

# Effective Use of Language

## The Importance of Language

As a writer, it is important not only to think about *what* you say, but *how* you say it. To communicate effectively, it is not enough to have well organized ideas expressed in complete and coherent sentences and paragraphs. One must also think about the style, tone and clarity of his/her writing, and adapt these elements to the reading audience. Again, analyzing one's audience and purpose is the key to writing effectiveness. In order to choose the most effective language, the writer must consider the objective of the document, the context in which it is being written, and who will be reading it.

## Characteristics of Effective Language

There are six main characteristics of effective language. Effective language is: (1) concrete and specific, not vague and abstract; (2) concise, not verbose; (3) familiar, not obscure; (4) precise and clear, not inaccurate or ambiguous; (5) constructive, not destructive; and (6) appropriately formal.

### Concrete and Specific Language

Concrete language includes descriptions which create tangible images with details the reader can visualize. Abstract language is vague and obscure, and does not bring to mind specific visual images. Consider the two sets of statements below. The statement at the top is abstract, but the statements become increasingly concrete and specific toward the bottom.

He is a bad roommate  
He is lazy and discourteous  
He is untidy and unclean  
He doesn't clean up his own messes  
He leaves his dirty dishes on the kitchen counter

Your relationship with John is unacceptable  
You do not get along well with John  
You and John have a lot of arguments  
You and John insult each other too much  
You and John call each other derogatory names

Notice how much more effective the statements become as the language becomes more specific and concrete. The statements at the top, which are more abstract, can be interpreted in many possible ways, and leave many questions answered. The statements at the bottom, which are more concrete, are less open to multiple interpretations.

## Concise Language

A hallmark of effective writers is the ability to express the desired message in as few words as possible. Good writers, in other words, use language which is straightforward and to-the-point. Consider the following examples.

(1) It is widely discussed by employees that many of them will be forced to change jobs and take on new responsibilities when the merger takes place between the two companies.

(2) Before making a decision about whether the person on trial is guilty or innocent in this case, the members of the jury should be sure to carefully think about, ponder and reflect on all of the important and relevant testimony in the case.

Notice how long-winded these sentences are, and how easily they could be shortened and simplified. An important part of revising and editing involves rephrasing sentences to eliminate excessive wordiness. One way to reduce wordiness is to eliminate redundant words or phrases. Consider example one above. The phrases "to change jobs" and "take on new responsibilities" are redundant, and could be combined into one short phrase to be expressed more concisely.

Consider example two above. The phrase "...should be sure to carefully think about, ponder and reflect on..." contains three ways of saying the same thing. This sentence could be improved by using only one of the key phrases: "...to reflect on..."

A second way to reduce wordiness is to eliminate "filler" words which serve no purpose in the sentence. Consider example one above. Replace the phrase "...when the merger takes place between the two companies" with "...when the two companies merge." Consider example two above. Notice the excessive wordiness in the following phrase: "Before making a decision about whether the person on trial is guilty or innocent in this case ..." This sentence could simply read: "Before determining the defendant's guilt or innocence..."

## Familiar Language

Familiar language is that which the readers easily recognize and understand because they use it on a regular basis. One of the most important functions of language is to build "homophily" or a sense of commonality with one's readers. Language which is foreign and unfamiliar to the reader tends to emphasize the differences between writer and reader, and makes the message difficult to understand. By using language that is familiar to the reader, the message is likely to have more impact.

Consider the following examples.

An assignment given to a class of business students by their philosophy professor:

"The presently assigned paper necessitates an eloquently articulated analysis

of the Existentialist perspective as it pertains to contemporary living. You should adumbrate the points which represent the sine qua non of your analysis."

A letter sent to high school students warning them of the risks of an unhealthy diet:

"Individuals who maintain a diet of high fat content are exposed to an increased risk of developing atherosclerosis, which is a buildup of fat deposits on the inner walls of the arteries. This condition can reduce or cut off the flow of blood in the arteries serving the major organs of the body. This can lead to poor health."

In both examples above, the language that is used is unfamiliar to the readers. As a result, the message loses its impact.

## **Precise and Clear Language**

The use of appropriate language is a tricky matter because the meaning of words is relative and situational. In other words, words can be interpreted in different ways by different people in different situations. For this reason, it is important to choose language which is as precise and clear as possible. The more precise and clear one's use of language becomes, the fewer the number of possible interpretations for a message. Consider the following words. What numerical value would you assign to each of them? If something is "probable what percentage of the time does it occur? P>

- (1) probable
- (2) doubtful
- (3) certainly
- (4) unlikely
- (5) perhaps

Would other people assign the same value to these words as you did? In actuality, the range of values varies greatly because these terms are relative: they can mean different things to different people in different situations. How could one be more precise in his/her use of these terms?

Consider the examples below. Notice that these terms can vary widely in the meaning to different people. The best way to use such relative terms, then, is to compare them to something concrete and "known" to the reader. For example: "Is that Acura an expensive car?" is best answered with a comparison: "Compared to that Honda, the Acura is expensive. Compared to that Lexus, it is inexpensive."

expensive  
hot  
intelligent  
good  
spicy

Consider the following examples. Note the potential confusion or ambiguity in these phrases.

- (1) Why the student body should continue in this state of apathy is not really understandable.
- (2) Our student body is dull and slack-minded.
- (3) The practice and theory of politics are studied in the classroom but political habits on campus do not seem to benefit from such labor.
- (4) He's an *interesting* individual.
- (5) It is difficult to estimate the number of people affected by AIDS.

Each of the following are actual headlines printed in newspapers. Notice their double meaning.

- (1) Include your children when Baking Cookies
- (2) Safety Experts Say School Buss Passengers should be Belted
- (3) Bank Drive-in Window Blocked by Board
- (4) Killer Sentenced to Die for Second Time in Ten Years
- (5) Eye Drops Off Shelf

In short, it is wise to think carefully about your choice of words and their potential interpretations. To communicate effectively, precise and clear language is essential.

## Constructive Language

Constructive language phrases a potentially negative message in a positive way, whereas destructive language directs blame and criticism toward the reader, creating defensiveness. Readers are likely to become defensive when the writer's language expresses any or all of the following:

- Superiority over the reader
- Indifference or apathy about an issue of importance to the reader
- Negative evaluation or judgment of the reader (as opposed to neutral descriptions or observations)
- Command or control over the reader
- Skepticism or doubt about the reader's credibility or the legitimacy of their claims

Consider the following examples.

- (1) **Boss to employee:** "Your job performance recently has been unacceptable and there are no excuses for it. You have claimed that you are having some serious personal problems, but even if this is true, you cannot allow it to affect the quality of your work. If your work doesn't improve, I'll have to replace you with someone else."
- (2) **Student to instructor:** "You have confused me so badly with your lectures that I don't know what to do. I am considering dropping out and taking the class next quarter from Dr. Johnstone, who can explain the

information much more clearly. I don't want to drop out, but I have never been so frustrated with an instructor in my whole life."

(3) **Instructor to student:** "I have never had a student who was so confused with this material. Perhaps you should take an easier course from an easier professor. It makes no difference to me."

Why would these examples create defensiveness in the reader? How could you change the use of language to make these examples more constructive?

## **Formality of Language**

The formality of the language one uses should match the formality of the situation and the relationship between the writer and reader. Consider the following examples.

**Very Formal:** Exceedingly large segments of the population are expressing their discontent with medical practitioners who appear to more engrossed in amassing financial assets than in providing efficacious care to people with health disorders.

**Formal:** A large number of consumers are complaining about medical doctors who are apparently more interested in making money than in provide effective health care.

**Informal:** A lot of people are unhappy with their doctors who only seem to care about how much money they make, and not about giving their patients good care.

Notice that any of the three examples could be effective, depending upon the reader, the writer's relationship with the reader, and the situation. Under what conditions might you want to use these different levels of formality?

Notice the difference in formality between the two words shown in pairs below. Either word might be equally appropriate, depending upon the reader and situation.

**utilize**  
**use**

**transpire**  
**happen**

**facilitate**  
**help**

**expedite**  
**quicken**

**impediment**  
**obstacle**

**comprehend**  
**understand**

**erroneous**  
**mistaken**

**exacerbate**  
**worsen**

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