



## **What Did You Just Say? Clear Writing and Speaking Is Worth the Effort**

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March 2016

*Gary Robinson died hungry.*

Many journalists can identify the author of that line as Edna Buchanan, a former Miami Herald reporter. She was known for her simple, yet powerful writing.

The sentence isn't about a hungry homeless man. It's the beginning of a news story about a shooting death in a fast-food restaurant. Robinson, a drunken customer, had started a fight after growing impatient waiting for his food. The fight ended with his death without him being served.

The four words Buchanan used in her lead sentence don't provide much information but they do something just as important. Those four words leave the readers wanting more, drawing the reader into the story.

Buchanan's writing style was sparse but effective. Her simplicity and clarity would be traits for anyone to emulate.

Clear writing can take practice and time, but the potential benefits are enormous. Good writing can persuade and inspire readers in addition to conveying critical information.

Dan Pallotta, an expert in nonprofit management, wrote in a Harvard Business Review essay how he's amused by the barriers people create that prevent clear communication. He's self-confident enough that he opened his essay with this statement: "I'd say that in about half of my business conversations, I have almost no idea what other people are saying to me." One of his main points was that trying to impress readers and listeners with your knowledge of professional jargon and abbreviations can have dismal results.

*Here's what I recommend: Instead of using jargon, abbreviations and complicated concepts, use the same language in your writing that you'd use to speak to your spouse or friend over dinner about your day at work.*

Would a scientist want to talk to non-scientists using the same terminology she'd use with fellow scientists? Of course not. It's likely the laymen wouldn't have a clue what the scientist was talking about.

With that in mind, here are some tips for clearer writing and speaking:

- Use plain English. Simple language can convey powerful messages.
- Gather key information before you start writing. Talk to people about the subject and read about it. Collect quotes, anecdotes and details. Often, when I find myself stuck while writing, it's because I don't have enough information – or the right information – to get to the heart of the matter and do so in an interesting way. As Albert Einstein said, "If you can't explain it simply, you don't understand it well enough."
- Eliminate redundancies. Examples: Advance planning; The vigil ended at 10 p.m. Sunday night; Ninety candidates originally applied.
- Don't be boring. There's less of a chance readers will read to the end if your writing is boring. If in doubt, focus your writing on people, which can often make topics more compelling.
- Avoid long sentences with lots of clauses. When a sentence seems too complicated, use one of the writer's greatest tools -- a period – to shorten the sentence.
- After you finish your draft, try one or all of the following steps to evaluate it: read it aloud, read it after taking a break, print it out and read it again, or have someone read it who will be candid with their feedback.

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