

## 2.4.21: Language as an Obstacle

### Learning Objectives

- Discuss strategies to avoid language that can confuse or exclude readers

Each of us has a variety of ways of speaking and writing depending on circumstances. You write a thank-you note to your aunt for the socks she sent much differently than you write a thank-you note after a job interview with the vice president of the division. In business communication, the key is to choose language that is direct and easy for your audience to understand.

When you're writing, it's important to consider your audience's understanding compared to your own. For example, if you're writing a newsletter for customers, you would use much different language than you would if you were writing a product status update to the engineers who initially created the product.

As you write, keep your eye out for these common language challenges:

- Clichés
- Jargon
- Slang
- Euphemisms
- Doublespeak

### Cliché

Clichés that we use in everyday conversation (*green with envy*, *face the music*, *add insult to injury*, etc.) can make your writing sound boring. Merriam-Webster's dictionary defines a cliché as “a trite phrase or expression; a hackneyed theme, characterization, or situation; something (such as a menu item) that has become overly familiar or commonplace.”<sup>[1]</sup>

### Avoiding Clichés

Consider the paragraph and revision below.

#### Original Paragraph

When I started thinking about getting a new job, I was completely clueless. I knew I wanted to do something really cool, but I was lost about what might fit the bill.

#### Revised Paragraph

When I started thinking about getting a new job, I was overwhelmed by my options and unsure of what to choose. While I knew I wanted to do something interesting, I was uncertain of what that might be.

Avoid	Try	Why
Please resolve this ASAP.	Please resolve this by March 30.	ASAP is not a time we each understand the same way. You might be thinking you will get a call back tomorrow. I might be thinking this research and forms needed will take a week, so seven days is sufficient.
Thanks for your help. Now just kick it through the goal posts.	Thanks for your help. Now you just need to finish submitting the paperwork to process the deal.	“Kick it through the goals posts” is common enough, and overused enough, but it is a sport reference that many may not understand. It is not clear what step must be taken next.

### Jargon

The dictionary defines jargon as “the technical terminology or characteristic idiom of a special activity or group.”<sup>[2]</sup> Since these terms are used within an activity, group, or profession, they're typically not well understood outside that context. Within the

context of a specific group, jargon may help members of the group refer to very specialized concepts, but those outside the group may find the jargon incomprehensible or may misunderstand the intended meaning.

For example, plumbers might use terms like *elbow*, *ABS*, *sweating the pipes*, *reducer*, *flapper*, *snake*, and *rough-in*. Other plumbers will understand those terms in the context of plumbing, but to non-plumbers, those terms may have different meanings or be entirely nonsensical.

Always keep your audience in mind. If you are addressing only members of a specialized field, using field-specific jargon will signal to your audience that you are also a member of the field and may allow you to talk about higher or specific concepts. However, if you are speaking to a broader group with no specialized knowledge, using jargon will only alienate or confuse your audience. If some technical terms are absolutely necessary when speaking to an audience, be sure to explain each term and its context.

For example, if you are writing a department-wide memo, it would be acceptable to use terms specific to your company or department. If you are writing a newsletter for customers, however, it would be better to avoid jargon and use broader language.

Avoid	Try	Why
Your help is appreciated.10-4.	Your help is appreciated. I know exactly what do do with the claim now.	10-4 started in police and military circles as a radio shorthand. While many may know that it means “ok” or “I understand”, it is not clear to all outside those circles.
ATM will work well in this situation.	Asynchronous Transfer Mode will work well in this situation.	If the receiver is not from the technical side of communications, someone might have been thinking about a bank machine.

## Slang

Avoid slang or idiomatic expressions in formal business writing or in academic writing. Slang and idiomatic expressions make your writing sound informal and less credible. They can also make it harder for non-native English speakers to understand you.

Avoid	Try
That cart did not work any more. It was all jacked up.	That cart did not work any more. It had a broken wheel and bent frame.
She was dead after all that overtime last weekend.	She was exhausted after all that overtime last week.

However, there are occasions when slang and idiomatic expressions may be appropriate, depending on who your audience is. If you are writing informally or humorously, slang and idiomatic language may help you better express yourself.

If you are going to use slang, however, make sure that you’re using it correctly. Customers who are “native speakers” of slang (i.e., people who are a part of the demographic you may be targeting by using slang) can very easily spot a marketing professional who doesn’t understand the correct usage of a slang term.

## Euphemisms and Doublespeak

Euphemisms are words or phrases used to talk about unpleasant or taboo topics in a more polite way. For example, instead of saying that you are leaving a meeting to urinate, you might say that you are “going to the restroom.” If you are talking about a person who just died, you might say that the person has “passed away.”

Doublespeak is a more deliberate form of euphemism that disguises the meaning of words so that the idea the words represent seems less unpleasant. For example, the act of terminating employment for many people at once may be referred to in doublespeak as *downsizing* or *right-sizing*, or a government dropping bombs might say it is *servicing the target*. Doublespeak language is usually used in bureaucracies and politics and should be avoided whenever possible. In business writing (and all writing), you should avoid using doublespeak.

In business writing, your purpose should not be to hide meaning but to communicate clearly.

Avoid	Try

Avoid	Try
The department is being right-sized. There is a meeting for the entire staff next Friday.	There will be layoffs in that department. There is a meeting for the entire staff next Friday.
The month-end income statement showed a negative cash flow.	The month-end income statement showed a loss.

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1. Merriam-Webster "Cliché." *Merriam-Webster.com*. n.d. Web. 12 June 2018.
  2. Merriam-Webster, "Jargon." *Merriam-Webster.com*. n.d. Web. 12 June 2018.

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