

Two big problems muddling your message

When I do any copy editing and/or proofreading, I always come across two problems: wordiness and punctuation mistakes. These problems affect how clear your writing is and muddle your message. That's because when readers have to read overlong, poorly punctuated sentences, filled with unnecessary words, they don't understand what you are trying to say.

Problem #1: Wordiness

Wordiness is using too many words to say what you mean.

How do you fix this problem?

- **Eliminate extra words and phrases**

When I was in grad school, one of my professors (the wonderful Jack Falla), had us write a press release, and then go back and eliminate ten words. The problem with this approach is that wordy people often think they need all the words they have written. They don't.

Today's Nonprofit Marketing Guide has a great post listing wordy phrases and their much more succinct alternatives. Read it here.

- **Ask yourself if you are being redundant**

Phrases such as "basic fundamentals" are redundant.

- **Use active voice**

Active voice uses fewer words than passive voice. It's more direct.

Problem #2: Punctuation mistakes

Punctuation is a tool to make your sentences work better. You use a period to end a sentence and a comma to insert a pause. You use a colon to indicate something is following and a semicolon to separate two big ideas in one sentence. We also use parentheses to add extra information to a sentence and em dashes to set off words or phrases.

How do you fix this problem?

- **Learn how to use the comma properly**

The comma seems to trip lots of people up. Either they use it too much or not enough. And then there's the whole serial or Oxford comma debate. In any case, Grammar Book has some useful rules for comma usage.

- **Learn when to use the em dash**

Em dashes are not to be confused with the shorter en dashes and the even shorter dashes or hyphens. The Punctuation Guide has a good explanation of how to use em dashes.

- **Watch out for improper capitalization and apostrophes**

It's become epidemic lately – people are using capitalization to indicate importance. That's not how it works. Use caps at the beginning of a sentence, and to indicate proper names. The president may be important, but unless you are expressly referring to President Barack Obama, there's no need to capitalize the word alone.

Apostrophes are meant to convey possession. They do not make a word plural. Hamilton University calls the misuse of the apostrophe a deadly sin of writing. Check it out.

To be clear, be concise

Sometimes people are wordy because they don't have anything to say. That's a lack of message. No amount of removing redundancies will fix it. However, if you've written something

and you are not sure whether it's communicating what you want it to say, make sure to eliminate wordiness and correct your punctuation. Chances are that being more concise (and precise with your punctuation) will clarify whatever it is you are trying to say.

If you need some help eliminating wordiness, fixing punctuation, and making your writing clearer, contact me!