

Summer challenge #8 (final!): Take a (social media) break

Here we are, in the last week of August, and Labor Day is upon us. This means that summer is “officially” over, and so is the summer challenge series.

There’s been a lot of chatter over the past couple of months about social media being addictive. Huffington Post UK has an article that states that quitting Facebook and Twitter is harder to do than quitting smoking!

CBS News, in the article “How real a risk is social media addiction,” shares that the National Institutes of Health (NIH) has defined a “Internet Addiction Disorder (IAD).” The article states:

Symptoms for Internet addiction can be similar to addiction to anything else, and fall into two types of behaviors: an ever increasing need to engage with the object of the addiction, and a bad feeling when not getting enough of it.

I feel that I check Facebook and Twitter way too often. Is it bad? Here are 10 Signs It’s Time to Take a Break from your Social Media Self. Do any of those ring true to you? In my case, I think Twitter definitely impacts my productivity.

My final summer challenge to you is to take a break from social media. I don’t mean quit it completely, but just take a few days off and see how you fare. With a three-day weekend ahead, now is the perfect time to do it. Why take time to be on social media when you can be social in real life?

Forbes has a helpful article (Need a Break from Social Media?) that concludes that taking a break from social media can help your productivity and impact in the long run, and even

provides three steps for how to do it.

I am pledging right now to be off Facebook, Twitter and LinkedIn for all of the Labor Day Weekend. If you see me post, get on my case! Will you join me?

Have a fantastic Labor Day Weekend, and make the most of the last few days of “official” summer!

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.

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.

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!

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?

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!

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!