

# Writing for your audience

According to Netflix, the British/BBC series Gavin and Stacey garners four and a half stars. This is why I added it to my queue. But I watched the first season (all on one DVD) and I rated the thing two stars. (Quick plot explanation: Gavin, who lives in Essex, and Stacey, who lives in Wales, meet over the phone and decide to meet in person after six months. They fall in love. Meanwhile, they each have a best friend: Smithy for Gavin and Nessa for Stacey, who also get involved.)

I have no doubt that many people find Gavin and Stacey hilarious. In fact, some of the acting is very good, and some of the situations are painfully relevant. However, it is clear that the intended audience is British. For instance, the whole Wales is another country joke. In the United States, we would be hard pressed to find Wales on the map of the UK, and for the British, Wales is quite literally another country (just like Scotland). There is rivalry between them, and there is some kind of joke on how the Londoners can't understand what the Welsh are saying. OK, I get it, but I don't really get it in the way a British person would.

And then, there is the culture of a place. Apparently, smoking is still a normal thing to do in Britain. There is smoking indoors and out, by everyone. In the U.S., we have steered away from showing this much smoking, and I don't think I have seen much on TV. In Britain, the culture is OK with smoking. To me, it is jarring (and adds nothing to the plot).

In short, I didn't find Gavin and Stacey quite as amusing as if I had been British. That is because the series is written by the British for the British. Yes, some things are universal (weird in-laws, weird friends, not wanting to reveal secrets), which is why we can watch programs from different countries and get it. Humor though, is harder to convey.

The bottom line is that you write for your audience. To do this, you must understand who your audience is and what makes them tick. We define audiences in all sorts of ways: demographically, geographically and so on. Case in point: you would not write an ad directed to a 65 plus demographic using teen slang. It just wouldn't make sense.

Understand your audience and tailor your word choice and message to their needs and sensibilities.

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## Overuse syndrome

You've probably seen or heard some words or phrases in ads/commercials so much that they have become meaningless. They do nothing to bring you in or tell you anything about the product or service. Yet, you will continue seeing and hearing them. Why? Because copywriters and in certain cases the advertising manager is enamored of the word or words and can't think of others.

At the top of my list of most overused words in advertising (and thus most meaningless) is the word **unique**. You've heard things like "a unique product," "unique way," etc. BTW, this is also overused in PR. Very few things in this world are unique, and then ad folk decide that some things are not only unique, but truly unique. Truly? (as opposed to fakely?). Other words/phrases that are overused as to become meaningless are: special, best, time of your life, out of the box, outside the lines, and so on.

If you find yourself about to use an overused phrase, think to

yourself, is this a cliché? What other thing can be highlighted about my product? What is its USP—and that can't be that it is unique, but what MAKES it unique. No, it is not easy, and that is why we see these words and phrases used over and over. But if you want your materials to communicate the essence of what you are trying to sell, then you will benefit from being unique in avoiding this word.

What are your most overused words?



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## Happy Grammar Day!

I love this! Check out the National Grammar Day website. I especially like the Top Ten Grammar Tips. CRUCIAL reading for anyone who writes for a living (or just writes).

Thanks to Kristen King for tweeting and blogging about this.



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## Why is writing so hard?

And writing clearly even harder? As a writer, I make mistakes and my stuff has typos. Occasionally, I use the wrong word. But most of the time, I catch these mistakes. However, most people seem to have no idea. Recently, through my work, I encountered the frequent misuse of the following words: effect/affect and ensure/assure. Check out this useful post on

Copyblogger about frequently misused words, which is helpful for reference. Another frequent mistake is using the word which instead of that or vice versa. In general terms, we use which only after a comma, to set off a separate phrase. Also, referring to businesses or corporations as “them” or “they.” Use it/it’s (the corporation, although employing people, is an entity not a person or a collection of people). Another pet peeve of mine is when people use that instead of who when referring to other human beings, as in: “you know Julie that lives in DC?” It should be “you know Julie who lives in DC.”

But what is most sad to me is how infrequently people even recognize mistakes. Grammatical mistakes abound in spoken English, especially on TV. I can’t tell you how many times I have heard an anchor or reporter use a completely convoluted sentence. We are human and we make mistakes, but we can also correct mistakes and improve, right? In my opinion, this dearth of writing skills is linked directly to lack of reading. Readers, especially avid readers, are exposed to good writing. Readers can recognize spelling, grammar, usage by exposure. I know that this is true for me. I don’t often know the grammatical terminology for something, but I recognize if it is used correctly.

I may start keeping a log of writing goofs. If you would like to share some, please do so in the comments.

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## Do U Ck Spelling?

A victim of all the texting and instant messaging is spelling. You simply don’t have time to spell everything out. Everything becomes acronyms or shortenings. Page 3 in today’s Washington Post has a feature on the importance of spelling and grammar.

One reader likens proper grammar/spelling to using the proper notes in music (if you don't, the music just doesn't sound right). As a writer, I agree. However, does the public agree? Do most people even realize when something is not spelled correctly or when grammar is poor? I once worked with a "writer" who did not know how to make his subject and verb agree. And he was completely unaware. Recently, on a DCPubs (a Yahoo group) discussion, someone asked what was wrong with using "their" as a gender-neutral alternative to "he or she." This person was completely unaware that one is plural and the other singular. (As an aside, we HEAR this all the time in conversation, but in formal writing?)

So, I ask you, are spelling and grammar important? Do you notice lapses in either or both?