

Watch Your Language! Choosing words for just the right spin

The U. S. Defense Department was once called the War Department. Same function but the newer name suggests a more positive image. Similarly, the Solid Waste Association of North America replaces words such as *garbage* and *trash* with the more refined term *solid waste*, and substitutes *sanitary landfills* for *dumps*.

You can add impact to your writing and speaking by selecting words for their connotations—the emotional associations people attach to the literal meaning of words. Depending on your intent, choose words and phrases carrying “loaded” or negative connotations or those with unbiased or positive connotation. For example:

“Loaded” or Negative

weakness
downsize
abandon
cheap
Your letter claims...

Unbiased or Positive

opportunity for improvement
right-size
discontinue
inexpensive
Your letter states...

Connotations bring a powerful emotional charge to the meaning of words. Be aware of the charge and use it to your advantage.

Presenting: Use numbers to guide your audience

When presenting, help your audience follow you and grasp your information. One way to do that is to use numbers to create a framework for your detail. For example:



I have **two** major objectives for today’s meeting.
You can benefit from this system in **three** ways.

When introducing the topic or a new aspect of it, don’t leave it open-ended. Limit the scope with a number:

Open-ended: *Let’s look at the obstacles we must overcome.*
Limited scope: *We must overcome **four** obstacles.. First...*

Audiences feel more comfortable and better able to absorb the material when the presenter guides them along. You can almost see them jotting 1-, 2-, 3- 4- in their notes.

(For more on presentations, see *Powerful Presentations*, by Cos Ferrara. Order it on CD-Rom directly from MicroMash at 1-800-272-7277 or www.micromash.net)

Writing: Energize with action verbs

Action verbs enliven and shorten sentences. Show action with verbs like *decide*, *enforce*, *escalate*, *plummet*, *rescind*, and *empower*. These kinds of verbs drive sentences to swift, emphatic ends and stress key ideas. In contrast, verbs like *is*, *were*, *has been*, and *will be* do not show action. These are called *verbs of being* because they simply indicate something exists.

Note the energy boost when the action verb supplants the being verb:

Being: *Working conditions **are** in need of a complete review.*

Action: *Working conditions **clamor** for a complete review.*

Being: *The Dow **was** lower in the morning but **was** higher at the close.*

Action: *The Dow **fell** in the morning but then **rallied** at the close.*

Sometimes you may have to restructure the sentence:

Being: *The offer **was** not acceptable to the union.*

Action: *The union **rejected** the offer.*

For livelier writing, replace being verbs with action verbs.

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

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Speaking/Listening: With sensitive issues, be tactful

Candor and directness are admirable qualities, but in some instances, discretion—or tact—works more effectively. When the issues are sensitive and could lead to confrontation, tread a bit more gingerly than normal. If the people you’re talking with—whether superiors, peers, or subordinates—are likely to take offense, apply these three diplomatic techniques:



1. **Lower your voice and control your tone.** True, you *can* convey hostility in a whisper, but that’s less likely if you control (and soften) your tone of voice.
2. **Cushion the impact of criticism with expressions like “maybe” and “we might consider.”** Such expressions imply an openness toward the subject and are likely to prompt an equally open response.

Maybe we can approach it another way.

3. **Use the passive voice to focus on the issue, not the individual.**

Instead of: *You designed the concept to...*
Try: *The concept seems designed to...*

The words you choose and the way you deliver them can turn confrontation into resolution.

Source: Ann Chadwell Humphries, “To Be Blunt About It...”

Mechanics: Rearranging misplaced parts

This morning I shot an elephant in my pajamas. How he got there, I’ll never know.
Groucho Marx

Keep words and phrases that belong together in close proximity. Otherwise, sentences can get confusing, even downright ridiculous:

Misplaced: *The customer complained of receiving poor service **in his letter**.* (Was the poor service in the letter?)

Clearer: *The customer complained **in his letter** of receiving poor service.*

Misplaced: *The indictment **almost** names the entire department.* (But never quite names anyone?)

Clearer: *The indictment names **almost** the entire department.*

You Try It

Rearrange the misplaced words in the following sentence.

Misplaced: *The computer was purchased from a vendor with a faulty hard drive.*

