

Talking Plain English When Your World is Alphabet Soup

Twenty Terrific Tips for Creating Easily Understood Messages... (so you never have to eat your words!)

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The most effective communication is **person-to-person, face-to-face!!** But, when you have to put it in writing, remember...

Get to the point. The opening paragraph must tell readers what's in it for them (WIIFM). The first five lines make it or break it.

Set the tone. Make it inviting, *alive and warm* not stuffy and boring.

Use simple words. More than two syllables increase reading difficulty.

- utilize use
- held a meeting met
- reach an agreement agree
- take into consideration consider

Write to express not impress. Resist the temptation to display your vocabulary. Readers don't want verbiage. They want information.

Be yourself. Write in a natural way. As a general rule, write the way you speak.

State things positively. Negative statements can be ambiguous or worse! And, negative statements are harder for the brain to process.

Eliminate needless words and redundancies.

~~close~~ proximity ~~new~~ record ~~complete~~ monopoly

Avoid jargon. Write in straightforward language. Minimize technical language and acronyms. If you must use them, spell out the first reference, followed by the acronym in parentheses.

Cut out clichés! They make your writing stale. One way to freshen up your writing or speaking: Take a common expression and give it a twist. You'll achieve a bright, original approach with a touch of humor. For example:

- Into each life a little sun must fall.
- He burns the candle at neither end.
- There's madness to her method.

Avoid sexist writing (but don't compromise grammar). Write and edit with a sense of equality, appropriateness and dignity for both sexes.

Keep your readability level low. Most Americans read at the ninth-grade level or below. Keep 60%-70% of your words to five letters or fewer.

Allow no more than two ideas per sentence—preferably one idea! One way: Make 60%-70% of your sentences simple ones—those containing just a subject and predicate with no additional clauses. For example: Students learn.

Control your average sentence length. Aim for passages that average 17 words—a line and a half; two and a half, maximum.

Use your word processor's readability function. After checking spelling and grammar, it displays reading-level information. To activate it in Microsoft Word: Click on spelling and grammar. Click on options. Click on readability statistics.

Mind your paragraphs. Keep them short: two to three sentences, maximum. Build bridges between paragraphs to maintain sentence flow, and idea continuity. Use "therefore," "moreover," "however," or "even so." Also, indent your paragraphs. Research shows indented paragraphs are easier to read.

Use the active voice. Purge all the passives; replace with active verbs.

Rid your writing of excess prepositions.

Avoid the "made" trap. Get them out by changing nouns to verbs. For example, instead of writing: "He made a suggestion that..." write: "He suggested that..."

Add clarity—and power—to your message by choosing the shortest possible verb. Note how the verbs gain power as they shrink in syllables:

- Accelerate, hasten, rush.
- Accentuate, highlight, stress.
- Alleviate, lessen, ease.
- Communicate, interface, talk.
- Clarify, explain, tell.

Edit, edit, edit and proofread. Whenever possible, have a fresh set of eyes review your work. Do more than spell check. While it may catch misspellings, it will pass over other words that are spelled correctly but misused.