

C21

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Baden Eunson



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Writing skills 4: plain English

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After reading this chapter you should be able to:

- Explain the impact of Anglo-Saxon-derived versus Latin-derived vocabulary on document readability
- Explain how nominalisations, 'verbings', abstractions and circumlocutions can affect writing style
- Discuss the nature of euphemism and jargon
- Apply principles of non-discriminatory language
- Explain how aspects of tone (reader-centred, personal and positive) can improve the style of documents

Plain English and plain language

In the previous chapter on style (online chapter 3), we considered the broader stylistic techniques of presenting our ideas: readability, sentences, clichés, tautologies, paragraphs, transitions, parallelism and rhetoric. Now let's turn our attention to a particular style of expression that has, in the past few decades, begun to receive a lot of attention, and that you may find has advantages for you as a writer: plain English, or plain language.

Readability: what is it again?

How 'readable' is your writing? Over a number of decades, attempts have been made to quantify such a quality, resulting in what are known as readability scores. Open up a word processing package like Microsoft Word or Corel Word Perfect and use the Help menu to find out about readability scores. There are two types of scores we will consider in this chapter: the Flesch Reading Ease score or scale, and the Flesch–Kincaid Grade (Flesch 1949, 1981; Kincaid et al. 1975). Readability scores tend to measure word length and sentence length. The basic assumption inherent in all readability scores is simply that a passage of writing with long words and long sentences will be harder to understand than a passage of writing with short words and short sentences. The Flesch Reading Ease score rates texts from 100 (very easy) to 0 (very hard). The Flesch–Kincaid Grade rates texts according to school grade level (1–12). In word processing packages, programming

routines count syllables, words and sentences and produce scores at the click of a mouse.

In scoring a passage of writing, the lower a Flesch score, the more difficult it is; in scoring the same passage of writing, the higher a Flesch–Kincaid grade, the more difficult it is.

Thus, the paragraph above this box rates a 26.6 Flesch score and a 18.3 Flesch–Kincaid grade. In contrast, the first paragraph immediately below this box (beginning 'Plain English, to most people . . .') rates 65.6 on the Flesch scale and 7.7 on the Flesch–Kincaid scale.

Readability scores are guidelines only (Eunson 1996). As Cutts (2007) points out, they do not take account of active and passive voice (see online chapter 1), nor do they consider the way the information is organised, how it looks on the page, and the reader's motivation and prior level of knowledge. (For more information on readability, see online chapter 3.)

Source: Flesch Reading Ease and Flesch–Kincaid Grade data, Microsoft Word 2007.

Plain English, to most people, means English that is simple and clear. It means English that is free from the jargon and gobbledegook that clogs up so much writing today.

The fight for plain English has been going on for some time, however. George Orwell noted in 1946 that 'official' language had a way of mangling meaning beyond recognition. To demonstrate, he took a famous passage from the Bible, and 'translated' it into the administrative jargon of the day:

Original Bible text	Orwell's parody
I returned, and saw under the sun, that the race is not to the swift, nor the battle to the strong, neither yet bread to the wise, nor yet riches to men of understanding, nor yet favour to men of skill; but time and chance happeneth to them all. Ecclesiastes	Objective consideration of contemporary phenomena compels the conclusion that success or failure in competitive activities exhibits no tendency to be commensurate with innate capacity, but that a considerable element of the unpredictable must inevitably be taken into account.
Flesch Reading Ease score: 78.3 Flesch–Kincaid Grade score: 8.4	Flesch Reading Ease score: 0.0 Flesch–Kincaid Grade: 27.1

Source: Orwell (1946 [1970], pp. 162–3).

Orwell's parody is 60 years old, and yet it could easily fit into many documents written today in public and private sector workplaces.

Plain English as a social movement began to pick up speed in the late 1960s, partly in reaction to the jargon that emerged from the Vietnam War. In 1971, the American Council of Teachers of English formed a committee on public doublespeak, and began to issue a journal, the *Quarterly Journal of Doublespeak*.

Governments in the United States, United Kingdom and Australia began to issue orders that legislation was to be drafted in 'clear' and 'simple' English. A group known as the Plain English Campaign was established in Britain, dedicated to the idea that many public and private documents could be much more clear. An example of one of the Campaign's 'translations' into plain English is shown below.

Figure 4.1: Two versions of a letter from a library to a borrower.

Source: Campaign for Plain English (1994, pp. 23–4).

Before	After
<p>Your enquiry about the use of the entrance area at the library for the purpose of displaying posters and leaflets about Welfare and Supplementary Benefit rights, gives rise to the question of the provenance and authoritativeness of the material to be displayed.</p> <p>Posters and leaflets issued by the Central Office of Information, the Department of Health and Social Security and other authoritative bodies are usually displayed in libraries, but items of a disputatious or polemic kind, whilst not necessarily excluded, are considered individually.</p>	<p>Thank you for your letter asking permission to put up posters in the entrance area of the library.</p> <p>Before we can give you an answer we will need to see a copy of the posters to make sure they won't offend anyone.</p>
<p>Flesch Reading Ease: 2.6 Flesch–Kincaid Grade: 23.1</p>	<p>Flesch Reading Ease: 70.7 Flesch–Kincaid Grade: 8.6</p>

Source: Flesch Reading Ease and Flesch–Kincaid Grade data from Microsoft Word 2007.

Here is a similar exercise based on a health and safety rules notice in an Australian textiles workplace:

Before	After
<p>Safety and safety rules</p> <p>No employee shall:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Operate a machine unless properly guarded. 2. Fail to observe good house-keeping procedures. 3. Fail to notify Supervisor of any injury. 4. Fail to wear safety equipment for the purpose for which it was intended. 5. Run in the factory. 6. Attempt to repair or clean a machine whilst it is operating. 7. Indulge in horseplay or fighting of any type. 8. Operate a machine which has a tag or sign indicating it is under repair. 9. Wear unsuitable or unsafe clothing in the work areas (this includes thongs and slippers). 	<p>Safety rules of this workplace:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Make sure your machine is properly guarded. 2. Keep work area clean and tidy. 3. Report any injury. 4. Wear safety equipment. 5. Walk in the factory. 6. Clean machines when they are not in use.
<p>Flesch Reading Ease: 51.1 Flesch–Kincaid Grade: 8.6</p>	<p>Flesch Reading Ease: 63.3 Flesch–Kincaid Grade: 5.9</p>

Figure 4.2: Health and safety rules

Source: Australian Textiles, Clothing and Footwear Industry Training Advisory Board (1994, pp. 28–9)
Flesch Reading Ease and Flesch–Kincaid Grade data from Microsoft Word 2007.

Another example of the plain English ‘before and after rewrite’ approach is shown in figure 4.3, in a US Department of Veterans Affairs letter.

Before	After
<p>addressee street: city state/zip</p> <p>Dear addressee: Please furnish medical evidence in support of your pension claim. The best evidence to submit would be a report of a recent examination by your personal physician, or a report from a hospital or clinic that has treated you recently. The report should include complete findings and diagnoses of the condition which render you permanently and totally disabled. It is not necessary for you to receive an examination at this time. We only need a report from a doctor, hospital, or clinic that has treated you recently.</p> <p>This evidence should be submitted as soon as possible, preferably within 60 days. If we do not receive this information within 60 days from the date of this letter, your claim will be denied. Evidence must be received in the Department of Veterans Affairs within one year from the date of this letter; otherwise, benefits, if entitlement is established, may not be paid prior to the date of its receipt.</p> <p>SHOW VETERAN'S FULL NAME AND VA FILE NUMBER ON ALL EVIDENCE SUBMITTED.</p> <p>Privacy Act Information: The information requested by this letter is authorized by existing law (38 U.S.C. 210 (c) (1)) and is considered necessary and relevant to determine entitlement to maximum benefits applied for under the law. The information submitted may be disclosed outside the Department of Veterans Affairs only as permitted by law.</p> <p>Sincerely,</p>	<p>addressee street: city state/zip</p> <p>Dear addressee: We have your claim for a pension. Our laws require us to ask you for more information. The information you give us will help us decide whether we can pay you a pension.</p> <p>What We Need Send us a medical report from a doctor or clinic that you visited in the past six months. The report should show why you can't work. Please take this letter and the enclosed Doctor's Guide to your doctor.</p> <p>When We Need It We need the doctor's report by [date]. We'll have to turn down your claim if we don't get the report by that date.</p> <p>Your Right to Privacy The information you give us is private. We might have to give out this information in a few special cases. But we will not give it out to the general public without your permission. We've attached a form which explains your privacy rights.</p> <p>If you have any questions, call us toll-free by dialing 1-800-827-1000. Our TDD number for the hearing impaired is 1-800-829-4833. If you call, please have this letter with you.</p> <p>Sincerely Enclosures: Your Privacy Rights, Doctor's Guide</p>
<p>Flesch Reading Ease: 43.8 Flesch–Kincaid Grade: 11.1 Passive sentences: 36%</p>	<p>Flesch Reading Ease: 69.2 Flesch–Kincaid Grade: 6.3 Passive sentences: 0%</p>

Figure 4.3: Traditional and plain English versions of a letter from the US Veterans Affairs Department

Source: Plain Language Action Network (2001), <http://www.plainlanguage.gov/>; Flesch Reading Ease and Flesch–Kincaid Grade data, Microsoft Word 2007.

Plain English as a concept is developing all the time, but it is important to clarify meanings and eliminate any misconceptions about its philosophy and techniques:

Plain English is clear, straightforward expression, using only as many words as are necessary. It is language that avoids obscurity, inflated vocabulary and convoluted sentence construction. It is not baby talk, nor is it a simplified version of the English language. Writers of plain English let their audience concentrate on the message instead of being distracted by complicated language. They make sure that their audience understands the message easily. This means that writers of plain English must vary the way they write their documents according to the composition of their audience. For instance, a document can contain a number of technical words and still be plain. (Eagleson 1990, p. 4).

Plain English is now beginning to develop in a number of interesting ways:

- It is slowly morphing into plain language, as writers and writing analysts in other languages also begin to apply clarifying approaches to documents outside the 'Anglosphere' (Bennett 2004).
- The concept of a plain English or language solely concerned with words is also giving way to broader conceptions of *information design* and *document design* (Robertson 2002). This means that non-word factors in documents, such as layout, typography and graphic communication are being seen as powerful communication tools that reinforce the total message (see chapter 2, 'Document design and graphic communication').
- Publishers have seen a need for clear, jargon-free exposition of concepts in non-fiction informational publishing, often incorporating graphic exposition, so that books with 'in plain English' in their titles now number in the hundreds, as do titles in series such as the *Dummies* and *Complete Idiots* series.
- Attention is being paid not just to the technicalities of before/after rewrites of documents but also to the broader ideological and behavioural uses of language, including the following:
 - What are the hidden motivations behind jargon?
 - What bureaucratic and political mindsets are revealed by the use of distorting language?
 - What impact does language have on equality and diversity in democratic (and not-so-democratic) societies?
 - What impact does language have on communication breakdown and communication success in the global community?

Plain language style

Let's now consider some of the technical and broader issues involved in plain language style. We will look at word choice, nominalisations, abstractions, circumlocutions, verbings, ambiguity, clichés, tautologies, euphemisms, jargon, political correctness, non-discriminatory language and tone.

Recommendations will be made in this section about which usage to follow. These recommendations are guidelines, not eternal truths to be dogmatically observed in all circumstances. The sky will not fall if you use the occasional nominalisation or cliché, and in fact some of these terms have some charm and descriptive precision about them. Use common sense when deciding how to express yourself, and when in doubt, remember what you have learned about readability and audiences, and use simple rather than complex forms.

Word choice

English is a compound language, made up of many other languages. The most basic layer of the language is Anglo-Saxon, the language brought to the British Isles by Germanic tribes from the fifth century onwards. Viking invaders arrived in the eighth century, introducing

Scandinavian words, and the Norman invasion from France in 1066 introduced French words to the language. Scholars, meanwhile, used Latin and Greek (see online chapter 2).

This history has given English a very large vocabulary. English users can often choose words – meaning much the same thing – from different origins to add variety and subtlety to expression, such as:

Anglo-Saxon origin	French origin	Latin origin
rise	mount	ascend
ask	question	interrogate
fast	firm	secure
kingly	royal	regal
time	age	epoch

Anglo-Saxon and Scandinavian words tend to be shorter, while French, Greek and Latin words tend to be longer.

People choose one word rather than another for a variety of reasons, however. George Orwell remarked:

Bad writers, and especially scientific, political and sociological writers, are nearly always haunted by the notion that Latin or Greek words are grander than Saxon ones, and unnecessary words like *expedite*, *ameliorate*, *predict*, *extraneous*, *deracinated*, *clandestine*, *subaqueous* and hundreds of others constantly gain ground from their Anglo-Saxon opposite numbers . . . (Orwell 2001 [1946], p. 141).

Word choice: strategy of choosing words on the basis of their historical origin. Generally speaking, English words of Anglo-Saxon or Scandinavian origin tend to be shorter than words of French, Latin or Greek origin.

Word choice is a vital part of the style of fiction writers as well. For example, in their analysis of the novels of Jane Austen, DeForest and Johnson (2001, p. 389) noted that:

English has two main sources for words: German and Latin. Distinct from each other, they have polarized our language into high diction and low ('diglossia'). Latinate words denote the intellectual world; Germanic words, the physical. Latinate words are indicators of status and education. Austen painted and delineated her characters by giving their speeches different densities of Latinate words. Higher densities of Latinate words sometimes indicate intelligence and moral seriousness, at other times they expose a character's formality or hypocrisy. Lower densities indicate lesser intelligence or, in the case of sailors, humble birth. The characters whose densities are very close to the narrator are Austen's four great heroines, Elinor Dashwood, Elizabeth Bennet, Emma Woodhouse and Anne Elliot.

Consider your motives carefully when you choose a word. Are you writing to express, or to impress? The rule for writers is: *write to express, not to impress*.

Get your meaning across, instead of trying to impress others with your command of words. You may end up confusing and discouraging your readers, and may also – if you are not accurate in your use of complex words – end up making a fool of yourself.

Check your words: how many of them are derived from French or Latin when an Anglo-Saxon alternative is at hand?

Be aware of the impact of the words you choose on the readability of your writing:

Text using mainly Anglo-Saxon-derived words	Text using mainly Latin-derived words
As the dog walked past, the light showed its hairy coat. I sweated, soaking my clothes and fogging my glasses.	As the canine perambulated past, the illumination revealed its hirsute exterior. I perspired, saturating my attire and obscuring my spectacles.
Flesch Reading Ease: 90.9 Flesch–Kincaid Grade: 3	Flesch Reading Ease: 14.7 Flesch–Kincaid Grade: 13.6
The car sped up, and then was involved in a crash, which produced many dead.	The automobile accelerated, and then was involved in an accident, which produced numerous fatalities.
Flesch Reading Ease: 90.0 Flesch–Kincaid Grade: 4.4	Flesch Reading Ease: 11.3 Flesch–Kincaid Grade: 15.1

Source: Flesch Reading Ease and Flesch–Kincaid Grade data, Microsoft Word 2007.

You do not have to consult a dictionary to check the origins of every word you wish to use. It's enough to:

- think about the concept or idea you want to get across
- think of a word that expresses such a concept or idea
- think about whether there are alternatives to the word
- think about your audience, and what it may and may not understand
- choose the word among your alternatives most likely to be understood.

It's usually the case that shorter words will be understood more easily than longer words (note the use of Latin-derived words in circumlocutions (p. 4.16), abstractions (p. 4.11) and jargon (p. 4.20). Note also the use of non-Anglo-Saxon words as euphemisms (p. 4.20).

In thinking about alternatives, a thesaurus can help you. In order to express yourself in plain English, you need to be comfortable with using both the dictionary and the thesaurus.

This is not to say that your writing should be boring – far from it. Use more complex words for variety, subtlety and style – but only if your audience will understand you. In this case, Latinate words may sometimes be preferable to Anglo Saxon words if they convey a more precise meaning and add rhythm, beauty and variety to discourse. They may also be preferable to use when a more formal tone or register is required.

Nominalisations

Consider these two sentences:

We undertook a comparison of photocopiers.

We compared photocopiers.

Both sentences mean the same thing, but the first is six words long, and the second is only three words long. Notice how the noun *comparison* in the first sentence is easily converted to the verb *compare* in the second sentence, whereas the verb *undertake*, the indefinite article *an*, and the preposition *of* are dropped completely in the second sentence (for definitions of parts of speech such as verbs, articles and prepositions, see online chapter 1).

Nominalisation: a noun that is formed from a verb. Also known as an embedded or buried verb, and can involve replacing adverbs and adjectives with nouns and noun phrases.

Nouns that are formed from verbs are called **nominalisations**, or embedded or buried verbs. Although nominalisations have their place, excessive use of them can clog up your prose, and also make it more abstract (p. 4.11).

Nominalisations often occur in passive constructions (online chapter 1). Examples of typical nominalisations, and alternative verbal expressions, are given below.

Table 4.1: Nominalisations and alternatives

Nominalisation	Verbal expression
arrive at a conclusion	conclude
arrive at a decision	decide
bring to a conclusion	conclude
conduct an investigation into	investigate
deliver a recommendation	recommend
draw a conclusion	conclude
enter into negotiations on/over	negotiate
extend an invitation to	invite
give a demonstration of	demonstrate
give assurances that	assure that
give permission	permit (verb)
grant authorisation	authorise
grant an extension for the deadline	extend the deadline
have/lodge an objection	object (verb)
make a decision	decide
make an examination of	examine
perform an audit	audit (verb)
perform an operation	operate
provide documentation concerning	document (verb)
put in jeopardy	jeopardise/risk
show a preference for	prefer
tender my resignation	resign
undertake an inspection of	inspect

Note that nominalisation is not simply a phenomenon where nouns replace verbs. Nominalisation can also involve replacing adverbs and adjectives with nouns and noun phrases:

Nominalisation	Recast wording
The liveliness and sophistication of the speech of our guest was the focus of our appreciation.	We appreciated our guest's lively and sophisticated speech.
When you have the opportunity to speak, make sure that your speech is delivered with clarity.	When you speak, speak clearly.
The musicians performed the piece in a way that showed their professionalism.	The musicians performed the piece professionally.

The effect is the same as that of verb–noun transformations – unnecessarily lengthening, complicating and obscuring expression.

Your writing can be more clear and forceful, and responsibilities for specific actions can be more apparent, if you minimise your use of nominalisations.

ASSESS YOURSELF

Translate the following passage, replacing nominalisations with simpler expressions. The Flesch-Kincaid score (Microsoft Word 2007) for this passage is 20.3 — try to halve this figure. You may need to edit substantially to reduce this score by creating shorter sentences, but make sure that the meaning is preserved.

It is of the utmost importance that all staff acquires an understanding of the newest version of the health and safety regulations. This workplace needs to provide a demonstration of all of us having reached, with completeness and thoroughness, compliance with the entirety of government regulations in this relevant field. In particular, we need to effectuate a speeding up of procedures in relation to the granting of authorisations for the purchase of new fire extinguishers and also the undertaking of demonstrations of the method of opening windows with sealed status in the event of there being a fire-based event. Coordinators in this field organised on a floor or area basis will need to enter into discussions with leaders of teams and managers of areas as to the making available of time opportunities to facilitate the training of staff in procedures relating to the drilling of staff in fire emergencies and the techniques pertaining to first aid and resuscitation circumstances.

'Verbings'

Just as verbs can be turned into nouns, nouns can also be turned into verbs. We take for granted such verbs as *telephone*, *film* and *itemise*, but there was a time when these words did not exist, and when the verbs were coined, there was almost certainly some opposition to them on the grounds that they were clumsy, unnecessary or barbaric jargon. Today, for example, evolving from the use of mobile phones and sending text messages, *text* is widely used (i.e. 'I'll *text* you'). This process has been called '**verbing**' (Tarrant 1991), but such is the controversy surrounding the process that it seems unlikely that the word will ever lose its

'Verbing': process of turning a noun into a verb

quotation marks (cueing the reader to the fact that it is an unusual usage). ‘Verbing’ can be transitive or intransitive (see online chapter 1).

Take care if thinking of ‘verbing’: a US Secretary of State and former general, Alexander Haig, was widely ridiculed for his ‘verbing’ of nouns like *context* and *caveat* (Time 1981).

Some current ‘verbings’ in use today – but which are by no means universally liked – are set out in table 4.2.

Table 4.2: Some ‘verbings’ in current use

‘Verbing’	Example
Diarise	Please diarise that appointment
Action	This needs to be actioned right away
Agenda	Please agenda that item for Friday’s meeting
Input	Input those figures, and see what you get
Prioritise	You will need to prioritise these funding requests
Fax	Fax it to me by tomorrow morning please
Impact	How will this impact our monthly budget?
Courier	I’ll courier it over to you today
Back-burner	We’d better back-burner this one until administration calms down

To many people’s ears, these sound like horrific jargon, and as such should be strenuously avoided. Other people are quite comfortable with some or all of them. Again, it all comes down to your audience: try to determine what is acceptable to your audience, and act accordingly. This of course is easier said than done. Language change is a slow and conservative process, and thus if you have fears that your audience may regard a ‘verbing’ as barbaric, don’t use it.

Incidentally, it’s not always what you say but the way that you say it, or frame it (see chapter 10, pp. 323–4). For example, a US Defence Secretary serving under George W. Bush was ridiculed when he said:

Reports that say that something hasn’t happened are always interesting to me, because as we know, there are known knowns; there are things we know we know. We also know there are known unknowns; that is to say we know there are some things we do not know. But there are also unknown unknowns — the ones we don’t know we don’t know. (BBC News 2006)

This sounds obscure and abstract, and is, but there is nothing in the concept that is not in the esteemed Johari window concept of knowns and unknowns (see chapter 10, pp 334–8).

If you have complex concepts to convey to your audience, don’t dumb down: think of the ways in which you can explain – analogies, metaphors, statistics, comparisons, quotations, precedents – and speak in ‘normal English’ with a ‘normal’ style of speech that is not pompous, obscurantist, or too high on the neologising scale (neology: the formation of new words).

Abstract versus concrete language

The effect of inappropriate use of passive voice (see online chapter 1), nominalisations and 'verbings' is to make your prose less immediate and understandable. You need to be very careful that your writing does not become too abstract, resulting in the audience being unable to understand your message.

Abstraction: tendency to use general, non-concrete terms when writing and speaking

It's useful to think of **abstraction** or generality as a ladder, or hierarchy. Figure 4.4 shows such a ladder. The most abstract terms are at the top, and as we proceed down the ladder, the terms become progressively more concrete, or closer to specific human experience.

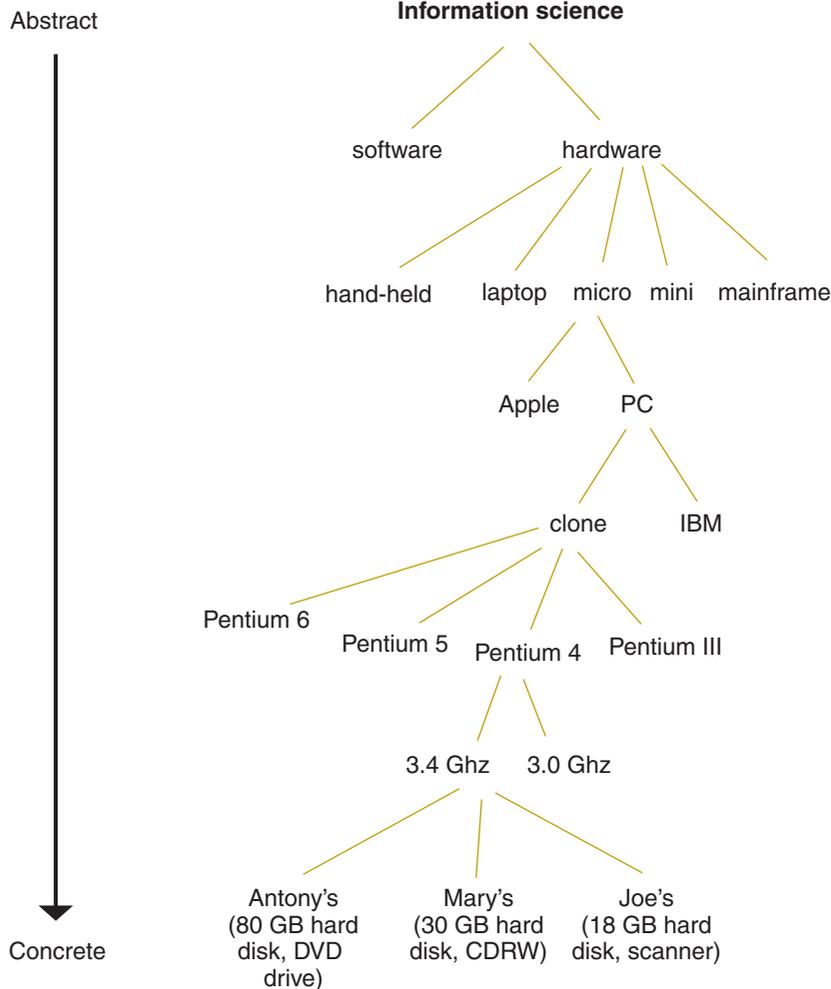


Figure 4.4: A hierarchy or ladder of abstraction

Consider these two sentences:

Organisational information science resources will need to be rationalised.

Brian Marsden of the Facilities Department is going to take Mary's PC out of room 312 this afternoon at 3 o'clock, and she and Antony and Joe will have to share the remaining two machines.

The sentence on the right is longer than the one on the left, but the language used is quite concrete and specific, and the message it communicates is quite clear. The sentence on the left, by contrast, is so abstract that it is virtually meaningless. ‘Abstractitis’ (Gowers 2003; Fowler 1996) is a disease that afflicts much prose, and you should be wary of it. Abstract writing can not only confuse, but also mislead: in many circumstances, the further up the ladder of abstraction a word is, the less chance it has of meaning to the reader what it did to the writer.

As Fowler (1996) observed of the addiction to ‘abstractitis’:

A writer uses abstract words because his thoughts are cloudy; the habit of using them clouds his thoughts still further; he may end by concealing his meaning not only from his readers but also from himself, and writing such sentences as ‘*The actualisation of the motivation of the forces must to a great extent be a matter of personal angularity*’. (Fowler 1996, p. 5).

(In Fowler’s example above, the Flesch-Kincaid score is 12.9 [Microsoft Word 2007].)

In your writing, strive to eliminate inappropriate abstraction, and give more weight to concrete expressions.

Abstract	Concrete
Make careful adjustments to the document using the appropriate techniques.	Convert the text to two columns, change the font to 12 point Arial, and ensure that headings are in bold capitals with Arabic numbers.
Photocopiers should have appropriate performance parameters.	Photocopiers should be able to produce 15 stapled copies of 20 double-sided sheets in less than 3 minutes.

However, this does not mean that abstract expressions are always wrong. There are occasions when abstract or general statements are precisely what is needed: for example, when giving an overview of a situation, in formulating a general rule or in reaching a conclusion. Writing that is unflinchingly concrete in approach may cause both writer and reader to become bogged down in details, with no chance offered to organise such details into meaningful wholes.

Good style means striking a balance between the concrete and the abstract. Some writers find it useful to make abstract or general statements, and then proceed to more concrete matters by:

- rephrasing (‘in other words...’)
- defining technical terms, acronyms and abbreviations
- giving examples
- using analogies or metaphors
- using colloquialisms, or slang, where appropriate.

Abstraction is often created by the cumulative effect of certain words. Such words are often of Latin rather than Anglo-Saxon origin, and are favoured by writers in private and public sector organisations that have a bureaucratic culture. This is language with its ‘official’ hat on. Complex words can sometimes be quite effective in describing certain situations or states of mind; in fact, some complex words can be quite beautiful. Beauty, however (to use a cliché), is in the eyes of the beholder, and some of your readers may tend to interpret your more abstract language as being hostile, impersonal, controlling and alienating. Try to avoid the more abstract terms in table 4.3, and instead choose the plain English alternatives.

Table 4.3: Abstract expressions and plain English alternatives

Abstract expression	Plain English alternatives	Abstract expression	Plain English alternatives
accede	allow, give	disconnect	cut off
accentuate	stress	dispatch	send
accommodation	where you live, home	documentation	papers, documents
accordingly	in line with this, so	domicile	home
acquiesce	agree	duration	time, life
advise	inform, tell	dwelling	home
affix	add, write, fasten, stick on, attach to	echelons	levels
aforementioned	this (or delete)	elect (verb)	choose
alleviate	ease, reduce	endeavour	try, attempt
allocate	divide, share, add, give	ensure	make sure
amendment	change	facilitate	help
anticipate	expect	henceforth	from now on
assistance	help	hereby	now, by this (or delete)
caveat	warning	herein	here (or delete)
claimant	you, the person claiming	hereunder	below
clarification	explanation, help	herewith	with this (or delete)
cognisant of	aware of, know about	hitherto	until now
commence	start, begin	identical	same
communicate	talk, write, telephone (be specific)	immediately	at once, now
comply with	keep to, meet	impact (verb)	affect, change, hit
correspond	write	jeopardise	risk, threaten
designate	point out, show	locality	place, area

Table 4.3 (continued)

Abstract expression	Plain English alternatives	Abstract expression	Plain English alternatives
magnitude	size	per annum	a year
methodology	method	permissible	allowed
minimise	decrease, lessen, reduce	personnel	people, staff
mislay	lose	predominant	main
monies	money, amounts of money	premises	places, property
monitor	check, watch	principal	main
moreover	and, also, as well	prior to	before
necessitate	need, have to, require	prioritise	rank
notwithstanding	despite	procedures	rules, ways
numerous	many	proximity	close, closeness, near
objective	goal	purchase	buy
obligate	bid, compel	purport (verb)	pretend, claim, profess
obtain	get	pursuant (to)	under, because of
on numerous occasions	often	quote	say, give
on receipt	when we (you) get	re	about
operate	work, run	reimburse	pay, pay back
optimum	best, greatest, most	reiterate	repeat, restate
option	choice	relocate	move
other than	except	remuneration	pay, wages, salary
outstanding	unpaid	represents	shows, stands for
parameters	limits, guidelines	reside	live
particulars	details, facts	restriction	limit

Abstract expression	Plain English alternatives	Abstract expression	Plain English alternatives
retain	keep	utilise	use
review	look at (again)	validate	confirm
said	such, same	verbatim	word for word, exact
save (prep., conj.)	except	verify	check, prove
scrutinise	read/look at carefully	viable	practicable, workable
settlement	payment	virtually	almost (or delete)
shall (future action)	will	vocation	job
shall (legal obligation)	must	voluntary	by choice
shortfall	shortage	warrant	call for
signature	sign here	whatsoever	whatever, what, any
solely	only	whenever	when
statutory	legal, by law	whereas	since, because
stipulate	state, set/lay down	whereby	by which, because of which
submit	send, give	whether	if
subsequently	later	whilst	while
undersigned	I, we	wilfully	deliberately
undertake	agree, promise, do	witnessed	saw

Sources: Adapted from Eagleson (1990); Campaign for Plain English (1994); Cutts (2007).

ASSESS YOURSELF

Translate the following passage, replacing abstractions with simpler expressions. You may need to edit substantially, but make sure that the meaning is preserved.

Dear Ms Harris:

I am communicating with you to advise you that the Council cannot accede to any further extensions of time on payment of the amount outstanding on your electricity bill (\$198.25).

Please endeavour to ensure that your remittance, affixed to the aforementioned invoice, is despatched forthwith.

Failure to comply with payment of the said invoice may necessitate our having to disconnect supply, as stipulated in the official regulations.

Notwithstanding the statutory provisions regarding disconnection, this office will endeavour to render assistance, if genuine hardship is involved. If you are able to furnish us with particulars of the said condition, the undersigned will undertake to review the situation.

Yours sincerely,

John Staines,
Team leader,
Customer Relations

Circumlocutions

Circumlocution: literally means talking in circles — long-winded way of expressing a simple concept

Related to the sin of abstractitis is the sin of circumlocution. **Circumlocution** literally means talking in circles. In communication, a straight line is preferable to a circle: if it is possible to say something in fewer words rather than more words, without distorting your message, use fewer words (table 4.4).

Table 4.4: Circumlocutions and preferable alternatives

Minimise using ...	Prefer using ...	Minimise using ...	Prefer using ...
a great deal of	much	a small number of	few
a greater length of time	longer	a sufficient number of	enough
a high degree of	much	absence of, an	no, none
a large majority of	most	according to our records	our records show
a large number of	many	accounted for by the fact that	because
a number of	several	acknowledge receipt of	thank you for
a proportion of	some	acquaint yourself with	find out about, read about

Minimise using ...	Prefer using ...	Minimise using ...	Prefer using ...
afford an opportunity	let	during the month of October	in October
afford an opportunity to	allow	equivalent as far as acceptability is concerned	equally acceptable
after this has been done	then	for a period of	for
aimed at	for	for the purpose of	to, for
are found to be in agreement	agree	for the reason that	because
are of the same opinion	agree	fully cognisant of the fact that	aware that
as a consequence of	because	gainful employment	paid work
as far as these experiments are concerned, they show	these experiments show	given the fact that	because
as of the date of	from	goes under the name of	is called
at a later date	later	has an ability to	can
at a rapid rate	rapidly	I myself would hope	I hope
at the present moment/ at this point in time	now	if conditions are such that	if
based on the fact that	because	if it is assumed that	if
bring to a conclusion	finish	if space is insufficient	if there is not enough room
cylindrical in appearance	cylindrical	if this is not the case	if not
dark blue in colour	dark blue	if this is the case	if so
deliberately chosen	chosen	if you knowingly give false information	if you give information that you know is false
despite the fact that	although	in accordance with	in line with
due to the fact that	because	in addition to	and, as well, as, also

Table 4.4 (continued)

Minimise using ...	Prefer using ...	Minimise using ...	Prefer using ...
in conjunction with	and, with	it may well be that	perhaps
in connection with	about, concerning	later on	later
in excess of	more than	liable to, you are	you have to
in isolation	alone	liaise with	coordinate, talk with
in lieu of	instead of	limited number	few
in light of the fact that	because	loud and clear	emphatically
in most cases	usually	make an attempt to	try
in order to	to	(it is) mandatory	(you) must
in point of fact	in fact	mechanisms of a physiological nature	physiological mechanisms
in respect of	about	most of the time	usually
in the course of	during	necessitate, it may	we (or you) may have to
in the event of	if	not infrequently	often
in the present communication	in this paper/report/etc.	on a regular basis	regularly
in view of the fact that	because	on account of the fact that	as
in view of the foregoing circumstances	therefore	on behalf of	for
inasmuch as	since	on numerous occasions	often
incumbent, it is ... upon you	you must	on the grounds that	because
incurred expense	had to spend money	on two separate occasions	twice
interestingly/it is of interest to note that	(omit)	over a period of the order of a decade	ten years



Minimise using ...	Prefer using ...	Minimise using ...	Prefer using ...
owing to the fact that	because	they utilise for sustenance	they eat
pertaining to	about	through the medium of	by
place of residence	where you live, home	utilise	use
point in time	point, time	very necessary	necessary
prior to the start of	before, preceding	which goes under the name of	called
provided that	if, as long as	with a view to	to
quote this reference number	give this reference number	with effect from	from
readily apparent	obvious	with regard/reference to	about
reported to the effect that	reported that	with the exception of	except
spell out in depth	explain	with the minimum of delay	quickly (or say when)
streamlined in appearance	streamlined	with the result that	so
subsequent to	after	you are requested to	please
the question as to whether	whether	your attention is drawn	please see, please note
the treatment having been performed	after treatment		

Sources: Adapted from Eagleson (1990); Campaign for Plain English (1994); Kimble (1993); Cutts (2007).

ASSESS YOURSELF

Translate the following passage, replacing circumlocutions with simpler expressions. You may need to edit substantially, but make sure the meaning is preserved.

I would like to spell out in depth in the present communication my reservations in connection with your job application. At the present moment in time we have a sufficient number of staff to carry out current workloads inasmuch as we hired eight staff last month based on the fact that revenue derived from new customers would allow us to cover salary costs. Interestingly we did not anticipate such a need for new staff during the month of March although we were fully cognisant of the fact that the market was picking up as it not infrequently does on a regular basis. If, however, conditions are such that a new customer we are currently talking to enters into a large contract with us then I myself would hope that as a consequence of increased cash flow we may be able to utilise new staff as a consequence of new business.

Grammar and plain English: subject-verb-object

Soon we will move on to consider sublanguages or jargon, but this may be an appropriate place to gather our thoughts after battling through abstractions and circumlocutions, but particularly through ‘verbings’ and nominalisations. Underneath the structure of style, we always come back – not always with enthusiasm – to grammar, and the foundation it provides us with. Understanding the grammatical sequences and sentence types we have considered in online chapters 1 and 3 gives us insights into practical techniques for writing plain English documents.

For example, the subject-verb-object (S-V-O) sequence is the most basic in the English language. Clear communication can be obscured when this sequence is complicated by modifying elements. Check your documents to see what sequences you have created, and whether the use of modifying elements has unnecessarily complicated your writing.

Euphemisms, gobbledegook, doublespeak and jargon

People don’t always say what they mean. They will often distort a message, using strategies such as euphemisms or jargon or other types of inflated or distorted language. Plain English documents should be free of such unintentional or intentional distortion.

Euphemisms are used when people talk about unpleasant things, but wish to mask the unpleasantness. Thus, instead of saying that a person has been fired, sacked or dismissed, we can say that they have been involved in or have been the victims of career change opportunity, coerced transition, decruitment, deselection, downsizing, executive culling, force reduction, involuntary separation, outplacement, redeployment, redundancy, elimination, rightsizing, selective separation, transitioning, voluntary severance, voluntary termination or work force imbalance correction (Crystal 2003; Holder 2002; Lutz 1999).

Euphemisms are also often used to disguise matters relating to sex or bodily functions, and are often taken from other languages, such as French or Latin, to mask the literal English meanings.

Euphemisms can, of course, often be employed for perfectly honourable reasons, particularly when they are used to spare the feelings of others.

Similarly, **jargon** can perform a useful function when technical language is used among specialists in certain areas, without the intent of deceiving or confusing others outside that specialist group. Some level of jargon, in other words, is unavoidable (see chapter 1, ‘Communication today’, p. 14 and chapter 10 ‘Interpersonal skills 2: listening, questioning, reframing and feedback, p. 333).

All too often, however, jargon is used by professions or groups of people to exclude others. George Bernard Shaw once observed ‘...the medical profession [is] a conspiracy to hide its own shortcomings. No doubt the same may be said of all professions. They are all conspiracies against the laity’ (Shaw 1946 [1911]).

When used to deceive, jargon is sometimes referred to as **gobbledegook**, **doublespeak**, **bureaucratese**, **insider lingo** or **bafflegab**. In fact, even though all groups and professions use technical language as a form of shorthand communication, overuse of technical language may indicate that a group or profession is losing touch with reality – that it has forgotten how to communicate with its stakeholders, and may in fact be miring itself deeper and deeper into self-deception or ‘groupthink’ (see chapter 20, ‘Team communication’).

Inflated language is sometimes used in a harmless way, when individuals or professions adopt absurd titles as a form of self-parody.

Euphemism: a pleasant word used to disguise an unpleasant reality

Jargon: technical language that is difficult to understand

Gobbledegook: meaningless words

Doublespeak: language used in a deceptive way

Lutz (1989, 1999) has attempted to classify uses of euphemism, jargon, gobbledegook and inflated language. Thus, he notes that euphemisms can be tactful (passed away = dead), but also deceptive (radiation enhancement weapon = neutron bomb). While this use of tactful phrasing is to spare people's feelings, and is perhaps commendable, the deceptive approach means that the words are 'weasel words' (Watson 2004), designed to mask the truth.

Jargon, on the other hand, can be used as a shorthand language in a specialised group, but can be also used as a tool to exclude those not in the 'in-group' (see chapter 20, 'Team communication', pp. 684–9). Lutz quotes [US] lawyers using the term 'involuntary conversion' (which would not have much meaning for most of us in the first place) to describe loss or destruction of property. However, this term was used in a footnote of an airline company's 1978 annual report to refer to a 727 crash that killed 52 passengers. The catastrophe was concealed in this type of jargon, and was described as 'an involuntary conversion of a 727'.

Gobbledegook (sometimes spelled gobblydegook) is believed to have been coined by Maury Maverick, a US congressman. Maverick, when asked how he came up with the word gobbledegook, said that '...I must have been thinking of the old, bearded turkey gobbler, back in Texas, who was always gobbledegobbling and strutting with ludicrous pomposity. At the end of this gobble there was a sort of, well, gook' (Cooke 2002).

Lutz cites as an example of gobbledegook, a US admiral explaining why US forces had poor intelligence in the 1983 invasion of Grenada: 'We were not micromanaging Grenada intelligence-wise until about that time frame' (for more jargon, see www.buzzwhack.com).

Lutz also identified language deception via what he called inflated language (vertical transport corps = elevator operators, and negative patient care outcome = the patient died).

You will probably be familiar with similar verbal strategies from your own experience. As with misuse of passive voice (online chapter 1), abstractions and nominalisations, such strategies create a type of communication in which it is not clear where responsibility lies or what meaning is being conveyed.

Counter-jargon: jargon from the underground

Jargon is often used by the more powerful in society to befuddle and control the less powerful. That is why Orwell, in his 1946 essay 'Politics and the English language', attempted to link manipulation of language to political manipulation (Orwell 2001 [1946]).

Fortunately for all of us, the human spirit is indomitable, and the less powerful sometimes create their own jargon with which to fight back. Historically, much slang was created in this way, as a sub-language that could be used to send and receive messages that others would not be able to decipher (Green 2003). Counter-jargon is beginning to emerge, usually on the Internet, in which language is used to express criticisms of those more powerful people who usually use jargon in the first place. Examples of counter-jargon include (Buzzwhack.com):

- *Management insultancy*: When corporate management hires a team of outside consultants to do what it should be doing — deciding how best to run the company!
- *Malicious obedience*: Opposite of civil disobedience. A quiet protest of company policy in which employees go through the motions of doing their jobs but intentionally accomplish nothing.
- *Templatished*: Any work or job that's had the creativity sucked out of it and basically been reduced to filling in the blanks.

- *Dot.commie*: Someone who eschews all things dot.com in favour of face-to-face, flesh-on-flesh and pen-on-paper interaction with the world.
- *Face guy*: A chief executive hired primarily because he looks like an executive and sounds good on TV.

Insider language and mindlessness: how not to write

Our occupation and experiences can lead us to view the world in a particular way. Military officers can assess events in terms of a battlefield; judges can view the world as a courtroom, with humanity divided into two classes, plaintiffs and defendants. This does not create problems while we are dealing with colleagues who share the same construct of reality, but unfortunately our worldview can also intrude on how we present facts to others in our documents. A decade or so ago this sign appeared in the lobby of a historic government building that was being refurbished:

Due to reorganisation, the basement will be on the second floor, half the second floor will be on the first floor, but half will remain on the second floor. First floor will move to the basement.

We can imagine how the sign made sense to the writer (it is worrying if it did not!) and to the public servants who worked in the building. We all take shortcuts with language when we are addressing colleagues and friends. But the sign is most definitely insider language: you have to belong to the group to get the message. The reason it strikes us as absurd is because we do not belong. The writer has been insensitive to the existence of different worldviews. To capture the message for both insiders and outsiders, we need some such sign as:

Location of sections from 4.10.90

Section	Floor
Accounts	First
Certificates	Basement
Claims	Basement
Payments	Second
Renewals	Second
Searches	First

In comparison this version is dull but at least it encompasses most users of the building . . .

Equally exasperating for readers is the mindlessness that characterises a lot of correspondence pouring out of large organisations. Computer-generated standard letters are prize winners. Here is one exchange between a family and an insurance company in Sydney in 2000. When a Forestville mother died, the family cancelled her car insurance and got a refund of the premium. A few weeks later a renewal notice arrived, addressed to 'Estate of late . . .' The family solicitor replied, explaining that the driver was dead and no insurance was needed. Another reminder letter from the insurance company, still to 'Estate of late . . .' The solicitor phoned, asking for the mother's name to be deleted from the database. A week later another letter addressed to 'Estate of late . . .' [arrived]:

Thank you for your letter. We note that you have died and no longer wish to renew your insurance. Should you require further insurance in the future, please do not hesitate to contact us.

Episodes like this can occur whether we write in plain English or gobbledegook and we need to remind ourselves constantly that efforts to improve language or design will be undermined seriously if we do not also attend to thinking.

Source: Eagleson (2002, pp. 7-8, 13).

Humour: the enemy of jargon

Jargon generators

Jargon generators have proven to be an excellent deflator of jargon and gobbledegook (see table 4.5). If you simply say or write one word at random from any of the three columns, you will immediately sound as though you have expertise in a highly specialised area. First developed by US public servant Phillip Broughton in 1968, the first generator is still as vicious and accurate a parody of jargon, gobbledegook and meaningless waffle as it was when first invented. Indeed, it is something of a worry that this parody from the 1960s, and Orwell's parody of gobbledegook from the 1940s (p. 4.2) are still relevant in the twenty-first century.

Table 4.5: A jargon generator

Column 1	Column 2	Column 3
Integrated	Management	Options
Total	Organisational	Flexibility
Systematised	Monitored	Capacity
Parallel	Reciprocal	Mobility
Functional	Digital	Programming
Responsive	Logistical	Concept
Optimal	Transitional	Time-phase
Synchronised	Incremental	Projection
Compatible	Fifth-generation	Hardware
Balanced	Policy	Contingency

Source: Adapted from Broughton (1968).

Karl Geiger's Business Buzzword Bingo! is one strategy for using humour to undermine jargon (Geiger 2003; Green 2003). Geiger has created a website that can generate a number of 'buzzword bingo' cards. Take a card to a meeting and mark a buzzword each time one is uttered. The 'BINGO' square is a free square. If you get five in a row (up, horizontally, down), shout 'bingo!' and you have won.

In the real world, of course, you would need to exercise caution before engaging in such an exercise or prank. Nevertheless, this type of exercise could be used to draw people's attention to the pomposity, emptiness and self-parodying slickness of jargon.

It could be argued that jargon used judiciously is not a major disaster, and might be tolerable. Like clichés, buzzwords were once fresh and meaningful, but overuse and abuse has made most of them objects of ridicule.

envision	paradigm shift	herding cats	upgrade	implement
alternative	marketing	experiencing slippage	tip of the iceberg	reward
involuntary retirement	result-driven	future-proof	emotional leakage	team player
BINGO	appropriate	adaptive	alpha office	heavy lifting
business silo	champion	rounding error	regroup	excellence

Figure 4.5: A 'Buzzword Bingo!' card

Source: Geiger (2003).

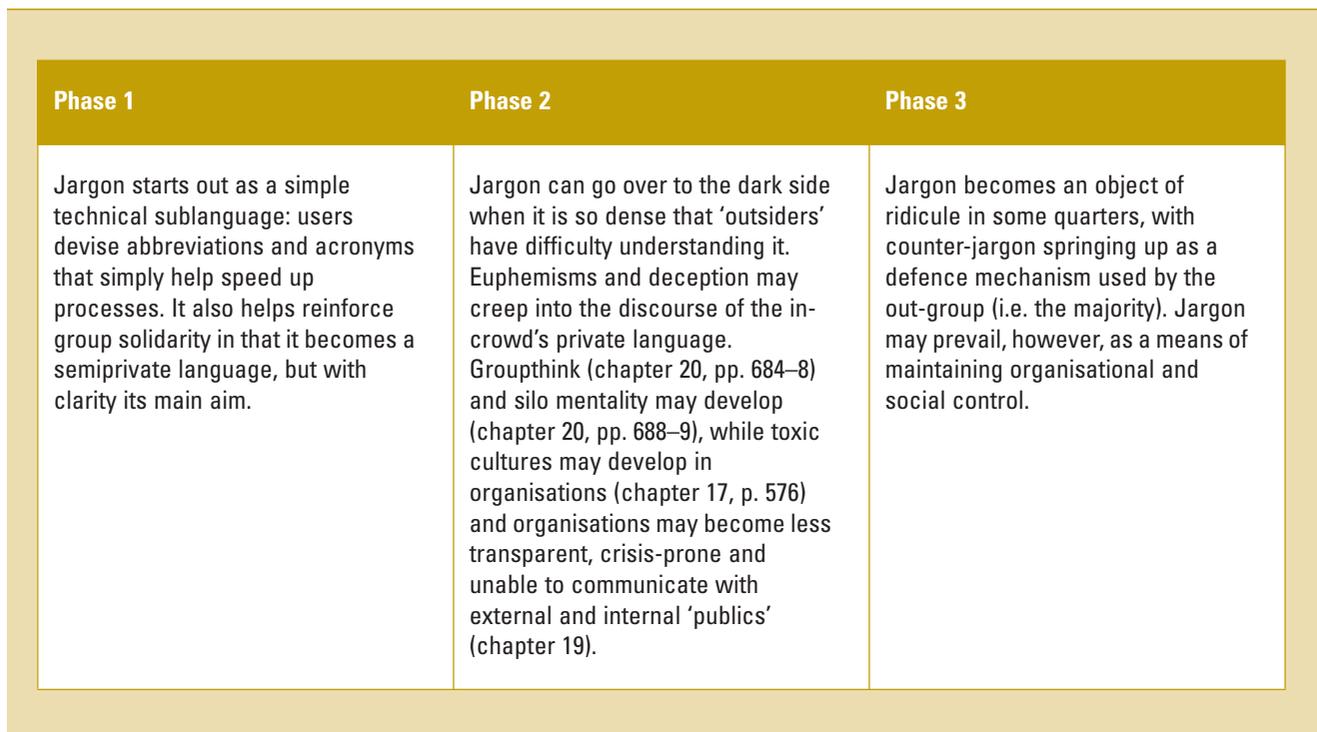


Figure 4.6: The three phases of jargon

ASSESS YOURSELF

Think of an area of inquiry, job or hobby with which you are familiar. Create a jargon generator of your own, relevant to that area, job or hobby, using the blank chart given here.

Does such a generator give an insight into the language used in that area, job or hobby, or does it merely trivialise and distort that area, job or hobby?

efforts. There have been responses in defence of political correctness (Brickell 2004; Fairclough 2003; Feldstein 1997; Mills 2003) even as new waves of anti-political correctness appear (Schwartz 2004).

A sweeping and unfair generalisation that might help us all here is that persons who tend to have politically left-wing views tend to be comfortable criticising the use of jargon in businesses and other workplaces, while persons who tend to have politically right-wing views tend to be comfortable in criticising what may be seen as ‘politically correct’ language.

This is a fascinating controversy unfolding before our eyes that will have major implications for the way language is used in the next few decades. While stumbling through this minefield, we should:

- try to avoid offending others
- examine our own language use to see that we are not merely venting prejudices
- be ready to use robust and non-euphemistic language when the situation calls for it.

Plain language tone: reader-centred, personal and positive

Tone: refers to a document’s *feel* or manner of expression

The **tone** of a document refers to its *feel* or manner of expression. It reveals the writer’s attitude to his or her readers. The tone or feel of a document is difficult to establish, but we will attempt to do so here.

Let’s presume that you want to invest some money, and you contact two companies to find out about how they would manage your money. Both companies respond with letters. Extracts from the letters are as follows:

Organisation A	Organisation B
<p>The company will administer these funds to maximise the profit of the client. A full statement will be issued at the end of each quarter.</p> <p>The client must not fail to make deposits into the fund before the end of each calendar month. Failure to do so will cause serious account-keeping problems.</p> <p>Under no circumstances should the client attempt to directly contact the portfolio manager managing the client’s funds. No communication should take place except through my office.</p>	<p>We will administer your funds to maximise your profit. We will issue you with a full statement at the end of each quarter.</p> <p>In order to achieve maximum benefits and avoid lost opportunities, we recommend that you place deposits into the fund before the end of each calendar month.</p> <p>Portfolio managers work very hard on your behalf, and we are proud of their record. Should you wish to speak to your manager, please contact me, and I will arrange a meeting. I should be able, however, to personally provide you with any information you seek.</p>

Who would you invest your money with? Many people would feel more inclined to go with Organisation B – because the tone is more attractive.

Tone tells us about the writer's attitude towards his or her readers. The writer from Organisation A comes across as:

- impersonal
- negative
- concerned with the company's interests rather than the reader's.

Organisation B, which uses plain English style, has a tone that is:

- personal
- positive
- reader-centred.

Tone: the personal approach

You are not a robot, and you don't deal with robots every day, so why should you write like a robot? Many organisations prefer a house style of writing that is impersonal. For example:

Official policy on this is ...

Acme Electronics will not buy at this price ...

The applicant must submit three copies ...

Customers need to observe the following regulations ...

People who write words like these do not conduct conversations with their colleagues, friends and loved ones in this way. Instead, like all human beings, they use personal pronouns such as *I*, *we*, *ours*, *you* and *yours* and contractions such as *won't* and *I'll*. This shows a certain amount of warmth and empathy. Why, then, do organisations persist in using impersonal style?

Impersonal style is often adopted because people think it is professional, because it is coolly detached. This can be a good thing, but when carried to extremes the impersonal style is seen as cold and hostile. Again, contrast Organisation A's letter with Organisation B's. Users of the impersonal style, by the way, use a lot of passive voice constructions (online chapter 1), nominalisation and abstraction.

In an age when organisations claim they want to communicate more directly with customers, the personal style should be used more often. People respond to directness and empathy, not to abstraction and remoteness. This is not to say that writers should adopt a gushingly familiar tone with readers; it is merely to say that a personal style is:

- more civilised
- more polite
- more effective.

Tone: the positive approach

Consider the various negative words and phrases in English, some of which we have already seen in Organisation A's letter (No, not, never, unable, however, yet, forbidden, prohibited, under no circumstances, restricted, have no objections, avoid, cease, not yet proved, without, lacking).

How do you feel about these words? Negative expressions produce reactions of fear, insecurity, resentment and aggression in readers and listeners, and, for the most part, that is not a good thing. Negative expressions, in combination with impersonality and a writer-centred attitude produce documents that have an authoritarian, bullying and bossy feel to them.

Negative expressions are also hard work: they present readers and listeners with another level of meaning that has to be translated. Consider, for example, these passages:

Negative phrasing	Positive phrasing
It is not obvious to us that this fee should not be disallowed at this juncture, and we would have no objections to work beginning in the not too distant future, providing the company has not ceased to attract the non-permanent government tax concession unavailable for all types of work except this.	It is clear that this fee should be approved, and we would be happy to see the work begin soon, provided the company still receives the temporary tax concession granted by the government for this type of work.

Notice that you have to work hard to decipher what is going on in the negative version. Sentences take on the look of equations, and readers have to become mathematicians, crossing out negative values to produce a result.

Sentences, however, shouldn't be such hard work. Notice also that, in comparison with the positive version, the negative version is cold and unenthusiastic. Most of us would prefer to read the positive version rather than the negative version.

Using double negatives can give writing some subtlety. For example:

- Not be disallowed...
- Not dissimilar to...
- Not unsympathetic to...
- Not infrequently...
- Not unconnected with...

However, a little of this subtlety goes a long way. Ultimately, double negative constructions mean more work for your reader, and you should thus be not uneconomical in your use of them.

Negative expressions do have their place, however, in situations requiring warnings. These situations include those where there might be physical danger for the reader, or where there might be serious legal consequences for the reader.

Do not place this bottle near a naked flame.

Do not turn on the machine until you have read this page.

The sale of alcohol to persons under 18 is not permitted.

Please do not fail to respond to this summons. Such failure may lead to your being arrested and charged.

Tone: the reader-centred approach

The bureaucratic, stuffy letter from Organisation A is, as we have seen, impersonal and negative. It also shows that the writer is primarily concerned with his or her own interests and problems rather than the reader's interests and problems. In other words, it shows a writer-centred rather than a reader-centred approach. The writer has an I/we attitude, rather than a you attitude (see online chapter 5).

Your readers, unsurprisingly, are concerned with their own world, and how you can help them. This is not necessarily egotistical and narrow on their part – merely practical.

Writers using the bureaucratic style often neglect the point of view of the reader. The person being addressed – the applicant, the buyer, the complainant, the user, the lessee, the taxpayer – is seen as an afterthought, a nuisance. This is a mistake.

The reader is usually the customer or client of the writer, and thus, in a very real sense, the writer's employer.

Without clients or customers, the writer would not have a job. When the writer does not consider the reader, means and ends become confused. The means – the system driven by the writer – becomes an end in itself, rather than something to serve the reader.

Writers should therefore adopt a reader-centred approach. This is not necessarily the same thing as a personal approach. Writers can make their documents more personal by the use of personal references, but if first-person references (*I, me, mine, our, we, our organisation*) outnumber the second-person references (*you, your, yours, your organisation*) the approach is personal, but writer-centred.

It is useful to calculate the **empathy index** of your documents to check their focus. The empathy index (Wells 1988) of a document is constructed by subtracting the number of first-person references from the number of second-person references. Here's an example:

Empathy index: a measure of personal focus in a document, calculated by subtracting the number all first-person references from the number of all second-person references

Company C	Company D
<p>We think you will like our new income loss insurance plan. Our planning staff at Perennial Insurance have researched this area of policy development intensively, and we think that we have come up with the best possible product here.</p> <p>Cover of up to \$50,000 a year is available should a loss of income occur. Only Perennial can offer such high levels of cover.</p> <p>We recommend automatic deductions of premiums from salary. This will speed processing through our new, state-of-the-art computer system.</p>	<p>A loss of your income — it could be a disaster for you, your colleagues and your family.</p> <p>Perennial may be able to help you with our new income loss insurance plan.</p> <p>You can be covered for loss of income of up to \$50,000 a year. You can't get better coverage than that.</p> <p>For your convenience, we can make provision for premiums to be deducted from your salary.</p>
<p>Second-person references = 1 First-person references = 9 Empathy index = 1–9 = –8</p>	<p>Second person references = 9 First-person references = 3 Empathy index = 9–3 = 6</p>

The *empathy index*, like readability scores (see online chapter 3) is a crude measure, but is often effective in keeping your writing on track.

Tone in plain English documents

As mentioned earlier, document tone is often a difficult quality to identify, but some aspects of it can be observed and controlled. Strive to make your documents as personal, positive and reader-centred as possible. If you achieve this, your documents will be measurably clearer and more effective.

ASSESS YOURSELF

1. Collect a number of documents — letters, memos, regulations, contracts, instructions, advertisements.
2. Make a copy of the Plain English Tone Grid for each document. Evaluate each document by placing check marks or ticks on each of the grid's lines.
3. Rewrite the documents so that they have maximum values for personal tone, positive tone and reader-centred tone.

PLAIN ENGLISH TONE SHEET

DOCUMENT: _____

IMPERSONAL _____ PERSONAL

NEGATIVE _____ POSITIVE

WRITER-CENTRED _____ READER-CENTRED

Second-person references

First-person references

EMPATHY INDEX =

Plain English style: an overview

Plain English style can help improve communication between writers and readers, and between speakers and listeners. Clearer style, when combined with clearer information design (see chapter 2) can break down many barriers to understanding.

Advocates of plain English argue that the approach is more than a simple set of writing techniques – it is a philosophy with real and wide-ranging payoffs for workplaces (see figure 4.7).

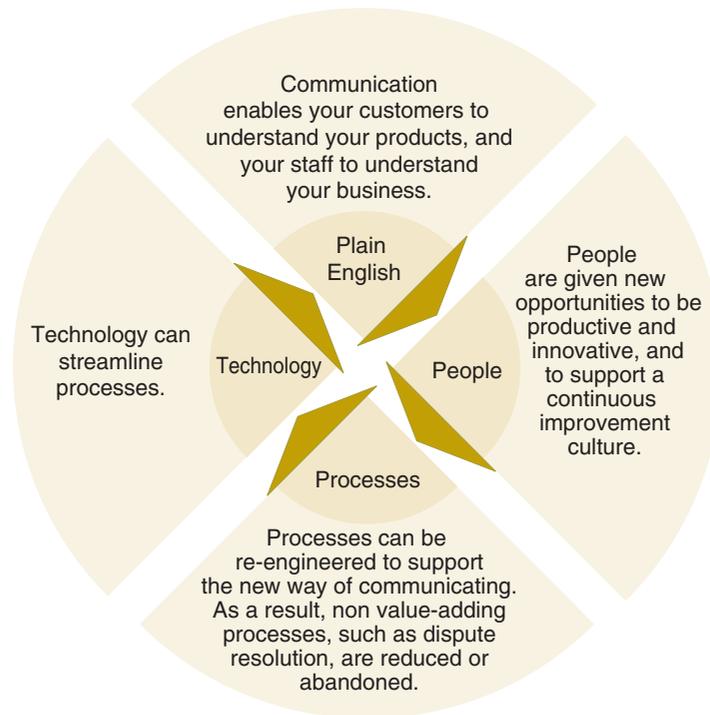


Figure 4.7: Plain English as a business improvement tool
Source: DLA Phillips Fox/Ernst and Young (1995).

Certainly, it is true that when customers and staff are bombarded by jargon or ‘geekspeak’ communication breaks down and business opportunities are lost. This appears to be true for both written and spoken communication. Such breakdowns and losses sometimes occur because:

- most people acquire their work roles because of their technical expertise
- some people in workplaces find technical talk among their peers not only convenient, but also reaffirming of their job roles, their sense of mastery and control, personal worth and membership of a wider technical community, and the security of their comfort zone
- such people then find it difficult to communicate with ‘outsiders’ because they tend to emphasise technical features of processes and products rather than articulate the benefits to the outsiders
- such people often labour under the delusion that ‘tech talk’ impresses others, whereas in fact it depresses, puzzles and angers others. In such situations, buzz words drive out the reality they allegedly describe, and insiders become more and more out of touch with reality. Thus, financial planners can alienate their clients by using too much jargon (Joiner, Leveson & Langfield-Smith 2002), management buzz words can sometimes impair decision making (Magretta 2002), and information technology specialists can alienate non-technical people, compromising their own career paths in the process by using ‘geekspeak’ instead of plain English terms (e.g. by saying ‘IP packets’ instead of ‘data transmitted over

the network’, ‘clouds’ instead of ‘large external networks, like the telephone networks’, and ‘mirroring’ instead of ‘keeping two copies of data’) (Melymuka 2002).

Plain English: what it isn't

In considering the virtues of plain English, and attempting to define what it is, we need to remember what it is not:

- It is not a substitute for artistic or poetic expression, where the beauty of words rather than their immediate clarity is the first priority.
- It is not a set of techniques that can completely eliminate the need for all specialised technical language.
- It is not a ‘dumbing down’ process.

It is possible to convey technically complex ideas in language, and plain English comprises only one approach to the solution of that problem. Other solutions include better information design, including graphic communication (see chapter 2, ‘Document design and graphic communication’) and the use of glossaries of terms (chapter 5, ‘Reports and proposals’).

Plain English: how to do it

Plain English is thus one of a number of styles, or registers, applied to some, but not all, genres of communication. Nevertheless, the plain English approach is, in many circumstances, a refreshing antidote to obscurantism, deceptive communication, faulty decision making and bad writing.

Let’s now put together some of the points made in this and earlier chapters, and conclude with a checklist of how to write in plain English:

- Minimise the use of passive voice (online chapter 1).
- Recast overstuffed sentences (online chapter 3).
- Minimise ambiguity via clearer grammatical and punctuation techniques (online chapters 1 and 2).
- Use simpler rather than more complicated words.
- Use appropriate sentence and paragraph construction techniques (online chapter 3).
- Use parallelism and information design strategies in document layout (chapter 2 and online chapter 3).
- Minimise or eliminate use of nominalisations, ‘verbings’, abstractions, clichés and tautologies.
- Minimise or eliminate the use of euphemism, jargon and discriminatory language.
- Keep your prose reader-centred, personal and positive.

Summary

In this chapter we looked at the question of word choice, and how the origins of a word (Anglo-Saxon, Scandinavian, French, Latin or Greek) can have a bearing on the readability of documents. We saw how aspects of word formation such as nominalisations, ‘verbings’, abstractions, clichés and tautologies can affect writing style. We saw that euphemism and jargon can conceal meaning, while counter-jargon can express the views of organisational undergrounds. We considered non-discriminatory language, and saw that it can help our expression to become more inclusive (noting in passing that some critics see some non-discriminatory language as a form of political correctness). Finally, we considered how aspects of tone (reader-centred, personal and positive) can improve the style of documents.

KEY TERMS

abstraction p. 4.11

circumlocution p. 4.16

doublespeak p. 4.20

empathy index p. 4.29

euphemism p. 4.20

gobbledegook p. 4.20

jargon p. 4.20

nominalisation p. 4.8

non-discriminatory language p. 4.25

political correctness p. 4.25

tone p. 4.26

'verbing' p. 4.9

word choice p. 4.6

REVIEW QUESTIONS

1. Why would you choose to use words that were derived from Latin rather than Anglo-Saxon?
2. 'A nominalisation is simply replacing a verb with a noun and a verb.' True or false?
3. What 'verbings' would you consider acceptable, and what ones would you take exception to?
4. What techniques can be used to reduce the impact of abstract language in sentences?
5. Under what circumstances does it make sense to use euphemisms?
6. What differences, if any, are there between technical language and jargon?
7. 'What you sneeringly call "political correctness" I call using language in a fair and humane way.' Discuss.

APPLIED ACTIVITIES

Exercise: Jargon

The clarity or otherwise of all documents is critically affected by the level and type of jargon present.

All jargon develops as specialised technical language, its prime purpose being to help, not hinder, communication. But what is jargon? All too often, one person's impenetrable jargon is another person's transparent and indispensable short-cut language.

1. Make multiple copies of the Communication Analysis table.
2. Use copies of the table to sample opinions of people working in a particular industry or area of enquiry. Sampling may occur by interviewing, or by mailing, emailing or faxing copies of the table. If your sample participants are difficult to contact, or are uncooperative, people teaching in the industry or area may be an acceptable substitute. (Participants may need more than one page.)
3. Discuss results, noting in particular areas of disagreement between recipients. What implications do such disagreements have for the industry? (The group sampled may appreciate some feedback on this exercise.)

Other questions that might be discussed include:

- How many of these terms would be comprehensible to outsiders/lay people?
- How might specialists inside an industry modify or translate such terms when communicating with outside audiences (e.g. in a submission/proposal for funding, a report to a parliamentary committee of enquiry, an advertisement)?

WHAT WOULD YOU DO?

Emails have been circulating in your workplace regarding something called ‘Buzzword Bingo’. This is a game or prank in which the number of buzz words or jargon words used in a meeting are counted, and when a certain number is attained, a person shouts ‘Bingo!’ Some (anonymous) writers of emails have mentioned that a prime candidate for being the focus of such an exercise would be your boss, Lee. Lee is, you have to admit, rather given to using jargon, and it concerns you that she seems oblivious to the fact that some staff, and even one of your best clients, find her faintly ridiculous, and thus less credible. As you ponder this, the phone rings. It’s Lee! She says that two of your immediate staff, Charles and Brody, have been incredibly rude in a briefing session she was just running. Apparently they shouted ‘Bingo!’ at the most important part of her presentation. Lee tells you she wants you to discipline them and issue a general memo about good manners in meetings. Lee then says: ‘But maybe I’m not tuned in on this, trend-wise. Give me some feedback on this, hmmm?’

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