The Portable Editor
UNC School of Social Work

Improve Your Writing: Cut the Jargon

My long-time favorite event is the Washington Invitational, which is sponsored by *The Washington Post* newspaper. The Invitational is an annual neologism contest that challenges readers to invent words describing the human condition. The best of the 2010 contest winners included:

Bozone (n): The substance surrounding stupid people that stops bright ideas from penetrating. The bozone layer, unfortunately, shows little sign of breaking down in the near future.

Giraffiti (n): Vandalism spray-painted *very*, *very* high.

Osteopornosis (n): A degenerate disease. (This one got an extra credit!)

Karmageddon (n): it's like, when everybody is sending off all these really bad vibes, right? And then, like, the Earth explodes and it's like, a serious bummer.

Caterpallor (n): The color you turn after finding half a grub in the fruit you're eating.

As entertaining as I find these inventions, the dark side of neologism (i.e., a new word or use) is the spawning of jargon that strangles communication. Jargon is that technical terminology or vocabulary that is specific to an area of interest. Those immersed in jargon use it as shorthand and freely toss it around among colleagues because they assume that the meaning is universally understood. The problem with jargon is that the meaning *is not* universal or even defined anywhere. Jargon is exclusionary because the meaning is known only to those in specific areas; even within the same field, the same jargon word can have vastly different meanings.

For many who are just beginning their careers as professional social workers, the jargon used in their agencies or the jargon they hear in lectures (!) is the first bit of professional cachet they acquire. Novices quickly adopt jargon because they feel it makes them seem more professional when they speak. Many students think that adopting the jargon of the field is a way to earn their place among their peers. Students who are unsure of their writing skills tend to load their papers with jargon because they think the jargon makes their writing seem more intelligent and appropriate to the graduate level. Like all bad habits, jargon might seem like a good idea at the outset.

Some people have defended their use of jargon as a part of their professional armor. Unfortunately, jargon is too much like impenetrable armor. The only thing that jargon does well is hinder communication by befuddling, mystifying, and isolating people. I once attended a lecture on the international campaign to ban land mines. The speaker kept referring to NGOs as the key to the campaign, but I had no idea what he meant. I asked the person on either side of me, but they didn't know either. They asked the people in front and behind them, and so on and so on. The speaker finally noticed that half the room was whispering in someone's ear and a lot of heads were shaking. When a brave voice asked, "What's an NGO?" the speaker sheepishly said, "Oh, a non-governmental agency. Perhaps I should start over." By that time, he was nearing the end of his presentation and realized he'd left his audience at the starting gate.

A writer's job is to create meaning with words, to clearly convey a message, and to communicate in a way that is inclusive rather than exclusive. The best way to accomplish this goal is to use simple, plain language. Cut the jargon.

Tips for Writing in Plain English

Don't sacrifice clarity for novelty. I applaud those with expansive vocabularies and a good thesaurus, but rest assured that "thinking" is equally good as "conceptualizing" and "using" is always preferable to "utilizing." If you're ever tempted to "incentivize" anyone, ask them if they would rather "receive an incentive." You may also find recruiting participants for a study is far easier if they know they will "keep a daily diary" rather than "diarize on a daily basis." (Really, I don't make up this stuff!).

Write concisely by cutting the fat. Put your writing on a low-fat diet to eliminate bloated, fat phrases. Replace "at the present time" with "now." Lighten the reader's load by replacing "in the event of" with "if" and "in the majority of cases" with "usually." Evaluate your writing as if you were placing a classified ad and had to pay for each word.

Another way to write more concisely is to examine your writing for forms of "to be," which often occur in *expletive* phrases (i.e., a phrase with no meaning; a filler phrase). "There are," "here are," and "it is" are examples of empty expletives. With the exception of Hamlet's soliloquy, "to be" can usually be replaced with a stronger verb.

Fat: There are many reasons that might explain the results of our study.
Low-fat: *Several possible explanations exist for our findings.*

Fat: It is estimated that 60% of college freshmen need remediation.
Low-fat: *An estimated 60% of college freshmen need remedial course work.*

Expletives often co-occur with nominalizations. Nominalization is the nasty habit of turning a verb or adjective into a noun. Have you ever turned "discussed" into "a discussion? Or converted "completed" into "completion"? You may be guilty of useless nominalization.

Nominalization: Our discussion focused on the proposed program.
> *We discussed the proposed program.*

Nominalization: The failure of the audio recording device did not preclude our completion of the qualitative data collection.
> *The tape recorder failure did not prevent us from completing the personal interviews.*

However, a rare nominalization can be useful, such as a nominalization that refers to the subject in the previous sentence:

These arguments depend on a single, unproven claim.

These decisions can lead to costly mistakes with long-term consequences.

Great Thoughts Deserve Great Language
The more complicated your ideas, the greater the need for simple language that conveys your intended meaning without losing anything in translation. Don't hide your knowledge under a layer of jargon.

For those working in jargon-filled agencies, you might consider starting a Plain Language Campaign to speed up meetings, improve communication, and increase efficiency. Above all, let your colleagues know you're open to the idea of

- touching base about this matter offline (meet face-to-face);
- considering all ideas like a lighthouse on a cloudy night (come up with a good/bright idea);
- and as long as everyone is willing to take a bite of the reality sandwich (think practically); then you'll be
- willing to come into the discussion with an open kimono (throwing an idea out into the open but being open to criticism).