

## Start Making Sense

### Fifteen ways to remove gobbledygook, buzzwords, businessese, techno babble, jargon and other gibberish from your copy

by Ann Wylie, president, Wylie Communications Inc.

Jargon. Buzzwords. Corporatese. They're things that make your reader say, "Huh?" And we need to remove them from our copy.

These 15 techniques will help you get the jargon out:

1. **Define your audience.** If you're writing to insiders — employees, investors and business-to-business (B2B) reporters, for instance — educate them about your language. Define terms in the text, compile glossaries and otherwise make it easy for readers to learn the language of the organization.

If you're writing to outsiders — customers, prospects and the general-interest media, for example — translate. Try using their language exclusively if they don't need to learn your terms to, say, buy a software program from your organization.

2. **Assume they don't know your language.** Not sure to whom you're writing? Target the outsiders.

"The reader who knows the jargon is unlikely to notice its absence," says Michele McLellan, a director at the Medill School of Journalism. "The reader who doesn't know the jargon will notice, and that could detract from the experience and undermine the ... goal of clarity."

3. **Picture your reader.** That's what CEO Warren Buffett does to write his stunning letters to shareholders:

When writing Berkshire Hathaway's annual report, I pretend that I'm talking to my sisters. I have no trouble picturing them: Though highly intelligent, they are not experts in accounting or finance. They will understand plain English, but jargon may puzzle them. My goal is simply to give them the information I would wish them

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to supply me if our positions were reversed. To succeed, I don't need to be Shakespeare; I must, though, have a sincere desire to inform.

No siblings to write to? Borrow mine: Just begin with "Dear Doris and Bertie."

- 4. Recast definitions.** The most common way to define terms on first reference is "unfamiliar term, familiar term . . ." But that's not the most friendly approach. It says, "Term A — which you, being a nitwit — apparently don't understand, means Term B."

Instead, try "familiar term, unfamiliar term . . ." This is a little more accessible, suggesting, "Term B, which, by the way, we geeks in accounting call term A . . ."

- 5. Spell out acronyms.** Explain them. As the SEC's *Plain English Handbook* counsels: "Don't let a shortcut for the writer become a roadblock for the reader."
- 6. Listen in on sales calls.** Your best salespeople don't talk to your clients in gobbledygook. Instead, they talk about benefits to the client in clear, tangible terms. Eavesdrop on your best salespeople, then steal their language for your copy.
- 7. Create a style guide.** Compile lists of industry terms and in-house terms. Then create guidelines for using them. Maybe you'll choose to define industry and in-house words on first reference when you're writing to employees, for instance. And perhaps you'll decide to use industry terms but not in-house terms when writing to business-to-business editors.

A style sheet gives you a lot more power in the approval process. You can say: "Gee, while I personally would love to use the phrase 'contaminated by the chlorine-resistant cryptosporidium,' our style guide prohibits using it when we write to our customers. I guess we'll just have to use a substitute that's allowed by the style guide."

- 8. Run the business-to-business test.** Writing a release for trade publications? Unsure whether a word is an industry term or an in-house

term? That's when Kelly Parthen, PR manager of Agilent Technologies, runs what she calls the B2B test: She searches trade publication Web sites for the term in question. If she can't find it there, she figures it's not an industry word and comes up with a more familiar substitute.

9. **Include a glossary.** One problem with defining terms on first reference is that it places the burden on readers to crawl back up through the text to find the meaning of a word they encounter later. Instead, include a glossary in addition to defining unfamiliar terms on first reference.
10. **Write about jargon.** In his 2001 "Letter to Shareholders," Buffett introduced a complex concept by writing: "Bad terminology is the enemy of good thinking. When companies or investment professionals use terms such as 'EBITDA' and 'pro forma,' they want you to unthinkingly accept concepts that are dangerously flawed."
11. **Use colloquial definitions.** Buffett again: "First, a definition: Loss reserves at an insurer are not funds tucked away for a rainy day, but rather a liability account."

Not "invested funds" but "funds tucked away for a rainy day."

12. **Create a scenario.** Readers faced with complex information often make up scenarios so they can understand the text, according to a study by Carnegie-Mellon University. That is, they use abstract concepts in hypothetical situations where people perform the action.

Why make your readers write scenarios? You can make complex ideas more understandable by sketching out a sample plot yourself.

13. **Find a real person.** Pete Weissman, who writes speeches on public policy, writes: "I focus on the impact a policy will have on real people" instead of on the policy itself. That's a great technique for getting rid of gobbledygook.
14. **Give an example.** When Fred Shlapak, senior vice president and assistant to the president of Motorola SPS, talks about Motorola's plans for the embedded electronic solutions market, he knows that some of his audience members don't know embedded solutions from embedded

journalists. So he clarifies the term by giving examples that mean something to the audience:

You might start your day by waking to a digital clock that is powered by a Motorola microcontroller. From there, you would grab your electric shaver — another device driven by DigitalDNA. Next, you make your way to the kitchen, where Motorola embedded systems control your microwave, coffee maker, refrigerator and dishwasher. On your way out the door, you grab your cell phone and check your e-mail on a DigitalDNA-powered network. Embedded systems surround you, and you haven't even made it to your car.

Where are your readers likely to see your technology in action? Illustrate your ideas so readers understand how the technical terms apply to their lives.

- 15. Hire your 12 year old.** Some renowned writers brag that they use junior high students to edit their copy. The result is copy that's literally written at the eighth-grade level. Give it a shot: Put your tween to work on your text and watch the gobbledygook disappear.

### **Write to be understood.**

Next time your fingers hit the keyboard, translate jargon. That will help you avoid Alan Greenspan's problem. The Federal Reserve chairman once told a group of economists, "I guess I should warn you, if I turn out to be particularly clear, you've probably misunderstood what I've said."

Huh?

### **About the author**

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