



WRITING, CLEAR AND SIMPLE

BAH, HUMBUG!

BUSINESS JARGON
NEEDN'T BE
A DONE DEAL

BY ROY JACOBSEN

It would be a wonderful thing for mankind if some philosophic Yankee would contrive some kind of “ometer” that would measure the infusion of humbug in anything. A “Humbugometer” he might call it. I would warrant him a good sale. —P.T. Barnum

The Bad News:
Business writing
is mostly
painfully bad.

The Good News:
We can do
something about
it.

Alas for readers throughout history, no enterprising engineer, Yankee or otherwise, has been equal to the challenge of creating a Humbugometer. However, had anyone managed to do so, we would find its needle being constantly pushed into the red by much of modern business writing.

Why is so much business writing—news releases, ad copy, product brochures, white papers, reports, e-mails, presentations, letters, manuals, and, of course, memos—so painfully bad?

Of course, bad writing is not limited to the business world; why else would we have words like legalese and bureaucratese? But we’re all more likely to encounter business communications in our daily routine. (And that could be one reason we tolerate it and even parrot it.) Let’s look at how what we’ll call business jargon for shorthand’s sake has become so entrenched we can’t escape it.

TOWARD A TAXONOMY OF GOBBLEDYGOOK

You can't argue that the state of business writing isn't all that bad when the idea that it is more often than not mangled and pompous is so universally recognized and lampooned.

Comic strips like *Dilbert*, movies like *Office Space*, and the TV sitcom *The Office* derive much of their material from it. Web sites like theOfficeLife.com create resources like "[The Ridiculous Business Jargon Dictionary](#)"¹ to catalog it, and dozens of books decry it.

But there's no future for writers, editors, and teachers in merely pointing out the river of bilge that is business jargon.

Let's classify some of its more common forms instead of letting them roll on unchallenged.

The main problem with creating a complete taxonomy of the obscure prose that clogs business (and legal, government, medical, scientific, technical, and academic) writing is that so many terms are used to describe it and their definitions are not always very precise. Take *jargon*, *gobbledygook*, *humbug*, *b.s.*, *hot air*, *blowing smoke*, *doublespeak*, to name a few.

1 <http://www.theofficelife.com/business-jargon-dictionary-A.html>

The entry for jargon in *Garner's Modern American Usage* begins by describing it as “the special, usually technical idiom of any social, occupational, or professional group. It arises from the need to streamline communication, to save time and space—and occasionally to conceal meaning from the uninitiated.”² However, the examples in the two pages following actually illustrate how seldom jargon streamlines communication or saves time and space, and how often it’s merely an impediment.

As Harry Frankfurt observed in his exposition on b.s. (a subset of business jargon):

“The phenomenon itself is so large and amorphous that no crisp and perspicuous analysis of its concept can avoid being procrustean.”³

That is one source of its staying power: It’s a moving target.

Nonetheless, let’s try to identify some basic sources and characteristics of business jargon:

2 Garner, Bryan A. *Garner's Modern American Usage*, Oxford University Press, 2003

3 Frankfurt, Harry. *On Bullshit*, Princeton University Press, 2005.

Abstraction—Using language that is abstract rather than concrete. It is usually riddled with passive voice and verbs and participles that have been converted to nouns by adding suffixes such as *-tion*, *-sion*, *-ence*, and *-ment* (for example, writing *the establishment of* rather than *establishing*). The Cornish writer Arthur Quiller-Couch described the abstract noun as “a vile thing... It wraps a man’s thoughts round like cotton wool.”⁴

Obscurity—Making the simple complex, and the complex even more so. I’m drawing a distinction between obscurity and abstraction here, because, while abstraction may lead to obscurity, concrete language can also be obscure if the writer chooses concrete language that the audience isn’t familiar with, or that is more complex than necessary. Phrases like *first in, first out* (and its acronym *FIFO*) or *asset / equity ratio* have strict definitions in business, but if the intended reader has to stop reading to go look things up, they cause obscurity. The same is true of multi-word phrases that can be replaced by simpler words and phrases, such as *due to the fact that* used instead of *because*.

Inflation—Trying to make things seem more important than they are by using puffed-up descriptions and grandiose metaphors, and

⁴ Quiller-Couch, Arthur. *On the Art of Writing*, 1916. Available from Project Gutenberg (www.gutenberg.org/etext/17470).

Everyone who
writes anything,
on the job or off,
is a writer. Most
of them just
don't realize it.

multisyllable words for single syllable ideas. It puts the same old product into a flashier package, and then trumpets the new package. In political speech, it's known as *bloviation*, "speaking in a pompous and boastful way." For example, the adoption of Einsteinian Relativity was a *paradigm shift*; the introduction of a new computer program is not.

Misdirection—Leading the reader to the wrong conclusion, either inadvertently or intentionally. We're familiar with the way readers can be led astray by misplaced modifiers, poor word choices, and unclear referents. There are other ways to accomplish this, as well, including euphemism and doublespeak, misused statistics, and logical fallacies like begging the question and confusing correlation with causation.

Where do we find the roots of this kind of writing? With the writer. (And I want to emphasize that everyone who writes anything, on the job or off, is a writer. Most of them just don't realize it.)

Lack of knowledge—Writers set out to write something without having more than a vague idea what they want to say. This isn't necessarily a bad place to begin, but if you finish with the same vague idea you started with, your writing can't help but be vague, foggy, and hard to follow. "Bullshit," says Frankfurt, "is unavoidable

whenever circumstances require someone to talk without knowing what he is talking about.”

Lack of writing skill—In many cases, people write the way they do because they don’t know better. They don’t know the difference between active and passive voice, what a dangling or misplaced modifier is. They have no idea how to recognize a cliché that has outlived any cleverness it may have had. Nobody ever told them that a piece of writing should serve the needs of the audience, not the author. Such a writer is more likely to create hard-to-understand prose. And this lack of skill can wreak havoc when coupled with the next factor.

Environment—We humans are great at modeling the behavior around us. And if the writing we read every day is muddled, confusing, filled with trite metaphors, buzzwords, passive constructions, and obfuscation, we are likely to adopt those mannerisms ourselves. In *Why Business People Speak Like Idiots*, Brian Fugere, Chelsea Hardaway, and John Warshawsky say that the pressure to conform to a “corporate voice” can be overwhelming. “We have business schools that churn out clones; an epidemic of political correctness that demands every sneeze be approved by a 12-person committee; corporate scandals that have eliminated even the slightest appetite for risk; and company standards for everything

If you don't take the time to make it clear and readable because "nobody reads it," then nobody will want to read it because it's not clear and readable.

from presentations and e-mail signatures to clothing and performance ratings.”⁵

Indifference—Why would anyone struggle to write something clear and readable when they really don't give a darn about the about what they're writing, or about the needs of the reader? This attitude might stem from the lack of knowledge mentioned above, or in the belief that “nobody reads this stuff anyway.” (This is a tautology, of course. If you don't take the time to make it clear and readable because “nobody reads it,” then nobody will want to read it because it's not clear and readable.) It may be a broader, more insidious indifference to doing a quality job in general, or, as Frankfurt points out, an overall indifference to the truth. “It is just this lack of connection to a concern with truth—this indifference to how things really are—that I regard as the essence of bullshit.”

Deception—Put simply, some writers use the characteristics I listed above (and others I probably neglected) to conceal the truth, to pass off forgeries as the real thing. You can call it “spin,” or “white lies,” but it is, at its root, deceit.

5 Fugere, Brian, Chelsea Hardaway, and Jon Warshawsky. *Why Business People Speak Like Idiots: A Bullfighter's Guide*, The Free Press, 2005.

SO WHAT CAN WE DO ABOUT IT?

Beyond ensuring that our own writing is clear of abstraction, obfuscation, bloviation, and insincerity, what can we do to combat a culture of shoddy organizational writing? Several things:

Educate colleagues. When you have an opportunity to review anything, whether it's an internal document or something for public consumption, use your feedback as an informal teaching platform. Explain to the writer or project manager that a message has a better chance of reaching more people if, say, the abstract terms are replaced with more concrete writing. Don't be a nag or a scold about it. After all, we hate it when the IT guys or someone from the accounting department uses that tone with us. Keep it helpful, light, and friendly. The educational approach works well when the writing issues are rooted in ignorance and lack of skill. It can also deal with the milder forms of indifference, if you can demonstrate that how things are written does matter.

But what of deep-seated indifference to the truth, out-and-out bullshit and deception?

Ridicule blatant b.s. The authors of *Why Business People Speak Like Idiots*, Fugere, Hardaway, and Warshawsky, started a "Serious Bull" contest at the consulting company where they worked: They asked

coworkers to send in prize-winning examples of obfuscation, inflation, and smoke-blowing. One of my former employers, Great Plains Software, held an annual holiday party where employees performed skits lampooning the foibles and failures of upper management—skits that weren't merely tolerated, but encouraged. (The CEO said it was some of the best feedback he got all year.) In several cases, good-natured ridicule helped individuals realize they had to do a better job of communicating.

Energize colleagues. Seek out and send people copies of research findings that show taking time to craft straightforward language is a good business investment. (For example, “Consequences of Erudite Vernacular Utilized Irrespective of Necessity: Problems with Using Long Words Needlessly,” by Daniel M. Oppenheimer.⁶) People who use plain language are perceived as being more intelligent than those who use inflated language.

Why not lobby for or volunteer to add a “Writing Tips” feature to the company newsletter? Or go underground and send out weekly writing tips out to interested colleagues? At the very least, keep yourself up-to-date by bookmarking and visiting writing, readability,

6 Oppenheimer, Daniel M. “Consequences of Erudite Vernacular Utilized Irrespective of Necessity: Problems with Using Long Words Needlessly,” *Journal of Applied Cognitive Psychology* vol. 20, no. 2, March 2006.

and presentation websites. A few of my favorites are Matthew Stibbe's "[Bad Language](http://www.badlanguage.net),"⁷ Roy Peter Clark's "[Writing Tools](http://www.poynter.org/column.asp?id=78),"⁸ and Garr Reynold's "[Presentation Zen](http://www.presentationzen.com)."⁹

There will be some lost causes. I'm not sure any amount of peer education, parody, or empirical evidence could have changed the culture of deliberate linguistic obscurity and deception that cloaked the Enron debacle, for example. You'll have to decide when to fight, and when to move on.

And however we may decry some of its products, remember that the coinage and use of new terms is essentially a creative act, with its own momentum. Once a term like *Enronization* is out of the bag, it's part of the culture and beyond editorial oversight—same as the now-accepted *debut*, which we were once forbidden to use as a verb.

These approaches aren't fast, fast, fast relief for writing woes. Bad writing will be with us forever. Don't give up the battle, though. "One cannot change this all in a moment," said George Orwell, "but one can at least change one's own habits, and from time to time one can even, if one jeers loudly enough, send some worn-out and

7 www.badlanguage.net

8 www.poynter.org/column.asp?id=78

9 www.presentationzen.com

useless phrase—some *jackboot*, *Achilles' heel*, *hotbed*, *melting pot*, *acid test*, *veritable inferno*, or other lump of verbal refuse—into the dustbin where it belongs.”

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Roy Jacobsen is a writer, editor, and writing coach. He has more than 20 years of experience writing and editing in a number of fields, including the health food industry, agricultural economics research, and computer software.

You can download this article, and other articles at his website, Writing, Clear and Simple. Go to rmjacobsen.squarespace.com, and click Articles on the sidebar.

Jacobsen lives in Fargo, North Dakota.

PUBLICATION DATE

This document was created on 22 May 2007.

This work was originally printed in *The Editorial Eye*, 66 Canal Center Plaza, Suite 200, Alexandria, VA 22314-5507, (703) 683-0683.



COPYRIGHT

The copyright of this work belongs to Roy Jacobsen.

This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License. To view a copy of this license, visit <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/3.0/us/> or send a letter to Creative Commons, 171 Second Street, Suite 300, San Francisco, California, 94105, USA.

Cover image courtesy Sandy Lewanscheck and [stock.xchng](http://www.sxc.hu) (www.sxc.hu).

WHAT DOES THAT MEAN?

That means you are free to give copies of this file to your family, friends, co-workers, and perfect strangers. You can send them via e-mail or distribute them on your website. You can print it out and give copies away in your office, in your neighborhood, or on the street corner. You may not change this document in any way, or charge a fee for it.