

Write for your reader, not for yourself

by Helen Wilkie

Too many business letters are written for the writer instead of the reader. You know what you want to say, so you assume the reader will too. But if the reader knew what was in your mind, why would you need to write? It's up to you to express your message so that the reader understands it.

Watch out for jargon

One of the main barriers to business communication is the inappropriate use of jargon. Is the reader a member of your company, your organization, your industry or profession? If so, a certain amount of jargon may be appropriate. After all, jargon comes into being simply because it is often the best means of communication among members of a particular group. The problem arises, however, when we forget that the reader is outside that group, and may not understand our special language.

Jargon is a special type of “insider” language designed to communicate easily with other members of a particular group. So there’s no reason why outsiders should know your jargon. It’s important to realize that they will not necessarily tell you they don’t understand because, ironically, they think they should know! So because of inappropriate language, the message is lost and communication breaks down.

Imagine a cocktail party conversation involving a doctor, a lawyer, an engineer, a plumber, a commercial printer and a rock musician—all using their own professional jargon. What a babble that would produce! That’s exactly the effect you create when you use your professional jargon, your own special “in” language, to a reader outside the group. They won’t understand, and if they don’t understand the words you use, you have thrown up the first barrier to communication.

Use a pleasant tone

Many of the letters we send to one another in business are just not nice! We use words and phrases we would never use in conversation, and many of them create a tone we never intended.

Tone is something we relate to sound, such as the human voice. We know when someone is annoyed by the tone of voice they use in speaking to us. We know if they are being polite, or if they are being sarcastic. In writing, tone is just as important, but here we don’t have the advantage of hearing the words spoken so they have to speak clearly on the printed page or on the computer screen.

You must have heard the old expression, “You catch more bears with honey than you do with vinegar.” But did you ever stop to think you may be dripping vinegar in your business writing,



Helen Wilkie is a partner in MHW Communications
90 Warren Road, Suite 202, Toronto, Ontario, Canada M4V 2S2
Tel: (416) 966-5023 • e-mail: hwilkie@mhwcom.com
www.mhwcom.com • www.masteringbusinesswriting.com
www.communi-keys.com



without ever realizing it?

Examples of what I call “vinegar words” are: blame fault careless failure inferior negligence penalty complaint.

“Honey words” include: please thank you appreciate understand agree excellent service value.

Think, for example, about the difference in tone between these two sentences

- John did not attend the meeting.
- John failed to attend the meeting.

The first one is simply a statement of fact, while the second one implies judgement. He should have been at the meeting, but he wasn’t. Often we don’t mean to inject that shade of meaning when we use the word *fail*, but we do.

Here is an illustration of how you can say the same thing, but with a vastly different result, by using honey words instead of vinegar.

Vinegar

Because the defective motor that we purchased from you failed to perform its function, we are dissatisfied and are returning the faulty motor for immediate replacement.

Honey

Although we have generally been pleased with your products, the on/off switch on our new motor does not work as it should. We are, therefore, returning the motor and look forward to receiving a replacement as soon as possible.

Notice that the part still doesn’t work, I am still returning it and I still expect it to be replaced. I’m just asking in a civilized manner.

It’s worth noting that customer service people who have taken my writing seminar have told me, overwhelmingly, that they would respond more quickly, more positively and more helpfully to the second version—simply because they get so much of the first. People really don’t like to be yelled at. Do you?

The problem of vinegar-laden correspondence has become more noticeable now with the use of e-mail, and the situation is even worse here because we have a tendency to press that “send” button without carefully considering what we have written. Many a cyber-fight has started because someone unthinkingly poured vinegar into their words, when they could just as easily have



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www.communi-keys.com



smoothed the way with honey.

In editing your correspondence before it goes out, make sure you haven't inadvertently yelled at someone in writing. Be nice!

Helen Wilkie is a keynote speaker and workshop facilitator who focuses on the link between communication and productivity. Her keynotes and workshops cover the specific skills of communication, such as writing, presenting and meeting skills, as well as the importance of communication at work. She is the author of "The Hidden Profit Center: a tale of profits lost and found through communication", Reach her at 416-966-5023 or hwilkie@mhwcom.com. Watch video clips on her main website at <http://www.mhwcom.com> to get a feel for her platform style and audience response.



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