



SOCIETY OF ACTUARIES

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Get Noticed with Every Word

by Melanie J. Davis

The aphorism, “You never get a second chance to make a first impression,” applies to business communications as well as wardrobe and handshakes. Your image is polished — or tarnished — with everything you write and distribute. Style, spelling, structure and grammar count whether you are writing e-mails, reports, meeting notes, flip charts, PowerPoint® slides or sticky notes.

It’s highly unlikely you will lose a job for a misspelled word on a flip chart, but repeated errors will cause people to doubt your professionalism. If you want people to respect your business acumen, you need to command respect with every word you write.

This week, set aside time to review your communications materials to see if they accurately reflect the image you intend to project. You may want to ask a colleague to provide feedback on the same materials to see whether your perceptions match your readers’.

E-mail

Send yourself copies of your outgoing messages, and let them age for a few days before reading them again. Are your notes brief, with a clear purpose and call to action, or do they ramble on? Did you make errors in spelling, punctuation or facts? Did you deliver on your promises?

Letters

Are you using standard formats and letterhead? Do you clearly state the purpose of the letter and the anticipated outcome?

PowerPoint Slides

Do you use every bell and whistle, or do you present information in a straightforward, yet compelling manner? Is your script on the slides in small print, or do concise bullets support your verbal presentation?

Flip chart

To ensure you remember all of your salient points, pencil them onto the page margins. As you arrive at each point, copy it in large letters with a marker. Review your flip chart pages after your next presentation or meeting. Your notes should be legible and spelled correctly. They should be neat with headings on each page.

Reports

Most companies or clients will have preferences regarding report format, length and content. Before you begin your first draft, clarify your readers’ expectations to ensure your report will suit their needs.

The following general rules will help improve everything you write:

- Avoid jokes and comments that could offend specific demographic groups.
- Avoid adjectives and adverbs, which waste space and detract from your message.
- Use active verbs to keep your writing dynamic.
- Have a goal in mind before you begin writing. Everything in the message should support that goal.
- Less is usually better than more. If you write clearly the first time, you will not need to repeat yourself.
- Find an ally who can proofread your materials before you distribute them. Both you and your ally should check your spelling, grammar, punctuation, capitalization, facts, style and tone.
- If you cannot find anyone to help you proofread your work, improve your skills by taking a business writing class at a local adult school or college.



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cut your speech in half, so it runs about 10 minutes. Why? By show time, presentations invariably expand, because of a plethora of reasons, including introductions, transitions and technical delays. (Besides, has anyone in the history of Western civilization ever complained that a talk was too short?)

Be prepared. Rehearse your speech often. Know it cold and you'll be free to be yourself on presentation day. Be aware of what you can jettison and add, if it comes to that. Be prepared for anything, including the chance that you may have to follow someone who overspeaks and cuts your own talk short, or the possibility that another presenter takes ill and you have to lengthen your remarks (adhering to the ever-lean formula for presentation success.)

Less is more. It's really quite simple. Tell an interesting story that serves the needs of your audience well within the time provided, make an impact and then sit down.

For overspeaking to be eliminated for all time, it must be rendered socially unacceptable, like smoking in public buildings, only worse. I have a friend who, when taking the lectern to follow a speaker who has gone over his time, will say, "I was going to speak for 15 minutes, but because Ed went on too long I only have 12 minutes to address you."

My friend doesn't smile when he says this. Neither does Ed.

Of course, for people like Ed, a presentation means never having to say you're finished. But the days of those who *overspeak* are numbered. The revolt has begun. □

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- Anger does not translate well to paper or e-mail. If you are tempted to fire off an angry letter, draft it and let it age for a day or so. Use the letter as a rough draft for a face-to-face conversation.
- Become an expert in some aspect of your work, and find or create opportunities to share your knowledge with peers and/or superiors.
- Market yourself within your company by getting your name in print. Submit an article to a corporate newsletter or write a letter to the newsletter editor commenting about an article and providing additional information.
- Submit an article or guest editorial to an industry publication. If you lack the skills to go it alone, hire a ghostwriter. You will

provide the background information, and the ghostwriter will add the style.

- Every two or three years, have a marketing expert evaluate your materials to ensure they are furthering your professional goals. □

