

Communicating on the Job

Tips for effective writing, speaking, and listening



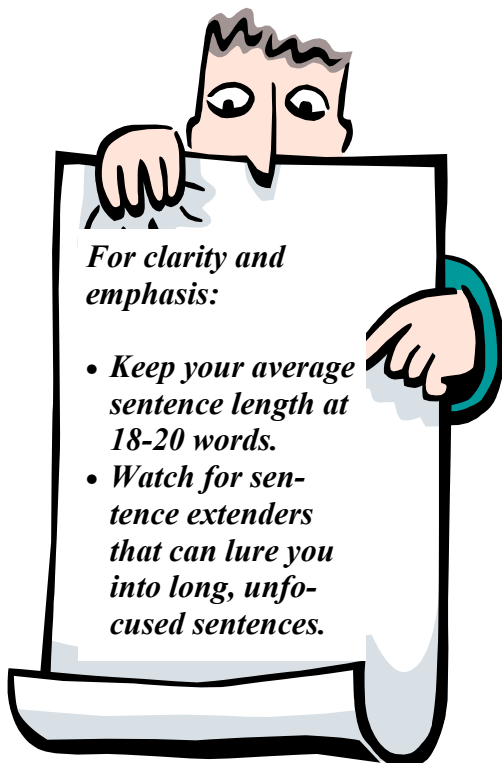
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Writing: To Make Ideas Clear, Keep Sentences Short

Good ideas are often buried in long, rambling sentences. Readers shouldn't have to *study* a sentence to grasp its content. But long sentences force them to do that. Short sentences limit the number of ideas so readers then have an easier time picking them up:

Long, Unfocused: *Some hospitals use head-hunters to recruit high-technology technicians **because** they find this is the only way they can ease the growing shortage of radiologists and others who operate expensive, sophisticated hospital equipment.* (2 ideas, 33 words, 1 sentence)

Shorter, Clearer: *Some hospitals use head-hunters to recruit high-technology technicians. They find this is the only way they can ease the growing shortage of radiologists and others who operate expensive, sophisticated hospital equipment.* (2 ideas, 32 words, 2 sentences)



For clarity and emphasis:

- **Keep your average sentence length at 18-20 words.**
- **Watch for sentence extenders that can lure you into long, unfocused sentences.**

By breaking the long sentence in two, the writer gives greater emphasis to each idea. The reader can then grasp each idea more easily.

Beware of "Sentence Extenders"

Words like *because*, *since*, *and*, *but*, *as*, and *with* are often used to couple a second idea with the first, as in the example above. If your sentences are long, look for these sentence extenders. The point where you find the extender is probably where you can insert a period and begin a new sentence.

Some sentences, of course, will have to be long. But surround such sentences with shorter ones. Shoot for an average sentence length of 18-20 words.

(For more on writing, see *Writing on the Job*, by Cos Ferrara, published by Prentice Hall)

Mechanics: By the Numbers: Words or Figures?

In business we not only have to *make* the numbers; we also have to write them. Do we use figures or words for those numbers?

A) In general, spell out all numbers lower than 10, except when decimals or fractions are involved:

No: *We filled 3 positions.*

Yes: *We filled **three** positions.*

Yes: *Profits increased **44** percent.*

Yes: *Each letter required **2.7** hours.*

Exception: When the document is heavy with numbers—as in a scientific or statistical report—simplify the reading by using figures exclusively.

B) Never begin a sentence with a figure, even a multi-digit figure:

No: *43 was the cut-off point.*

Yes: *Forty-three was the cut-off point.*

Yes: *The cut-off point was 43.*

C) Avoid placing two sets of figures back-to-back:

No: *In 2001, **300** people were hired.*

Yes: *In 2001, **three hundred** people were hired.*

Yes: *In 2001, we hired 300 people.*

Yes: *In 1990, the company hired **300***

When you need...

...help writing reports, proposals, manuals, and brochures, or your people need a refresher class in business writing or speaking, contact Cos Ferrara at 201-391-0178 or drcff@aol.com, or visit my Website: www.cosferrara.com

Presenting: Free Yourself of Stage-Fright

A study revealed that speaking before a group is many people's greatest fear—outranking death. Jerry Seinfeld says: "These people would rather be the deceased at a funeral than the eulogist."

How can you keep your nervousness in check?

- **Psyche yourself.** Keep telling yourself what you have to say is important or you wouldn't be on the agenda.
- **Exercise.** Before taking the podium, try relaxation techniques, deep breathing, isometrics.
- **Socialize.** Before the program starts, chat with members of the audience. You'll see they're not so threatening.
- **Rehearse.** *The best way to overcome*

nervousness is to rehearse your presentation. Don't memorize it. Working from notes, "deliver" it repeatedly over the course of a week. You'll improve the material and become more familiar with it. Your confidence will grow.

Presenters seldom appear as nervous as they think they do. Videotaped presentations have verified this fact. Most signs of nervousness that we worry about disappear when we get control of the material and ourselves. To do that, rehearse. *(For more, see Powerful Presentations, by Cos Ferrara. Order the CD-Rom directly from MicroMash at 1-800-272-7277 or www.micromash.net)*



Watch Your Language! "Mantle is a switch-hitter because he's amphibious." Yogi Berra

More people know Yogi for his verbal bloopers than for his baseball exploits. But he's not alone when it comes to misusing words. The misuse of words is so common there's a name for such errors—*malapropisms*. The name comes from a Mrs. Malaprop, a character in a play who went around saying things like:

You will promise to forget this fellow—to illiterate (obliterate) him from your memory.

The comedian Norm Crosby made fractured English part of his repertoire, with lines like:

I reached the pinochle (pinnacle) of my career.

In business circles you might hear malapropisms like these:

Mandatory sentences are the best anecdote (antidote) to crime.

Except for two abstentions, the vote was anonymous (unanimous).

Both parties claimed the marriage had not been conjugated (consummated).

Don't let the fear of making such errors keep you from stretching your linguistic boundaries. But be certain you are using and pronouncing the words correctly. To be sure, follow Casey Stengel's advice: "Look it up."



Speaking: Make Big Gains Through Small Talk

You're in the elevator and the Executive VP enters. As the elevator ascends, the silence builds. You search desperately for something to say. What will the VP think if you say nothing?

Casual meetings may not advance or derail your career, but they do add to the impression people form of you. In such situations, sparkling conversation isn't expected, but social small talk is.

To small-talk:

- **Don't try to be brilliant.** Most people don't expect it in casual meetings.
- **Turn the spotlight on the other person.** Ask questions, about a recent promotion or accomplishment, the person's family, vacation plans. "What do you think of this weather?" is not original but it still works as an ice-breaker.
- **Compliment carefully.** Most people are never bored by praise, but be sincere. False flattery can back-fire.
- **Use friendly body language.** Don't fold your arms or turn away. Make eye contact. And smile.
- **Keep it light.** Avoid topics such as illness, layoffs, the person's divorce.
In a deadly silence, the other person may be just as uncomfortable as you are. So any small talk will be welcome.
Source: "How to Talk to Anyone About Anything," Pam Kruger, Redbook, April, 1994.

Communicating on the Job is published for clients and friends of Cos Ferrara (www.cosferrara.com)