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One of the most important characteristics of a professional man is writing ability. It's necessary in every report, every letter, every communication. Yet on few subjects is there so much bad advice —

THE ANATOMY OF A SHIBBOLETH

by Allen Weiss

P & L Careers, Inc.

“ . . . when any of the fugitives of Ephraim said ‘Let me go over,’ the men of Gilead said unto him ‘Art thou an Ephraimite?’ If he said ‘Nay,’ then said they unto him ‘Say now Shibboleth’; and he said ‘Sibboleth,’ for he could not frame to pronounce it right. . .”

Judges 12

ALL but the most fortunate—and gifted—businessmen are concerned with writing. All communications are important, they realize, but the form that awes them most is the written word. A simple letter, a report, a manage-

ment letter—all take the businessman more hours of thought and concern than a talk, formal or informal, with associates, clients, or superiors.

This is perhaps more emphatically underlined with the accountant specializing in management services than it is with any other CPA. The precision and clarity of his writing style are vital to his work. For the management services specialist frequently finds himself inducing change. So he must often convince, cajole, persuade, or instruct.

Language—and primarily the

written language—is one of his most essential accessories.

Yet the person in a business or technical field who wants to improve his writing has a host of bad advice available to him. Perhaps the worst—because the most common—prescription is that advising the use of shorter words and fewer words. For this is one of the major shibboleths by which too much modern writing is judged.

Excerpts from this article appeared in an earlier article by the author, “Choosing the Right Word,” in *Supervisory Management*, a publication of the American Management Association.

Since the theory of shortness first appeared some years ago, it has been attacked again and again by writers and teachers of writing. Still it manages to retain a sizable following. Many loyal adherents firmly believe that the short word is always superior to the long word and the fewer words the better. Some extremists go so far as to imply that shortness is the panacea for all writing ills.

And yet, the criticisms of the shibboleth are valid and cogent. Certainly the best word in a given situation is the one that conveys the meaning (including nuances and connotations) most accurately, without fighting the context. Syllable count has nothing at all to do with it.

Furthermore, reading ease is not necessarily promoted by uniformly short words or excessively spare writing. Without variety, writing can be painfully boring, dull, and —yes—difficult.

Why then is the shibboleth so durable? Why do so many people feel that they are helped by advice that must cramp their writing style? Perhaps the answer is to be found in those incidental benefits that shortness confers by overlapping other, more useful, guides at a number of points.

Adherence to the criterion of shortness instills in some writers a measure of confidence that is, unfortunately, specious. We ought therefore to examine the criterion in detail, to uncover the reasons for such success as it can claim, and to formulate proper standards that will save the baby when the bath water is thrown out. For shortness in itself will never produce a good writing style.

Pretentiousness

One common fault, perhaps more than all others, stands out as having brought success and popularity to the idea of brevity for the sake of brevity. That fault is pretentious writing. The writer who has a tendency to reach for longer words, the one “who endeavors to secure

maximum utilization of existing equipment” where others would simply “try to use the machines” can indeed be helped by a reminder to use shorter words. Still, the real target to shoot down in these cases ought to be, not polysyllables, but pompous language.

Accordingly, such a writer should take aim at the unnatural, the unusual, the bombastic words, regardless of length. It is true that many pompous words are also long, but short words can offend, too, if they are unfamiliar to the reader. Much jargon fits into this category.

Beware the unfamiliar word

On the other hand, many three- and four-syllable words are quite common in ordinary speech and therefore quite safe. This page is studded with them. It is hard to see how “unfamiliarity,” a seven-syllable word, can cause the kinds of problem, ranging from annoyance to misunderstanding, that “ergo,” “parlous,” or “discrete” can impose.

Foreign words and phrases create needless difficulty. “Vis-a-vis” means literally “face to face.” To write “vis-a-vis” for “as compared with” is to use a metaphor involving foreign words, a practice not to be recommended. The phrase “au fait” (to the point) is likely to make readers uneasy because most people will have no handle with which to try to extract a meaning. “Per se” (of itself), though used more often, is as much an affectation as “au fait” because in both cases there are simple English phrases to say what is meant without any difficulty.

On the other hand, a phrase like “de novo,” which can be understood by people who have not seen it before and which has a precise meaning not easily expressed in English—“anew” and “afresh” sound pedantic, “all over again” is not as precise, “from scratch” has not quite the same meaning—may be permissible for occasional use. Its strangeness is a mark against it, though, even to observers unjaun-

diced by xenophobia. A similar conclusion may be drawn for “quid pro quo.” “Something in exchange” is just different enough to lead us to prefer the Latin phrase on occasion, but some caution is advisable.

In the end, the decision to use a given word involves a judgment concerning your readers. Should you delete a word like “damp” because a colleague happens to ask what it means or because he is surprised to learn that fluctuations or oscillations are damped when they are reduced in amplitude? Should you allow yourself to be inhibited by the man who thinks that “cull” is an unusual word? Should you drop “xenophobia” from your vocabulary even though no other word can replace it?

A reasonable solution to the problem is to allow a certain number of risky words, words that are neither so rare as to be startling nor so common as to be in every educated vocabulary. The golden mean is a good enough rule here. Don’t eliminate these words altogether, but don’t overdo their use, either. Try to write for most of your audience, but not necessarily for every last reader who may happen along.

Humor, conscious and not

This advice is not meant to condone the replacement of a short word by a long one just to foster an air of weightiness, or to appear to be saying something significant when you are not. Someone who says “face-to-face communications” when he means “conversations,” or just “talking,” has more than a mere writing problem. He has a peculiar view of the world and the people in it.

A phrase like “face-to-face communications” is so grotesque as to almost qualify as humor. It is sometimes tempting to mimic such writing in search of a laugh, but the risk is great. Your audience may not recognize your intention. After all, they have seen so much bombast that was written seriously,

why should they suspect that you are only joking? Indeed, some pompous writing is so exaggerated that it parodies itself. In these circumstances, your effort to be facetious by being pretentious may give you far more enjoyment than it does your audience.

If you must indulge in polysyllabic humor, perhaps the way to do it is with words that are elaborately precise, like "sesquipedalian," with its whimsical implication that a word can be measured in feet (one and one-half feet, to be exact). Excessive gentility can be funny, too, but somehow the genteel words get to be hackneyed euphemisms ("intestinal fortitude" is one), and the humor vanishes.

The fact that people do find pompous language laughable is perhaps all that has to be said in criticism of it. The additional fact that bombast is so widely employed in misguided efforts to display erudition is saddening. There are easier ways to make oneself ridiculous.

The esoteric

A technical word is often so fitting in place of a long expression that it cries out to be used, even though you may be writing for an audience of laymen. The thing to do is to explain the meaning of the word the first time you use it. It matters far less whether you come straight out with a definition or you attempt an indirect, perhaps more urbane, method for making your meaning clear; sometimes the



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context may accomplish the purpose for you. Whatever your method, be sure you introduce each technical word in a way that assures your readers' understanding it.

Acronyms like PERT (for Project Evaluation and Review Technique), initials, and abbreviations are easy to handle. Just write the expression out in full the first time it occurs, and follow with the shortened designation: "Electronic Data Processing (EDP) provides a means for coping with these difficulties."

A particular kind of word, usually long, is dangerous for reasons other than length. This is the -tion word, which originates in one of two ways. Words like "conceptualization," typically formed in several stages (concept, conceptual, conceptualize, conceptualization) cause the most trouble. Rightly used, there is a place for such a word as "conceptualization." But it must never be allowed to stand for "concept." "Conceptualization" is the name for a thought process, "concept" for the idea it produces.

The second -tion group consists of nouns formed by adding suffixes to simpler verbs: demonstration, consideration, explanation. As nouns, they require verbs to bring them into a sentence. But then an awkward construction results. It is better to "demonstrate" a procedure than to "give a demonstration" of it. (Sometimes there is room for further improvement in "showing" instead of "demonstrating," but this is not always a gain.) It is better to "consider" a possibility than to "give consideration to" it. And it is better to "explain" one's position than to "give an explanation of" it.

To state the principle in general terms: Wherever possible, use a specific verb that states your precise meaning, rather than a combination of broad verb and specific noun. Never "make an announcement" of an upcoming event; just announce it. As for the committee member who always wants to "make a motion," perhaps he should

himself be moved—off the committee.

There are other suffixes besides "tion" and "ment" for changing verbs into noun forms, and they are all dangerous. It is no gain to "have a fondness for" something, or to "have a liking for" it, when you can simply "like" it. Incidentally, the advice to use fewer words is not nearly specific enough to treat this common difficulty as a problem in its own right.

There is a situation where a simple, active verb can cause trouble, and it occurs frequently enough to warrant attention. Take the sentence, "The kind of customer a firm attracts affects its operations." The juxtaposition of two active verbs, each with a different subject, is confusing enough to be avoided at all costs. Here "firm" is the subject of "attracts" and "kind" is the subject of "affects." Such a sentence must be rewritten. "A firm's operations are affected by the kind of customer it attracts" uses a passive verb to make an unambiguous statement. "The kind of customer a firm attracts will have an effect on its operations" is also better than the original, even though it employs a combination of verb and noun to replace a verb alone.

Verbal phrases

Sometimes a stock phrase is made to substitute for a verb, to the detriment of writing style. There are times, of course, when a "result" should be announced, but more often "as a result of" is used where words like indicating, proving, showing, or implying would serve better. "In almost all cases, these errors are the result of improper systems design" can be improved by switching from a causative to a symptomatic viewpoint: "These errors almost always indicate faulty systems design."

Sometimes verbs are converted to adjectives, with equally disastrous results. The sentence you are reading illustrates a point; there is no need to say that this sentence

“is illustrative of” something. Notice that the derived adjective is longer than the original verb and that it requires both a verb to introduce it and a preposition to relate to its object. Note also that the short-word rules may not work in many of these cases. Both “illustrates” and “illustrative” count as polysyllables, and therefore equals, in one system. The average syllable count is lower for “is illustrative of” than for “illustrates” and therefore is somehow preferable in another system.

Simple active verbs produce better writing than verbal phrases. There is nothing inherently wrong with, “They are afraid of the possible consequences of such an act.” But somehow, “They fear the possible consequences . . .” comes through stronger. Again, “They incline toward the first proposal” is more direct than, “They are inclined to accept the first proposal.”

Viewpoint

We have several times come upon the changed viewpoint as a technique for improving style. A clear example of this technique involves replacing a passive verb with an active one: “Supervisors who neither instruct nor guide nor manage their sections can hardly be expected to earn the esteem of others” may be written “. . . can hardly expect to earn . . .” By shifting from an outsider’s point of view to the subject’s, we can make the statement more direct. Word length is not the issue here at all; we have reduced the word “expected” by one syllable, to be sure, but that was an incidental result of something more fundamental.

The other viewpoint can belong to a machine or other inanimate object, or even to something as intangible as a system. Thus a system can introduce new standards of productivity and a machine can ask for instructions or supplies. People who work around data processing equipment frequently personify their machines. They “tell” the black box to do this or that,

as though it were alive. In writing, we “program” the computer instead, but with a little care in selecting the audience, we might occasionally “tell” it in writing too. It’s a way to avoid stuffiness.

Intensives

There is an easy way to intensify a statement by adding a single word. If we have said that a technique is effective, we can intensify by making it “very effective” or “highly effective.” Then, since intensity is relative, we have to try harder next time; so we hit on “very, very effective” or “very highly effective” or perhaps “extremely effective.” Some writers go to “extremely” right away, never bothering with lesser degrees of intensity. Others settle for doing everything very soon or very well or very thoroughly, and so on.

The trouble with the extravagant use of words like “very” and “extremely” is that it is self-defeating. Instead of emphasizing a select statement above the rest, we find that we lose our means for giving proper emphasis altogether. Emphasis is relative, and there is no way to stress everything.

The remedy is simple: Avoid intensives. Strike words like very, highly, and extremely from your vocabulary. Use words like extraordinary and unusual only when you are describing those rare things that are indeed extraordinary or unusual.

It is helpful, in avoiding intensives, to use words that are themselves graduated in the meanings they convey. An idea that really is very bright might perhaps be brilliant; a train that is moving very fast might be speeding; a very large backlog might be huge. Of course, this method of overstatement can be carried too far, but not as easily or as carelessly as by inserting “very” wherever it can be made to go.

In the end, the real remedy for overstatement is to treasure understatement. The person who habitually understates seldom finds him-

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self out on a limb; he need not reach for ever higher levels of exaggeration; and his remarks carry greater weight with his audience.

Modifiers

There is a place for modifiers in writing. An adjective can be as definite as a noun in conjuring up an image. In the laboratory, it can be important to describe a dark blue solution, a stable compound, an amorphous substance. In the factory it is often useful to know that a container is rigid or that its top is flat. Replacing adjectives with circumlocutions can lead to such pompous constructions as, "The platform has a quality of sturdiness."

The method for dealing with explicit adjectives is not to eliminate them from technical writing, but to be sure that they are necessary. If it matters to your reader that an object is round, then say so; if not, then don't.

Some adjectives present opinions rather than facts. When we call a speech dull, or describe a result as important, or consider a report interesting, we are expressing opinions. The same rule applies in any case: State your opinion only if it should matter to the reader, bearing in mind always that it is better to state facts and rely on the reader to draw his own conclusions.

Similar considerations apply to adverbs. A mathematical function may be described as continuously variable over a prescribed interval, and no one will object. But the word "continuously" is so often thrown in where it is meaningless—sometimes incorrect—that its use should be carefully watched.

Modifiers often can be dispensed with by selecting a more precise noun or verb. A substance can be said to produce an explosive reaction, to produce an explosion, to react explosively, or to explode. The primary consideration is to express the meaning precisely. The next most important factor is simplicity.

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Modifiers can diminish the force of a noun or a verb. When a person announces that he is "seriously considering" a course of action, many a listener wonders how seriously. The word "considering" by itself raises no such doubt. Words like "generally" and "usually" are inserted for the purpose of hedging statements. When you don't have to hedge, leave them out.

Some modifiers become attached to words and are automatically brought in whether they serve a useful purpose or not. For a while, every risk became a "calculated risk," even when there was no possibility of making a calculation. It is doubtful also that every "considered opinion" has really received all that consideration.

Redundancy

Often an adjective or adverb merely repeats what a noun or verb has already implied. When we predict a result, our readers don't need to be told that we are "predicting an expected result" or one that is anticipated or possible or potential. Nor do we need to "improve the future effectiveness. . ." Similarly "past" is redundant in "report of past activity" and "record of past events."

Some kinds of redundancy merely slow the reader down. "Smaller size" and "smaller in size" fall into this category. An extreme example is, "It is rather hazardous to attempt to predict. . . However, I am going to stick my neck out and. . ." A prediction may be made, or perhaps hazarded, flatly. There is nothing to be gained by "attempting" to predict.

A more dangerous type of redundancy is the one that misleads by implying something that is untrue. When we write "relationships between systems to each other," we indicate by the last three words that there may be some other relationships—something like relationships between systems but not to each other—and a careful reader may legitimately conclude that we mean to exempt all such other re-

lationships. This is nonsense, of course. Deleting "to each other" corrects the problem and loses nothing.

Wordiness

"We are incorporating into a coordinated operation separable and distinct activities, which go on independently from one another." "It is desirable that he be able to devote ample time to researching and developing. . ."

These examples are typical of much that goes out as technical writing. They may be translated in turn as follows: The first says, "We are coordinating activities that are independent." The second, "He should have time for research and development."

Clearly no one would want to read sentences like the original examples above. Why then do people go to the trouble of writing them? That is the mystery. Superfluous words, words used improperly, useless repetition, awkward constructions: All of it is easy to correct, and yet it is allowed to stand.

Summary

From the previous discussion, we may conclude that no simplistic rule is going to produce good writing. A basic need is an appreciation of the effect that our words have on our readers. Are the readers likely to come away with the concepts and the understanding that we intend? Will they know what it is that we are trying to say? These are the pertinent questions.

A writer who seriously works at getting his message across is not likely to be pompous. The intention alone should protect him from the errors of preening himself or patronizing his audience. If he works hard enough at adopting the reader's viewpoint, he is not likely to inflate his writing with unnecessary words. He will delete the useless modifiers and the redundancies, and in the process his writing style will improve. He may even become a better thinker.