

Weekly communications #fail: homonyms, and how you say it matters

Homonyms: words that sound and/or are spelled the same but have different things

As I was reading the Washington Post this morning, on the front page was an article about a rapist recently sentenced to three life terms. In the article, the reporter said that the rapist “**reined** terror on Montgomery three decades ago...” Of course, the correct word in this context is **reigned**. Reined (restrained) and reigned (exercised power over) sound the same—they are homonyms—but have completely unrelated meanings. Yesterday, I was reading a blog post with a headline that said “too much to **bare**.” The author really meant to say “too much to **bear**.”

Granted, these mistakes are easy to make because the words are not spelled incorrectly (so spell check would not help) and they sound the same to your ear (so reading aloud would not catch it). Sadly, misusing homonyms is a common mistake. Here’s a list of the most common: <http://wsuonline.weber.edu/wrh/words.htm>

These types of mistakes are precisely why we need editors.

How you say it matters

Using the correct words is important. But how you say what you are saying also matters. If you are asking me to do something for you, being pleasant and appreciative makes me want to help you. If on the other hand you write me asking me for something you need (like an email I received a few weeks ago) that says that this thing is needed right away, and you don’t say please, thank you or that you would appreciate my help, then,

I am not inclined to help you.

Being polite and considerate of whoever is receiving your business communication will result in better compliance. That's a fact. Being rude, inconsiderate or demanding, on the other hand, will result in resistance.