

# People should understand

It seems obvious that your readers should understand whatever it is you are writing for them. But it only *seems* that way because too many writers, especially those who write legal documents, don't stop to think whether their readers will get it. I know this because I've attempted to read contracts and other legal documents. Although I understand most of the words, sometimes I can't fathom the meaning.

## **Do you speak medical jargon? I don't**

Same goes for medical stuff. A few years ago, I had an MRI done. I got the report from the radiologist and try as I might, I couldn't make heads or tails of it. In this case, it was the vocabulary. I gave it to the doctor, and I told him that I didn't understand the report. This doctor, as is usual with any insider, gave me a look indicating he thought I must be very slow because it was obvious to him that this report said I had a torn rotator cuff. But it wasn't obvious to me. And it's not because I am slow. It's because the radiologist wrote this using medical jargon that I don't understand.

## **Plain language required**

You'd think the plain language movement were new. It's not. In fact, government agencies are mandated to write in plain English since President Obama signed the Plain Writing Act in 2010. But the directive to make things clearer goes back to the 1970s (read the timeline at [plainlanguage.gov](http://plainlanguage.gov)).

But there are no such mandates for other industries. Sure, writing in plain language should be common sense and many businesses strive to make their writing clearer and more user friendly but others write (and speak) in industry jargon, making it hard for the average person to understand.

Of all the posts I've shared on LinkedIn, the following from

Bloomberg Law really struck a chord:

Use Plain Language in Contract—No One Wants Legalese

It was viewed hundreds of times and shared by many readers, making it my best performing post of all time.

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Here's the bottom line: There's a real need for people to understand what you are writing. If you need help, there are some courses available online. You may find the "Oxford Guide to Plain English" by Martin Cutts helpful. Or you could hire someone like me to copy edit your documents with plain language in mind.

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## Do you speak Jargonese?

Chances are you do...especially if you are in marketing, or the government.

I just came across the article "How to 'unsuck' you jargon" on Ragan's PR Daily. The key seems to go to Unsuck-It.com and type in the offending phrase or word, such as "above the fold" or "leading edge."

The issue is that most people who are fluent in Jargonese don't really realize they are speaking in Jargonese. It seems perfectly natural to say things like: "We are currently working on aligning our values with our mission, while creating storytelling capacity in case there is a barrier to entry and we need to create synergies to boost the bottom line."

But hey, Unsuck-It.com may only be a stop-gap measure. You may

need to restructure your language skills.

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# 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?