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CHOOSING THE RIGHT WORDS FOR CLEAR AND UNDERSTANDABLE COMMUNICATION

Abstract: Words are the building blocks of language and communication is essentially a series of word choices. Regardless of whether we are communicating in written or spoken form, we must choose words that we will use to express our ideas clearly and accurately and decide how to arrange those words into sentences and paragraphs so that our listeners or readers will not just understand what is being said but will truly know what we mean. We will need to choose the right word, not just the word that may be technically correct. The paper discusses tools and rationale for choosing the right words to provide clear and understandable communication.

Keywords: word choice, right word.

The word. Defined by Merriam Webster, a word is «a sound or a combination of sounds having meaning as a unit of language, or its representation in writing, that symbolizes and communicates a meaning». Words are alive; parts of the living creature called language. Each word has a physical character, it has a look and a personality, an ancestry, an expectation of life and death, a hope of posterity. Some words strike us beautiful, some ugly, some divine, and some evil. Some words are magical, and some words make us laugh or cry. Words are indeed the building blocks of language and communication.

We humans use words to describe and relate our thoughts and feelings to others either in spoken or written form. Scholars have alleged that thought makes the word; also, the word makes thought. These scholars then are proposing that before we allow our silent thoughts to come to life in the format of spoken (or written) language, we must make choices and arrange words in patterns of sense and form that are receivable

and understandable to other people. These choices and patterns are called usage and throughout time the usage of words has changed and evolved and will continue to change and evolve into future times and generations. And so, it is in making these choices that we discover that words matter. Regardless of whether we are communicating in written or spoken form, we must choose words that we will use to express our ideas clearly and accurately and decide how to arrange those words into sentences and paragraphs so that our listeners or readers will not just understand what is being said but will truly know what we mean. We will need to choose the right word, not just the word that may be technically correct. Communication then is essentially a series of word choices – so what I will discuss here is the importance of choosing not just the correct word, but the right word.

Words are the smallest units of communication, the building blocks of our messages. To be in the best position to choose the correct word so that our communicated message is understood correctly we must have a variety of words to choose from. A good and well-developed vocabulary is essential so that the correct and most appropriate word can be used. The two most reliable and available resources for increasing vocabulary are the dictionary and the thesaurus. Today, these are available in electronic formats and can be easily accessed on computers, tablets, or hand-held devices. In dire circumstances, the old-fashioned book format can also be used. Many versions and publications of dictionaries and thesauruses can be found on the Internet and downloaded for use free of charge. Dependent upon the audience, a specialized dictionary, such as one relating to law, medicine or business, should also be utilized as a resource to ensure that again, the words chosen are the best ones to use in each situation so that the message is correctly received and understood. Dictionaries will provide the meaning, spelling, pronunciation, use and synonyms for words that can guide us to selecting the correct word to use in our communications. Similar words in English can be confusing and are often used incorrectly even by native speakers. Examples of some of these words are affect and effect, capital and capitol, principal and principle, and further and farther. A thesaurus provides synonyms to words that may reveal alternative words that can be chosen which may have just a slightly varied meaning that may be better to relate the full meaning of what we are trying to communicate. By consulting a thesaurus, the simplest and most concise word to convey the true meaning of the message can be chosen. For written messages, these two powerful

tools are invaluable in word selection and to prevent the over-use of the same word in your communications. For spoken messages, the vocabulary you have committed to memory will be all that is readily available to you for use. Taking the time and doing the work of memorizing vocabulary words will be of great value as you will be better able to choose and use the right word to relate your meaning.

The first rule to remember when deciding the correct word or words to use is to know who is going to receive the message or the communication. What is their level of knowledge and understanding of the topic of the message or perhaps even the language you are using? Delivering the message from the perspective of receiver will help to make sure that the vocabulary used is appropriate and understandable. Some examples of words that are more and less understandable:

More Understandable

amicable
emulate
copy
facilitate
incriminate
prerogative
trajectory

Less Understandable

friendly
help
blame
right or privilege
path

Professionals such as doctors and scientists often must use words that are simple and less technical when speaking to non-doctors and non-scientist to ensure that they are fully understood, and their message is clearly and accurately received. Some examples of technical and non-technical words:

Technical

cerebellum
mandible
brief
plumage
spelunking

Non-techni

lower part of the brain
jaw
summary of a legal case
feathers
cave exploration

One of the longest words in the English language is *antidisestablishmentarianism* consisting of 28 letters and 12 syllables. It means «to take away official support and position from a Church or similar organized group». To use this word in a communication may be completely correct, however it may not be the right word to choose if you want to be certain that the audience totally understands your message. While in this example it might be better to choose several words to

describe what you are trying to say choosing words that are short and simple may be the best option for clear and understandable communication.

Another rule to remember when deciding the correct word or words to use for clear and understandable communication will be to choose precise or specific words. The chosen words should be totally clear and leave the receiver with no doubt of the intended meaning. The words that are chosen should be precise and never vague if the goal is understandable communication. Using vague words can leave doubt as to the meaning of the message and the receiver is then only able to interpret for themselves what was meant. Choosing and using precise words will eliminate all doubt as to the meaning of what is communicated. Some examples of vague and precise words:

<u>Vague</u>	<u>Precise</u>
many	1000
some	10
most	75%
soon	by 17:00 Thursday / within 30 minutes
some people	university students / sports fans

When making words choices, preference should be given to precise words to avoid possible confusion with the message. «Cake and coffee will be served» is much clearer than «Refreshments will be served». «The ice melted» tells a more precise event than «The ice disappeared».

There is, however, a time when the use of vague and non-precise words is may be preferred. Vague responses are often used to provide a response to a question when the answer is not known or to avoid being held accountable to a specific reply. An example here would be a young person's response of «out» in reply to their parents' question of «Where have you been?». Vague words can also be used to mask the full truth of the message. When a new CEO tells employees she wants to «fundamentally change the company» is she really saying that she does not like the current company and plans to change it into something different? This vagueness in word choice could leave the receiver without a clear understanding of the CEOs intentions for their future. Politicians frequently use vague words in their speeches and communications.

Being concise with word choices is another good rule in being able to provide understandable communication. Sometimes, less really is more. Using more words than is necessary may confuse the message. Some examples of this include:

Lengthy

In the event that

Due to the fact that

Prior to

In the process of

Concise

If

Because

Before

While

Additionally, the overuse of adjectives, adverbs, prepositions and prepositional phrase can make the message confusing. Avoid using these words when not necessary to keep the message clear and understandable. «I printed off a copy of the article». does not add clarity or improve the understanding of the sentence «I printed the article». By using precise, concise and no unnecessary words you will be able to create the image of your message in the mind of the receiver and make your message clear and easier to understand.

Keeping these things in mind will help in choosing the right and / or correct words to allow for clear and complete understanding of our communications. Knowledge of the field and topic will be key to choosing the right word for the message as well as having a full and well-rounded vocabulary from which to make the choice.

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