

Communicating on the Job

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

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Watch Your Language! Does that really make sense?

What language errors can you spot in the following?

1. Highly leveraged companies have a hard road to hoe.
2. Growing up next store to the library nurtured her love for books.
3. The negotiators finally got down to brass tax.
4. The director honed in on the problem.
5. Though a teatotaler, he had no trouble socializing with his peers.



Many common expressions come to us through speech, so we repeat them as we hear them. We use some so frequently we never think to verify our use or consider their origins or meanings. If we did, we would realize that:

1. *road to hoe* makes no sense. *Row to hoe* is the correct expression, based in our agricultural past, when people scraped the earth with a hoe, preparing it for rows of vegetables.
2. *next store* is a slurred mispronunciation of *next door*.
3. *brass tax* sounds the same as the correct form, *brass tacks*. So *brass tax* is an error in written form only. But what does it mean? At one time brass tacks were placed one inch apart on the counter in fabric stores. When the customer decided on a fabric, she was ready to “get down to brass tacks”—to measure the length of fabric against the brass tacks for the purchase.
4. *Homed in* is the correct form, as in a guided missile’s proceeding to a specified target, or to “home.”
5. *Teetotaler*—tee—has nothing to do with tea. A teetotaler refrains from alcohol. The *tee* was used to emphasize a person’s *total* abstinence from alcohol.

A reader asks...

“Are *then* and *than* interchangeable?”

No, they aren’t. *Than* is a conjunction used in comparisons:
Older *than* dirt. Plan A is better *than* Plan B.

Then is an adverb indicating time:
First we plan, and *then* we act.

If you have a question about business communication, ask Cos at drcff@aol.com.

Writing: Save the best for last

The dramatic highlight of Macy’s Thanksgiving Day parade is Santa Claus riding at the very end of the parade. You can write sentences that generate dramatic impact by placing the point of greatest emphasis last.

Why last? Because the reader stops at the end of the sentence and reflects on the last point. Note the difference in impact in this pair of sentences:

Despite the other factors, cost was the primary reason behind the decision.

More Impact: *Despite the other factors, the primary reason behind the decision was cost.*

The critical idea—cost—receives greater emphasis when it’s at the end, like a joke’s punchline.

You may not always be able to shift elements as you’d like. But when you can, don’t waste the most prominent position on a secondary element.

You Try It

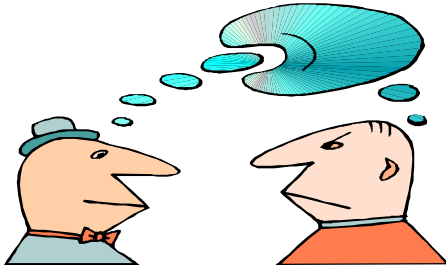
Rewrite the sentence below to put greater emphasis on a more important element.

The company announced a two-for-on split in a letter to stockholders.

When you need...

...copy for a brochure or website, a quick edit or review, or a fresh approach, contact Cos Ferrara at 201-391-0178 or drcff@aol.com, or visit www.cosferrara.com

Listening: A listening habit checklist



How many of these poor habits impede your ability to listen effectively?

1. **Freezing your evaluation of the speaker.** If you have a negative opinion of the speaker, do you discount everything she says, and possibly miss out on some good ideas?

2. **Second-guessing the speaker.** Do

you interrupt and finish the speaker's sentences, in an effort to let him know you understand his ideas?

3. **Closing prematurely.** Do you tune out too soon, before the message is completed?

4. **Taking over to show your authority.** Do you feel your position entitles (requires?) you to always be the leader, which means being the speaker?

5. **Becoming distracted by the speaker's delivery.** Do you pay so much attention to the speaker's hand movements, accent, or facial expressions that you don't concentrate on her words?

6. **Prejudging the content of the message.** Do you tune out because the subject is one you're not interested in or

don't agree with?

7. **Overreacting to key words and phrases.** Do you react emotionally to loaded words, such as "instead of that," or "I don't care for that"?

8. **Locking into your own point of view.** Instead of listening, do you begin framing your rebuttal as soon as you get the other person's drift?

9. **Listening for too much detail.** Do you miss the forest for the trees?

10. **Drifting off.** If you're listening to a slow speaker, do you tune out and start thinking of other things?

Source: *Communicating Effectively*, Dellinger and Deane, Chilton Book Company

E-mail: Setting the right tone and reaching the right audience

You can't unring a bell. Or pull back an e-mail. So before you click "Send," be sure you're comfortable with your message. E-mails dashed off in haste can have dire consequences.

Any time you're sending an e-mail that is other than simply matter-of-fact, be careful. Whenever your message carries a tone—angry, sarcastic, clever, frank, retaliatory—think twice about sending it.

Your message can come back to haunt you even when you're in a joking mood. You may write something in jest only to have your reader take it seriously.

Check Your Distribution List

It's easy to accidentally send e-mail to more than one person. For instance, in replying to an e-mail, be sure your response goes only to the person(s) you want it to, not to everyone on the distribution list of the original message.

And in sending to more than one individual, use the "To" field only for people who have action items to complete. Use "cc" for people who may want to see this information but will not be asked to act on it.

Don't be so casual

We use e-mail so often and in so many ways, we've become very casual about it. But remember that anything we put in print has greater permanence and impact than a conversation would. So don't treat e-mail lightly.

Mechanics: Which is it—who or whom?

People may not hold you to the letter of the law in most speaking situations, and even in informal writing, but formal situations do demand complete correctness. So let's tackle the troublesome *who* and *whom*.

Apply the He or Him Test

Determine if you want *who* or *whom* by substituting *he* or *him*. Where *he* fits, use *who*; where *him* fits, use *whom*. To apply the test, you may have to switch some words around or phrase a question as a statement.

Sentence: The employee (*who, whom*) offers the best suggestion wins the award.
he or him test: ...*he* offers the best suggestion...
Therefore: The employee *who* offers the best suggestion wins the award.

Sentence: (*Who, Whom*) did you send the report to?
he or him test: You did send the report to *him*.
Therefore: *Whom* did you send the report to?

