

Communicating on the Job

Tips for effective writing, speaking, and
listening from Cos Ferrara

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Writing: Increase Understanding with Definitions, Details, and Examples

Readers don't have the insight into your subject that you as a writer have. Help them grasp your ideas with definitions, details, and examples.

Definition: Be sure readers know the meaning of terms you use.

Weak: The concern centers around proposed increases in the *prime rate*.

The Wall Street Journal almost always defines *prime rate*, just in case readers don't know exactly what it is:

Strong: The concern centers around proposed increases in the prime rate, *the rate banks charge their largest customers*.

Detail: Give the specifics that enable readers to understand fully.

Weak: Management felt the company was ready for expansion. So it laid out a plan to open...

Some readers might want to know what *ready for expansion* meant to the company. Details give the reasoning and enrich the idea:

Strong: Management felt the company was ready for expansion. *Profits had been consistently good, all systems were state of the art, and the managerial staff was strong*. So management laid out a plan to open...

Example: Examples are perhaps the most effective way of explaining an idea.

Weak: Companies often rely too much on their accounting systems as a way of managing the business. They think every important event is recorded in an accounting transaction. But that is not always true.

The reader may have grasped the idea, but an example will ensure understanding:

Strong: ...But that is not always true. *For example, if a key executive leaves the company, no accounting record is made of that departure. But it is a significant business event that can seriously affect the company.*

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



Presenting: Never Say "I'm Sorry"

Presenters sometimes feel the need to apologize, often for matters beyond their control. For example:

NO: *There's so much to cover in so little time, I can't possibly give you all of it. But I'll do my best.*

Apologies create negative impressions. The audience feels the talk will be less than rich because the presenter told them so. Address these issues in positive terms:

YES: *In the time we have, I'll give you the essential points.*

This opening sends a positive signal—no fluff.

And don't apologize in your wrap-up. Close on a positive note:

NO: *I'm sorry I couldn't get to more questions, but we're out of time.*

YES: *Your questions are insightful. If there are others, I'll be happy to take them after the session.*

For a tutorial on presentation skills, see *Powerful Presentations*, by Cos Ferrara, on CD-Rom, from *MicroMash* at 1-800-272-7277, ext. 4150, or www.micromash.net.

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

Listening: How to Listen Smarter

Listening is the most under-rated and under-developed survival skill. To be more effective in meetings and conversations, become a better listener by practicing these techniques.

Eliminate distractions. Getting all the details of a phone conversation is difficult if you're leafing through your mail. Mentally debating the speaker and preparing your next volley can also impede your listening. To listen well, put your own views aside momentarily to focus on the speaker's.

Use and observe body language. Convey with your body language that you are interested—smile, uncross your arms, make eye contact, lean forward. These signs encourage the other person and make her/him more willing to open up. And by focusing on the other person's body language, you can zero in on his/her chief concerns.

Avoid unnecessary interruptions. Don't interrupt a speaker to make trivial points, petty corrections, or abrupt topic changes. The conversation shouldn't be a monologue, but make your comments pertinent and timely.

Be alert for key words. Think of them as the tip of the iceberg, clues to the speaker's major interests. Key words help you know what to say or ask:

Other: *...that was before I went to New York, got my MBA, and went to work at XYZ.*

Having picked up the key words, you can continue the conversation with a comment or question such as:

You: *In what area did you concentrate your MBA work?*
OR: I once worked at XYZ too.

Use Reflective Listening. Rephrase what you have heard, to let the speaker know you've been listening and understand. Don't parrot, but summarize or paraphrase:

If I understand you correctly, you feel you're ready for more responsibility.

Reflective listening builds rapport, enables you to focus on the key points, and helps correct misconceptions.

Clarify implied statements. Some people won't say what they mean, but they imply. Such statements can cause confusion. Listen for implied statements, and ask questions to make explicit what has been implied:

Other: *I'm not crazy about the plan.*

You: *Can you tell me what you don't like about the plan?*

Focus on the main points. Resist the urge to challenge the speaker—even just mentally—after hearing only one or two points. Get the big picture first.

Acknowledge the speaker's point of view. You can miss opportunities to build rapport if you don't acknowledge the other person's right to opinions, conclusions, and feelings. Acknowledge the other person's point of view by saying something like:

I understand how you feel...

These techniques will make you a more active listener and a more insightful participant.

Source: *Speaking Your Mind in 101 Difficult Situations*, Don Gabor, Simon & Schuster



Watch Your Language! Raining Cats and Dog?

If you deal with speakers of foreign languages, remember that literal translations do not always convey the message. In fact, they can cause confusion, laughter, even insult.

Note these signs seen abroad and avoid similar *faux pas*:

- *If this is your first visit to Russia, you are welcome to it.* (Moscow hotel)

- *You are invited to take advantage of the chambermaid.* (Tokyo hotel)
- *Our wines leave you nothing to hope for.* (Swiss menu)
- *Drop your trousers here for best results.* (Bangkok dry cleaner)

Source: *Men's Health*, 12/92