

# Are you sure you know what that word means?

By now you will have heard about the Cleveland local news anchor Kristi Capel and how she used a racial slur to describe Lady Gaga's performance at the Academy Awards. According to this report in the *Cleveland Plain Dealer*, Capel apologized and said she did not know what the word meant (I am not using the word here because it is racist).

Think about that for a moment: *A news anchor, while broadcasting live, used a word that she did not understand.*

In Capel's case, I don't think there was any racial motivation behind this incident, but there was something much more common: ignorance. She was called out (and rightfully so) because what she said was racist. But every single day, people are guilty of using words they don't understand, mangling their meaning.

If you watch enough TV or read enough stuff online or in print, you will see many instances of misused words. To quote Inigo Montoya in *The Princess Bride*:

"You keep using that word. I don't think it means what you think it means."

Lifhack says that travesty, ironic and bemused are among the 10 Most Commonly Misused Words. Just look up the phrase "misused words" in your favorite search engine and you will get loads of examples (there are many more than 10).

## Here's one I see all the time

One word that I have seen misused over and over is "misnomer." Merriam-Webster defines misnomer as:

*: the misnaming of a person in a legal instrument*

*: a use of a wrong or inappropriate name : a wrong name or inappropriate designation*

Basically, a misnomer is using the wrong *name* for something . The example used by Merriam-Webster is the *international* airport that only serves domestic flights. Seems straightforward enough. Yet, many times I hear journalists using the word misnomer when what they really mean is misunderstanding. They'll say something like: "It's a misnomer to say that the senator is going to vote for the bill."

### **You know that word doesn't exist, right?**

There are some people who make up words or mispronounce words. Huffington Post lists "11 Commonly Used Made-Up Words That Drive Us Insane" to include: "expresso," "supposably," and the famous "irregardless." (Buzzfeed has a similar list: 17 Misused and Made-Up Words That Make You Rage.)

Using words that don't mean what you think they do only makes you sound ignorant to those who do understand the meaning. In cases like Capel's, not only will you sound ignorant but you may also offend. So here are some warnings:

- If you are not sure of what a word means *precisely*, don't use it.
- If you think a word is right, but you aren't absolutely sure, don't use it.
- If you think you will sound like you know what you are talking about because you are using a long word, definitely don't use it.
- And finally, use a dictionary. Look that pesky word up.

### **What words do you often notice as being misused?**

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# Are we living in a bubble?

I wrote this post back in November, and never published it. But today, I was reading the *Washington Post* and came across Paul Farhi's column regarding the Brian Williams "scandal." In case you haven't heard about it, it involves Brian "misremembering" being shot at in a helicopter in Iraq in 2003. Farhi writes:

*NBC News went into damage-control mode a day after the public symbol of the network, anchor Brian Williams, faced a **torrent** of derision and criticism for telling a story about his wartime reporting that has proved to be untrue.*

*As **public disapproval roared on social media**, NBC sought to protect and defend Williams, its lead anchor since 2004 and the most popular anchor in the nation.*

Bolding is mine. Notice that Farhi writes about the "torrent" of criticism and disapproval...on social media. I stopped reading the article after these two paragraphs because I don't think there's a torrent, or a deluge or even a rainstorm of derision outside of social media. I think this is a *social media crisis*, where people in social media all seem to be outraged by the "crisis" and where the rest of the country (those people sitting around their living rooms watching TV in the evening) couldn't care less. Notice too that Brian Williams was on TV last night as if nothing had happened. And maybe it only happened in our little social media bubble.

So this is where I started this post back in November:

When it started three years ago, I was a huge fan of Showtime's series *Homeland*. I was hooked and had to watch every episode. It bummed me out we had to wait nine months

between seasons.

But when the third season started this past September, I was no longer enthusiastic. I watched the first couple of episodes and found that I just didn't like the main character Carrie anymore. She had become way too crazy (she actually considers drowning her child!) and demanding and unreasonable. The story line had strayed so far from the initial *Homeland* that it was another story altogether. I quit watching. I no longer care.

Because I no longer care, I am no longer living in the *Homeland* bubble. The bubble is one where "everybody" is watching and commenting. Everybody just loves it. Articles and blog posts abound.

It seems that when you believe something or are a big fan of something, you surround yourself with like-minded people and views. In fact, your views are being reinforced. At times, you actively avoid being exposed to opposing views.

Notice what is going on with Uber and Bill Cosby. In case you haven't seen the reports, Uber threatened to expose the personal life of a reporter who was aiming to write an article about Uber. Several women have come forward to accuse Cosby of sexual assault. Both these cases are serious and they expose great flaws in a popular company and a beloved entertainer.

Many articles, blog posts and Tweets have been devoted to dissecting the PR and communications shortcomings shown by both Uber and Cosby. But here's the thing: does it matter? People are still using Uber. And it was reported that at a comedy show in Florida a few days ago, the comedian got a standing ovation.

There's a disconnect between the world at large and the bubble we surround ourselves with. In PR and crisis communications, both Uber and Cosby are toast. They've handled these situations poorly. But for those who don't delve into how things are communicated, who don't follow the news (and by the

way, journalists are living in a bubble sometimes too), the concern is just not there. They don't care about Uber's threats because Uber gives them a convenient way to get places. They ignore the accusations against Cosby because they find him funny.

**What do you think? Are these controversies manufactured? Is the scandal for real? Are we living in a social media culture of outrage? Are we living in a bubble?**

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## **Stop surprising me with your “tips”**

In the last few weeks, I have been noticing an inordinate amount of posts with this type of formulaic headline:

[Insert number, generally 5 or 7] [insert hyperbolic adjective such as surprising or best-ever] **Tips to** [insert desired action, generally improving or achieving] **Your** [Insert success-oriented result such as expert knowledge or success]

Example:

### **5 Tips to Exponentially Improve Your Business Success**

This is a headline formula sure to get attention. It is well-known that people love lists, tips and any headline with a number in it. Combine them all, and well, you have guaranteed clicks (also known as click-bait). And click-bait is exactly what these are. Very few, if any, of the articles attached to these headlines provide anything substantial. Certainly, not anything surprising. And many seem to forget what a tip is.

Although the word tip has many meanings (including the point of a pencil, to topple something) the definition most of these posts refer to is this, from Merriam-Webster:

*a piece of advice or expert or authoritative information*

**or**

*a piece of advance or confidential information given by one thought to have access to special or inside sources*

But here's the thing. A lot of what I am reading barely seems like advice and most of it is certainly not authoritative. For example, I read one of these articles entitled something like 5 Tips to Improve Your Writing, and one of the "tips" was "don't lie." Seriously. Don't lie is not a tip, it's a given (and some of the religious persuasion would say it is a commandment).

And then, there's an article I read last week about "surprising" ways to land a job. Here's one of the surprising ways: network. They may have well put in "fill an application" or "send a resume."

I understand why people are writing these headlines and constructing their posts like this. After all, following a formula is easy, and it usually gets attention. The problem is that when you don't deliver on the promise of the headline, people won't read anything you write anymore or at least won't look at it seriously.

Here's my non-surprising tip: avoid click-bait posts.

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# Would you make a good Etsy seller?

In Sunday's *Washington Post* there is an interesting interview (How to craft a successful career) with Chad Dickerson, CEO of Etsy. In case you've never had the urge to shop for handmade jewelery or other crafts, Etsy is *the* place to do that online. On Etsy, thousands of artists and crafters can sell their goods to a national/international market. It's a model that is working to the tune of \$1.35 billion in sales.

The part of the interview that caught my eye as a marketing communications professional was this:

*Q. What do the best sellers on Etsy have in common?*

*A. The best sellers on Etsy have really great photography. They also tell stories about themselves, how they're inspired, how they make the things they sell. Those are the keys to being successful on Etsy.*

In other words, to market yourself successfully you have to have a standout image and a great story. Your graphics and your storytelling ability is what makes you stand out from a really crowded marketplace.

This is true everywhere, not just on Etsy. If you are shopping for a product online, you need to be able to see what you are buying (**the power of image**) and know why this product is better than the rest (**the power of storytelling**).

Perhaps if you are struggling to get "eyeballs" to your blog or website or buyers to your bricks-and-mortar business, you need to take Chad Dickerson's insight to heart. Perhaps you need to assess the power of your graphics and your story. Are they strong? Are they setting you apart from our competition

(in a positive way, of course)?

Oh, and the other thing(it *should* go without saying) is that to be a good Etsy seller you have to **have a good product that people want to buy.**

What makes you buy on Etsy or anywhere else? Do you assess the strength of the graphics? Do you read the description and/or story?

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## Thanks are not only for Thanksgiving

Thanksgiving is two days away. If you are like me, you've gotten lots of email and regular mail from companies and organizations you've done business with or have donated money to. Some are simply expressing thanks, and others are reminding you that some people won't be able to eat on Thanksgiving (so give more money). Others are using Thanksgiving as a differentiator—sending holiday cards now instead of Christmas/New Year's.

There's nothing wrong with this, and I appreciate getting thanked or remembered at least once a year. But perhaps businesses and organizations should consider how to thank customers and supporters year-round.

So many times, we conduct a business transaction and afterwards there's nothing. What's particularly galling is when you donate or volunteer, and you hear nothing from the organization. A couple of years ago, I volunteered at a huge



Christmas event. Not only was it very disorganized (which showed a lack of appreciation for volunteers' time) but there was no thank you, formal (follow up email) or otherwise. I haven't been back since.

A thank you—a show of appreciation—is an important marketing tool. I wrote “Why a thank you is good marketing” here five years ago. I still think it's true.

**So thank you! I appreciate that you took the time to read my thoughts. I am especially thankful for those who have shared my posts and/or taken the time to comment.**

Happy Thanksgiving to those celebrating! I wish you and your families a happy and relaxing holiday.

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## **More is not a smart communications goal**

It's like I am hearing the Pointer Sisters' *Jump (For My Love)* song on repeat. It's that refrain “more, more, more.” I get emails urging me to get more website visitors. I see accounts on Twitter that claim they can get me more followers. I see announcements for webinars on how to get more blog readers.

Enough!

More is not a smart communications goal. More is meaningless without qualifiers. Yes, I want more Twitter followers. But I want followers that are genuine (as opposed to spam) accounts and who have an interest in what I am saying. I want more blog readers who will find what I write useful and may then share a post or sign up for my newsletter or hire me to do work.

But more in and of itself does not mean much. If a Facebook page has 4,000 likes but none of those “likers” shares information or buys products, then what is the point? If you have thousands of Twitter followers but are never re-tweeted, are you having an impact? If you get hundreds of website visitors but there is no “conversion” then what did you accomplish?

We see ploys for more all the time. You see TV stations running sweepstakes and exhorting people to “like our Facebook page.” You see link bait. You see forced sign-ups for newsletters before you can read an article or blog post. All these are trying to get more without caring exactly who those people are.

Your communications goals should not be simply to get more. Your goals need to be specific. For example, you may want to reach more people in a certain geographic area or in an age group.

Are you being bombarded by vendors trying to get you to get more? If so, what are your thoughts about it?

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## **Are you communicating with everybody, somebody, or nobody?**

A couple of weeks ago I was at Ronald Reagan National Airport waiting for a flight to Miami. I was checking my email,

Twitter, etc. on my phone, when the woman next to me asked me in Spanish if the flight was about to leave. Luckily (for her) I speak Spanish, and I told her that no, not yet. I pointed at the podium, which was empty, and explained that the plane was not yet in and that when we got ready to board, there would be someone there making announcements.

She told me she was headed to Santo Domingo (Dominican Republic). She showed me her boarding pass, and I pointed out her seat number and her group number, explaining she needed to wait for her group number to be called. Unfortunately, she spoke no English. None. I asked her if she had ever traveled before. She hadn't.

Here she was, about to embark on an international flight, and she had not the faintest idea of what was going on or how to navigate the boarding process, which most of us take for granted. In Miami, she would be OK, since the announcements are made in both English and Spanish, but in Washington, the announcements are all in English. If I hadn't been sitting there (and been a Spanish speaker), I am not sure how she would have figured it out.

Which brings me to a marketing question: who do you communicate to?

### **Everybody?**

You can't communicate with everybody, obviously. There are too many variables. There's language obviously, and then there's level of knowledge. Do you assume that your audience knows certain things or do you explain everything thoroughly?

### **Some?**

Chances are, most communicators are aiming to reach only some of the total audience. This is called the target audience. Communications are tailored for the representative member of the target audience. So, in the DCA example of above, the gate

agent speaks in English only because most of his audience speaks English.

### **Nobody?**

If nobody understands your message, then your communications are in serious trouble. You are making strategic and tactical mistakes. It has happened at the Miami airport, on flights to Spanish-speaking countries, the gate agents don't speak a bit of Spanish (and if they do, heavy accents and bad translating make it virtually impossible to understand). Very few people understand and everybody is confused.

**When making communication decisions, you must consider your target audience (and then some). You will choose language, complexity of message, and what will resonate based on how you can reach the majority of your target. You will not communicate with everybody. But if you are communicating with nobody, then you have a problem.**

Thoughts?

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## **Is hurry killing reading comprehension?**

In his Sunday *Washington Post* article "What writing 30,000 posts taught this financial planner," Barry Ritholtz, author of the On Investing column, says that not only are many readers choosing to believe what they want to believe, but that their reading comprehension is abysmal. He writes:

*Reading comprehension is terrible. I am astonished how many*

*people lack the basic reading comprehension skills to understand a 500-word essay. I give every piece a second edit to figure out how lazy and biased readers are going misinterpret, misunderstand and just plain old miss the point of the post.*

(Note: This is part of the last paragraph of his article that appeared in the printed edition of the *Washington Post*, but which is mysteriously missing from the online version of the article.)

This is sad and disturbing. Those of us who make our living from writing, depend on readers to understand what we say. If readers can't understand our ideas, then how are we going to make sure to get our point across? What is the point of writing? It doesn't matter how talented we are, if the readers don't get it, then it is not worth anything.

What is behind this lack of reading comprehension? Is it that people are not being taught how to read well in school? Is it that people are stupid? Is it that writing has to be "dumbed down"? There's probably some element of all of these, but one bigger problem is that people are in a hurry. They are not taking the time to read closely.

We hear over and over how people are so busy. People are multi-tasking. People are frazzled. One consequence of this continual rush is that people are not paying attention to what they are reading.

How many times have you posted something or written an email including details about an upcoming event and the recipient will ask you for the exact information you have already provided. It happens to me all the time.

Case in point: I wrote a short email to a friend telling her that I had missed seeing her at our book group and that I really didn't like the book. She wrote back telling me that

she has had some family issues and hadn't finished reading the book, and she also wanted to know what I thought of the book. Now, my email was five sentences long. One of those sentences was about my opinion the book. She clearly did not absorb what I wrote. Either she was preoccupied or in a hurry or both.

It seems people are no longer able to read closely. They skim through the information. In fact, when I teach my blogging workshop, I tell my participants that content should be scannable, since this is what people do when they read on the web.

This loss of reading comprehension concerns me. It makes me wonder how anybody is going to learn anything new, let alone anything complex. If we are promoting new products or ideas, this is going to be a huge obstacle to overcome.

What do you think? Have you noticed that you have to oversimplify ideas? Have you noticed that people just don't seem to pay attention?

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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.**