

Poor grammar is poor communication part 3

Grammar matters

This is a lawn sign that has appeared around my neighborhood:



Lawn sign

I believe what they meant to say was “No Townhouses on Historic Chestnut Lodge.” Or maybe they meant to say “Not More Townhouses on Historic Chestnut Lodge,” which would still be awkward. I am not sure. Perhaps the people behind this campaign were not sure either. But what I do know is that this sign is wrong.

It's spelled A-L-A-N

U.K's Vision Express had a major typo, transposing the L and A, in a letter to a customer. It was quite insulting. You have to read this Daily Mail article to see what I mean, but suffice it to say, a proofreader would have saved the day. (Thanks to Leslie O'Flahavan for sharing the article on her company's Facebook feed.)

Copy edit your work, or at least, do some proofreading

Having poor grammar, or a typo (or two or three) in your marketing materials is poor communication. Your message will

be muddled and any mistakes will distract from what you are trying to say.

Typos and grammatical mistakes are fixable, and if you don't catch them in time, they can be costly. There is a solution and that is to copy edit *and* proofread your written materials.

Watch this space next week for the next On Writing interview, with a pro who certainly knows that grammar and spelling matter.

Asking the wrong question is poor communication (part 2)

This post is about how Delta Airlines compounded a bad experience by asking the wrong questions. Here's the story:

International flight on Delta

A few weeks back I was returning to the United States on Delta from a trip abroad. My first port of entry was Delta's major hub, Atlanta. If you've traveled internationally you know that you must claim your suitcase and then pass with it through customs, to then be able to check it back through to your final destination. However, on this occasion, my suitcase never arrived in the customs baggage claim. And even though I asked several Delta agents and baggage claim workers, not one person was able to tell me where my bag was, if it had been loaded off the plane or even if it had arrived in Atlanta at all.

Tweeting doesn't help at all

I was forced to check with Delta's customer "service" counter

outside the customs area, where I was quite unhelpfully told my bag would “automatically” be transferred to my Washington bound flight, since it was tagged to DCA. I tweeted Delta to see if they could help me find out the whereabouts of my bag. Their response was to ask me if I had spoken to a manager. That was not the right question. The question should have been “how can we help?” If I had spoken to a manager (which, I would have had one been available and I did not have to catch my next flight), why would I be tweeting @Delta?

Do you really want to know what I think?

Well, my bag did not arrive at Washington with me on my flight. It was delivered to my home the next afternoon. At which point, Delta sent me the following email, with the subject line “Deborah, We Value Your Opinion:”

Dear Deborah,				
We are very sorry for the baggage mishandling you experienced on May 05, 2016.				
As a valued SkyMiles member, your feedback about your experience is important to us and will help us continue to improve. We ask that you please provide feedback on your experience by answering the question below.				
How likely are you to recommend Delta Air Lines to others?				
Definitely Will	Probably Will	May or May Not	Probably Will Not	Definitely Will Not
5	4	3	2	1
Your feedback is important to us and again, we offer our deepest apologies for this inconvenience.				
Sincerely, Gil West Chief Operating Officer				

There are literally countless other questions they could have asked such as: was my bag delivered in good shape, as promised, was the delivery service professional, did DCA

baggage services handle my claim correctly, did the service met my expectations or anything at all about the actual incident. Delta would have had to ask questions like that if it actually cared about its operations and customer experiences. Instead, Delta only wants to know if, based on this experience, I would recommend it to others.

That was not the right question. It showed me that Delta is only interested in its reputation and not even vaguely about their operational efficacy or customer experience.

I wrote Delta a three-page letter (not an email) about this travel experience (there were other issues too). I enumerated the various things that Delta should look into and correct (customer service, their Twitter presence, among others). I got a two-paragraph email back, basically repeating what I had mentioned and offering me some Delta SkyMiles for my troubles.

No, really, what do you think of us?

And then I got another email from Delta with the subject line "Deborah, We Value Your Opinion." This is what this email said:

Dear Deborah,				
We recently sent you an email regarding your Delta Customer Care request. It was our pleasure assisting you.				
Our goal is to deliver the very best service possible, so your feedback is important in helping us recognize and improve our quality. Please begin this short survey regarding how I did by answering the first question below:				
How likely are you to recommend Delta Air Lines to others?				
Definitely Will	Probably Will	May or May Not	Probably Will Not	Definitely Will Not
5	4	3	2	1

Again, Delta is mostly interested in whether I would recommend Delta. Which, again, is not the right question. The question

should be whether I was satisfied with the response to my letter (I was not) or whether the response had addressed any of my concerns (not to my knowledge).

Do you really want to know?

Companies that are serious about improving ask for real feedback. To ask me whether I would recommend Delta is not a good or useful question. It is poor communications and even poorer customer service.

What do you think? Would you have answered this question? What benefit does it provide the company and does it provide any benefit to the customer?

Forcing “likes” is poor business communication (part 1)

A few weeks ago, I told you about how a Udemy instructor requested that I change my review from three stars to five stars because it would help him remain high in the ratings. He had no interest in whether his course merited five stars or why I had rated it three stars. He just wanted me to like him enough to further his purposes.

And then today in the *Washington Post*, I read this article: “This landlord said ‘like’ me on Facebook or get evicted.” Basically, in both a show of poor communication skills and even poorer business law knowledge, a landlord in Salt Lake City, Utah posted notices on tenants’ doors, telling them to

“like” the building/complex on Facebook or be in violation of their rental agreement. Naturally, the tenants did not like this at all and many took to Facebook to complain and some threatened legal action, saying that it was an invasion of privacy, etc. The landlord was forced to retreat, and even had to take down the Facebook page because of the various negative comments and ratings that arose due to this move .

You can't force people to like you.

But hidden in the article, lies the purported reason why the landlord made this move: since there had been pictures taken at a community party, the landlord wanted to have legal authority to post them and tag them. I am not sure if this is an excuse, or it's real, but the way the landlord communicated this was poor or non-existent.

So again, it is an issue of poor communication.

In today's social, online world, it is increasingly difficult for businesses to hide bad behavior. Businesses can't force positive reviews or likes, although many times businesses ask customers to like them in order to give discounts or other preferential information. In this way, the number of likes on a page has become completely meaningless. Similarly, if a business has only glowing reviews, they are suspect, and may not be seen as valid.

Give 'em a reason to want to like you

I am not saying that businesses should avoid reviews or Facebook. Businesses need to communicate better, and more importantly, give customers a reason (through actual good service or products) *to want* to like them and review them positively.

Why do you like Facebook pages? Do you like them to get event information or special discounts? To support a business owner? Let me know your thoughts in the comments.

On writing: Brad Phillips knows training is key

One of the blogs on my must-read list is Mr. Media Training, written by Brad Phillips. I've been reading Brad's insights on media and communications for years. Brad truly is a born blogger, and a great communicator, so naturally, I wanted to him to share this thoughts on writing.



Brad Phillips,
president,
Phillips Media
Relations

Brad Phillips is the president of Phillips Media Relations, a media and presentation training firm with offices in New York City and Washington, DC. Before founding his firm in 2004, he was a journalist with ABC News and CNN. Phillips is the author of *The Media Training Bible*, an Amazon #1 Public Relations best seller, the new book *101 Ways to Open a Speech*, and the

Mr. Media Training blog, the world's most-visited media training website.

Twitter: @MrMediaTraining

1. What role does writing play in your work and how important a skill is it?

Writing is critical for our firm and touches all parts of our work. Our books help introduce potential clients to our work for a modest cost, and our blog—which posts fresh content at least weekly—does the same for free. Our writing also influences our training sessions; sharply written media interview practice questions often elicit surprising responses, which allow us to discuss better approaches with the client. In terms of its overall importance as a skill, I can't think of many others that are more important. Framing your ideas well—particularly in a business dependent upon the written word—is non-negotiable.

2. Does writing well still matter in a digital/text/emoji world?

When I first joined Twitter in 2009, I feared that it would hasten grammar's demise, or at least its relative importance. To my surprise, I found that the challenge of reducing thoughts to a compelling 140 characters tightened my writing in other places, too. Like so many things, writing can both thrive and suffer in a digital world.

3. What's the best advice you've received or would give on how to improve writing skills?

The best advice may also be the most obvious: the greatest

writing lives in the editing. For example, my preference is to frame a blog post in my mind before writing, hammer it out quickly, and then spend the majority of my time cleaning it up, moving pieces around, and tightening the writing.

4. What are your top three writing resources or references (digital or paper-based)?

I don't have any specific writing resources, but try to pay attention to other bloggers. For some reason, blog posts are the perfect length for me. I've always struggled with longer-form writing, which is why I organized *The Media Training Bible* as 101 two-page lessons rather than, say, eight main chapters containing 25 pages each.

5. Do you follow a style guide, and if so, which one?

I've never felt a compelling need to marry myself to a single style guide; even the editor for my books relied on Chicago style but modified it to meet our needs. This is one of those areas in which it's helpful to know the rules in order to know how and when to break them. More important than stringent rules to me is making sure my choices are grammatically defensible.

6. What's your top writing/grammar/usage pet peeve?

My biggest pet peeve is when writers include unnecessary words. A few extraneous phrases in an effort to achieve a friendlier tone is one thing. But when it's pervasive throughout someone's writing, I click away from their post.

7. What's your favorite word and what's your least favorite?

My favorite word is "yes," not when offered in an unthinking or overly compliant way, but when someone agrees to take on a challenge with determination and enthusiasm. My least favorite is "like" when used as verbal filler.

Do you agree with Brad editing is the most important part in

producing top-notch writing? I know I do! Share your thoughts on writing in the comments, and be sure to check this space next month when another communications pro will share his or her thoughts on writing.

Have a meaningful and relaxing Memorial Day weekend: Unofficial summer is finally here!

You don't want shares or likes

Social media is easy – all you need is quotes

Last week, I attended a networking event where a speaker shared her insights about social media, specifically for business (you'd think that by 2016, everyone has learned all about social media, but I digress).

The speaker, a self-proclaimed social media expert who works primarily with small, local businesses, wanted to share with us that “doing” social media is not hard. All you have to do is to provide content. She gave suggestions for the types of “content” your business could share—articles you find “around,” pictures you take, and her absolute favorite, quotes. Basically, she told us, find a “cute” quote and then put together an image featuring said quote and a picture or a background, like this:



She told us quotes do gangbusters on Facebook. People just love them, and then they “like” them and even share them.

OK, I don’t have anything against quotes. Sometimes a nice inspirational quote will motivate you or a funny one will make you laugh. We all need quick breaks and reading and sharing a quote is a harmless use of 10 seconds.

It’s not about liking or sharing. It’s about goals.

But, here’s the thing: why are you on social media? If you are on social media as a business, you are not there simply to get likes or shares. Getting likes or shares is great, but you really are using social media to achieve certain business or communications goals, such as:

- Getting people to visit your website
- Establishing your “thought leadership”
- Creating a network
- “Engaging” with your customers and potential customers

Start with why

To quote Simon Sinek, “start with why.”

(See what I did there?)

What are you trying to accomplish?

If all you are trying to accomplish is being social or having fun, then go ahead, share all the quotes and funny pictures

you want. Get all sorts of likes and shares, and feel good about yourself.

However, if you are trying to accomplish business goals, then be clear on what those are and figure out how to get there. Perhaps sharing an article from your CEO about the issue your service solves, and which links back to your website, gets you both website visits and thought leadership.

Do you know why you are social media? Do you have specific goals for your social media?

Does your audience get you?

An exponential mistake?

Several years ago, when I was just starting out, I was hired by a new client to write a sales pitch letter. The letter would promote a hotel reservations software that the client was selling to small (non-chain, independent) hotels.

The client hated the letter I wrote. He didn't even want to pay me for it! His main complaint was that I used language the hotel owners wouldn't understand. Specifically, I had used the term "exponential growth," and the client thought most people would not understand the word "exponential." I was completely taken aback. To me, "exponential growth" sounded good. You'd

want your business to experience it by simply buying a new software, right?

Whether this client was right or not about “exponential,” the takeaway is that you have to use the language that your audience will get. If your audience talks at a sixth-grade level, you can’t use university-level language and hope they understand what you are saying.

Trump gets it (or maybe doesn’t know better)

According to the article “Donald Trump Speaks Like a Sixth Grader. All Politicians Should,” by Allison Jane Smith and published this past Sunday in the *Washington Post*, part of Trump’s success in the presidential primaries can be attributed to his ability to communicate with the swath of Americans who have low literacy skills. As you probably have heard, Trump always uses simple words, and repeats them constantly.

Smith writes:

When speaking to or writing for a broad audience, it’s a best practice to speak at an eighth-grade reading level. More than 40 percent of Americans have only basic literary skills, according to a 2003 assessment. And even highly educated people prefer to read below their formal education level.

Adjust your language

In other words, speakers (and writers) who want to communicate more widely would do better to simplify. Using big words when most people don’t get them will only hurt your cause, perhaps exponentially.

Of course, if you are trying to communicate more narrowly, or to a very sophisticated audience, you will have to adjust your language accordingly.

Your job as a communicator is to make sure your audience gets you.

Have you ever read marketing material that you didn't understand? Do you think it was a language choice issue? Let me know in the comments.

On writing: For Jay Morris, writing is a journey

We've reached the fourth edition of *On Writing*, and this time, I asked Jay Morris to share his insights. Jay, who runs his own PR consultancy, has an extensive writing background as a journalist and editor. He also writes one of my favorite blogs, *The Wayward Journey*.



Jay Morris, CEO, Jay
Morris
Communications, LLC

Jay Morris began his career as a newspaper reporter and editor before moving to the Washington area to practice public relations and marketing at several DC-based trade associations. An award-winning communicator, he now manages his own firm, Jay Morris Communications, LLC, where he helps clients increase their visibility in the marketplace, on Capitol Hill and with members, consumers and stakeholders. He also blogs at The Wayward Journey.

Twitter: @JayMorCom

1. What role does writing play in your work and how important a skill is it?

Writing is by far the most important “deliverable” I provide my clients. My projects often begin with a strategic communications assessment, but I almost always end up writing something for the client. It could be web content, a blog post, a press release or a speech—some type of written communication that meets a need and tells the client’s story.

2. Does writing well still matter in a digital/text/emoji world?

Writing does matter, and I think it matters even more in a world where there is a way too much mediocre content. If you want to distinguish yourself—if you really want to stand out—you need to be able to communicate effectively. Whether it’s a tweet or a long-form journal article, put some effort into writing it well. Readers will take notice and reward you for it.

3. What's the best advice you've received or would give on how to improve writing skills?

An English professor once wrote on one of my papers, "You seem to understand the concepts, but your writing is unpracticed." That was a bruise to my ego, but I took what he said to heart and worked hard at improving my writing. I practiced writing clearly and concisely. My advice to anyone who wants to write would be the same: practice, practice, practice! Just as musicians and athletes practice for hours each day, writers need to flex their creative muscles, too. Look for ways to stretch your skills, try new forms and experiment with your style and voice. Blogging and journaling are two excellent ways of doing that.

4. What are your top three writing resources or references (digital or paper-based)?

Strunk & White's "The Elements of Style," John Warriner's "English Grammar and Composition" and Gerald Levin's "Prose Models" are timeless references worth getting. A good way to perfect your craft is to study authors you admire. Early on, I read nonfiction by John McPhee, Tom Wolfe and Garry Wills, and I read a lot of short story collections. Taking classes or joining a writers group helps, too.

5. Do you follow a style guide, and if so, which one?

I've always followed the AP Stylebook. It goes back to my journalism days when I worked on a newspaper, then later on magazines and newsletters. Regardless of the style guide, I lean towards rules that favor simplicity and eliminating the unnecessary. For example, I'm not a big fan of the Oxford comma. I'm also a stickler for consistency. Once you choose a style rule, you should apply it consistently throughout your work.

6. What's your top-most cringe-worthy-writing/grammar/usage pet peeve?

Dangling participles and misplaced modifiers. I often see these in poorly written marketing pitches (and it does make me cringe). The offending sentence usually goes something like this: “As a communications professional who is constantly asked to do more with less, Acme Media understands how important it is for you to spend your PR dollars wisely.” Needless to say, Acme Media is not a communications professional!

7. What’s your favorite word and what’s your least favorite?

I think the words “intentional,” “mindful” and “purposeful” have become overused. It’s a shame because I do like the idea of being purposeful in my life and work. Probably my favorite words are the “the other day.” I always seem to start my blog posts with, “The other day, I...” It’s a good way to begin a story. My advice is to choose words that help your storytelling, which, after all, is what writing is about.

How do you stretch your writing skills? Do you journal and blog like Jay Morris? Let me know your thoughts in the comments and watch this blog next month for more thoughts on writing.

Feedback is not a synonym for review (customer feedback part 2)

Is asking for feedback the same as asking for a review? Nope. Not even close.

There’s a huge difference between feedback and reviews: First

of all, each targets a different audience. And second, each serves a different purpose.

Feedback is about you (service/product/offering)

If you ask for feedback, you want to know what works and what doesn't, (presumably) in order to improve the offering. Do you want to know what customers/supporters really think about you? Then ask for feedback.

Reviews are about your customers/supporters (potential and current)

If you ask for reviews, you are asking customers to *share* their thoughts, both good and bad, about your product or service *with other customers*.

Many organizations make the mistake of asking for a review when what they want is feedback and some ask for feedback when all they want is a review.



You need both, but for different reasons

Organizations should try to get both feedback and reviews from their customers, but not at the same time or using the same method.

Feedback benefits the organization, because it provides honest insights meant to correct any issues.

Reviews are important too. They help with SEO, they can entice new customers, and they add credibility. Of course, not all reviews are positive, but negative reviews can serve as a red

flag to businesses.

Do you want feedback or just an inflated review?

I am taking a course on Udemy (an online “school”). The course is super long, and I am almost finished with it. About half-way through, Udemy asked me to rate the course. I rated it three stars out of five, mainly because the course is too long, repetitive and somewhat disorganized.

And then I got this email from the course’s instructor (in full below, except I removed the instructor’s name):

Hey Deborah,

Thank you for enrolling in my course.

I noticed you left a 3 star review. Was there something specifically wrong with the course that I can help you with? If the course simply isn't for you, I can surely help you get a refund.

Teaching on Udemy is part of my livelihood, and as you can see from the thoroughness of the course, I put a huge amount of effort into making it as useful as possible. I know the course could get boring from time to time, but I tried my best to be as thorough as possible for the beginner.

Udemy reacts very negatively toward 3 star reviews, and it tells them not to give my course as much visibility. It also hurts my livelihood generated from course sales.

If you can modify your review, that would be very much

appreciated and it will go a long way toward helping me continue to teach on Udemy.

Once again, please let me know what was wrong with the course, and if you need me to get a refund processed for you, please let me know.

Thank you very much for your consideration,

Basically, the Udemy instructor wants me to give him a five-star review, *because it benefits him*, not because it benefits his potential customers. By the way, in my book, a three-star review is not negative, but fair/middling.

It occurs to me that if reviewers are pressured to change their reviews, and provide glowing reviews for something that is not five-star worthy, it can create problems down the road. Say this instructor gets all five-star reviews for a non-five-star course. People sign up based on those reviews and they are then disappointed because the course does not live up to the reviews. In turn, they provide not-so-glowing reviews. The instructor contacts them and offers to negotiate a refund, like he did for me. In the end, he will make less money.

If instead, the instructor asked for specific feedback and disassociated it from the review or from the money I paid for the course, I would provide a critique. And if he were interested in actually improving his course rather than just improving the reviews, he would weigh it carefully and maybe consider incorporating my feedback.

So, ask for both

Businesses and organizations who want to improve, should always ask for *private, anonymous* feedback.

Businesses who want to build up credibility and SEO should ask for reviews. However, businesses need to be prepared for negative comments, and they need to have a way to deal with them.

What are your thoughts? Do you use reviews and feedback interchangeably? Do you solicit either feedback or reviews or both? How do you do it? Let me know in the comments.

It's not always about the money (customer feedback part 1)

Going by the emails I receive, some companies think that I don't do business with them solely because I can't afford to.



Every few weeks, a yoga studio I used to attend until my favorite teacher left sends me a dollars-off promotion. Come back, they say, here's an \$8 discount.

Then there's the company that is always sending me discounts for handyman services.

And there's a cosmetics company that sends emails telling me how I can get a free something or other with purchase (Only today! Only friends and family!).

It's not about money.

None of these companies has any idea why I am not a return customer. They've never asked me, but I'll tell you my reasons.

I haven't been back to the yoga studio because I don't like the teacher that is currently teaching during the time slot that is convenient for me. Additionally, I hurt my shoulder and I can't do yoga right now.

I haven't used the handyman company because I don't have a current need. That's not to say I won't in the future, but there's nothing (knocking on wood here) that needs fixing right now.

The cosmetics company just yesterday was offering me a free lash-extender mascara. I wear contact lenses and I never use mascaras that extend because it bothers my eyes, so even a free mascara is not an enticement.

But at least they are tracking.

To their credit, these companies have noticed that I haven't been a customer for a while and they want me back. But they err in thinking that doing business is simply about money.

Here's the thing: Getting customers back is not as easy as offering a discount or a gift with purchase. You have to understand what motivates your customer.

The decision to buy something or do business with a company is often about more than just price. There are other factors, both tangible (e.g., need, convenience, timing) and intangible (e.g., trust, satisfaction, appreciation) that affect whether you shop somewhere or buy a certain product.

Sometimes, you have to ask.

If you've lost business or aren't getting repeat business, you have to ask why. Don't assume that everything can be fixed with a dollars-off promotion. Companies are collecting emails to do marketing or to send reminders. Well, they can also send a survey or even a personalized email.

Imagine how much more effective it would be if the yoga studio owner sent me an email saying she's noticed I haven't been there in several months and she'd like to know if I am still living in town or doing yoga.

How do you track your clients or customers? How do you entice them to come back? Let me know what works for you in the comments.

On writing: Julie Mullen buzzes about PR

This month, for the third edition of *On Writing*, I reached out to Julie Mullen, who has had a long and very effective career in public relations. Julie has not only worked in the trenches of the PR world, but now, as a communications agency owner, directs communications strategy, and hires and manages staff.



Julie Mullen Partner/Co-
Founder The Buzz Agency

Julie Mullen is co-founder and partner of one of South Florida's largest communications firms, The Buzz Agency, based in Delray Beach. The firm specializes in public relations, social media, community outreach, and event management. A proud Air Force brat, Julie has lived in 10 states and one foreign country. Her PR career includes director-level positions in broadcast and print media, as well as in agency, not-for-profit and corporate sectors.

Organization: The Buzz Agency

Twitter: @juliemmullen

1. What role does writing play in your work and how important a skill is it?

At this point in my career, I spend much more time editing than writing. I do enjoy giving "track changes" a hearty workout. Most of the writing I do currently is geared towards new business development (e.g., proposals, RFP's). Is it important? Absolutely. Our livelihood depends on it. Who wants to hire a communications firm that can't craft an interesting message? Or spell?"

2. Does writing well still matter in a digital/text/emoji world?

There are many platforms our industry uses to create compelling messages. Press release writing is obviously much different than creating content for a Tweet. But regardless of *what* you are writing, it's critical to know *how* tell the story in an effective way. Additionally, I will not even consider an applicant whose writing skills are sub-par. From their initial introductory email, to their resume, to their writing samples, and if we give them a writing project, we look at the compilation of it all before we even begin to take the next steps. I don't want recent college graduates mistaking their for they're, for example.

3. What's the best advice you've received or would give on how to improve writing skills?

Read, read, read. If you're a publicist, read content that is relevant to your client – newspapers, magazines, industry trades, etc. Get to know what kind of information those outlets require and what style of writing they tend to use, then format your written pitches, releases, presentations accordingly.

4. What are your top three writing resources or references (digital or paper-based)?

AP Stylebook has always been my go-to source. I also use industry sources like PR Daily or PRWeb.com. But the best source I have is an editor I know, who, I believe, is the best in the business.

5. Do you follow a style guide, and if so, which one?

Yes, AP Stylebook is like the Bible of proper grammar and punctuation for journalists, so if it's good enough for them, it certainly is good enough for me!

6. What's your top writing/grammar/usage pet peeve?

Improper use of homophones, such as their/there/they're; affect/effect; than/then. It drives me NUTS!

7. What's your favorite word and what's your least favorite?

My least favorite has to be any form of hyperbole, such as AMAZING! SPECTACULAR! MOUTH-WATERING! Wow, it's hard to pick a favorite word, but contenders include serendipity, oxymoron, and love.

Do you agree with Julie that your livelihood in public relations depends on being able to write well? Share your thoughts in the comments. And be sure to check this space on the last Thursday of every month for more thoughts on writing.