

A tagline that works

Taglines can help or hamper your marketing efforts. They must be clear and relevant. A few nights ago, I was watching TV and saw the following commercial for Red Lobster:

[youtube
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ySl03vqdKNQ&w=560&h=349>]

The last line is: “I see food differently. “The tagline for this campaign is **Sea Food Differently**. I think this is tagline writing at its best: clever, play on words, and RELEVANT. They are saying that Red Lobster does seafood differently (presumably better) than other restaurants. Perfect.

Compare that to Salonpas. Salonpas, which has a completely weird name that makes me think of a hair salon, is a pain relief patch. They are running this spot on TV right now:

[youtube
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eX4WVN4YN0Q&w=560&h=349>]

The tagline is: “Nothing’s been proven to beat the relief.”

What does that mean? It is saying that nothing is proven to provide relief—which, I am pretty sure, is not the message they intended.

Some taglines make you scratch your head, some don’t make you think at all, and some, the ones that work, make you think.

Using capitalized words the right way

In English, we use capitals in the following situations:

- At the beginning of a sentence.
- For proper names (Deborah Brody lives in Maryland)
- For titles (President Barack Obama)

We do not use capitals as a way to emphasize words, or make them prominent. For that purpose, we might underline, italicize or bold the word in question.

All caps as in NO WAY AM I GOING OUTSIDE TODAY is generally used to denote excitement, anger or “shouting.”

However, I see words being capitalized that don't need to be, all the time.

Notice this help wanted ad from Craigslist (words underlined for emphasis by me):

*Our Firm has an immediate open for two Writers/Proofreaders
We are very flexible:
You can work as contractors, Part Timers or Freelancers
You can work from your house/office or/and our office
You must have experience writing for Finance, Tax,
Accounting, and Insurance businesses
You must have experience in Marketing, Advertising and Sale
You must be available to start next week
You must include your desired pay (per page and/or per hour)
in your email or cover letter*

This is a help-wanted ad for a proofreader! I am not sure the ad is intended to be a test or if it is showing (unwittingly) a desperate need for a proofreader.

Things that make me crazy

We all have pet peeves and things that make us go bonkers. Right? Unfortunately, we can't always tell what will make other people feel like they are listening to nails scratching a blackboard, and sometimes our communications misfire because of it.

I wish I could say these are universal peeves and that you should avoid them at all costs (you *should* avoid them with me), instead I am asking you to think of what makes you crazy and what you would like to see avoided. Please be sure to share in the comments.

- Using words that you don't understand or saying something complicated when simple would do (like utile—why can't you say useful?)
- Having really obvious grammatical mistakes (example: using I instead of me or having problems with subject-verb agreement)

(Please read this entry over at [OpenForum: 5 Common Word Usage Mistakes that Make You Sound Stupid](#))

- Capitalizing Everything Instead of Bolding: more and more people are doing this in white papers and other texts. **Capitals are for proper names and the beginning of sentences only.**
- Threatening: If you don't do it this now... For instance, I got an email from the IPRA (a division of the PRSA-NCC) about an event, and then I got another email, and another. Then, I got one that said "final notice." Like if it was an overdue bill and I hadn't paid it. And then I get an email telling me it's my "last chance." Here's

a newsflash IPRA: threatening me is not going to make me more interested in seeing Mike McCurry, who sold out his boss for the chance to sell his book. Nope.

- Saying or claiming things that are obviously not true: I am planning to write a post about this specifically, but what I am referring to are ads or brochures that seem to ignore reality. Like those Cox Communications commercials that claim the company has great customer service, when plenty of people can attest to the opposite. Or American Airlines claiming to be empathetic, telling me they know why I fly.
- Insulting my intelligence: enough said.
- Excessive self-promotion: I see this a lot on Twitter and Facebook. When you feel the need to tell me how great you are all the time, I immediately think you are insecure. I used to follow someone who was very proud of her WeightWatchers progress. And that is fine, but she needed all her followers to pat her on the back too. There is a moving line somewhere between excessive self-promotion (and neediness) and genuine pride and promotion of accomplishments. Figure out where it lies.

What's on your list?



Grammar rules again

I think I hit a nerve yesterday with my post Grammar rules. I got the second highest number of visitors in one day to my blog in its two plus years of existence. And, several of you

commented. First, let me say thanks for checking it out, and second, let me issue a plea to everyone who works with words, spoken or written, pay attention! Make grammar, spelling and proper usage a priority in your communications.

The response made it clear that many people are irritated by the lack of care we are seeing in English usage. Please take a look at the comments to the post to see what different people are experiencing.

What is not so clear is the reason behind the lapse in grammar. Is it laziness? Is it improper/insufficient instruction? Is it sheer ignorance? What do you think?

How do we change this? Mignon Fogarty, “Grammar Girl,” gives seminars on grammar across the country. She has also written a couple of books on the subject. But how do we get people to a) realize they need to improve their grammar and b) learn what they are doing wrong?

Please let me know your ideas. I am so frustrated when I see my colleagues and otherwise educated folk use English so poorly.



Grammar rules

Yes, we all make mistakes. But the key is to realize our mistakes and correct them, right? And yet, I see the same grammar mistakes over and over again. And the people who are making said mistakes work in a language-based industry like PR, advertising, social media consulting and so forth.

I have seen the following grammar mistakes so many times I want to scream:

- Affect versus effect. No one seems to know or recognize the difference.
- Me versus I. So many people refer to themselves as I in the reflexive.
- Assure versus ensure. They mean different things, really.

I am currently reading Grammar Girl's Quick and Dirty Tips for Better Writing by Mignon Fogarty. I suggest reading it too. Or check out Mignon's tips online at Grammar Girl.

Like I said, we all make mistakes. But let's learn how to avoid them.

The bottom line is that bad grammar makes you sound ignorant.

What do you think? What grammar mistakes do you see repeated?



It's National Grammar Day!

Today, March 4th, is officially designated here in the United States as National Grammar Day. How will you celebrate?

If I may offer some suggestions:

- Read a grammar book or my favorite book about punctuation: *Eats, Shoots & Leaves* by Lynne Truss
- Mind your apostrophes (here's a hint: apostrophes do not

make a word plural)

- Practice gender neutrality, but don't use "they" to signify ONE person.
- Read a well written book, any book.
- Try to effect change by not using big words you don't understand (it affects how people perceive your writing and speaking)

What would you like to see on National Grammar Day?



Are you being obtuse?

The definition of obtuse I am referring to is this one, from Merriam-Webster: difficult to comprehend; not clear or precise in thought or expression.

Have you ever visited a website or picked up a brochure that makes you wonder what is really being said? Sometimes there is too much information, sometimes there is not enough and sometimes what is there is hard to understand, unclear. And in certain cases, the information is being presented in a hard to comprehend way ON PURPOSE.

Let me tell you why I am writing this. I ordered my business cards from a place called Overnight Prints. I have ordered my cards there before, and they are of good quality. They are also fast. As the name implies, they print "overnight." Well, I ordered my cards on Thursday and on the next Tuesday, it occurred to me that I had not received a notification that the cards had shipped. I checked my account on line, and it told me that the order was "in process." I wrote an email to their customer service asking why my cards had not yet printed. A

few hours later I received a notification that my cards had shipped. Hmmm.

More than 24 hours later I received an email response from customer service telling me that my cards had shipped. I replied telling them that when I checked the cards had NOT shipped, and that I expected they would have shipped by Monday at the latest, and that a more than 24 hour response was not acceptable. The CSR replied that their new policies suggest that if you choose ground shipping (the least expensive choice) your cards are also printed later. I replied that shipping time is not equal to printing time. Amazon, for instance, will ship your book within 24 hours, and depending on how you pay for it, you may get it the next day or the next week. I also told the CSR that perhaps they should make this little rule of theirs clearer by saying: We expect to print your order on DATE and ship on DATE. Fairly simple and straightforward in my opinion. Well, apparently Overnight Prints is committed to being obtuse. This is the response I got back from them:

Our print and ship time differs by product. Please see charts below for more details. For Business Cards & 4×6 Postcards the print & ship times are as follows:

Shipping Service	Your Order Will Ship...	Your Order Will Arrive In...
Next Day Air	The Next Business Day	2 Business Day
2 Day Air	The Next Business Day	3 Business Days
3 Day Select	Next Business Day	4 Business Days
Ground w/ Priority Printing	Next Business Day	4-6 Business Days
Ground	Within 3 Business Days	5-7 Business Days

Clearly, if you truly want overnight printing from Overnight Prints you need to pony up more money for SHIPPING. If you pay less money for SHIPPING, your PRINTING will also be delayed.

As a customer, I am irritated. I have ordered from this outfit before and I am still paying a fairly high price for printing as well as a high price for ground shipping. I know the shipping will be slower, but the printing should be the same. If you have changed your policies, it is not clear. Your wording is not clear. And when I point that out to you, you revert to your unclear wording. Why endanger a customer relationship over lack of clarity?

In any case, it is a good exercise to try to see what your customers are seeing when they read your marketing materials. Are you being clear? Or are you being obtuse?

What language are you speaking?

Are you by chance speaking in jargon? Why are you doing that?

As a writer and a consultant, I often ask my clients what their “keywords” are. It is helpful, and sometimes crucial, to use the right terminology for any given industry. Especially when you are working in a business to business environment, you need to know how these businesses look for the services/products that they need. But when an outsider lands on one of these B-to-B web pages or marketing materials, he or she will most likely end up not understanding a word. For instance, a client of mine uses the terms “professional services.” For general marketing purposes, this is the emptiest phrase out there, but in the client’s world, it carries a specific meaning.

Setting aside the need for industry-specific terminology, and recognizing the importance of specific terminology in a B-to-B setting, what is going on with language today? Why are so many people talking in gobbledy-gook? Lately, I have heard the following phrases/terms on TV, in conversation and seemingly, everywhere else:

- Drilling down (apparently, this means getting to the heart of the issue or talking specifically)
- Sweet spot (as in where the perfect opportunity lies)
- Being out of pocket (never got this one although it means being unreachable)
- Getting your ducks all in a row (oldie but goodie, means be prepared)
- Leveraging an opportunity (making the most of something)

- Staying ahead of the curve (presumably, leveraging opportunities to get to your sweet spot)

In a sense, these universally used phrases serve as a crutch. Use them and other people will understand what you mean, even when the meaning isn't entirely clear. Sometimes, using touch phrases makes someone look like an insider, someone who is in the know.

In the end, jargon and catch phrases muck up your meaning. It's one thing to use these in conversation where I can stop and ask you what you mean. It's another to use them in writing. When things are written (especially printed) there is no easy or quick way to ask the writer what he or she means.

Catch my drift?

Plainly speaking, it is better

What is better is to speak and write plainly, a lesson that is being forced on the U.S. Government according to the Federal Diary column by Joe Davidson in the Washington Post. To make that happen (I could have written: In order to facilitate the transition), there will be a symposium on plain language this afternoon at the National Press Club, held by the Center for Plain Language.

There is no doubt that the government (and many in the legal community) loves to make things complicated. The more obtuse, the better. The more wordy the better. Passive voice? They love it. Big words when smaller words would do, check.

But, more disturbing in my opinion (since I already expect government/legal communications to be convoluted), is that marketing folk are jumping on the complicated bandwagon. This blog post, from the Branding Strategy Insider, claims that “Complex Language Weakens Brands.” As the post says:

A serious impediment to communications is this constant upgrading of the language. No aspect of life is left untouched by the upgrade police. Not only does a term have to be politically correct, it has to be as long and as complicated as possible.

A great example from the post is that UPS went from being in the parcel delivery business to being a logistics company. How many people on the street instinctively understand what logistics is???? Not many, my friends. The only people who understand logistics are in logistics.

In any case, if you want to be clear, speak and write plainly. Using big words when small ones would do does NOT make you look more intelligent (if anything, it makes you look less so). From the Center for Plain Language website:

A communication is in plain language if the people who are the audience for that communication can quickly and easily

- *find what they need*
- *understand what they find*
- *act appropriately on that understanding*

I think the bullet points above are the point of ANY communications.

And you thought plain vanilla was the boring choice.

Whatever do you mean?

Have you seen signs/logos/headlines that make you stop, and not because you are intrigued, but rather because you are confused? If you have, you know what I mean.

I just say a delivery truck with the following sign:

Sanford Foods

Poultry Distributor

Pork Beef Supplies

The “Poultry Distributor” part was highlighted. So I thought to myself, what is it? Poultry or pork? Yes, I know they distribute all of it, but why highlight poultry? My point is that there is too much contradictory information in a few words. It is not clear. They could have said: Sanford Foods: Distributors of Fine Poultry and Meats. And that would have been fine.

My advice is to have one overarching message in your logo or slogan. Too much is confusing.

Thoughts? Or better yet, examples?