought that Perry Como was an undersecretary of agriculture in the Truman administration. I probably should have suggested Frank Sinatra. You know Frank Sinatra, right? Don't you? Seriously? Oh, come on! (Photo: audiopreservationfund.org)

hear when they are placed on HOLD. In these meetings, very little attention was given to the text. We spent much more time listening to different speakers and registering our opinions: Should the voice be masculine or feminine? High or low? Soothing or animated? How many different messages should we record? Should there be music between them? What genre? Jazz? What sort of jazz? Be-bop? Cool jazz? Swing?

While we were parked in meetings, minutely critiquing various voices (Too squeaky. Sounds angry. Slight lisp), we failed to notice that the message itself was plainly, obviously, patently a lie. We knew it was a lie, because if it were not a lie there would be no need for it, no justification for its existence, no meetings to evaluate tonal qualities and calculate the optimal length of time between repetitions.

What was that message?

Your call is important to us

I heard this message at least thirty times just this morning, during two calls to the optical department at Shopko. A few months ago I got a new prescription for bifocals. Last week I received the frames I ordered from eBay. I called my regular eye clinic about filling the prescription, but the optician told me that my insurance is no longer accepted there. "Try Shopko," he suggested.

Called Shopko, spoke with Stacey, and learned that Shopko would indeed fill my prescription, at no charge. Hurray. Open seven days a week. Hallelujah.

Darn! Forgot to ask whether I needed an appointment. Called back. Stacey must have gone to lunch and everyone else was evidently "busy helping other customers," because I was placed on HOLD. Not to worry, though. My call was important to them.

My call was, in fact, so significant that they felt compelled to tell me so every ten or twelve seconds. Due to a glitch in the recording, sometimes two voices at once told me how much they cared. Call me cranky, but after five or six repeti-

tions, the more times they told me I was important, the less important I felt.

The missing link

After all, I thought my call was important to CenturyLink last week, when I reported that my Internet connection wasn't working. I spent the better part of four days on HOLD with CenturyLink, and they *told me* my call was important



envisioningtheamericanadream.com

to them, too—*although* they wouldn't mind at *all* if I were to hang up and conduct my business online. I'd still be important.

The first automated voice you hear when you call CenturyLink is probably familiar to anyone who has had a "land line" in the past twenty years. I call the voice "Kirk," because he sounds like someone whose name might be "Kirk"—wholesome fellow, crew cut, recent college graduate who was vice president of his fraternity and the one male cheerleader on the squad. When I call CenturyLink, Kirk always answers, just as he did when I called Century Link's predecessors, Qwest and US West.

Kirk is on duty 24/7, and I think the long hours are taking their toll, because when I finally get through to a human representative and my call gets dropped—which happens fairly often—and then I call back, Kirk remembers nothing from our earlier conversation and I have to start at the beginning.

Even though I pushed "2" for "internet repair" as instructed, Kirk urged me to take advantage of CenturyLink's "automated options" available at centurylink.com, replete with advantages, such as (a) no waiting, and also (b) no waiting. "Kirk," I say, a little sternly, "you're not paying attention."

In the course of more than two dozen phone calls over four days, I was given these assurances:

Statement	Repetitions
Your call is important to us	96
We're sorry you're having this problem	21
We'll solve the problem immediately	10

They threw thousands of words at me, with *content* meant to reassure, but the *context* said otherwise. Eventually I got connected to Sean, and my call was important enough to him that when we got disconnected he called me back, and he had excellent news: A human repair person would come to my home the very next morning.

As kind and helpful as Sean was, I was not in-



clined to believe him, but I got up early, dusted the modem and the shelf it sits on, and cleaned the bathroom, just in case. At 10:30, just as I was calling CenturyLink to report a no-show, there was a knock at the door. Could it be...? It was! CenturyLink Human Repair Guy Mike was standing in the hall, brandishing his tools and looking competent. Within ten minutes, the problem was solved and I was back online, nominating Mike for the Nobel Peace Prize.

Twitter: Nobody home

Companies such as CenturyLink pay marketing firms great sums of money in an exercise called *branding*. They develop graphics, taking great care with fonts and logos, labels and emblems, ads and promotions. They want to be perceived as sleek and modern, high-tech, state-of-the-art, competent, efficient... or warm and friendly, accessible, "service-oriented." Whatever style they want to project is incorporated in their visuals... but all it takes is one customer's experience with a disgruntled employee to erase the desired perception and replace it with "snarly." Brand identity is reinforced or undermined not only by how *customers* are treated but also by employee satisfaction and the company's relationships with its vendors and strategic partners.

As damaging to your brand as an owlish employee can be, even worse is *no interaction at all*. If a

company makes no one accessible to outsiders, that company is making a statement: We don't like you, we don't care about you, now go away and let us get back to our geekery.

Mark my words

I want to go on record with my prediction that the social-media phenomenon Twitter is not long for this world. The folks at Twitter have better things to do than talking to you about their screw-up with your account. If you're going to have a problem with Twitter, it had better slide neatly into one of six or seven common categories, such as "can't log in" or "forgot my username." Otherwise, Twitter customer service consists of a very short loop. If your question isn't answered on the page you're routed to,



they send you back to the list of ordinary problems that aren't yours.

If, out of desperation, you choose "my hashtags aren't working"—just so they'll give you space amounting to one hundred and forty characters to explain that hashtags aren't really your problem, it's that your account has gotten tangled up with someone else's and when you post to Twitter your tweets show up on the other person's Twitter feed—then Twitter emails you instructions for the proper use of hashtags.

In more than an hour spent scouring the Web for advice from people with a similar dilemma—and they are legion—I learned that it is virtually impossible to talk to or even chat online with an actual Twitter representative. There is, however, a small industry developing around Twitter's arrogant unhelpfulness: Starting at \$20, some enterprising individual, presumably with inside information, will try to get Twitter's attention. It strikes me as being a little like asking one of the lesser-known saints to intercede for you because God's busy elsewhere. Twitter, are you listening?





III. Why Me?

Why should I do business with you instead of somebody else?

What is your organization's unique selling proposition (USP)? Generally, companies try to attract customers based on some combination of price, quality, and convenience. If your product or service isn't the cheapest and it's not the most convenient, then it had better be the best. Are you the best at what you do, at least in your niche? Is that niche well defined? Most important, do your employees understand it?

Note: The USP principle applies whether you are selling a product or service, an idea, a thesis, or yourself. The question remains: Why should I believe you rather than someone else who is mak-

ing a comparable claim? Why should I hire you instead of another applicant? Why should I accept the premise of your essay? In fact, why should I even read what you've written? If *USP* stands for "unique selling proposition," *UIS* can be an abbreviation for "unique identity statement."

Note that USP and UIS are *abbreviations*, not *acronyms*. An *acronym* is pronounceable as a word. *UNICEF* is an acronym, as is *NASA*. When acronyms get comfortably embedded in the language, and they represent phrases that don't require initial caps, they tend to go lowercase—hence *radar* for "radio detection and ranging," *laser* for "light amplification by stimulated emission of radiation," and *snafu* for "situation normal, all f***ed up."

The fact is, **people tend to do business with you because they like you**. There's nothing wrong with that, but likability alone isn't usually enough to ensure long-term success.

Define your USP

Develop a USP (or UIS) that's easy to understand. Your USP will be the basis for most of your communication: advertising, promotion, media releases, annual reports, correspondence, and so forth. Your writing tasks become easier when you are thoroughly and habitually aware of your organization's identity (or your own).



Your USP might be similar to but not identical with your *mission statement*. If you are a home-health-care provider, for example, your mission might be “to help people with health challenges feel comfortable, safe, and as independent as possible in their own homes... to offer comprehensive home-health services delivered by loving, experienced, and continuously trained companions... to attract and retain the most skilled and experienced caregivers... to establish mutually beneficial relationships within the healthcare community...” and so forth.

Not so long ago I thought mission statements were a waste of time. Most of the mission statements I had seen were puffballs of verbosity, loaded with jargon and largely ignored in the organization's day-to-day operation. But I now believe that developing a mission statement, like writing a business plan, can help a company pinpoint its USP—its reason for being and its advantages over the competition.

The sample mission statement above, however, doesn't qualify as a USP. It could be a mission statement for any home-health-care provider. It doesn't specify what sets you apart. It doesn't answer the question "Why should I do business with your company and not XYZ Inc. down the street?" Among the criteria of (a) price, (b) service, and (c) convenience, where do you excel?

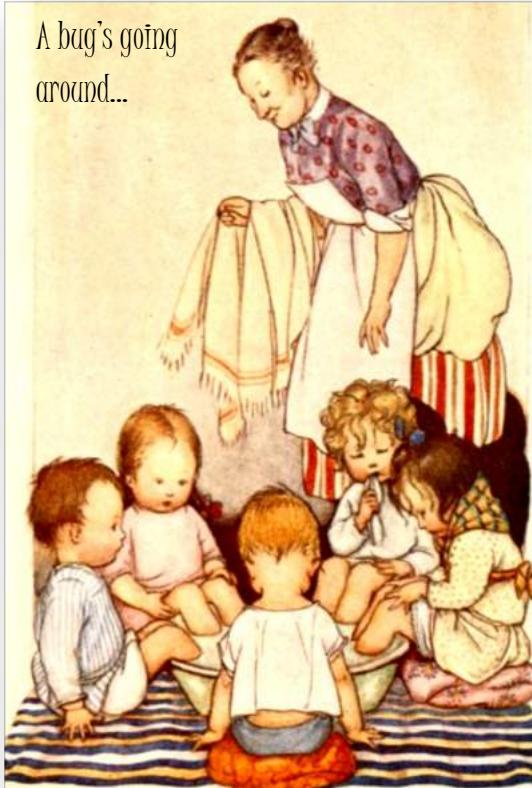
As a marketing consultant, I once spent six months helping “ABC Interior Design” improve

its proposals... which were lackluster, to say the least. The firm had a stunning portfolio. Especially lovely were the church interiors—naves, chapels, and parlors, all gloriously yet tastefully appointed. But not one of the designers could state the company's USP. Other firms had pretty pictures, too. In fact, three of the five lead designers had worked for the competition.

Finally, Jane, one of the three interns, mentioned that ABC was known in the profession as the best firm to work for. The corporate culture was fun and easygoing. Every so often the boss would declare "Pizza Day" and drive across town to the metro area's primo pizzeria, paying out of pocket for luscious pies that honored every individual preference, from gluten-free to grease-soaked. In every respect, ABC treated its employees like solid gold, promoting and paying generously, understanding that relationships were the key to success and that loyal longtime employees were the key to relationships.

To broadcast this attribute, I set up a newsletter for clients, suppliers, and “strategic partners”—architects, engineers, and landscapers—highlighting personalities and relationships.

The “relationships” theme was incorporated into ABC’s branding and permeated the company culture. Hostility on the job—backbiting, unhealthy competitiveness—was nipped in the bud. The company even offered workshops on developing and sustaining positive personal relation-



ships outside the workplace. Recognizing the need for balance, ABC's culture and benefits were family-friendly. No employee ever had to worry that staying home with a sick kid might cost him his job.

Exercise

Summarize your organization's USP or your UIS.

Jargon gives the impression that the writer is more interested in showing off—exhibiting power—than in telling a story, answering a question, or solving a problem.

Product strategies? Off with their heads!

Craigslist handed me a beautiful gift the other day—a help-wanted ad that's more ridiculous than one I could make up. Like many ads written in corporate-speak, it expresses a preference for applicants who "exhibit strong written & verbal communication skills" that are so plainly absent in the ad itself.

Note: By *verbal*, the writer probably means *spoken*. It's common to see the phrase "verbal agreement," as if any agreement expressed in words—written or spoken—were not *verbal*. But I pick nits, when there's so much more to bewail in this misguided verbal-communication endeavor.

Hyphens do matter, as "exhibited" in phrases such as "cross portfolio strategies" and "cross functional stakeholders." If there's anything worse than a functional stakeholder, it's an irritable functional stakeholder, I always say, when I'm talking about stakeholders of any stripe—something I go out of my way to avoid. But maybe that's because I lack the ability to "evolve strategic & tactical elements based on research, data, & industry trends." Perhaps one can learn to evolve such elements only in "highly matrixed" organizations. Most of my experience has evolved in organizations with lowly matrixes. I suspect I've even "executed collateral among stakeholders" in matrix-deficient organizations. Let's have that be our little secret, if you don't mind. I might need to pull the matrix card in a



Execution—in a painting from Froissart's *Chronicles*, 15th century

job interview some day.

As buzzwords go, *transparency* is a useful one, and this ad is anything *but* transparent. An organization that's transparent doesn't have a lot of secrets, knowing that **secrets are not good for business**. They're like roaches, hiding in the dark, skittering around only when they think they won't be noticed. Eventually someone turns a light on and they run for cover, but it's too late. They've been found out.

Transparency is not served by *jargon*, which gives the impression that the writer is more inter-

ested in showing off—exhibiting power—than in telling a story, answering a question, or solving a problem.

Below you'll find (a) the ad, (b) my reaction, some of which I shared in a friendly, helpful way with the advertiser, and (c) an excerpt from the *Harvard Business Review Guide to Better Business Writing*, whose author gleefully deplores the sort of verbiage you're about to read... if you have the stomach for it.

a. The Ad

Organization seeks Marketing Specialist who supports the execution of product strategies and cross portfolio strategies and works with moderate guidance across businesses to create and execute supporting communications.

- Assists in the design, development, editing & execu-

We cannot avoid using power, cannot escape the compulsion to afflict the world, so let us, cautious in diction and mighty in contradiction, love powerfully.

- Martin Buber

QuotePixel.com

tion of marketing messaging & collateral including advertisements, direct mail & technical information for targeted audiences in conjunction with internal marketing team and external agencies, including LMR processes and requirements.

Skills:

- Understands the sales budgeting process and participates in the prioritization of tactics.
- Exhibit strong written & verbal communication skills along with excellent interpersonal skills.
- Demonstrated strategic thinking, initiative, and creativity.
- Show agility with a proven ability to evolve strategic & tactical elements based on research, data & industry trends.
- Demonstrated problem solving and analytical skills.
- Demonstrated ability to work with cross functional stakeholders. OR. Demonstrated ability to work in a highly matrixed organization.
- Proven track record of achieving goals. OR. Proven track record of meeting financial and other quantitative goals.
- Demonstrated success working in a team environment.

b. Critique

The ad reads as if it's meant to test your knowledge of industry jargon. For example, if you don't know what *LMR* stands for, evidently you need not apply. I had to look it up, and there are several definitions, not all of them printable.

It could be “late-model restoration.” “Labor-management relations” is more likely, but without knowing the industry it’s hard to say. And the industry is only one of the secrets this inscrutable ad fails to communicate. The unwritten message is that this potential employer holds all the cards, some of which might be revealed if you make the cut. **It's a bullying sort of prose that hints at a bullying sort of employer.** Self-important, verbally bloated, jargon-laden—these traits don’t speak well of the company. How can management possibly hire sensible people with ads like this? “Cross functional stakeholders”? “Highly matrixed organization”? Seriously?

The day after I espied this ridiculous ad, I lambasted it on my blog with a link to a first-rate article from the *Harvard Business Review*, which, among other things, bemoans the use of jargon in business communication. Here’s an excerpt:

c. A Bizspeak Blacklist

It’s mission-critical to be plain-spoken, whether you’re trying to be best-of-breed at outside-the-box thinking or simply incentivizing colleagues to achieve a paradigm shift in core-performance value-adds. Leading-edge leveraging of your plain-English skill set will ensure that your actionable items synergize future-proof assets with your global-knowledge repository.

Just kidding.

Seriously, though, it’s important to write plainly. You want to sound like a person, not an institution. But it’s hard to do, especially if you work with people who are

addicted to buzzwords. It takes a lot of practice....

[Below is]... an “index expurgatorius,” a roster of [undesirable buzzwords and jargon.] [Ed. note: (a) A few of these terms are occasionally useful and even necessary. *Strategic alliance*, for example, is a good term for a temporary partnership, and *synergy* is the only word I know of that describes how such a partnership can yield benefits greater than would be achieved by the two organizations separately. (b) I have added jargon examples from other sources.]

actionable (apart from legal action)
agreement
as per
at the end of the day
back of the envelope
bandwidth (apart from electronics)
best of breed
best practices
boil the ocean
bring our A game
bring to the table
business model
buy-in
c-level
centers of excellence
circle back around
circle with

client-centered
close the loop
come-to-Jesus
componentize
deliverables
descope
dial-in
dialogue with
disintermediate
disambiguate
disincent
drill down
drink the Kool-Aid
ducks in a row
eating your own dog food
facetime
forward initiative
functionality
gain traction
going forward
go-live
go rogue
granular, granularity
harvesting efficiencies
heads-up
helicopter view
impact (verb)
impactful
incent
incentivize
instantiate
kick the can down the road
leapfrog
learnings
let's do lunch
let's take this offline
level the playing field
leverage (verb)
level set
liaise
long-pole item
loop in, keep in the loop
low-hanging fruit
mindshare

NOTES

mission-critical
monetize
net-net
operationalize
out of pocket (apart from
reference to expenses)
paradigm shift
parameters
planful
push the envelope
pursuant to
putting lipstick on a pig
recontextualize
rightsize
scalable
seamless integration
seismic shift (apart from
reference to earthquake)
smartsized
strategic alliance
strategic dynamism
synergize
think outside the box
throw it against the wall and
see if it sticks
throw under the bus
turnkey
under the radar
utilization, utilize
value-added
verbage (the correct term is
verbiage—in reference only
to verboseness)
where the rubber meets the
road
win-win

—February 2013. Bryan A. Garner's blog series on business writing draws on advice in his book *The HBR Guide to Better Business Writing*.

Exercise

1. Rewrite the first paragraph of the ad in plain English, based on your best guess as to what the company actually wants in an employee—or what you might want, if you were the employer.
2. Add a paragraph of incentives, summarizing why an applicant would want to work in your organization, based on your USP.



NOTES

Handwriting practice lines consisting of ten sets of horizontal dashed lines for letter formation.

Writing is less about the "rules"—grammar, syntax, spelling, parts of speech—than about motion, progress, rhythm, and flow.

Features and benefits

In your advertising and other promotions, emphasize benefits over features. If you manufacture snow shovels from a revolutionary lightweight material, it's a feature. If, as a result, I can shovel more snow with less time and effort, that's a benefit.

Exercise

1. Pay attention to advertising you see in print, on television, on the internet, and elsewhere. List at least one feature and a related benefit for each of ten to twelve products or services.
2. Often the benefits are implied rather than stated. If a young guy drinking ABC-brand beer is surrounded by a bevy of buxom babes, the implied benefit of ABC Beer is that it makes you irresistible to glamorous women. If the advertiser came right out and *said* that, it would be silly. It's silly anyway, but it appears to work. Why do you think this sort of advertising is effective?



Slimming down plump prose

	Murky, Tiresome, Unclear, Unread	Energetic, Easily Understood
1	<p>Crimpy Hair Products[*] has exercised a dynamic posture by first establishing a professional marketing program and utilizing that base to penetrate multi-markets.</p> <p>* Actual copy, made-up name.</p>	<p>Crimpy Hair Products is energetically seeking new markets.</p>
2	<p>Personal Data Interchange (PDI) occurs every time two or more individuals communicate, in either a business or personal context, face-to-face, or across space and time. Such interchanges frequently include the exchange of informal information, such as business cards, telephone numbers, addresses, dates and times of appointments, etc. Augmenting PDI with electronics and telecommunications can help ensure that information is quickly and accurately communicated, stored, organized, and easily located when needed.</p> <p>Personal information, by nature, is complex and diverse. Currently, proprietary standards exist to structure some types of PDI information, but no single, open specification comprehensively addresses the needs of collecting and communicating PDI information across many common communication channels such as telephones, voicemail, email, and face-to-face meetings.</p> <p>The traditional types of textual information corresponding to that found on a paper business card have been enhanced in the vCard specification with multimedia information. This includes digital image and audio data. This multimedia is captured within the vCard in a format defined by accepted international and industry standards.</p>	<p>Business is a continual exchange of information, whether on the phone, via email, or in person. Let's say you and I meet at a conference and we decide to get together next week. You write the appointment time on the back of my business card. At your office, you copy it onto your computer's calendar.* You might also enter my contact information in your database.</p> <p>Wouldn't it be great if both of us, in a single step, could record all this information and store it at our fingertips.</p> <p>That's the beauty of the new multimedia vCard. This technology records not only the information found on most business cards but also voice and photos. And we can easily exchange vCard information even if we have different kinds of phone and computer systems.</p> <p>* This example predates smart phones.</p>
3	<p>Urgent. As you might have noted via observation or personal experience, an individual who becomes immersed in water (i.e., of which the depth exceeds the individual's height) imperils himself or herself if said individual lacks facility in swimming. It appears that this phenomenon is applicable to my own situation at this point in time. For this reason, I would be exceedingly grateful if, at your earliest convenience, you might be good enough to locate a water-safety professional to render aid in an expeditious manner. My location may be ascertained by conferring with one or more of the approximately three dozen persons shouting and pointing near the dock. Thank you for your attention to this important matter.</p>	<p>Get help! I'm drowning!</p>

IV. All about Attitude



Communicators have a reason to be cranky

In 2012 I started revising my 2007 writers' guide and changing the world... beginning with my target readership: entrepreneurs, managers, executives, educators, and other people who aren't professional writers but whose work requires writing, public speaking, or both. They do (at a guess) 25 percent of the writing that shows up on the Internet, in letters and reports, in certain periodicals, in government documents, and in other settings—though many are reluctant writers who would rather be doing almost anything else. They don't like to write, they tell me, adding that writing takes them away from the work they were trained for, which might be medicine, architecture, R & D, client consultation, or sales calls.

For the last forty years I've been working with nonwriters who have to write. Though many would rather not and are perfectly happy to give the job to someone else, others believe that they write well... or at least well enough. They do a fair job of arranging words on pages, I'll grant, though few of these architects and educators and executives consistently communicate well in writing.

This is bad news. It means that there are millions of writers who are certain that their work is be-

ing read and understood, and millions of readers who think that they're getting the information they need, and nearly all are mistaken, and it's making them cranky.



An act of love...

If you write much at all, you might have found that writing to communicate with anyone—from your mom to your constituents—begins as an act of love and courage: love for the values and goals that move you to write... love for your readers, perhaps... and courage to tell the truth to a reading (or listening) audience of a single relative or ten million strangers.

Some writing is motivated by fear—the flip side of love. But implicit in fear is the loss of what is

loved—life, liberty, ease, and the power to choose. Writing that stems from fear can be an attempt to clobber readers with weighty clumps of words arranged in perplexing disorder and leaving the reader disgusted, confused, or resigned... possibly intimidated into compliance by the narrative's sheer bulk and heavy-handed vocabulary. When I started creating websites, using software that was simpler than your basic word processor, I discovered that my clients—unfamiliar with the technology geek's deceptively thorny lexicon—were convinced that websites were far too complicated to be attempted with their (my clients') meager skill sets.

That strategy works for a while, until a savvier entrepreneur comes along with a product that is genuinely serviceable and understandable. The innovator's clientele remains grateful and keeps shelling out reasonable fees for upgrades and support as long as the seller stays focused on service rather than deception. Just ask the purchasers of 80 million Macintosh computers.

Writing is visual talking

If you write letters, proposals, reports, news releases, and other ordinary documents—even if you write well by business standards—you might be missing an opportunity to convey friendliness, respect, empathy... traits that in conversation you intuitively transmit. (If you’re prone to writers’ block, you might actually want to use dictation

equipment instead of drafting at a keyboard.)

Some writers say that they feel naked in print much as some performers do onstage, so they use sarcasm, untruths, hyperbole, and obscure vocabulary (jargon) as barriers or disguises. Clever writers develop signature strategies for commanding and abusing a sort of transient power long enough to impress, perhaps ultimately to control, well-targeted audiences. Multiply one writer's power by the billions of documents—electronic and otherwise—produced daily on the planet, and you can see how cynicism creeps so slyly into our unconscious attitudes.

View writing as essentially a long-cherished and protected form of human interaction, however, and sarcasm comes across not as clever but as ugly... a huge verbal sneer, or worse. So let's turn it around.

No matter how trivial the medium and homely the message, writing presents continual and abundant opportunities to convey beauty and serenity, joy and excitement, or comfort and compassion. Apply the math to those opportunities, let a smile be your palette, and in a single day feel the world hum with a more hopeful, peaceful, whimsical vibration.

This is no joke!

Research for the new edition of my writers' guide turned up a fascinating bit of data: *Bad*

FREE! FREE!

Send me your name and address with two cents in stamps to pay the postage and I will send you free a cake of Dr. Scott's Complexion Soap, a food for the skin.

Dr. Scott's Electric Corsets

With Spinal Supporting Back will cure LAME BACK, RHEUMATISM, NERVOUSNESS, LIVER AND KIDNEY TROUBLES and improve the CIRCULATION. Made in all sizes, six styles to suit any figure. Prices, \$1, \$2, \$3. Postpaid to any address. My Corsets are not on sale at department stores.

DR. SCOTT'S ELECTRIC HAIR BRUSHES

Remove DANDRUFF, prevent FALLING HAIR, CURE ALL SCALP DISORDERS by giving HEALTH and YOUTHFUL VIGOR to the roots of the hair. In the daily application of electricity you will also find that this gentle current will cure HEADACHES and NEURALGIA. Pure Bristle, no Wires. No. 1, \$1; No. 2, \$1.50; No. 3, \$2; No. 4, \$2.50; No. 5, \$3. Canvassing Agents Wanted. Established 1878

DR. GEO. A. SCOTT, 870 Broadway, New York

writing is more harmful than many of us understood. We thought that a particular business plan, editorial, annual report, or media release was merely annoying... overwritten, stuffed with jargon and buzzwords, or merely inexplicable. But did we understand that the writer wasn't feeling friendly toward us readers... that being in something of a snit caused her to rely more on power than on honesty and charm to win us over... and that it wasn't working?

When a given piece of writing goes horribly wrong, it might not be purely out of the writer's ignorance or inexperience. This morning's five-minute whirlwind tour of websites turned up a dozen examples of writing styles that in my view are offensive and misleading. The meanings are skewed, clarity is absent, and communication opportunities are wasted. I chose to illustrate this point with examples of corporate-speak and

memes because they appeared more than once, and because they're easy to recognize. You've already been treated to a few such dollops, including the medical center's help-wanted ad in the introduction to this book (page 11). Here's another:

Sample 1: Corporate-speak — buzzwords and jargon

At base level, this just comes down to systemized reciprocal contingencies. The consultants recommend responsive monitored matrix approaches. It's time to revamp and reboot our outside-the-box administrative paradigm shifts. We need a more contemporary reimaging of our integrated relative innovation. This is no time to bite the bullet with our knowledge-based policy capability.



What picture is painted here? I see a weary bureaucracy with a thesaurus. I see a shallow and murky answer to the essential marketing question *why should I do business with you rather than your competitors?*

This common and tedious business-writing style actually holds readers at arm's length and fails, I believe, to forward the writer's objectives. Beyond that, there's a sly animus that I find in much of the writing for public audiences and that might fuel the polarities and feelings of isolation many find troubling... by way of the sample's

- patronizing tone and attitude (I'm smart and you're not, so I can feed you this word salad

- though it lacks both flavor and substance)
- unfamiliar or esoteric vocabulary
- overwriting, clumsy verbiage, “stringing”

Sample 2: Memes infiltrate minds

I'm especially interested these days in the effect of “memes”—common perceptions or assumptions similar to “sweeping generalizations.”

Heard on the radio recently —

We live in a swamp of greed and materialism.

The parents of your generation didn't understand the importance of children's self-esteem.

Most people don't notice or care about the homeless.

In my experience, there's not much you could say about “most people” that would be accurate, unless you've actually looked into “most people's” eyes while personally interviewing “most people.” Bogus statistics and unsubstantiated trends become “public knowledge” when introduced with words and phrases such as *everybody* and *most people* or the pronoun *we* (antecedent unclear). Similar results can be achieved with headlines that readers fail to examine. The 2008 headline “Teen pregnancy numbers are skyrocketing!” appeared when the number of teen pregnancies had actually reached a record low—42 percent of the 1990 figure.

During my high-school and college years in the 1960s, journalism and English instructors decried

sweeping generalizations and unsubstantiated statistics wherever they appeared. I was among the students who lost points for all manner of fuzziness in the assignments we turned in, exemplified by unsubstantiated “facts” about “our society” and “our culture” as in the following:

What's wrong with society today? ...Smartphones have taken over our lives. —*digitalsynopsis.com*

Unfortunately, Americans today are obsessed with losing weight. Everybody wants to be thin! —*brightkite.com*

We live in a toxic culture. —*Michael Neill*, Supercoach, *Hay House Radio*

With the traditional homeless population, we turn a blind eye. We tell ourselves, and our friends, that these people just need to get a job. —*GrantCountyBeat.com*

Allegations such as these (a) foster cynicism and distrust within “our culture” (whatever that might be), and (b) mislead readers, being wholly or partially inaccurate. If I were editing this woolly writing, I'd recommend that the writers (a) define *everybody*, *we*, *our*, *society*, *culture*, and *Americans today*, and (b) include data and other documentation, both supporting and examining the claims.

What is “our culture” anyway? Who, exactly, are the citizens of “our society”? I've yet to see a “typical” human being. As an individual, I experience radically different cultures from zip code to zip code, in universities and factories, and across state and county lines. It's probably nearer the mark to say that we live in a stew of cultures that



are continually splashing over into one another without ever congealing into "a thing" that can be packaged and sold.

It occurs to me that many writers use phrases such as these at least occasionally when what they really mean is "popular media." Magazines,

movies, and television programs and commercials might glamorize skinny girls with generous bosoms. In the world I live in, however, young women who are overweight greatly outnumber the curvy or the pathologically thin.

I wonder how many casual readers or listeners infer that they are living in an impersonal, uncaring, even malevolent oligarchy. Feeling powerless, do they retaliate by padding insurance claims or understating taxable income on their annual returns? Cheating their nameless, faceless enemies is justified, isn't it, since these very enemies exploit women and ignore the homeless. Don't they?

Sure, to some extent... but don't tell the National Coalition for the Homeless, which helps millions of Americans obtain short- and long-term housing as well as furniture, food, education, healthcare, and other goods and services. The implication that the societal evils cited are pervasive is a bayonet thrust, much unprovoked, into the ranks of all who respect women, support human rights, and work on behalf of the homeless.

Who are 'we'?

My advice: Be very careful with the use of the generic pronouns *you* (*your, yours*) and *we* (*us, our, ours*) and phrases that begin with *most people* or *most of us* or just *people*.

The popular astrologer Mark Hussan made this

statement on the air:

We are run by fear. We are controlled by fear-makers....
Most of us have not a single-digit clue....

—Mark Husson, Power Peek Hour,
Hay House Radio, September 11, 2012

When I hear *we* and *most of us* used in this way, I am instantly predisposed to quarrel with whatever follows unless it's patently self-evident, as in, "Most of us are unlikely to be mistaken for pomegranates."

The late Hay House founder Louise Hay—who should have known better—made the statement "Most people work at jobs they don't like" on *ThisIsAWar.com*. And there's this from Rush Limbaugh: "Work is how most people identify themselves" (*The Rush Limbaugh Show*, June 22, 2012).

Hay's and Limbaugh's assertions are, in my opinion, particularly dangerous in that they don't send up warning flags. Uncritical readers might well let pass an assertion that most people don't like their jobs—which, it turns out, is false, at least according to a 2017 Gallup Poll indicating that 51 percent of U.S. employees are "not engaged" with their jobs... barely more than half, which means that the other half are fairly satisfied or thrilled to pieces in the workplace.

Regarding Limbaugh's assertion, I couldn't find confirmation more specific than "Americans often identify themselves through their jobs" (Guttmacher Institute, February 2012).

Well, it sounded true

According to the Writing Center at UNC-Chapel Hill, it's easy to slip into untruthfulness without realizing it, especially if you have strong feelings about your topic. The Writing Center lists about a dozen common types of fallacies to watch for in your own writing or others', including...

Hasty generalizations—Example: Christians are hypocrites.

Missing the point—Example: The U.S. constitution mandates separation of church and state, so no one should be allowed to pray in state-owned facilities.

Post hoc (false cause)—Example: Ninety-five percent of people who smoke weed also drink milk; therefore, milk-drinking causes pot-smoking.

Slippery slope, a chain of worst-case outcomes—Example: (As an argument for forced sterilization) Girls who get pregnant in high school tend to drop out of school and get minimum-wage jobs that don't pay enough to support their babies, so they become prostitutes, sell drugs, use drugs, and give birth to crack babies.

Weak analogy—Example: *Tough* is pronounced like "tuff," so *through* must be pronounced "thruff."

Ad hominem—Example: Physicist Stephen Hawking doesn't believe in God. Dr. Hawking is the

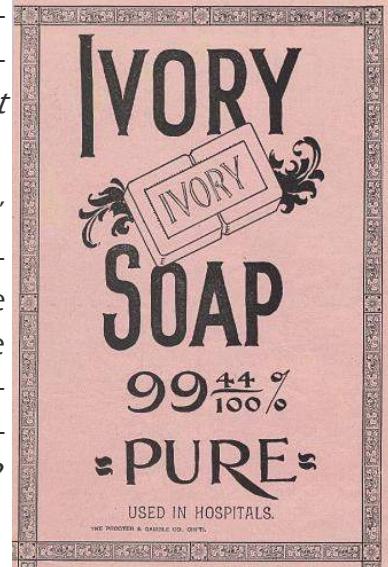
smartest guy on the planet, so God is a myth. (The flaws here are numerous, including: [a] not all truth is scientifically accessible; [b] Stephen Hawking might or might not be the most intelligent among the highly visible scientists in his field; [c] many brilliant people—some of them scientists—*do* believe in God. Another kind of *ad hominem* fallacy dismisses a premise because someone *vile*—say, Adolph Hitler—believes it. Thus, for example, Hitler was not an atheist; he was evil and insane; thus, people who believe in God are evil, insane, and certainly not credible.)

Ad populum—Example: (a) There *is* a God, according to the 89 percent of the world's population who adhere to some sort of religion. (b) And what about atrocities committed in the name of God—the Inquisition, the Crusades, Jihad? (Rebuttal: [a] Sometimes, the whole world is wrong. At some point in the distant past, virtually 100 percent of the earth's population believed that the earth was flat, if they thought about it at all. [b] Atrocities committed “in the name of God” are generally about divergent religious beliefs; religion and God are not identical.)

There are dozens of types of fallacies floating around, and you'll often find one or more mixed with statements that are demonstrably true. The story below has elements of truth and falsehood that are hard to separate. Data that apply to the larger group of six- to nine-year-olds are manipulated such that they seem relevant to the six-year-olds taken separately. The qualifier *68 percent*

of [group] is paraphrased and positioned as *most of [group]*.

What does “most of...” actually mean? Three-fourths? Eighty-five percent? Ninety-nine and 44/100ths percent, as in the old Ivory soap ad campaign? What do you think?



Why 6-Year-Old Girls Want to Be Sexy (Study)

http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2012/07/17/6-year-old-girls-sexy_n_1679088.html

Most girls as young as 6 are already beginning to think of themselves as sex objects, according to a new study of elementary school-age kids in the Midwest....

Psychologists at Knox College in Galesburg, Ill., used paper dolls to assess self-sexualization in 6- to 9-year-old girls. Sixty girls were shown two dolls, one dressed in tight and revealing “sexy” clothes and the other wearing a trendy but covered-up, loose outfit.

Using a different set of dolls for each question, the researchers then asked each girl to choose the doll that: (a) looked like herself, (b) looked how she wanted to look, (c) was the popular girl in school, (d) she wanted to play with.

Across the board, girls chose the “sexy” doll most often. The results were significant in two categories: 68 percent

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of the girls said the doll looked how she wanted to look, and 72 percent said she was more popular than the nonsexy doll.

The data simply don't support the sensational claim. *Sixty-eight percent of the 6- to 9-year-olds studied* hardly equates to *most 6-year-old girls*. Preferring the "sexy" doll doesn't equate to

"thinking of... [oneself] as a sex object." But I suspect that many readers take news stories such as this one at face value, as I too often do. We don't give them more time or scrutiny than the usual cues prompt us to. Why should we? We don't expect to have to read the *Huffington Post* with a microscope.



V. It's Personal





Remember to aim

You and I might speak to one another for an hour and communicate little. Communication doesn't take place without meaning.

Meaning is information that enriches or expands a basic message. It is a layer of communication, adding dimensions beyond the basic message. Successive layers of meaning go from the concrete to the abstract and often from the universal to the personal, the objective to the subjective.

Everything you write, from a laundry list to an inaugural address, has at least three dimensions of meaning: (a) what it means to you, (b) what it means to your principal audience, and (c) what it means to DISINTERESTED bystanders or secondary audiences—your coworkers, for example.

Disinterested, by the way, is not synonymous with *unin-*

terested. *Disinterested* means “neutral” or “uninvolved,” “impartial,” “unbiased.” If you’re a defendant in a jury trial, you want jurors who are *disinterested* but certainly not *uninterested*.

Your meaning can be straightforward or complex, but finding the relationship between (a) and (b), with a nod to (c), provides structure and direction as you write.

The careless writers we’re discussing probably don’t intend to shoot themselves in the foot. Some might start out organized and sensible but become impatient and a little scared, so they rush the process. Maybe they have a hidden agenda. For whatever reason, they lose sight of the audience; they forget to serve.

Don’t make the same mistake. In a matter of minutes you can put your writing project in perspective, giving it the proper weight and emphasis and improving the odds that your message will be

- read
- understood
- believed
- persuasive

Maintain that perspective as your work progresses, checking now and then to ensure that your prose is

- clear and concise
- free of jargon, convoluted phrases, verbal showing-off
- consistent with your brand

Use the Writing Wheel

As you prepare to write, put yourself in the proper frame of mind.

- Know what you want to say and why. Develop a clear idea of your purpose, and make sure it's consistent with your USP or UIS.
- Determine who your audiences are and how your writing will serve them—even if you're writing to criticize or complain.
- Unfailingly address your audiences with respect.
- Be honest and transparent. Don't use language to conceal the truth.
- When writing a first draft, let your writing flow freely. It's okay—even desirable—to write a "shitty first draft" (see page 23). When you edit, choose your words carefully.
- Less is usually more—short words, short sentences, short paragraphs show respect for your readers and their attention spans.

Wait! Stop! Back up!

As you were preparing to write, was your message in focus? Did you understand...

- what you wanted or needed to say [= your meaning]?
- how your message was relevant to your principal audience [=audience meaning]?
- whether there were important secondary audiences (colleagues, critics, or competitors, for example) who might construe additional or

conflicting meanings?

Ideally, once you've decided (a) that you have something worthwhile to say and (b) how and to whom you want to say it, you'll take whatever time is necessary to determine (c) what it means to your audiences.

Exercise

Read the following scenario and then prepare a message to convey the necessary information. Indicate the medium (or media), delivery methods, transmission schedule, and other details.

Scenario. You're an elementary-school principal and your message

- deals with next Wednesday's early school closing—ninety minutes before the usual bell—due to maintenance requiring that the water be shut off. (Today is Thursday.)
- must be conveyed to students, parents, teachers and other staff, district administrators, bus drivers, child-care facilities, and all others with a need to know.

What does it mean?

To you, it's of minor administrative importance, but it could turn into a major bureaucratic headache if not everyone is informed. The meaning from your perspective is initially a matter of penetration.

You've identified numerous audiences and you address the matter of perception. Within each audience there might be dozens of interpretations buzzing around. No audience will interpret your message uniformly, but there might be one or two prevalent understandings.

For example—

Students will be thrilled at the prospect of a shorter school day, you think, before it occurs to you that there are a number of kids for whom school is safer and more hospitable than home.

Some **parents** will enjoy a little extra time with their kids; other parents will have to scramble for child-care arrangements; still others will shrug it off since their children are latchkey kids no matter when the bell rings.

Teachers will have to adjust lesson plans and, if the hour and a half isn't made up, cram a little more learning into a little less time.

Transportation planners and drivers will have to change bus schedules with an eye to factors such as hour-to-hour traffic patterns and the possibility that some parents will forget to meet the bus ninety minutes earlier.

Just a brief mental scan of students', parents', and staff's attitudes toward school-closing time reminds you that your announcement is far from trivial. Feelings of sympathy might tug at you as you're drafting the announcement, and your

The understanding between a non-technical writer and his reader is that he shall talk more or less like a human being and not like an Act of Parliament. I take it that the [writer's aim]... must be to convey exact thought in inexact language... [in which] he can never succeed without the co-operation of the reader.

—Sir Arthur Stanley Eddington,
Messenger Lectures (1934),
New Pathways in Science (1935)

tone becomes softer, less abrupt.

When you see how an apparently simple message can be understood in dozens of ways (not all of which you can realistically consider), accounting for a reasonable variety of interpretations will automatically become part of your writing process.

Getting their attention

There will be other times when some or all of your message will be of scant interest to your au-

dience. Be prepared to improve your communication or, starting from scratch, to rethink the relevance of your message. *To do neither is a declaration of war.*

Maybe you're required by law to inform parents about school-board meetings. Maybe half of them don't care. You can't make them care, but you can (a) embed the meeting details in announcements of popular sports events and concerts; (b) place relevant topics on the board's agenda; or (c) format the school-board notice like an ad, keeping it brief and eye-catching... among other creative approaches.

If you mean to be understood, your writing will address the various levels of interest and understanding among your audiences.

If you have communicated clearly and respectfully, and your audience understands but rejects your message, don't blame your writing. Knowing about a particular audience's distaste for your point of view doesn't obligate you to satisfy that audience's appetite.

You don't have to do all the work. Your readers can be expected to meet you partway. It's your job to figure out how far they'll advance and on which path.

Good writing is the truth as you know it that communicates as intended. It's as much a matter of how it's received as how it's delivered. Whether your writing is "correct" in terms of grammar

and mechanics, whether it's clever, whether it's lyrical... these are secondary considerations, less important than clarity, respect, and honesty.

Postscript

Consider nonverbal factors in written and public forums. There are dozens of potential sources of interference that can weaken your message. A few examples:

- the paper you print on
- the delivery method
- parking availability at your venue
- your fragrance
- a preexisting relationship with your audience; in particular,
- a hostile audience (a situation that might require your defusing of the situation ahead of time)

Early-closing announcement

Do you need to prepare more than one announcement? If so, how many, and to whom will you address your messages?

What media will you use? (Letter, convocation, school PA system, weekly newsletter, and so on)

How will you transmit your message or messages? (Send

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home with students, U.S. mail, broadcast, and so forth)

When will you transmit your message or messages? (For example, send first announcement immediately with reminder the day before the early closing.)

Text

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How well does your audience know you?

Apart from the content of your message, being liked and respected by a large and expanding audience will contribute to your persuasiveness and further your objectives.

You might make any number of assumptions, correct or otherwise, about me and my spoken message based on, for example,

- eye contact and other body language
- the site I choose—meeting you for coffee or treating you to lunch at a swank restaurant
- my slovenly appearance or expensive manicure and wardrobe
- my age, gender, cultural background, accent

These factors are differently understood across cultures and send unintended messages, only some of which I can control.

In written communication, examples of nonverbal cues about me and my message include:

- communication medium—text message, email, snail mail
- type of paper
- visual presentation—design, illustrations

A note about nonprofits: I am often perplexed by fundraisers' lavish appeals, and am less likely to be persuaded by slick, expensive-looking pamphlets than by well-written, -designed, and -presented one-color appeals on, say, matte recycled 24-pound stock.

Fundraising professionals have told me that their wealthy target donors expect, and respond more favorably to, slick, glossy, full-color pamphlets. I believe, however, that creative, resourceful writers and designers get the job done without appearing to waste money better spent on the charitable cause they represent.

A positive relationship with your audience has impact at many levels and over time and is a huge factor in how well you communicate. Remember that when it comes to your audience, there is no hard line between your public self and your private self. If you are well known, a public figure, perhaps, and are observed man-handling your weeping toddler in public, it can undo much of your good communication work.

Be accessible and transparent. Your reputation matters. Your secrets matter even more.

“Wait a minute!” you might be thinking. “Are you trying to tell me that my personal life and emotional stability have an effect on how well I write a business letter or an instruction manual?”

You bet. I'm telling you that your attitude toward other people—those you know and those you don't—shows up loud and clear in what you write and how you write it. Those classified ads on page 11 and page 39 might have been written by bullies, deeply insecure individuals who get a power jab by throwing jargon around like dice on a Monopoly board.

"But... but... but..." (that's you, spluttering), "my personal life is nobody's business."

That might very well be true, in principle. But many experienced CEOs have set up employee assistance plans and offer other fringe benefits geared toward helping staff with financial and mental-health issues. They know how personal problems affect employee performance.

Happy, healthy employees are better workers in all areas of their jobs, but their attitudes are especially evident in their writing because it reveals so much to so many, and also because it's on the record. So, yes, the quickest way to improve an employee's writing might be to arrange for marriage counseling.

How well do you know your audience?

It's my belief that the best writers and speakers know (at least via research and personal knowledge of representative populations), respect, even love their audiences. With some exceptions, they don't brandish their bylines or trumpet their credentials. First-class public speaking and writing invite civilized human interaction, not armed conflict.

Let's work with the assumption that the better you know your audience *and consciously use that knowledge in developing your message*, the more effective your communication will be... and vice versa.

In January 1999, at city hall in Washington, D.C., this incident took place (as reported in the *Chris-*

tian Science Monitor, February 2, 1999):

David Howard, the mayor's white ombudsman, said he would have to be "niggardly" with the scarce funds in the department's budget. One of his two interlocutors, Marshall Brown, who is black, left the room in anger. Mr. Howard offered his resignation, and Mayor Anthony Williams accepted it.

Niggardly means "stingy," but what it very likely meant to Marshall Brown is that his colleague lacked the character and the class to avoid using a word that *sounds like* a racial slur. That particular word sears the air like a lightning strike when used unexpectedly and publicly.

An example of the opposite approach—hypersensitivity to cultural identity—was hilari-



Oscar Wilde

ously portrayed on the immortal Jimmy Smits *Saturday Night Live* sketch "Enchilada" (season 16, 1990), in which NBC News employees (played by Phil Hartman, Jan Hooks, Mike Myers, Dana Carvey, and Julia Sweeney) overenunciate Spanish words such as *enchilada* in the presence of the new Hispanic economics correspondent (Jimmy Smits), who speaks... well, like the Anglo guy next door.

You don't have to *be* your audience to *know* your audience. Oscar Wilde had it on the nose when he said, "Be yourself; everyone else is already taken."

No, no, no, no, no...

When the powerful are addressing the comparatively powerless, they would do well to study their audience exhaustively. A wealthy politician talking to or about the poor is entering a mine field, as Mitt Romney discovered during his unsuccessful presidential campaign in 2012.

"I'm in this race because I care about Americans," he told CNN's Soledad O'Brien during a February 1 interview.

"I'm not concerned about the very poor—we have a safety net there," he said. "If it needs repair, I'll fix it. I'm not concerned about the very rich—they're doing just fine. I'm concerned about the very heart of America, the 90 to 95 percent of Americans who right now are struggling."

Whatever came after "I'm not concerned about the very poor" was lost in the booming echo of that thoughtless statement. Apart from the obvious—if the "safety net" were working, there would *be* no "very poor"—Romney required less than ten seconds to disenfranchise nearly 50 million food-bank-dependent Americans by excluding them from "the very heart of America"—whatever that means.

Later that day, Romney told reporters on his campaign plane that the statement about his lack of concern for the very poor was taken out of context.

"No, no, no, no, no, no, no. I — no, no," he said. "You've got to take the whole sentence, all right, as opposed to saying, and then change it just a little bit, because then it sounds very different. I've said throughout the campaign my focus, my concern, my energy is gonna be devoted to helping middle-income people, all right?"

Oh, dear. Romney doesn't come off well here. He entered a mine field without sweeping it first. He'd forgotten a key rule of communication—respect. An honest admission—"I have no idea what it's like to be poor, but I intend to find out"—would have served him better, though it would backfire if he didn't follow through.

Contrast Romney's credibility among the poor with that of President Jimmy Carter. According to the organization Habitat for Humanity,

[President and Mrs. Carter]... have seen firsthand the effects of poor living conditions....Throughout their involvement with the Carter Work Project, President and Mrs. Carter have become tireless advocates, active fundraisers, and some of our best hands-on construction volunteers.... To date, President and Mrs. Carter have served with over 92,260 volunteers in 14 countries to build, renovate and repair 3,944 homes. They have also made quite an impression on thousands of Habitat homeowners and volunteers.

—www.habitat.org

You don't have to be elected president or build

four thousand houses to gain credibility among the disadvantaged. You do need to know enough about any audience to address its members with respect. That might mean becoming familiar with intricacies of culture, environment, needs, and interests.

Addressing a hostile audience

If you are a chief of police speaking to the black community after a racially charged incident, non-verbal factors are as important as what is said, maybe more so. If you have scheduled a news conference, for example...

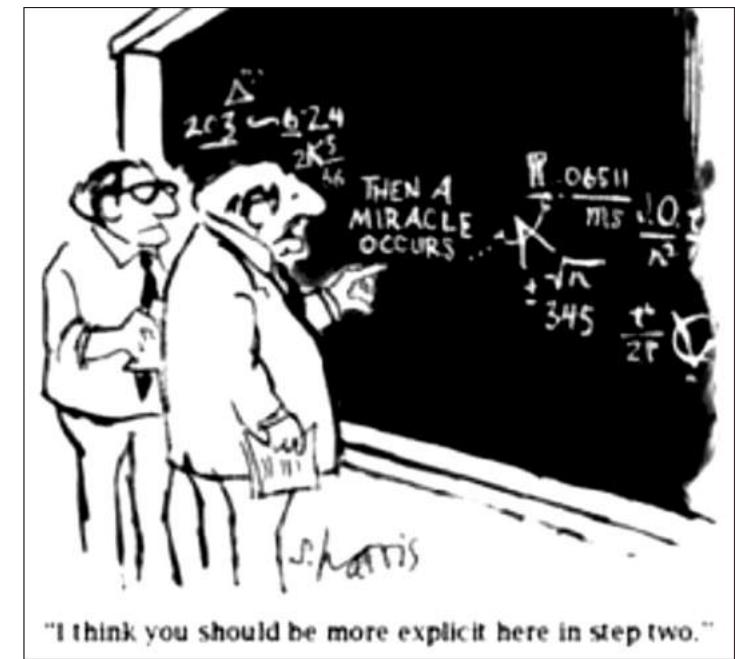
First, seek to serve. Open your mind and be willing to learn. No matter what your position, don't insult your audience by riding on your stature.

Defuse the situation in advance, if possible. Lay the groundwork ahead of time through small meetings at schools and churches. Go to them; don't make them come to you. Ideally, you will already have strong relationships with community leaders.

Blur the line between "us" and "them."

- Be transparent; toss out your hidden agenda, if you have one. Be generous with information.
- Recruit respected individuals from the black community to support your intention to reach consensus.

- Ask them to write even-handed op-ed pieces for local media. Messages from different sources will resonate differently.
- At meetings and news conferences, don't stand, figuratively or literally, at a pulpit, and don't insulate yourself with your cronies.
- Distribute an agenda (the printed kind, not the hidden kind) and include contact information.



"I think you should be more explicit here in step two."

Your starting place should be how the audience feels right now. Articulate their position as you understand it. Then move with them, step by step, to consensus. Try to reach agreement on each step before moving to the next. You might move through the steps with statements like these:

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1. Of course you're angry. Decent human beings are right to oppose injustice.
2. We can't undo what has happened. We can take action to see that it doesn't happen again.
3. We all want to feel safe in our environment.
4. What needs to happen for you to feel that justice has been done?
5. What needs to happen for you to feel safe in your community?

Continue in this vein, using “active listening,” validating people’s feelings even if you disagree with their opinions, and showing willingness to compromise. Keep moving through the agenda, offering opportunities for future communication in writing or at additional meetings.

Depending on the setting, you might want to use the brainstorming technique of recording all ideas on a flip pad without comment, no matter how impractical or absurd some of them might be.

Record, transcribe, and distribute proceedings of meetings; include assignments, action steps, and contact information.

More nonverbal ways to respect your audience:

- If at all possible, avoid conducting meetings on stormy nights or during the Super Bowl.

- Ensure adequate parking and seating.
- Keep the venue at a comfortable room temperature.
- Use a wireless microphone with someone to carry it to those who wish to speak. It keeps things orderly and discourages outbursts.
- You'll need more elaborate arrangements for larger meetings; for example, collect names before the meeting starts, have speakers step up to a stationary microphone, limit speaking time.



Mitt Romney gets the message at a West Philadelphia charter school, 2012; NPR.org

VI. Smart News



Creating news

You're writing a media release (formerly called a "press release") announcing the hiring of a new president.

Your opening paragraph might look something like this:

XYZ Corporation is announcing the hiring of Mary Doe as president. Mary has been with Acme Widgets for twelve years, the past six as vice president for product development. She invented the Writing Widget, which surpassed revenue projections by more than 150 percent in the first twelve months....

After you scribble a few more paragraphs about Mary and her background and achievements—having said everything that might be considered pertinent for a media release—you're ready to edit. As you read what you've written, tweaking the vocabulary and correcting the punctuation, you might notice something that many writers of media releases notice when they review their first drafts:

It's boring. It's not news. There's no "hook," nothing to grab the reader's attention.

Media releases: What's news?

Writing a media release is more about promotional savvy than writing skill. The fact that your company has lured Mary away from Acme offers little news value unless Mary is famous, has



climbed Mount Everest in a bikini, is 14 years old, or stands out in some other way. Being hired is not newsworthy.

Whatever the anomaly that makes Mary special or her hiring a reason to celebrate, you owe it to your audience to share that information. As you are seeking to serve your readers or listeners, you need to give them something useful, interesting, amusing, or otherwise beneficial. Without that, all you've done is throw more words onto the massive pile that grows by the trillions minute by minute. I suspect that all that hot air is the real cause of global warming.

Let's assume that if there were nothing remarkable about Mary you wouldn't have hired her. It's possible, though, that her qualifications are esoteric, not of interest to the general public. If that's the case, then the newsworthy portion of your

media release might be the open house that XYZ Corp is going to host in order to introduce Mary to the community.

Once you've etched the bare facts onto your shitty first draft, checked it out to see if it makes its point and that point is worth reading, and revised it if necessary, then it's time to rewrite—making it succinct, well organized, grammatically correct, and so forth. Finally, ask someone else to look it over for those same attributes. Every company has an employee who seems to have a knack for proofing. Enlist that person's aid.

The finished product might begin like this:

Meet Mary Doe, the new president of XYZ Corporation and inventor of the Writing Widget, the popular handheld device that supplies instant vocabulary on thousands of topics.

Mary will present five free 30-minute Widget Workshops at the times and places listed below. Sign up and you'll automatically enter a drawing for a free Writing Widget, a \$49 value.

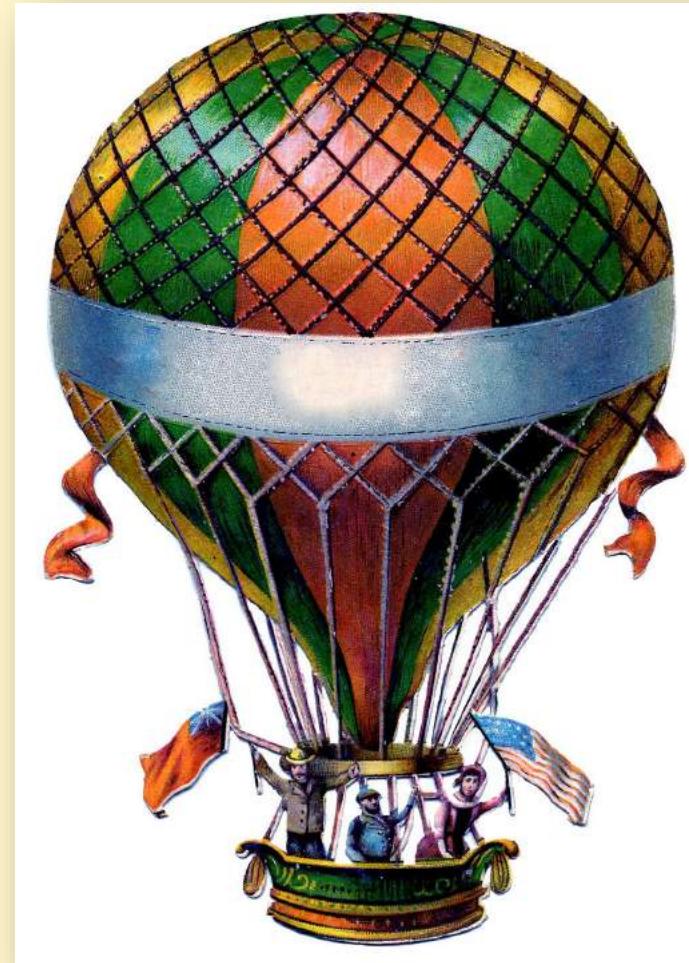
Why is the final media release so different from the first draft? XYZ Corp has wisely determined that Mary's new job, in itself, has little news value but could be a vehicle for exposure of its hottest product.

Not every media release requires a lot of fanfare. News stories should answer the basic questions—who, what, where, when, why, and how? But you should put all your media releases to the final test—the key question—which is “so what?”

If you pass the draft around to colleagues and the typical reaction is a very long yawn, you'd better go back to the drawing board and find a way to pump up your story so that media will be interested enough to print, broadcast, or otherwise disseminate it.



VII. Verbal Inflation



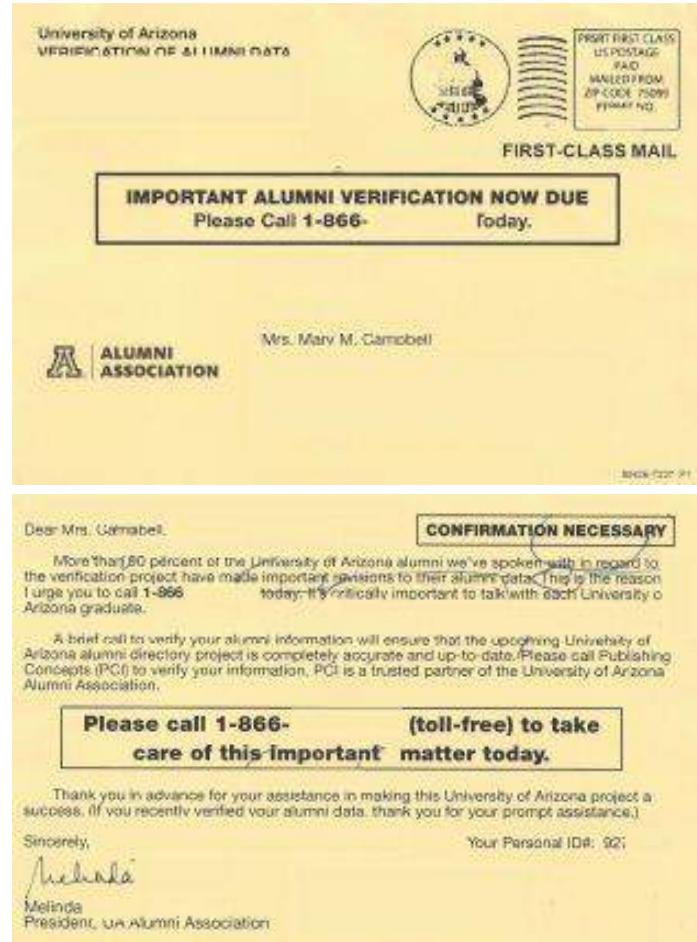
Act now! Operators are standing by!

There is in front of me a postcard from the University of Arizona Alumni Association. It's small and unimpressive, but I know that this is One Frigging Important Postcard. For one thing, it's bright yellow. But besides that, just above my address there is a box with a wide black border surrounding the words—which are in bold capital letters—IMPORTANT ALUMNI VERIFICATION NOW DUE. On the other side is another box containing two words: CONFIRMATION NECESSARY.

Dear Mrs. Campbell [the postcard reads], More than 80 percent of the University of Arizona alumni we've spoken with in regard to the verification project have made important revisions to their alumni data. This is the reason I urge you to call 1-866-555-5555 today.

If the postcard said, "Last year, more than 80 percent of the University of Arizona alumni purchased mayonnaise. This is the reason I urge you to call..." it would make just as much sense. I can almost hear my dear mother's voice: "Mary, if 80 percent of the University of Arizona alumni jumped off a cliff, would you jump off a cliff?"

But wait! There's more! "It's critically important [the paragraph continues] to talk with each University of Arizona graduate."



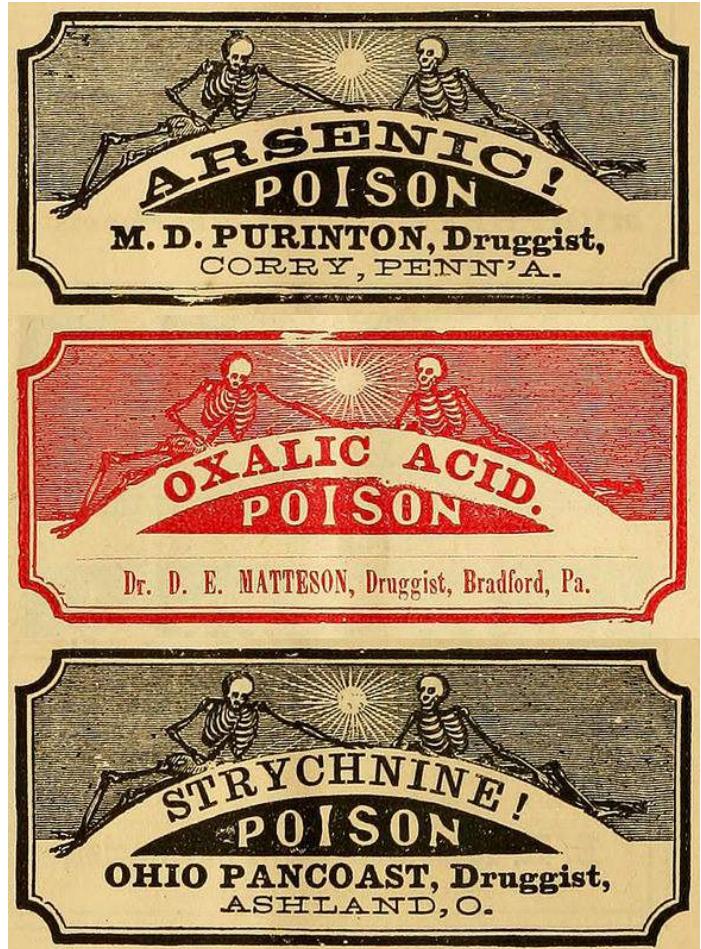
Critically important for *me* to talk with each U of A graduate? Or for Melinda Brown, the Alumni Association president, whose name appears at the bottom of the postcard? Either way, I'm sort of busy. My toddler is spraying toilet-bowl cleaner on the cat, and a glop of the foam is on the finger she's about to stick into her own nose. Is it okay if I take care of that before I call 1-866-555-5555? Although... Wow! I don't know.... There's another box around some bold type—upper and

lower case, but the letters are HUGE—asking me nicely to “Please call 1-866-555-5555 (toll-free) to take care of this important matter today.” I couldn’t help noticing the absence of exclamation points, but Melinda *did* say it’s important, and... Oh! Toll-free. Well, then. I’ll call 911 right now, and by the time the EMTs get here I’ll have finished talking to Melinda.

What's in it for me?

Actually, I won’t be talking to Melinda but to someone at a company called Publishing Concepts, “a trusted partner of the University of Arizona Alumni Association.” This means that the Alumni Association has paid an outside firm to compose this ill-judged attempt to coerce me into making a donation—ill-judged because (a) in 20 years I’ve never given the U of A Alumni Association a dime, and (b) the postcard is worse than a waste of time, ink, and yellow card stock; it’s offensive, and I’m not easily offended. Ten years have passed since my last mammogram, and this yellow postcard from someone I don’t know is telling me what’s critically important?

No. “Critically important” is cleaning up the water supply in Flint, Michigan. “Critically important” is talking someone down from a suicide attempt. My mammogram is important, but I’d hardly say it’s critical. Calling 1-866-555-5555 doesn’t even make my list of things to do after I’ve (a) read every book in the library, (b) painted my house,



(c) sterilized the switch-plate covers, (d) ironed all my clothes and hung them in the closet sorted by color, and (e) achieved world peace.

Even if you allow that crass marketing instruments have their uses and you judge the yellow postcard against similar solicitations, instead of the Bible or *Macbeth*, the yellow postcard violates the first rule of marketing:

Tell me what's in it for me.

Melissa, or whoever, gives me no incentive to comply. Do I care that 80 percent of my fellow alums have updated their information? Is it in my interest to "ensure that the upcoming University of Arizona alumni directory project is completely accurate and up to date"? Hell, no! Even if that were possible, for all I care the upcoming University of Arizona alumni directory can be printed entirely in classical Latin. If it were, I'd buy it, just to see the phone numbers. Mine would be CDXXII-DCCXIX-MMCXXXIII.

If they wanted to sell me on critical importance, it would have to be important to *me*, not the directory-reading public. And the layers of redundancy just make this appeal less appealing—"critically

important" in italics, bold face, and underscored, in capital letters and enclosed in a ridiculous box, when once upon a time it was enough just to say "important." The people who wrote my yellow postcard aren't completely stupid, because they know that many of us have so



many things in our lives clamoring for our attention, claiming to be important, that we throw up our hands at times and stop relying on our own judgment. If they can convince us, even for a minute, that calling 1-866-555-5555 is more important than locking up the toxic household chemicals or taking our kids to the park or meditating or whatever it is that we know we should do but feel we don't have time for, then they have a good shot at getting our annual donation.

VI, ILI, DI, Magnum, PI, mud in your eye, etc.

We have a situation—I won't even call it a problem—with language that I call "verbal inflation." Sometimes I call it "inflated linguistic importance" (ILI), just because it sounds more important.

ILI occurs when words, phrases, and punctuation marks are overused and lose their edge, like my mother's expensive sewing shears that my brother and I always "borrowed" for cutting paper, which (according to my mother) dulled the blades, making the scissors unusable for sewing. In every kind of communication, from marketing letters to emails, the writers try to snag our attention with exclamation points, superlatives, and modifiers such as *absolutely* and *extremely*.

Any more, to call a woman "pretty" is almost an

insult. *So, what did you think of my new girl-friend?* She's pretty. *Pretty? Just pretty?* Okay, she's gorgeous. *How gorgeous?* Really gorgeous. Really, really, seriously, downright frigging, drop-dead, hose-me-down-and-hang-me-out-to-dry gorgeous. *You really think so?*

The flip side of ILI, which I call “disastrous insinuation” [DI], is exemplified by the following letter:

Dear Ms. Campbell: Your recent MRI showed a small mass, called an incidentaloma, above your right kidney. The radiologist who read the MRI described the mass as "anomalous" and commented, "I've never seen anything like it. I wonder what it is." If you're wondering the same thing, you could try calling our office at your convenience to get on a waiting list to make an appointment for follow-up with one of our physicians or nurse practitioners. Good luck with that.

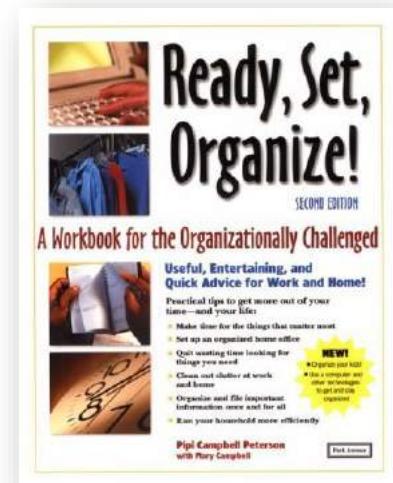
This sort of communication never arrives on a yellow postcard. Usually it comes in a plain white envelope. Half of these letters probably get mistaken for bills or solicitations and tossed in the recycling.

Do what you love

My sister has Alzheimer's disease. We have conversations that might appear normal to others, until they notice that it's really the same conversation over and over, but my sister and I have a good time. She used to be a professional organizer. She wrote a book called *Ready, Set, Organize*. (I was coauthor of the second edition. That's how important I am.)

In *Ready, Set, Organize*, she describes the technique she used with consistent success: Before you can organize your schedule and your stuff, you have to define your values. When you figure out what's important to you, and you develop goals and objectives around those values, only then can you make sensible, productive decisions about your time and your space.

Without that structure, everything seems important, and the loudest and most persistent demands get the greatest share of attention. Whatever you're doing, you have this nagging feeling that you should be doing something else, and you never really relax. You might even find yourself calling 1-866-555-5555 and giving money to a total stranger in Dallas, Texas, while your child eats toilet-bowl cleaner. So if you want take control of your life and gain mastery of your schedule, I suggest that you start by eliminating exclamation points. Just don't use them. If nothing else, you'll save on ink.



VIII. Avoid Misteaks



Solecisms by the dozen

Many of us studied English grammar and usage in the black-and-white school of language-learning favored by the textbooks and teachers of my childhood. To say *ain't*, for example, as in "I ain't got time," was just plain wrong, only slightly less criminal than shoplifting. "He don't have no lunch" and "me and her already ate" were equally undesirable.

Experience has taught me that a wise and compassionate response to "he don't have no lunch" might be to give the guy something to eat rather than to correct the speaker's way of speaking. Assuming that the fellow is indeed lacking a midday meal, "He don't have no lunch" describes the situation clearly and succinctly.

Moreover, if you set yourself up as an authority on any aspect of the English language, fastidious and vigilant defenders of another point of view will rise up to prove you wrong, throwing nasty clots of evidence like yellow snowballs in your face.

There are typos and there are typos

Words can be misspelled and commas misplaced without doing violence to the meaning of the text. Occasionally one notices an astonishingly inappropriate typo that not only distorts

but actually reverses the intended message, as in the following paragraph:

The International Symposium on Focal Therapy and Imaging in Prostate and Kidney Cancer is a joint initiative of the departments of urology at Duke [University], Durham, North Carolina, and AMC, Amsterdam.... The initiative has a purely educational focus [on]... minimally invasive treatment... that destroys the known area(s) of cancer while preventing a man's continence and potency....

—www.focaltherapy.org

Either *preserving* (rather than *preventing*) was meant, or the writer omitted some important prefixes (incontinence, impotence).

The thing is, is

Note how Wikipedia defends "legitimate usages of two successive copulae" (linking verbs):

The *double copula*, also known as the *reduplicative copula*, *double is* or *isis*, is the usage of two successive copulae when only one is necessary, largely in spoken English. For example:

My point is, is that...

This should not be confused with legitimate usages of two successive copulae, such as:

What my point is is that...

In the latter sentence, "What my point is" is a dependent clause, and functions as a subject. In the former sentence, "My point" is a complete subject, and requires only one copula.

Oh, please. What happens is, is that someone begins a sentence having no idea how it is going

to end. Rather than fumbling around with superfluous clauses ("What my point is, is that what on earth was he thinking, wearing a gorilla suit to a wake?"), the speaker could have (with a split second's forethought) communicated with greater clarity and elegance ("My point is that a gorilla suit doesn't belong at a wake").

Dangling "as far as" construction

Another common syntax error is seen in "As far as mice, they terrify me," a corruption of "As far as mice are concerned, I'm terrified of them" or "As for mice, they terrify me."

Like *the thing is, is*, dangling "as far as" constructions strike me as primarily a lack of forethought paired with an unrelated but nonetheless expressive rodent megaphobia reflecting, I am sure, something very interesting about human psychology; I have no idea what that might be.

I am a wanderer of sorts, habitually walking from room to room carrying a key, an electric drill, or an empty Tupperware cereal container and trying to remember why I got out of my chair in the first place; but I rarely begin writing a sentence, paragraph, sonnet, or full-length novel without being fairly certain how it will end, with this essay offered as a clear exception requiring no additional explanation but perhaps provoking a discussion on the need for ink conservation, which, if mandated, ought to be made retroactive to

whatever dark hour this essay first took form, if it is determined that "form" can be applied to this bit of sinister prose and at the same time allow it to retain its integrity.

Standing firm on podium

The English language never stops evolving. I've learned to accept change as an inevitable and even beautiful quality of our language. I've become more flexible, less rigid, and more adventurous about choosing and arranging words on a page.

Right. When pigs fly and hell freezes over. I *hate* change. If it were up to me, the Dodgers would still be in Brooklyn.

Change is sometimes necessary, even beneficial. I get that. Pantyhose had to go. Lard in the cupboard, lead in the gasoline... I don't miss them. But the English language is, for the most part, nontoxic and fat-free, so let's not mess with it more than we have to.

There must be a better way to write respectfully than this:

Someone's at the door. I wonder what **they** want.

...or this:

Someone's at the door. I wonder what **he or she** wants.

The latter is "correct," but neither is going to win a prize for dialogue. No one talks like that, just as

no one answers the question “Who’s there?” by saying—correctly—“It is I.”

We can be forgiven for colloquial speech that breaks the rules... until it descends into grunts and snarls. I’ve been embarrassed by my own mumbles lately during the half-block stroll to the grocery store. I usually pass other pedestrians, and one of us says something on the order of

“How ya’ doin’?”

Understanding that this isn’t a request for an organ-by-organ medical status report, I used to answer...

I’m doing well, thanks. How are you?

...but lately what comes out of my mouth sounds more like this:

Doin’ gud. H’bowchershelf?

Speaking is work...

...a highly complex motor task that involves approximately 100 orofacial, laryngeal, pharyngeal, and respiratory muscles....

—Wikipedia

and we sometimes take short cuts. Over time, our sloppy speech becomes formalized in the language. What’s a contraction, after all, except sanctioned laziness? It’s easier to say “didn’t” than “did not,” and even easier to say “di’n’t,” dropping that second pesky plosive altogether.

This is nothing new. The word *lord*, for example,

comes from the Old English *hlāfweard* with a meaning similar to “breadwinner.” I learned this from Kevin Stroud on his excellent History of English Podcast (mandatory listening for anyone who’s interested in English-language and British history). Kevin explains how our language evolves to reflect the way we actually speak. A word’s journey from its earliest appearance—quite possibly among the ancient Indo-European people long before there was an alphabet—to its current spelling, pronunciation, and usage, can be a fascinating tale. When you know the word’s story, you don’t like to see it misused.

Consider, for example, the beleaguered *podium*. If ever a word deserved mercy, surely *podium* is that word. It’s expected to do not only its own job—that is, to be the word associated with a low platform of the type shown in figure B (below right)—but also the job of another word, which was assigned hundreds of years ago to objects such as that shown in figure A (below left); and that word is *lectern*.



A podium is a platform upon which a speaker stands.

A lectern is the tall desk or stand, usually with a slanted top, that holds the speaker's books, notes, sermons, and so forth.

You stand *on* a podium and *behind* a lectern.

As a rule, using the wrong word interferes with communication, but that's not the case here. If I ask, say, the Scratchnsniff triplets to come on stage by summoning them "to the podium," and there is no podium—only a lectern like the one shown in figure A—the siblings will cope. They won't get lost or wander around looking for the podium that isn't where it is supposed to be. Why? Like a majority of the English-speaking population, they think that *podium* and *lectern* are synonymous.

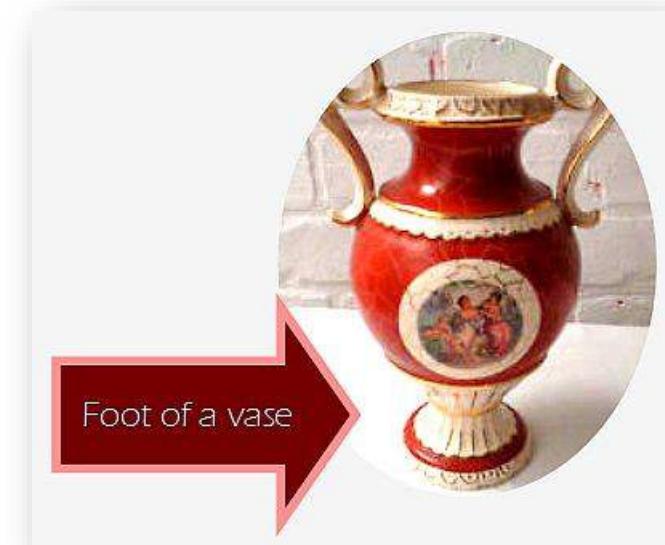
I stand by *podium* for a different reason—its etymology. *Podium* is related to the Greek word *pous* "foot." *Octopus* has the same root. *Pous* evolved from the Proto-Indo-European root *ped-* "foot" c. 2000 to 4000 BCE.

Thus, *podium* has something like five or six thousand years of history to its credit, as summarized below:

The life and times of *podium*

- Starts out as *ped-* with the Indo-Europeans, c. 2000 to 4000 BCE.

- Evolves as *pous* among the Greeks, arty souls who refined it as *podion*, meaning "foot of a vase."
- Borrowed into Latin, where the Romans fiddled with it and came up with *podium* "raised platform."
- Word and meaning arrived intact in English, late 17th or early 18th century—not the typical way for Latin words to enter the language. Most of our Latin vocabulary came through the French language after the Norman French invaded England in 1066. In the aftermath, Normans and their families arrived in great waves, bringing their culture, their customs, and their language. Obviously, *podium* wasn't part of the initial onslaught.



What, precisely, do a podium and a foot have in common? I guess I had assumed, without giving it much thought, that the podium got its name because people stand on it. You know, with their feet. No; that's not it at all—though it can be a useful memory trick. The "foot" in this equation

isn't a human foot but an architectural or artistic one, as illustrated in the photo labeled "foot of a vase" above. As the Romans apparently saw it, a podium was analogous to the foot of a vase (Greek *podion*).

Got an extra podium? Maybe you should take out an ad: "Podiums for sale." You could use *podia* instead, but trust me, people will smirk when your back is turned. Me, I'm a Nebraska girl. I don't say *celli* or *concerti* or *podia* or *gymnasia*, I don't eat raw fish, and I buy my jewelry on eBay.

Where do you stand?

Unlike *podium*, the word *lectern*—which originally referred to a reading desk in a medieval church—came into Middle English "through channels," you might say, if you don't mind perpetrating a vicious pun that relies on a clumsy reference to the English Channel, which separates France and England. In any case, *lectern* came through Old French *letrun*, from medieval Latin *lectrum*, from *legere* "to read."

Now, if you can remember that **we read at a lectern and stand on a podium**, my work here is done.

P.S. If it were only a matter of clarity, using *podium* when you mean *lectern* might actually be the better choice. If you ask for a podium,

you'll probably get a lectern. If you ask for a lectern, you'll probably get a blank stare.

The way my mother waxed

My daughter gave me a ticket to a lecture by the novelist Geraldine Brooks. I arrived early and sat in the front row of the balcony. The eminent author's voice skittered, as one's voice might when it is put to overuse on a lecture tour, but she was articulate and funny and I minded only a little that she is considered a "women's author" and that among the thousand people in the audience there were maybe four men. I settled into my seat, anticipating a pleasant and informative ninety minutes.

She began well, giving a concise, amusing account of her journalism career and the horrors, dangers, conquests, and rejoicings she experienced on five continents. She had turned to fiction, she told us, as a way of lending her voice to women who lived in times and places that denied them self-expression. It was as Ms. Brooks was relating the experience of one such woman—a character in her third or fourth novel—that the fall from grace occurred, with, I would almost say (were literal precision not essential here), an audible thud. The woman was, Ms. Brooks said—these were her exact words—"waxing eloquently."

If you are not a well-known author or a serious

NOTES

student of the English language, you may be excused for not grasping the enormity of the phrase *waxing eloquently*. My mother detested polishing our hardwood floors—something virtually required of all middle-class women of her generation—and she could be quite eloquent on the subject, to the point where my father felt the need to close the door to prevent her eloquence from alarming her young children.

But Geraldine Brooks's character was not engaged in polishing the floors, the furniture, or the family car.

Often, people who speak of waxing eloquently have heard the phrase “wax eloquent” and mentally added *-ly* because verbs are modified by adverbs, right? But in this case, *wax* is what is sometimes called a *linking verb*, which means that the verb is joining two words that are more or less equal:

My word is my bond. Word = Bond

The song was an anthem. Song = Anthem

The sun appears unusually bright. Sun = Bright

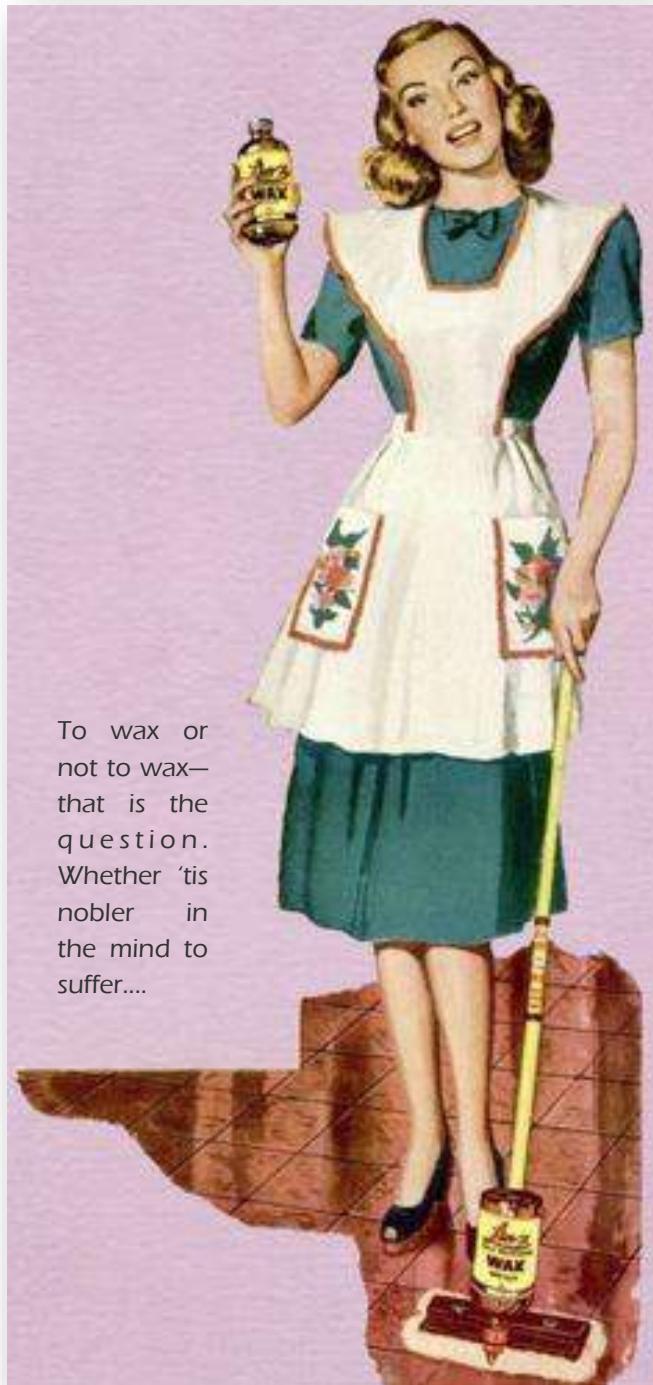
You look nice today. You (that is, your appearance) = Nice

The night was becoming stormy. Night = Stormy

Uncle Steve is feeling poorly. Steve = Poorly. Not all modifiers ending in *-ly* are adverbs. *Poorly, wily, owly*—all adjectives.

The speaker waxed eloquent. Speaker = Eloquent

A modifier used with a linking verb is not an ad-



To wax or
not to wax—
that is the
question.
Whether 'tis
nobler in
the mind to
suffer....

verb describing a verb, it's an adjective describing the subject noun.

Wax means "grow" or "become" when we're talking about the moon. A waxing moon is "growing," getting plumper every night until it's full. After that, it starts to narrow, or wane. Likewise, when a speaker "waxes eloquent," he or she is becoming more articulate.

Writers know this. It's taught in *How Not to Write Stupid 101*, where they also learn to not write "Hopefully, it won't rain" or "The year is comprised of four seasons." So at first I thought that our speaker was making a little joke. But she had been funny and clever to that point, and "waxing eloquently" fell short as humor. She didn't deliver it jokily, and no one laughed. It's hard to believe that she doesn't know the idiom or that no one has ever pointed out her error, but that seems to be the case.

In any event, she plummeted in my esteem. That's on me. Why should one mistake sink her past redemption? And who am I—writer of little note and less fortune, probably committing solecisms daily by the dozen—to judge a famous, rich, and talented novelist for flawed diction, when Shakespeare can write, with impunity, "This was the most unkindest cut of all"?

A solecism is a grammar mistake or, more generally, a rule violation, a faux pas, a slipup. If you put your napkin on your lap before your host

does, you've committed a very mild solecism... but perhaps your host has committed the egregious solecism of not providing napkins. If you're in the back seat at the drive-through and your host tosses a bunch of napkins in your lap as she hands you your fries, a plethora ("whole bunch") of solecisms have occurred, so I wouldn't worry about whether she placed a napkin on her lap before giving you yours.

In fact, unkindness is the principal solecism I pay much attention to, in writing or dining or any other activity. As an editor, however, it is often my job to spot solecisms and correct them, and, in the universe of standard grammar, there are a few that really get on my nerves.

One of them is...

Importantly

This item appeared in the *Washington Post* (which should know better) on May 17, 2017:

...The notion that calm, principled voices surround Trump (Kushner, Kelly, McMaster) on disaster-prevention duty has been belied by recent events. As frightful as this might seem, there really is no one to save Trump — and more importantly, the country — from Trump.

More important would have sufficed. At one time, *importantly* was universally understood to mean "pompously, in a self-important manner," as in, "He strode importantly across the stage." News anchor Ted Baxter (played winningly by



Brock Peters as Tom Robinson, Gregory Peck as Atticus Finch, *To Kill a Mockingbird* (1962)

Ted Knight) on CBS television's *Mary Tyler Moore Show* (1970-1977) was forever behaving importantly. Now that *importantly* has come to signify plain old everyday importance, we are losing that wonderful, concise, single word that describes people who behave as though they think very highly of themselves indeed.

A similar fate could soon befall...

Disinterested | uninterested

As I pointed out on page 59, *disinterested* means “objective, impartial,” whereas *uninterested* means, roughly, “bored.” The terms are not interchangeable.

Many decades ago, *uninterested* and *disinterested* had the opposite meanings, which gives

some legitimacy to the use of *disinterested* to mean “not interested” or “no longer interested.” I might accept it, but I don’t have to like it.

For me, *disinterested* brings to mind Atticus Finch, Gregory Peck's character in the film *To Kill a Mockingbird*. He defends Tom Robinson—a black man accused of raping a white woman—not so much as a civil-rights crusader but rather as a lawyer committed to justice. Although his sympathy is clearly with Tom, his defense is based purely on the manifest evidence in Tom's favor.

Alternate | alternative

As a verb, *alternate* means “take turns” A possible synonym for *alternate*, in adjective form, is “every other,” as in, “I work Monday through Friday and alternate Saturdays [every other Saturday].” Morning-drive radio announcers, reporting on accidents and road closures, often advise listeners to “take an *alternate* route.” *Alternative* is the better word, meaning “available as an option.” Were I one of those announcers, I might just recommend that drivers “go a different way”; but really, friend, just between you and me: Once you’ve informed a commuter that Interstate 80 is closed, is it necessary to micromanage her reaction? Maybe she just wants to skip work and go back to bed. That’s what I’d do.

Chauvinist

INTERVIEWER: Dr. Mathers, why did you resign from your position at the university?

MATHERS: My department head was a chauvinist S.O.B. who treated women like the lower orders of rodents... worse, even... like fleas on rodents.

INTERVIEWER: Dr. Mathers, are you saying that your department head was aggressively and blindly patriotic, especially devoted to military glory, as the word *chauvinist* suggests? Or do you mean that he was a *male chauvinist*, aggressively and blindly sexist in his dealings with woman faculty members?

MATHERS: Yeah, that. What you said.

When *chauvinist* became a household word in the 1970s, it was usually sandwiched between *male* and *pig*. Many of us were unfamiliar with the word except in the context of discussions about unenlightened and insensitive men who treated women disrespectfully. We started taking short cuts, omitting *pig* if the guy was biased but not porkish, then dropping *male* because by that time we'd forgotten—if we'd ever known—that there was any other sort of chauvinist.

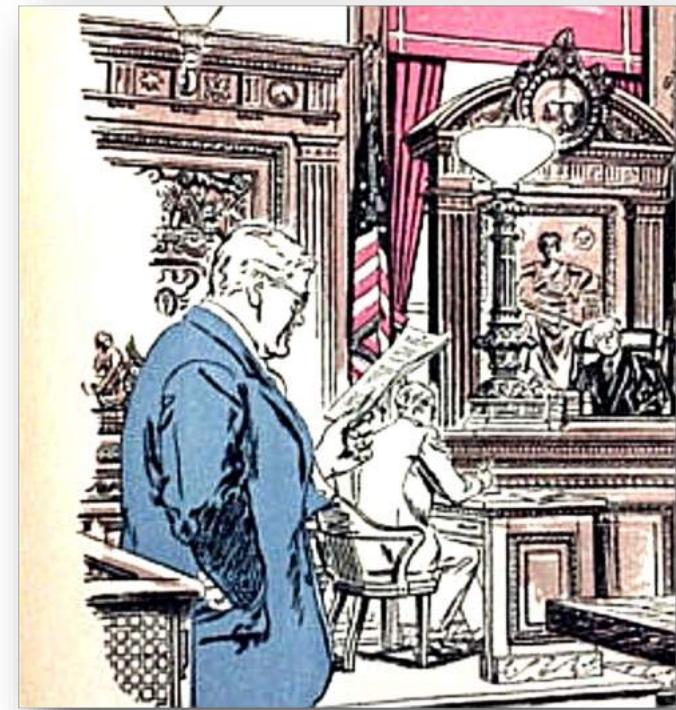
In truth, *chauvinism* entered the language in 1840 with the meaning

"exaggerated, blind nationalism; patriotism degenerated into a vice," from French *chauvinisme* (1839), from the character Nicholas Chauvin... in the... 1831 vaudeville "La Cocarde Tricolore."

—Online Etymology Dictionary

Actionable

On the surface, there should be nothing wrong with the addition of *actionable* to the language



with the meaning "capable of being acted upon" and often describing helpful information that can immediately be put to use.

Trouble is, *actionable* was already taken, and its older meaning is less benign: "giving cause for legal action." If you punch me in the face for no good reason, it's an actionable offense.

The English language should welcome new and

handy words—except when their meanings make important older usages obsolete, as appears to be the case with *actionable*.

Preventative | preventive

Hearing a speaker say *preventative*, the friend sitting next to me clucked crossly, “There’s no such word as *preventative*.” I looked at him in some surprise, since we’d both just heard that very word spoken quite clearly. There seems to be no good reason for *preventative*’s persistent competition with *preventive*—the latter being shorter, easier to say, and preferred by “careful” speakers of the language. *Preventative* is indeed a word, but if I were you, I’d stick with *preventive*, if only because, if my friend is in the room, he’ll cluck at you, and almost nobody I know likes to be clucked at.

Other words on my friend’s nonword list—with the “real words” in parentheses—include...

- orientate (orient)
- disorientated (disoriented)
- cohabitiate (cohabit)
- adventuresome (adventurous, venturesome)

Comprised | composed

The whole comprises the parts; the parts compose the whole. Do not say, “The human body is comprised of oxygen, carbon, hydrogen, nitrogen, calcium, and phosphorus and

very small amounts of potassium, sulfur, sodium, chlorine, and magnesium.” The correct use of *comprise* is as follows: “A full year comprises four seasons.” Got it? Good.

comprise
vs.
compose

Plural or singular?

My clucking friend also gets cross when he hears certain plural nouns used with singular verbs, such as...

Plural

phenomena

crises

criteria

savings

Singular

phenomenon—Do not say, “A solar eclipse is a rare phenomena.”

crisis—Do not say, “That was the fifth crises this week.”

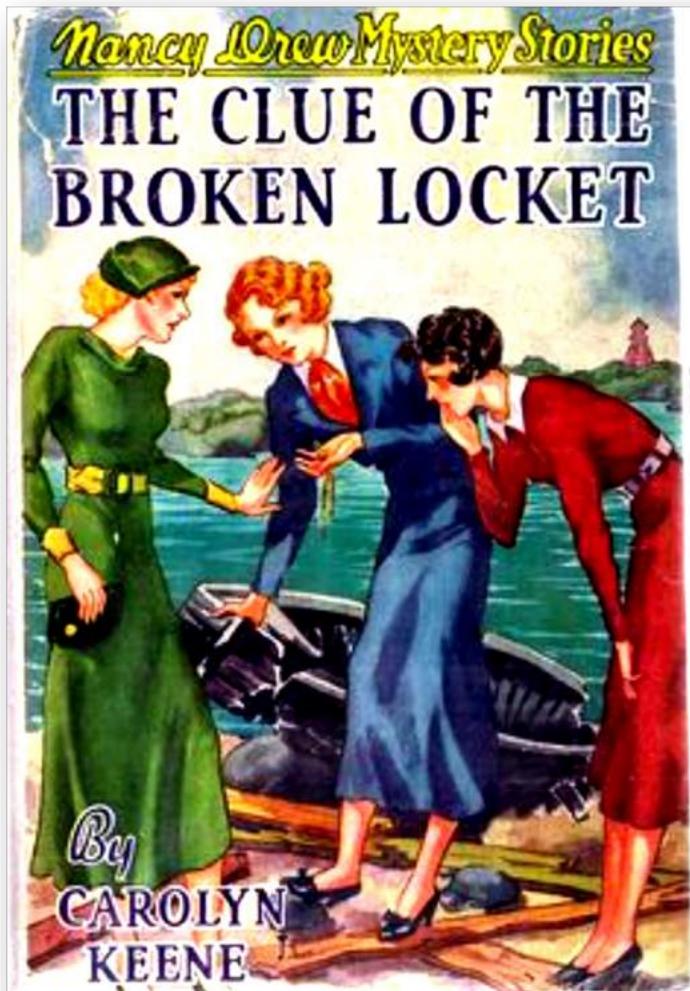
criterion—Do not say, “The only criteria for a picnic is a sunny day.”

saving—Do not say, “a \$50 savings.”

X. Say It Right



To air is human



English-speakers are forever mispronouncing things, especially if they (the English-speakers) read a lot. It's bad enough that British and American pronunciations often differ for no good reason. But the notoriously complex English-language pronunciation issue is rooted in the history of English and its many borrowings

from other languages. I treasure English for its eclectic origins, but they leave us with spellings that bear little relationship to pronunciation, as with *knight* and *through*. Consider *height* and *weight*, *chattel* (pronounced CHAT-el) and *Mattel*. Many of us, if we encounter a printed word but never hear it spoken, are likely to pronounce it phonetically, or as nearly so as we can manage.

When my daughter, Marian, was nine or ten years old, we were discussing her newest vintage-series Nancy Drew detective novel, *The Clue of the Broken Locket* (1934), and the characters therein—Nancy herself, of course, as well as Nancy's father (eminent attorney Carson Drew), her chums (Bess Marvin and George Fayne), her special friend (Ned Nickerson), the Drew family housekeeper (Hannah Gruen—Marian pronounced her first name "HAN-huh"), and, in this book, someone called Gladys—which, as Marian pronounced it, rhymed with *ladies*. Of course it did. We'd all pronounce it that way if we'd never met someone named Gladys or watched an episode of the television show *Bewitched* featuring Samantha's nosy neighbor, Gladys Kravitz. If your first encounter with the name *Gladys* happens in print, you're not likely to "hear" "GLAD-iss" in your mind, but rather "GLADE-ez" or, less likely, "GLAD-eez."

I don't speak of "correct" pronunciation, since the English language is fluid and "correctness"

changes from day to day. Moreover, most dictionaries no longer judge the speaking habits of their users, preferring to be *descriptive* rather than *prescriptive*. (See note, page 98.) Twenty or thirty years ago, dictionaries gave the “correct” pronunciation first, followed by less-respectable alternatives. Now they offer pronunciation options without bias, although the standard (read “correct”) pronunciation usually appears first.

If you want advice on pronunciation, the best source I know of is Charles Harrington Elster’s charming book *There Is No Zoo in Zoology* (which has been incorporated into *The Big Book of Beastly Mispronunciations—The Complete Opinionated Guide*). From the title alone, you can infer that (a) *zoo-OLL-uh-jee* is just plain wrong and (b) Elster’s book will tell you how and why to say it (and hundreds of other words) right. (It’s *zoe-OLL-uh-jee*, with a long O in the first syllable.) As useful as the book is, you’ll be dismayed to find that you’ve been mispronouncing two-thirds of your vocabulary for your entire adult life. For example—according to Charles Harrington Elster—

- *Calm* rhymes with *bomb* (the *L* is silent).
- *Conch* rhymes with *bonk*.
- *Colander* sounds like *cullender*.
- In *collate*, the stress is on the second syllable.

Elster’s pronunciations are exhaustively researched and entertainingly presented. If you do any public speaking, you need this book.

Err

According to Elster and most (but not all) of the other sources I consulted, *err* rhymes with *fur*, not *hair*.

Short- and long-lived

The */* is long; */ived* rhymes with *hived*. This pronunciation is etymologically correct, since the compound is derived from the noun */ife* rather than from the verb */ive*. But the short-/pronunciation “is by now so common that it cannot be considered an error,” according to the English Language & Usage Stack Exchange website.

Kudos

This much-abused word has strayed a great distance from its original pronunciation and usage. Usually pronounced “KOO-doze” and treated as plural in the U.S.—though there’s no such thing as *o n e K O O - d o e*—It means “the praise and respect that you get from other people because of something that you achieved” (*Cambridge Dictionary*). Some Americans, most Brits, and Charles Harrington Elster say KYOO-doss.

Clothes

The items that hang in my closet are cobwebs.

The stuff behind them is what I refer to as my *close*—shirts, pants, dresses, and so forth. *Clothes*, with the *th* combination pronounced, is difficult to say. I suspect that one day soon, “CLOZE” will be the standard pronunciation.

Arctic

Even experienced network news announcers sometimes say “AR-tick” instead of “ARK-tick” (ditto for “ant-AR-tick | ant-ARK-tick”)—omitting the first *K*-sound—and they’re wrong, wrong, wrong. It seems to me there’s even a beverage called something like “Artic Blast.” Let’s agree to get this one right and unite behind “ARK-tick.”

History, historical

It’s a mystery to me that so many people drop the *H* when saying “historical” and precede it with the article *an*, as in “an historical account.” There’s no accounting for what the British do, but in the U.S., the *H* in *history* (and *historic*, *historical*, and so forth) is sounded, not silent as in *honor* and *heir*, and the combination “an historical” is incorrect.

Envelop, enveloped

The verb *envelop* (“enn-VELL-up”) means to wrap, enclose, or shroud: “The landscape was

enveloped in fog.” In the past few weeks, I’ve heard two authors on Hay House Radio talk about being “enveloped” in peace and serenity, which might have sounded dreamy indeed had they not said “ENN-vuh-*loped*.”

Other frequently mispronounced words with their standard (right) and non-standard (wrong) pronunciations

anyway not *anyways*

cardsharp not *card shark*

cavalry not *Calvary*

champ not *chomp* (at the bit)

cohabit not *cohabitate*

diphtheria not *diptheria*

espresso not *expresso*

February not *Febuary*

for all *intents* and not *intensive* (purposes)

herbal not *erbal*

homogeneous (5 syllables) not *homogenous*

lambaste not *lambast*

mauve (rhymes with *rove*)

mischievous (3 syllables) not *mischevious* (4 syllables)

often (rhymes with *soften*; the *T* is silent)

orient not *orientate*

potable (rhymes with *notable*)

recur not *reoccur*

reprise (second syllable rhymes with *ease*),
not *reprize*

spayed not *spaded*

spit and not spitting (image)
suite (sounds like *sweet*), not *suit*
supposedly not *supposably*
utmost not *upmost*
verbiage (3 syllables) not *verbage* (2 syllables)

Note: The truth of the matter is that today virtually all English language dictionaries are descriptive. The editors will usually say that they are simply recording the language and how its words are used and spelled. True, there may be some guidance. For example, most Merriam-Webster dictionaries will note if certain words are deemed nonstandard or offensive by most users; however, the words are still included. Of modern dictionaries, only the Funk and Wagnall's contains a certain amount of prescriptive advice. All the major dictionary publishers—Merriam-Webster, Times-Mirror, World Book, and Funk and Wagnall's—will tell you that they are primarily descriptive.

—Englishplus.com

CHAISE LONGUE

A reclining chair with a lengthened seat forming a leg rest

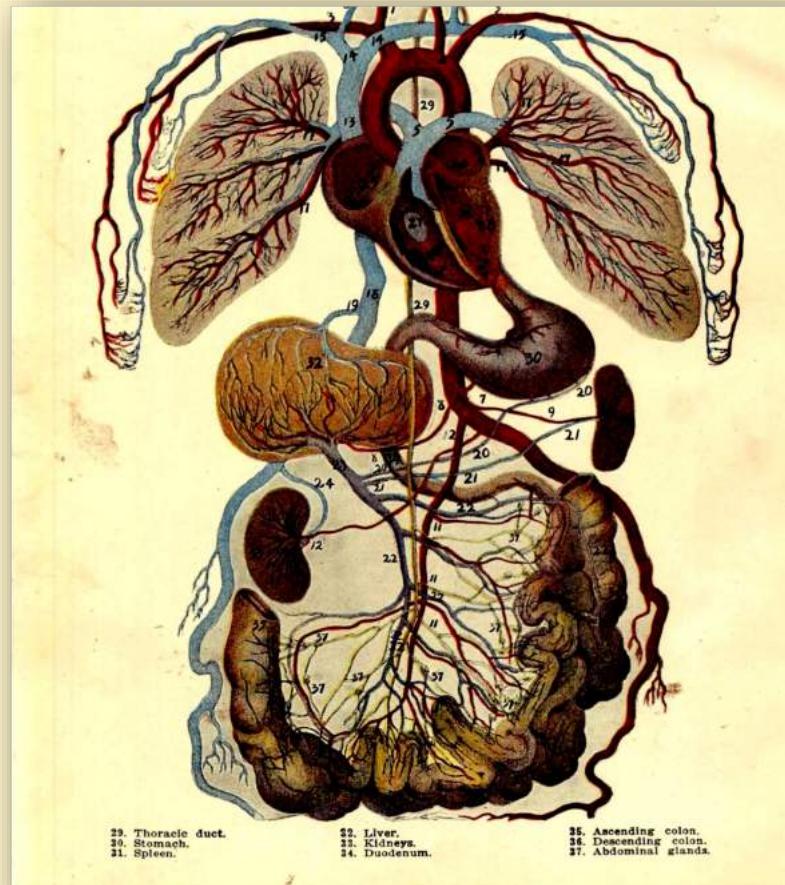


(SHAYZE LOUNGE)



(SHEZ LAWNG)

Appendix



Social Intelligence

Social Intelligence is successfully navigating and connecting with the people around us, and making more thoughtful decisions about the direction in our lives. We become more socially intelligent by understanding the root causes of human behavior. Specifically, here at the Social Intelligence Institute, we teach research from the fields of neuroscience and social, cognitive, and developmental psychology to help us understand human behavior.

SI Principles

Our institute has four main principles that we believe people of all ages can make a part of their daily living.

View others as humans, rather than objects. Other people are not chess pieces. They are aware and capable, just like us, with thoughts, feelings, hopes, dreams, and anxieties. Other people are as real as we are.

To understand and react appropriately to another person, we must first determine WHAT they see, HOW they see it, and WHY they see it the way they do. No human is alike and everyone has their own perspective on what is happening around them. This unique perspective, a personal lens, is acquired from life experiences, culture, parenting, and genetic make-up. The ability to read other people, understanding what they are thinking and feeling, from their perspective, is the cornerstone of social intelligence.

Recognize automatic behavior in yourself and others. 95% of what we say, do, and

think is automatic. It is behavior that is done without thought. Once you are aware of these behaviors in yourself, you can choose to change course and behave differently. Likewise, as you recognize automatic behavior in others, you can respond in more appropriate ways because you have a better understanding of why they are behaving the way they are.

It's all about choice. How we view humans that cross our paths is a choice. For instance, when we pass a stranger on the street, we make the choice to look at them and say "hello" or look through them without engagement. As we talk with our child, we make the choice to see the world through our own eyes or through our child's eyes. As we work in teams at work, and automatic group behaviors begin to emerge, we make the choice to jump into the fray or lead the group down a more productive path.

—Social Intelligence Institute



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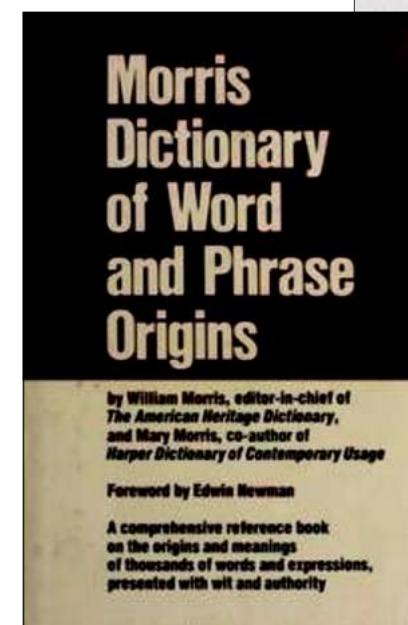
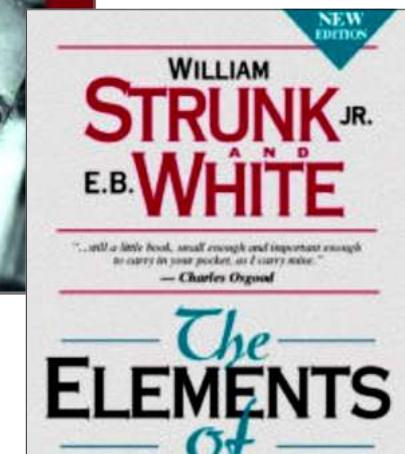
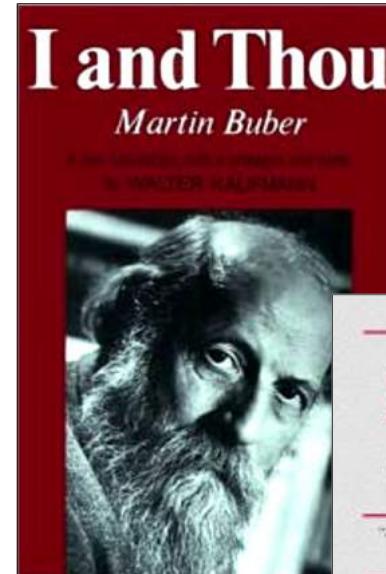
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