

Principles of Professional Communication 1

Lecture 11
The process of good writing –
what's a cliché anyway?

What do writers have to think about? - purpose

- Why do I want to write about this? What do I expect to learn/achieve as a result?
- Different writing purposes include – Information, Persuasion, Entertainment



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What do writers have to think about? - purpose

- Consider how their readers will use or react to the information/document
- Frame a purpose statement to clarify your aims in your own mind eg *I am writing this letter to collect an overdue account but need to still ensure good customer relations*
- A purpose statement gives the writer a mental target to aim for

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What do writers have to think about? – audience

- *Who* are my intended readers – age, experience, culture, education level etc?
- *How* much will they know about the topic?
- *Why* is it important to put your ideas in print?



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What do writers have to think about? – audience

- *What* misconceptions do they have – how will I address their biases or mindset?
- *How* will the document/piece of writing impact on their lives – how will I get their attention and emphasise its importance?
- *How* does it fit in with what they are already familiar with – will they know how to read the form, fill it in?

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What do writers have to think about? – topic or content

- What have I got to say?
- Do I have all the necessary information?
- Do I know both sides of the story or argument?
- What level of detail is necessary?
- Do readers need general background information?
- Is my information accurate and verifiable?

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What do writers have to think about? – topic or content: 4 Ps

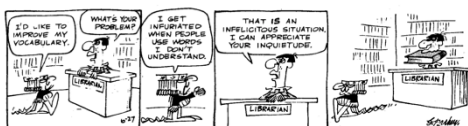
1. Describe the *present* situation – what is happening around you that is prompting you to write?
2. Outline the *problem* that exists in the current situation
3. Present some *possible solutions*
4. *Propose* a solution or some action

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What do writers have to think about? – language

- Which words will I use to make myself clear?
- Will my readers be familiar with those words?
- Can I use jargon?



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What do writers have to think about? – organisation

- How will I present different parts or sections of the topic – headings, numbering, text, boxes, diagrams etc?
- Which item will I put first?
- Will the order of information impact on how the reader reads the document
- In what order should the information go – general to specific or vice versa?
- Good news or bad news first?

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What do writers have to think about? – design

- How will I set this document out to make myself clear?
- Page numbering, font selection, white space, numbering systems, tables of contents etc
- Will readers be able to find info easily?
- Design is a form of written non verbal communication

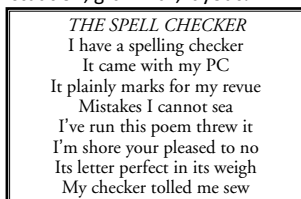


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What do writers have to think about? – revision

- Have I said what I really wanted to say?
- Is my documents clear of errors – punctuation, grammar, layout?



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Reminder ... definition of good writing

Good writing narrows the communication gap between sender and receiver.

It does this because it is clear, accurate, concise and coherent.



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Why is clear writing important?

- *“Language tethers us to the world; without it we spin like atoms.” ... Penelope Lively*
- *“Language is a key issue of access for people from any non-English speaking culture. It affects the individual’s ability to access and use services and knowledge of services.” ... Human Rights Commission (cited in Watson, 2003)*

What are the benefits of clear writing?

- According to Eagleson (1990,6), in 1982 in the UK, 750,000 copies of an internal Ministry of Defence travelling allowance form were filled in every year. By rewriting and redesigning the form, the ministry was able to reduce:
 - The time taken to fill it in by 10%
 - The error rate by 15%
 - The processing time by 15%
- This saved the British Government £900,000 per year

Some examples of political gobbledegook ...

- *“It’s very clear, I think, from the totality of the Opposition’s question and the totality of the Prime Minister’s answer, exactly what the context of the answer was.” ... Tony Abbot MHR*
- Knowledge managers “ ... use frameworks ... based upon reflection in action, pragmatic real world systems implementations, as well as theory and practice defining research conducted over the past two decades.”

And the winner is ...

- “As we know, there are no known knows. There things we know we know. We also know there are known unknowns. That to say we know there are some things we do not know. But there are also unknown unknowns, the one ones we don’ t know we don’ t know.”

... U.S Secretary of Defence, Donald Rumsfeld

What the ...?

How do we achieve clear writing?

- Simplicity
- Objectivity
- Clarity
- Coherence
- Conciseness
- Familiarity



Clarity can be achieved by using the following principles

- *Simplicity* – getting to the heart of the matter and avoiding unnecessary complexity
- *Familiarity* – means using words and pictures your reader will recognise
- *Visibility* – means using word pictures and analogies to create mental pictures the reader will ‘see’ immediately

An example of 'visibility' in language

Physicist Martin Gardner (1976) explains Einstein's Theory of Relativity to a non-science readership ...

Imagine a rubber sheet stretched out flat like a trampoline. A grapefruit placed on this sheet will make a depression. A marble placed near the grapefruit will roll toward it. The grapefruit is not 'pulling' the marble. Rather, it has created a field (the depression) of such a structure that the marble, taking the path of least resistance, rolls toward the grapefruit. In a roughly (very roughly) similar way, spacetime is curved or warped by the presence of large masses like the sun. This warping is the gravitational field. A planet moving around the sun is not moving in an ellipse because the sun pulls on it, but because the field is such that the ellipse is the 'straightest' possible path the planet can take in spacetime. (cited in Mohan et al, 1996, 173)

Be aware of ambiguity ... when a sentence has more than one meaning

- The woman tickled the baby wearing crimson lipstick.
- The camels were located using helicopters
- When the building caught fire, the tenants sought safety in their pyjamas
- Coming home, I drove into the wrong house and collided with a tree I don't have
- In accordance with your instructions, I have given birth to twins in the enclosed envelope

Avoid idiomatic expressions

How clear are these sentences?

- Jones is really *on the ball*.
- He was *head and shoulders* above any of the other job candidates
- The company is expanding by *leaps and bounds*.



Misunderstanding his employer's actions of "Simmons has lost his marbles," Mr. Wagner burats from his office for the last time.

Fig 1: The danger of using idioms according to Gary Larson

A clearer and less vague version would be ...

- Jones is quick thinking and demonstrates a high level of initiative.
- He had superior qualifications and more experience than any of the other job candidates
- The company is expanding rapidly – production has increased by 20% in the last year and we have employed 30 new staff.

Euphemism, PC, jargon & doublespeak

- Euphemisms are designed to remove the “offence” or “unpleasantness” that can arise from certain words, notions or concepts eg
 - Die = passed away, life extinct
 - Go to the toilet = use the bathroom, spend a penny, see a man about a dog, visit the powder room
 - Sacked or dismissed = career change, downsized redeployed, selective separation, workforce imbalance correction

Doublespeak at work



Euphemisms designed to deceive

- Radiation enhancement weapon = nuclear bomb
- Eliminate with extreme prejudice = kill
- Pre-dawn vertical insertion = invasion
- Friendly fire = kill your own soldiers
- Engage the enemy on all sides = ambushed
- Ballistically-induced aperture in the subcutaneous environment = bullet hole
- Period of accelerated negative growth = recession

Socially polite euphemisms

- Follically challenged = bald
- Non discretionary fragrance = body odour
- Physically challenged = crippled
- Achieved a course deficiency = failed
- Alternative dentation = false teeth
- Horizontally challenged = short
- Chronologically gifted = old
- Differently interesting = boring
- Vertical transport corps = elevator operators
- Automotive internists = mechanics



Non discriminatory language

- Language has the ability to subtly discriminate and influence the perceptions of readers and listeners by carrying "hidden" connotations.
- Discrimination can occur on the basis of gender, age, race etc
- Non-sexist language is language that is gender neutral or inclusive language that treats men and women equally



Some major results of sexist language

- Invisibility – due to the use of ‘generic’ masculine pronouns such as a ‘he’, ‘him’ and the use of ‘man’ as a noun eg ‘mankind’, ‘manmade’
- Dependence – women often portrayed in language as subordinate or oddities in certain occupations eg female doctor
- Trivialisation – ‘girls in the office’, ‘just a housewife’
- Stereotyping – women described in terms of their roles or physical attributes when it is not appropriate in the context eg ‘mother of three’ when describing a company executive

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Some ways to combat sexism in writing

■ Each student must submit <i>his</i> essay by Friday.	■ Each student must submit <i>their</i> essay by Friday.
■ <i>My girl</i> will answer the telephone.	■ <i>My assistant</i> will answer the telephone.
■ You and <i>your wife</i> are invited to the party.	■ You are <i>your partner</i> are invited to the party
■ Foreman → Supervisor	■ Manpower → staff
■ Actress → Actor	■ Cleaning lady → cleaner

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Word confusion ... a barrier to accuracy

- In English, there is often confusion between words that have a similar function
 - In 1996 the (amount/number) of projects increased by 135 compared (with/to) the previous year.
 - This morning’s attempt to (elicit/illicit) a response was inhibited by a (deficient/defective) receiver switch.
 - The largest item in our (stationary/stationery) cupboard is a carton of paper.
 - The (principle/principal) need in this company is for a new administrative centre.

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Increase your vocabulary ... the power of synonyms

- Use a thesaurus or dictionary to select the most appropriate word to convey the intended meaning
 - The lawyer never stopped talking about trivial, irrelevant, and stupid subjects. His (glib/garrulous/loquacious/fluent) tongue eventually drove everyone from the room.
 - Garrulous = talkative and trivial
 - Loquacious = longwinded
 - Fluent = clever and clear
 - Glib = fluent in an insincere way

The Sir Humphrey syndrome

From Lynn & Jay (1981) "Yes Minister" p133

Today I attempted to explain the new system to Sir Humphrey, who effectively refused to listen. Instead, he interrupted as I began, and told me he had something to say that I might not like to hear. He said it as if this were something new!

What he actually said to me was: "Minister, the traditional allocation of executive responsibilities has always been so determined as to liberate the Ministerial incumbent from the administrative minutiae by devolving the managerial functions to those whose experience and qualifications have better formed them for the performance of such humble offices, thereby releasing their political overlords,

Sir Humphrey syndrome continued

...

for the more onerous duties and profound deliberations that are the inevitable concomitant of their exalted position."

I couldn't imagine why he thought I wouldn't want to hear that. It was rivetting. Presumably he thought it would upset me - but how can you be upset by something you don't understand a word of?

Yet again I asked him to express himself in plain English. This request always surprises him, as he is always under the extraordinary impression that he has done so.

Nevertheless, he thought hard for a moment and then, plainly opted for expressing himself in words of one syllable. "You are not here to run this department," he said.

Avoid (unnecessary) redundancy

- With reference to = about
- A considerable period of time = a long time
- In the vicinity of = near
- In some instances = sometimes
- Make an attempt = try
- Reach a decision = decide
- On a daily basis = daily
- Reverse backwards = reverse

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The ten commandments for more effective writing

- Keep your writing clear, concise and simple
- Choose your words carefully
- Be natural
- Avoid fad words, jargon and cliches
- Use active verbs
- Take a stand – avoid qualifiers and modifiers
- Use familiar words – plain English
- Be specific – avoid vagueness
- Eliminate redundant expressions
- Keep your audience in mind

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Some examples of the absurdity of language thanks to "The Far Side"



Innocent and carefree: Stuart's left hand didn't know what the right was doing.

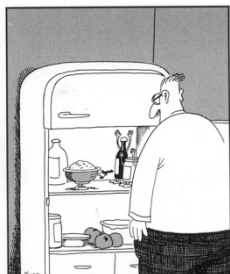


Specialized obituaries

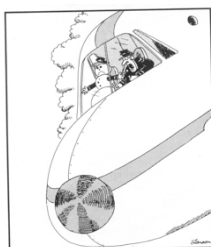
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More Larson ...

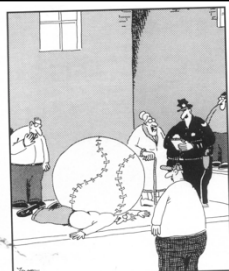


When potato salad goes bad



"Mayday! Mayday! This is Flight 97! I'm in trouble! ... My second engine's on fire, my landing gear's jammed, and my worthless co-pilot's frozen!"

And some more ...

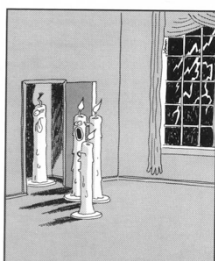


"And then wham! This thing just came right out of left field."



Understanding only German, Fritz was unaware that the clouds were becoming threatening.

Last ones



"AAAAAAAAAAAA! It's Sid! Someone snuffed him!"