

Chapter 3: Writing With The Appropriate Precision

Ambiguous Claim

A claim that ...

- A) Has a meaning that is imprecise or indistinct
- B) Has no relevance to the subject matter being addressed
- C) Has a syntactical reference error
- D) Has two or more possible meanings

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Vague Claim

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Vagueness: Time and Place...

Is the following a good response:

John asks an usher at a movie theater:
“How long until the show starts?”

Reply: “Only a minute or two.”

Time and Place...

John is a lead actor in a new Broadway show called “The Critical Thinker.” He is curious how much longer he has before he needs to be on stage and asks: “How long until I go on?”

Manager: “Only a minute or two.”

Time and Place...

- The first is vague, but it is not more vague than we require or is satisfactory
- The second is way more vague than what John needs to know

Time and Place...

- The first is vague, but it is not more vague than we require or is satisfactory
- The second is way more vague than what John needs to know
- Make sure that you know when is an acceptable time for being more vague than what is normally required

Vagueness & Fuzzy Language

- Words like:
 - Old
 - Bald
 - Rich
 - Love
 - Beauty
 - Etc.
- Words that often have less clear division lines are very often vague



Nice hair,
Brad!

Textbook Definition: Vagueness

- An expression 'x' is *vague* when it is imprecise either because there are borderline cases of being an 'x'; or because there are degrees of being an 'x' (Page 97).

Key Evaluative Idea:

- It is certainly fair to criticize claims based on vagueness, but when we do so what we are asking is if they are *more* vague than what we wish to know, need to know or to have communicated

Correcting Vagueness:

Which of each set of claims is MORE
vague

- 1) John served the church his whole life.
John's fastball is impossible to hit.

Correcting Vagueness:

Which of each set of claims is MORE vague

1) John served the church his whole life.

John's fastball is impossible to hit.

John served the church his whole life.

Correcting Vagueness:

Which of each set of claims is MORE
vague

2) Time to fix the garden.

Time to turn off the sprinkler.

Correcting Vagueness:

Which of each set of claims is MORE vague

2) Time to fix the garden.

Time to turn off the sprinkler.

Time to fix the garden. - But it is very close here!

Correcting Vagueness

Is the italicized word too vague? Be able to explain your answer.

3) Please cook this steak *longer*. It is too rare.

Correcting Vagueness

Is the italicized word too vague? Be able to explain your answer.

3) Please cook this steak *longer*. It is too rare.

- Yes, it is vague. What could you do?

Correcting Vagueness

Is the italicized word too vague? Be able to explain your answer.

4) Advertisement: Carpets cleaned: \$99 and up. Must see to give *exact* prices.

Correcting Vagueness

Is the italicized word too vague? Be able to explain your answer.

- 4) Advertisement: Carpets cleaned: \$99 and up. Must see to give *exact* prices.
- *Not too vague. Why?*

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For Health... eat some food
from each group...every day!



*IN ADDITION TO THE BASIC 7...
EAT ANY OTHER FOODS YOU WANT*

Famous Slogan

“It is important that you eat five servings of fruits and vegetables every day. V-8 provides you with 2 servings.”

Definition

Ambiguous:

- “If a word, phrase, or sentence is too imprecise (for the needs of the audience) because it has two or more distinct interpretations, it is *ambiguous*” (Page 88).

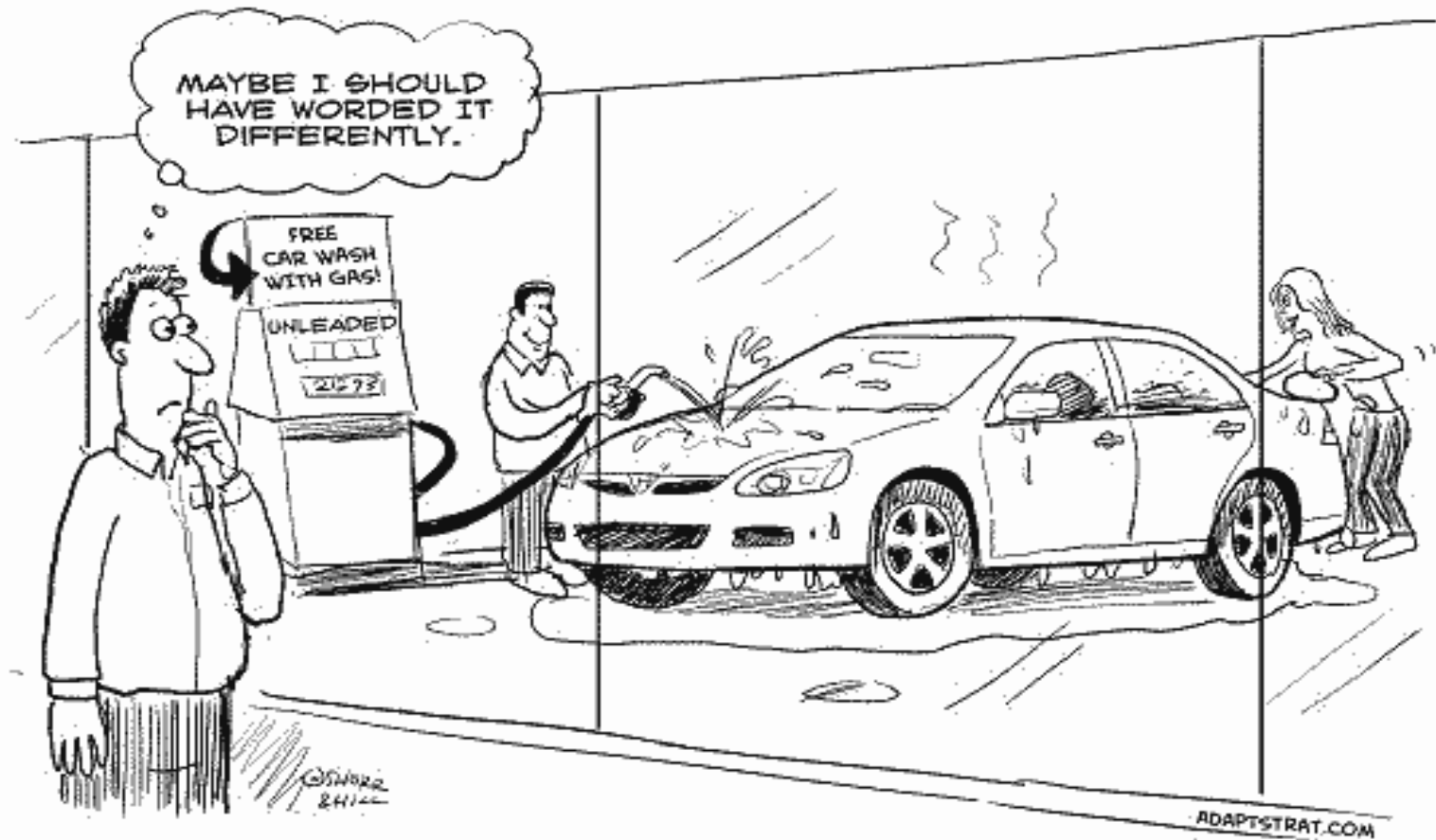
Example

- “We Rise to Every Occasion.”
 - Anheuser Yeast (1927)
- “Always on. Slightly off.”
 - Independent Film Channel (IFC)
- “Like a Good Neighbor. State Farm Is There.”
- Ambiguous or Vague or No Confusion?

Semantic and Syntax and Ambiguity

- Semantic: Word or phrase is ambiguous
 - “I know a little Greek.” -- you will remember the problem here
 - Textbook example: “Air Force considers dropping new bombs” (page 88).
- Syntax: Structural issue
 - “I saw the man with binoculars.” -- What?
 - Textbook: “More sanctions coming, Japan warned” (page 88).

Syntactically Ambiguous



Retrieved from: <http://jobmob.co.il/blog/funny-craigslist-job-titles-listings/>

Semantic Ambiguity

Los Angeles Times

Monday, May 20
11:39 a.m. PDT

LOCAL U.S. WORLD BUSINESS SPORTS ENTERTAINMENT HEALTH LIVING

Big rig carrying fruit crashes on 210 Freeway, creates jam



A big rig overturned Monday morning, creating a headache for commuters on the 210 Freeway.

Semantic Ambiguity

- Semantic: Word or phrase is ambiguous
 - **Grouping Ambiguity:**
 - “Teachers make more money than neural surgeons.”

Semantic Ambiguity

- Semantic: Word or phrase is ambiguous
 - **Grouping Ambiguity:**
 - Whenever we refer to a collection of individuals, we must clearly show whether the reference is to the collection as a group or as individuals

Preventing Ambiguity and Vagueness

- Context Is Key
 - Establishing *verbal* context: Other things we say, when we say it, who is saying it and how we say it (body language)
 - Establishing *written* context: Look at other words, paragraphs and ideas presented
 - Apply background knowledge to disambiguate claims

Applying Background Knowledge

- If our friend John says, “How about a swim?”
 - Knowing that he is terrified of the ocean (background knowledge) what can we deduce?

Avoid Ambiguity

- “The conclusion to be drawn ... is that the principle "Avoid ambiguity" requires not that you completely avoid using words that have multiple meanings but only that you avoid them when they interfere with communication” (Page 89).

Correcting Ambiguity

1) We were invited to go to the movies
yesterday.

Correcting Ambiguity

- 1) We were invited to go to the movies yesterday.
 - Could mean more than one thing...
 - Better: Yesterday we were invited to go to the movies

Correcting Ambiguity

2) Correct the following newspaper headline:

Fire Department Traps Mountain Lion
After Attacking Girl.

Correcting Ambiguity

2) Correct the following newspaper headline:

Fire Department Traps Mountain Lion
After Attacking Girl.

How about: *Mountain Lion That Attacked
Girl Trapped By Fire Department*

Correcting Ambiguity

3) Famous Slogan

GE: We Bring Good Things To Life

Correcting Ambiguity

3) Famous Slogan

GE: We Bring Good Things To Life

GE: We Help Create Good Things
or

GE: We Make Life Good

Note: *Good is still an ambiguous term here, but the correction is far superior in terms of being ambiguous.*

Correcting Ambiguity

4) French eat millions of pounds of cheese every year.

Answer the following:

A) What is the ambiguity here called?

B) Correct the ambiguity

Correcting Ambiguity

4) French eat millions of pounds of cheese every year.

Answers

A) Grouping Ambiguity

B) As a group, the French eat millions of pounds of cheese every year.

Substantial Disagreement

- Definition: Disagreements about more than just the meaning of terms but about *how* the world really is or what should be done in the world