

# Summer challenge # 7: Be direct and get it fixed

A few years ago, I had a client who thought I had a special skill: mind reading. Unfortunately for both of us, I am not actually able to read minds. I can sense moods (anger, disapproval) but I can't actually know what a person is thinking unless that person decides to tell me. In the case of this client, I did not do what she was thinking I should do, and therefore, the relationship went south.

Years later, reflecting on this client relations episode, I concluded that that particular client was passive-aggressive. She had high expectations, which she did not clearly articulate, and then was extremely disappointed when her staff and contracted personnel failed to meet those standards.

Unfortunately, passive-aggressive behavior has become standard for many. Instead of confronting a problem, they hope the other party will sense their disapproval. If you've dealt with passive-aggressive people you know they will often pretend everything is OK but do things like procrastinate or give the wrong information in an effort to subvert your efforts. Or they will give you the silent treatment. (You may want to read: [How to Spot and Deal with Passive-Aggressive People](#) .)

In social media, we see a lot of passive-aggressive behavior. On Twitter, we see it in "sub-tweeting," in which a tweet refers to a specific individual without identifying him/her. We see it in random complaints, designed solely to shame the company but not actually get the problem fixed. You know the type: "My phone service sucks thanks to @companyIhate ... I should switch." Or there is the re-tweeting and hashtagging of someone's tweet, in order to embarrass or mock that person (I recently had this done to me and it resulted in getting a couple very ugly tweets from random strangers).

Recently, I saw some truly remarkable passive-aggressive behavior on Twitter from someone busy live-tweeting her condo board's meeting. She tweeted her displeasure at everything discussed. Never mind the condo board is not on Twitter and that nobody would even know to look for the hashtag this Twitter user made up. I read her litany of tweets with complete astonishment. She was present in the room—why not speak up and address these issues with the people she was so angry with instead of showing (and recording for posterity) her mocking displeasure?

**My summer challenge to you is to drop the passive-aggressive behavior and be direct. If there is an actual issue, get it fixed.** Yes, it may mean confronting someone directly. In some cases, it may mean going offline and using the telephone to call the dreaded customer service to deal with a problem. In the end, the problem will be aired out if not resolved completely.

Before you go to Twitter to air your problems, why not follow excellent advice from Paula Kiger on [Spin Sucks: Four Questions to Ask Before You Complain on Twitter](#) .

If you are upset or angry at someone's actions, why not discuss it directly? Here are [5 Tips for Communicating Assertively Without Being Passive-Aggressive](#).

What do you think? Have you been victimized by passive-aggressive behavior? Or do you engage in passive-aggressive behavior yourself? The truth is we have all been on the giving *and* the receiving end of passive-aggressive behavior. Let's try to stop the cycle.

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# Summer challenge #6: Make your writing understandable

(Or, stop writing in “jargonese”.)

Look up jargon in Merriam-Webster and you find three definitions:

- 1) Confused, unintelligible language
- 2) Technical terminology of a special activity or group
- 3) Obscure, often pretentious language, marked by circumlocutions and long words.

Then look it up in the Oxford Dictionary and you find this:

*Special words or expressions that are used by a particular profession or group and are difficult for others to understand*

Using jargon, especially in professional or academic writing, seems inevitable. Anybody who has glanced at a medical journal or a legal brief knows that doctors, scientists and lawyers love to use jargon (thinking about the *ex parte injunction brought forth by the complainant*). But then again, those people are talking to their peers, where there is an expectation and more importantly, *an understanding* of jargon.

However, in business or marketing writing, where you are trying to communicate with a wide audience, jargon should have no place. You don't want people to have difficulty understanding you and you certainly don't want to come across as pretentious, do you?

Well, I am here to challenge you to go jargon-free in your business/communication writing, or at least to become more

aware of how much jargon you are using and to ask yourself if there is a better and plainer way of expressing yourself.

Don't think you use much jargon? Check this out and tell me whether you haven't been guilty of incentivizing your readers to drill down to find the low hanging fruit to achieve buy-in from the C-suite:

16 business jargon words we never, ever want to hear again

The Ridiculous Business Jargon Dictionary

The Most Annoying, Pretentious and Useless Business Jargon

So please, drop the pretense and write in English, at least for a summer challenge. Your readers will thank you and your detractors will stop thinking you are a pompous ass.

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## Summer challenge #5: Get classic

Do you do much reading? I do, but rarely do I read classic novels, instead I spend a lot of time reading Scandinavian detective novels (I've read almost everything by Hakan Nesser, Camilla Lackberg, Stieg Larsson, Arnaldur Indridasson, and on and on.)

But this summer, my book group has given me a chance to read something classic I have always wanted to read: *Their Eyes Were Watching God* by Zora Neale Hurston. It was published in 1937, and centers around a strong, black female character (Janie Crawford). It was not well received when Hurston

published it, but it has become a must-read in American literature. The dialogue is challenging to read, but Hurston's descriptions and how she captures a very specific time and place are a delight.

Some book characters become iconic and often-quoted. Some lines, such as the first line of Charles Dickens' *Great Expectations* ("It was the best of times, it was the worst of times....") or *Hamlet's* "to be or not to be" become instantly recognizable.

For many of us, we last read classic novels in college or high school. We were all forced to wade through tough books such as *Moby Dick* (and in my case, I had to read it at least twice, once in high school and then in college). But now I am grateful to have read all about Ahab and his search for the great white whale, if only because I know that Starbucks coffee is named after the Pequod's first officer Starbuck.

Without reading the great works, we miss a lot of references. We miss a lot of cultural knowledge. Reading classics exposes us to truly great writing, which stands up to time, in some cases, centuries (we are still reading Shakespeare after nearly 500 years).

Why not take the dog days of summer to read a classic that you have always wanted to read? That's my summer challenge to you!

If you need some ideas, here are a couple lists to help you choose:

The Modern Library's list of 100 Best Novels

The top classic books everybody should read from Indiana University

Must Reads in Literature

Many thanks to Jay Morris, of Jay Morris Communications, LLC, who gave me the idea to offer a reading challenge.

Let me know what you read and what you thought. Happy reading!

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## Summer challenge #4: Be more active

Before you think I am going to challenge you to move more, let me clarify that this is a writing challenge, not a fitness challenge. I am talking about **active voice**. Originally, I wanted to name the post “Be less passive,” but that sounded a bit too negative.

Most every writing teacher, and probably even your own English teacher in school, makes a point of telling students to avoid the passive voice. And yet, especially in business writing, we see people using passive voice without any measure. “The company was founded by John Doe,” they write. “The management team will achieve its objectives by implementing long-standing traditions,” they add. And on and on.

Passive voice is dull. It’s boring. You know why? Because it isn’t active! Passive voice is the equivalent of the couch potato, who just sits around, staring mindlessly at the television. The couch potato often feels bored (and boring). The couch potato hasn’t done much lately so he doesn’t have much to say.

Active voice is more like an athlete than a couch potato, and therefore, has far more energy and zest for life. Active voice is the runner while passive voice is the straggler. Active voice gets to the point much faster, while passive voice is busy drawing out its words.

You see why active voice gives your writing more punch. It

makes it lively. It makes it more interesting.

So, challenge yourself to use the active voice as often as possible. Because really, do you want your writing to resemble a couch potato?

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## Two content issues (or why I no longer read Mashable)

Last week, for my eight-week summer challenge post, I challenged you to clean out your social media channels, such as your RSS feeds. I did some cleaning myself, and I finally removed Mashable from my feeds. It's been there for a long time but I haven't been reading it for ages, and just marking everything as read without so much as scanning it.

When I first started on Twitter several years ago, Mashable was *the* source for how-to information and stats about Twitter. If you wanted to understand social media, you had to read Mashable. But in the past year or so, Mashable has become a source for all sorts of news. As I write this on Tuesday morning, some of the headlines on the site include these:

"At Least 22 Civilians Were Killed in Ukraine Today"

"12 Simple Tweaks That Make Your Resume Easier to Review"

"10 Heroic Women of World War I"

Do you see anything about about social media? Well, perhaps I scroll through the home page I could find a couple of articles about social media, but they are lost in the morass of

lifestyle, career and general news articles. Some of these wide-ranging articles are potentially very interesting (and shareable), but not what I subscribed to Mashable for. And, to make matters worse, Mashable's feed was overwhelming. There were around 60 new articles each day.

So here are the two issues with Mashable's feed:

### **1. Too much content**

### **2. The "wrong" content**

In fact, we see one or both issues crop up in what I consider ineffective content.

With the first issue, too much content, you are overwhelming your readers. You are giving them so much that they end up not reading any of it. For example, I see this happening with Inc. Magazine's RSS feed. Every day, there are dozens of new articles. Too much.

With the second issue, the "wrong" content, you are not providing readers with the content they want or need. I see this happening a lot, especially for websites/blogs that usually put out business/marketing advice and that are now peppering this information with self-help and self-improvement tales. Now, I have absolutely nothing against self-improvement, but I don't go to Marketing King John Doe to find out how to be happier or fitter.

**There's only one solution to these content issues and that is to respect your readers.**

You don't want to overwhelm your readers, and you want to make sure to respect their time. Too much content makes it hard for them to figure out what is important, what they should read. You should further respect your readers by providing them with the information they want and need.

What do you think? Are you swimming in a sea of content and



looking for the nearest island? Or are you finding just enough content and all of it relevant to you?

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## Summer challenge #3: Clean up your social media act

Are you happy with your social media presence? If so, then please feel free to ignore this post. If you want to improve your social media presence, this post is for you.

Now, let's take a look at your social media presence and then decide if you need to clean up your act. It's my summer challenge to you!

First, you may want to conduct a **social media audit** on yourself. A simple one would be to create a chart listing where you have social media presence, how many followers you have and how many posts you have in each channel. For more advanced audits, you may want to check out these articles:

The 15-Minute Social Media Audit Everyone Can Do

Auditing Your Social Media Content: 5 Issues to Tackle

Good. Now we know where you are.

Now, here are some suggestions for where to start "cleaning up" your social media:

**Clean up your bio.** Do you describe yourself consistently across social media? Is it time to update your bio? Has

anything changed, perhaps you have a new website/business/focus?

**Clean up your image** (I mean your profile pic). Do you use the same image across social media channels? Is it a current picture? Is it flattering?

**Clean out your Twitter lists.** Are you following the people you want to follow? Are there people that just clutter your stream with information you are not interested in? Perhaps it's time to unfollow.

**Clean out your RSS reader.** Do you enjoy reading all the feeds in your RSS reader? No? Well then get rid of those that you don't enjoy.

**Clean out your LinkedIn connections.** Are the people in your network people you know? Could you reach out and ask for an opinion, referral or coffee date? No? Maybe you need to cull down your contacts. Your network should be more about depth than about breadth.

Again, these are a few suggestions. You may find that you want to concentrate on just one social network, or think about your overall strategy. What would you clean up? Please tell me in the comments.

Happy cleaning!

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## Summer challenge #2: Be a tourist in your own town

I am fortunate to live right outside Washington, DC. Every summer, the area is invaded by hordes of tourists from across

the US and from other countries. As a local, I often find it annoying to have to walk behind a slow group of tourists who are taking up the entire sidewalk or to have to battle with out-of-towners for elbow room at a new exhibit at the National Gallery. But I need to remind myself that tourists are excited to be here, to see things they've only read about and to get to know our nation's capital. They are a huge source of revenue for the area. And, they are getting to see things I may never get around to seeing.

To be a tourist requires curiosity. It requires advance planning and research but also the ability to grab an opportunity when you see it (free concert today at noon!). It requires learning how to get around. It requires a willingness to try new things.

So you see how being a tourist really requires some important skills to any communicator.

**Your challenge for this week is to be a tourist in your own town.**

I know that not everybody's hometown is Washington, DC, but every town has something to offer a visitor. If you are in a small town, it will be your challenge to figure out what that is. Why would anyone visit your town? And if they do visit, what do they do?

Here's a few ways to be a tourist in your own town:

Go online or call your local visitor's center or CVB (convention and visitor's bureau). Ask what the **must-see attractions** are. Check out at least one. Or, pick up a tourist guide for your town.

**Spend a day walking** around your town's downtown or main street. Walking...not driving. Maybe take a side street you've never been on.

Eat a **meal at a new restaurant**, somewhere you've always wanted to try. (You could also go online to see what the top restaurants in your area are and choose one.)

Go to a **local park**. Bring a picnic. Take a hike if appropriate. Perhaps you live near a river. What about renting a kayak or canoe?

**Take a tour led by a tour guide**. Perhaps there's a specialized walking tour or an eating tour that you could check out. Don't know if they exist? Look it up!

Visit a **local brewery or winery**. Take the tour, do the tasting.

Take **public transportation**. If you already take public transportation, take a different method (if you always commute by train, take the bus or take a different route).

When we live somewhere, we overlook what is there because we take it for granted. Sometimes, we don't even know what is there! By looking at our surroundings in a new way, we are seeing things differently. It may help boost your creativity or it may spark some new ideas.

Let me know what you do! Tell me what town you played tourist in. Have fun exploring!

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# 5 easy and effective marketing tips for service providers

If you are a service provider, you are probably really good at what you do. You are probably not so good at promoting yourself. If, on the other hand, you are good at what you do and you know how to market yourself properly, you will have business coming out of your ears.

I know because I deal with service providers—and I am one myself. Our first order of business should be to provide the best service possible. But our second order of business, and in order to keep business, is to market ourselves properly.

Here are five easy and effective marketing tips:

1. **Be ultra-professional.** It should go without saying, but the most important thing a service provider can do is to provide good service and a good impression.

- **Be on time.** Punctuality shows respect for your customer's time.
- **Honor your commitments.** If you say you will do something, you must do it!
- **Be straightforward.** Is there an issue? Speak up.
- **Communicate** what, how, why of what you are doing.

2. **Introduce yourself properly.** When meeting with a customer, do not assume they know who you are. You don't have to provide your complete bio, but you should give your name and what you do. For example: "Hi, I am Joe Smith. I am an AC tech with XYZ company and I will be checking your system today." Or: "Hi, I am Gina, I will be teaching this beginner-level yoga class. "

3. **Provide a leave-behind or take-with.** It could be a brochure

or a business card. It would be best if your materials have your website address and your website is good and up-to-date. You want to give the customer a way to contact you and to find out more about you.

**4. Send a welcome/thank you letter, card or email.** After you meet or provide service to your customer, send something! If you are an art studio, for example, and you just signed up a new art student, send the student a welcome note and any information the student might need. If you are a painter, and just finished painting your customer's house, send a thank you for your business card or email.

**5. Ask for referrals.** You should have a way to ask for referrals. You could simply have a line in your thank you letter saying that you appreciate referrals. You could provide a discount or a freebie for any referrals. For example, A teacher at the yoga studio I just started going to announced that if you bring a friend to the studio, you get a free class (mind you, the owner of the studio has done none of the steps above including not providing the bring-a-friend information).

These tips are meant to be the basic, everyday things you do for every customer, every time. If you skip these steps, or only do one of them, you will miss out on simple opportunities that are already available to you.

Would you add anything? If you are a service provider, what is your must-do marketing tip? Please share!

**Coming up on Thursday, week 2 of the summer challenge.**

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# Challenge #1: Tick off verbal tics

Starting **every** sentence with words or phrases such as honestly, frankly, truly or in reality.

Describing things using the **same adjective or adverb** every single time. You know, that show was terrific, it was fantastic, it was tremendous.

(Over) relying on **certain expressions** (generally cliches) such as “at the end of the day” or “right back atcha” or “takes two to tango.”

I think of these as verbal tics. We are not even aware that we are using these verbal crutches. And they can creep into our writing, especially in social media posts. They may distract readers and listeners or even make them tune out what you are saying.

The summer’s first challenge is to rid yourself of verbal tics (or at least reduce them).

Here are the three steps to take:

1. **Identify** these verbal tics in your writing or speaking. Start paying attention to yourself and your writing. Do you find yourself saying certain things over and over?
2. **Figure** out why you are saying this. Why do you have to preface your statement with “honestly?” Are you generally not honest? Is it just habit? Is there any other way to say this?
3. Now, this is the hard part: **eliminate** the word or phrase completely. Try doing this for a day or two. If you catch yourself about to use one of your verbal tics, find another word or phrase to use instead.

This won't be easy. We get into patterns and it's hard to stop. And that's the point of this challenge: becoming aware of your patterns.

What do you think? What is your verbal tic? Are there verbal tics that your colleagues have that drive you nuts? Tell me!

UPDATE:

Seems that even the New York Times has verbal tics, as the article [The New York Times lists its crutch words](#) points out. Verbal tics are crutches for sure!

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## Make it a challenging summer!

In the marketing communications world, it seems like summer is a quiet time of the year. People are on vacation. Summer Fridays are in force. This makes it a great time of the year to take on a few challenges.

I think summer is a good time to shake things up. On a personal level, you may have certain goals for the next couple of months. Maybe, like me, you want to spend as much time outdoors as possible. Maybe you want to learn a new skill. Maybe you just want to have fun.

How about making it a challenging summer?





Obstacle 14 from the West  
Point, The US Military  
Academy Flickr stream Photo  
by Tommy Gilligan

For the next **eight weeks**, I'll be issuing a weekly challenge to do with your writing, social media and blogging. Although there will be no scoring and no prizes (sorry), it's a way to shake things up and to make things better while you watch the thermometer hit 90 degrees and higher.

The first challenge will be posted tomorrow. To participate, simply read the post. Your comments are welcome here on the blog or you can post on Twitter using the hashtag #summerchallenge.