

CHAPTER THREE

Adapting Your Words to Your Readers



Overview

- Role of adaptation in selecting words
- Simplifying with short and familiar words
- Appropriate use of technical words and acronyms
- Selection of words with appropriate strength
- Use of concrete words and active voice
- Achieve clarity and precision by avoiding camouflaged verbs, selecting the right words, and using idioms correctly.
- Use of words that do not discriminate

Need for Adaptation

(fitting the message to your readers)

How to do it:

- Visualize your readers
 - how they think
 - what they know
 - their education level
 - etc.
- Then write for them

How to Adapt to Multiple Readers

Write for the bottom level

- Usually this means simplifying the message
- Thus, the following suggestions stress simplification

Use short, familiar words.

DON'T

In effect, it was hypothesized that certain physical data categories including housing types and densities, land use, characteristics, and ecological location constitute a scaleable content area. This could be called a continuum of residential desirability. Likewise, it was hypothesized that several social data categories, describing the same census tracts and referring generally to the social stratification system of the city, would also be scaleable. This scale could be called a continuum of socioeconomic status. Thirdly, it was hypothesized that there would be a high positive correlation between the scale types on each continuum.

Use short, familiar words.

DO

One can tell from an aerial photograph where rich and poor people live. The rich live in big houses set far apart. The poor live in small houses set close together.

Prefer the short, familiar word to the long, unfamiliar word.

Long, Unfamiliar Words

- Abbreviate
- Accomplish
- Approximately
- Ascertain
- Commence
- Considerable
- Determine
- Detrimental

Short, Familiar Words

- Shorten
- Do
- About
- Find out
- Begin
- Much
- Decide
- Harmful

Prefer the short, familiar word to the long, unfamiliar word.

Long, Unfamiliar Words

- Duplicate
- Elevation
- Equivalent
- Fabricate
- Furnish
- Indeterminate
- Indicate
- Ineffectual

Short, Familiar Words

- Copy
- Height
- Equal
- Build
- Give
- Vague
- Show
- Useless

Prefer the short, familiar word to the long, unfamiliar word.

Long, Unfamiliar Words

- Interrupt
- Minimal
- Modification
- Proceed
- Supersede
- Ultimate
- Visualize
- Verification

Short, Familiar Words

- Hinder
- Smallest
- Change
- Go
- Replace
- Last
- Picture
- Proof

Consider the strength and vigor of words.

Weaker

- source of great wealth
- additional compensation
- great loss
- complete failure
- untruth
- put an end to
- upraise

Stronger

- bonanza
- bonus
- disaster
- fiasco
- lie
- destroy
- boost

Use Technical Language with Caution.

Social Security's technical language found
to be misunderstood by outsiders:

Technical Language

Improved Version

Has sufficient quarters of
coverage to acquire an
insured status.

Has worked long enough (under
Social Security) to become
insured.

Survivors' benefits

Family insurance payments

Covered employment

A job covered by Social

Deceased wage earner

Security

To file a claim

Worker who has died

Aged workers

To apply for insurance
payments

Workers past 65

Use initials and acronyms with caution.

What do these letters mean?

- | | |
|-------------------------------|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> VCR | <input type="checkbox"/> Video cassette recorder |
| <input type="checkbox"/> FDA | <input type="checkbox"/> Food and Drug Administration |
| <input type="checkbox"/> CD | <input type="checkbox"/> Certificate of Deposit/Compact Disc |
| <input type="checkbox"/> IPO | <input type="checkbox"/> Initial Public Offering |
| <input type="checkbox"/> RV | <input type="checkbox"/> Recreational Vehicle |
| <input type="checkbox"/> NATO | <input type="checkbox"/> North Atlantic Treaty Organization |
| <input type="checkbox"/> IRS | <input type="checkbox"/> Internal Revenue Service |

Prefer the concrete to the abstract.

Abstract

Concrete

We have found that this technique is successful.

Our research shows that 87 percent of those using this technique are successful.

Your department may hire some new employees.

Your department may hire three new stock clerks.

We will ship your order soon.

We will ship the Moss No. 41 desk sets you ordered October 12 by Arrow Freight on October 15.

Each of the branch managers will receive a substantial pay raise.

Each of the branch managers will received a 15 percent pay raise.

This procedure requires a constant low temperature.

This process requires a constant temperature of 10 degrees centigrade.

Prefer the active to the passive.

Passive

Active

It *is believed* that the bill was padded.

I believe they padded the bill.

Your report *was read* by the president.

The president read your report.

The profit and loss statement *is prepared* by the treasurer each month.

The treasurer prepares the profit and loss statement each month.

It *is suggested* that you clean the element in warm, soapy water.

We suggest that you clean the element in warm, soapy water.

It *is desired* that every effort be made to have this matter brought to the attention of the manager.

Mr. Wong wants you to bring this matter to the attention of the manager.

Prefer strong verbs to verbs camouflaged as nouns.

Camouflaged Verb

... make a classification ...

... make a computation ...

... conduct an exploration ...

... provide information ...

... engage in negotiation ...

... make an observation ...

... provide representation ...

Strong Verb

... classify ...

... compute ...

... explore ...

... inform ...

... negotiate ...

... observe ...

... represent ...

Prefer strong verbs to verbs camouflaged as nouns.

Camouflaged Verb

Cancellation of the order was made on the 12th.

Elimination of the deficit was brought about by the change.

The management of this office is conducted by Ms. Brown.

Distribution of the special equipment was accomplished by the safety officer.

Strong Verb

We canceled the order on the 12th.

The change eliminated the deficit.

Ms. Brown manages this office.

The safety officer distributed the special equipment.

Choose the precise word.

- The committee (comprises) (constitutes) representatives from all four sales districts.
- This building site cost a large (sum) (amount) of money.
- She was (notorious) (noted) for her concern for the poor.
- We found no evidence that would (cause) (enable) us to support him.
- The management of this store is independent (of) (from) the main office.

Choose the precise word.

- She (claimed) (maintained) (said) that she was ill.
- He is angry (about) (with) the loss.
- I will try (to) (and) correct the error.
- I differ (with) (from) you on this conclusion.
- If he is late, I will not wait (for) (on) him longer than ten minutes.
- She has an interest (in) (for) technical writing.

Suggestions for Nondiscriminatory Writing

Avoid sexist pronouns by

- rewording to eliminate the offending word,
- making the reference plural, and
- substituting a neutral expression (he or she, he/she, s/he, you, one, person).

Reword to eliminate the offending word.

Sexist

We will reimburse any employee who paid his travel expenses.

If a customer pays promptly, he is placed on our preferred list.

A physician should treat his patients with respect.

Nonsexist

We will reimburse any employee for travel expenses paid.

A customer who pays promptly is placed on our preferred list.

A physician should treat patients with respect.

Make the reference plural.

Sexist

If a customer pays promptly, he is placed on our preferred list.

When an unauthorized employee enters the security area, he is subject to dismissal.

A supervisor is not responsible for such losses if he is not negligent.

When a customer needs service, it is her right to ask for it.

Nonsexist

If customers pay promptly, **they** are placed on our preferred list.

When unauthorized employees enter the security area, **they** are subject to dismissal.

Supervisors are not responsible for such losses if **they** are not negligent.

When customers need service, **they** have the right to ask for it.

Substitute a neutral expression.

Sexist

If a customer pays promptly, he is placed on our preferred list.

When an unauthorized employee enters the security area, he is subject to dismissal.

A supervisor is not responsible for such losses if he is not negligent.

When a customer needs service, it is her right to ask for it.

Nonsexist

If a customer pays promptly, **he or she** is placed on our preferred list.

When an unauthorized employee enters the security area, **he/she** is subject to dismissal.

A supervisor is not responsible for such losses if **s/he** is not negligent.

When service is needed, **one** has the right to ask for it.

Avoid words with a masculine origin.

Sexist

Nonsexist

man-made

manufactured, of human origin

manpower

personnel, workers

congressman

representative, member of Congress

businessman

business executive, businessperson

mailman

letter carrier, mail carrier

policeman

police officer

fireman

fire fighter

cameraman

camera operator

waiter/waitress

server

Masculine-sounding Words— No Masculine Origin

- manufacture
- management
- history
- manipulate
- mannequin
- manicure
- mandolin
- histrionic
- histamine

Avoid words that lower one's status.

Instead of

- my girl
- lady doctor
- authoress
- actress
- poetess
- sculptress
- male nurse
- male secretary

Use

- my secretary
- doctor
- author
- actor
- poet
- sculptor
- nurse
- secretary

Generally avoid words that stereotype by

- Race
 - a hard-working African-American
 - an honest Sicilian
- Age
 - golden ager
 - youngster
- Disability
 - deaf and dumb
 - crippled
- Sexual Orientation
 - homosexual
 - gay

“Why use two words when one will do.”

--Thomas Jefferson