Always aim for clarity

Have you ever read something that left you shaking your head, where you wondered what exactly the writer was trying to say? That's what happens when the writer of what you are reading lacks the ability to communicate clearly.

It's important for your communications to be clear, to be easily understood, and not to confuse your audience. How do you achieve this type of clarity? Following are four suggestions:

1. Know what you are trying to say before you start writing. Remember in high school when you were taught about a thesis and its supporting points? That lesson should be ingrained in any writer's head. Always have a thesis (your premise or argument) and why you support it. It's helpful to jot down your thesis (for this piece—clarity is essential to communication) and then your top reasons for supporting it (for this piece I jotted down too many words, not knowing what you really want to say).

2. Balance your assumptions. Don't assume your audience knows too little or too much—find the middle ground that works for your specific audience. To be able to find the middle ground, you must know who is in your audience. Are they insiders? Are they the general public? How much do they know? Have you ever watched *Washington Wee*k on PBS? I watch it practically every Friday. One quirk they have is that they insist on spelling out every reference. If a journalist on the panel simply says "McConnell," the host quickly adds: Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell. This assumes the audience won't understand the reference to McConnell and yet most people who watch *Washington Week* are fairly informed and interested in all things political.

3. Write simply. Often, clarity is compromised by wordiness or

jargon or big words when smaller words would do just fine. It's tempting to stuff articles and blog posts with fancy words, and office speak, but what you end up doing is alienating the audience who may not be conversant in your world. So work to eliminate extra words and jargon, and use plain language instead (e.g., if you see the word "utilize" substitute "use").

4. Reread and edit everything before you make it public. Sometimes we write something and then look it over quickly before we hit "publish." It may make sense to us at that moment, but does it make sense to others? Taking the time to read something slowly, copy edit it, and make sure it says what you want it to say will go a long way in making sure it is clear to *others.* If possible, get another person to read your copy (a copy editor and/or proofreader).

Always aim for clarity. If your audience doesn't get what you are trying to say, then you haven't communicated at all.