CHAPTER THREE

Adapting Your Words to Your Readers

Overview

- Role of adaptation in selecting words
- Simplifying with short and familiar words
- Appropriate use of technical words and acronyms
- Selection of words with appropriate strength
- Use of concrete words and active voice
- Achieve clarity and precision by avoiding camouflaged verbs, selecting the right words, and using idioms correctly.
- Use of words that do not discriminate

Need for Adaptation
(fitting the message to your readers)

How to do it:

- Visualize your readers
  - how they think
  - what they know
  - their education level
  - etc.
- Then write for them

How to Adapt to Multiple Readers

Write for the bottom level

- ▲ Usually this means simplifying the message
- ▲ Thus, the following suggestions stress simplification

Use short, familiar words.

DON'T

In effect, it was hypothesized that certain physical data categories including housing types and densities, land use, characteristics, and ecological location constitute a scaleable content area. This could be called a continuum of residential desirability. Likewise, it was hypothesized that several social data categories, describing the same census tracts and referring generally to to the social stratification system of the city, would also be scaleable. This scale could be called a continuum of socioeconomic status. Thirdly, it was hypothesized that there would be a high positive correlation between the scale types on each continuum.

Use short, familiar words.

DO

One can tell from an aerial photograph where rich and poor people live. The rich live in big houses set far apart. The poor live in small houses set close together.

Prefer the short, familiar word to the long, unfamiliar word.

Long, Unfamiliar Words	**Short, Familiar Words**
▲ Abbreviate	➔ Shorten
▲ Accomplish	➔ Do
▲ Approximately	➔ About
▲ Ascertain	➔ Find out
▲ Commence	➔ Begin
▲ Considerable	➔ Much
▲ Determine	➔ Decide
▲ Detrimental	➔ Harmful

Prefer the short, familiar word to the long, unfamiliar word.

Long, Unfamiliar Words

- Duplicate
- Elevation
- Equivalent
- Fabricate
- Furnish
- Indeterminate
- Indicate
- Ineffectual

Short, Familiar Words

- Copy
- Height
- Equal
- Build
- Give
- Vague
- Show
- Useless

Prefer the short, familiar word to the long, unfamiliar word.

Long, Unfamiliar Words	Short, Familiar Words
⬥ Interrupt	➔ Hinder
⬥ Minimal	➔ Smallest
⬥ Modification	➔ Change
⬥ Proceed	➔ Go
⬥ Supersede	➔ Replace
⬥ Ultimate	➔ Last
⬥ Visualize	➔ Picture
⬥ Verification	➔ Proof

Consider the strength and vigor of words.

Weaker		Stronger
▲ source of great wealth	➜	bonanza
▲ additional compensation	➜	bonus
▲ great loss	➜	disaster
▲ complete failure	➜	fiasco
▲ untruth	➜	lie
▲ put an end to	➜	destroy
▲ upraise	➜	boost

Use Technical Language with Caution.
Social Security's technical language found to be misunderstood by outsiders:

Technical Language	Improved Version
Has sufficient quarters of coverage to acquire an insured status.	Has worked long enough (under Social Security) to become insured.
Survivors' benefits	Family insurance payments
Covered employment	A job covered by Social Security
Deceased wage earner	
To file a claim	Worker who has died
Aged workers	To apply for insurance payments
	Workers past 65

Use initials and acronyms with caution.

What do these letters mean?

▲ VCR　➔　Video cassette recorder

▲ FDA　➔　Food and Drug Administration

▲ CD　➔　Certificate of Deposit/Compact Disc

▲ IPO　➔　Initial Public Offering

▲ RV　➔　Recreational Vehicle

▲ NATO　➔　North Atlantic Treaty Organization

▲ IRS　➔　Internal Revenue Service

Prefer the concrete to the abstract.

Abstract	Concrete
We have found that this technique is successful.	Our research shows that 87 percent of those using this technique are successful.
Your department may hire some new employees.	Your department may hire three new stock clerks.
We will ship your order soon.	We will ship the Moss No. 41 desk sets you ordered October 12 by Arrow Freight on October 15.
Each of the branch managers will receive a substantial pay raise.	Each of the branch managers will received a 15 percent pay raise.
This procedure requires a constant low temperature.	This process requires a constant temperature of 10 degrees centigrade.

Prefer the active to the passive.

Passive	Active
It *is believed* that the bill was padded.	I believe they padded the bill.
Your report *was read* by the president.	The president read your report.
The profit and loss statement *is prepared* by the treasurer each month.	The treasurer prepares the profit and loss statement each month.
It *is suggested* that you clean the element in warm, soapy water.	We suggest that you clean the element in warm, soapy water.
It *is desired* that every effort be made to have this matter brought to the attention of the manager.	Mr. Wong wants you to bring this matter to the attention of the manager.

Prefer strong verbs to verbs camouflaged as nouns.

Camouflaged Verb	Strong Verb
. . . make a classification . . .	. . . classify . . .
. . . make a computation . . .	. . . compute . . .
. . . conduct an exploration . . .	. . . explore . . .
. . . provide information . . .	. . . inform . . .
. . . engage in negotiation . . .	. . . negotiate . . .
. . . make an observation . . .	. . . observe . . .
. . . provide representation . . .	. . . represent . . .

Prefer strong verbs to verbs camouflaged as nouns.

Camouflaged Verb	Strong Verb
Cancellation of the order was made on the 12th.	We canceled the order on the 12th.
Elimination of the deficit was brought about by the change.	The change eliminated the deficit.
The management of this office is conducted by Ms. Brown.	Ms. Brown manages this office.
Distribution of the special equipment was accomplished by the safety officer.	The safety officer distributed the special equipment.

Choose the precise word.

- The committee (<u>comprises</u>) (constitutes) representatives from all four sales districts.

- This building site cost a large (sum) (<u>amount</u>) of money.

- She was (notorious) (<u>noted</u>) for her concern for the poor.

- We found no evidence that would (cause) (<u>enable</u>) us to support him.

- The management of this store is independent (<u>of</u>) (from) the main office.

Choose the precise word.

- She (claimed) (maintained) (said) that she was ill.
- He is angry (about) (with) the loss.
- I will try (to) (and) correct the error.
- I differ (with) (from) you on this conclusion.
- If he is late, I will not wait (for) (on) him longer than ten minutes.
- She has an interest (in) (for) technical writing.

Suggestions for Nondiscriminatory Writing

Avoid sexist pronouns by

- ▲ rewording to eliminate the offending word,

- ▲ making the reference plural, and

- ▲ substituting a neutral expression (he or she, he/she, s/he, you, one, person).

Reword to eliminate the offending word.

Sexist	Nonsexist
We will reimburse any employee who paid his travel expenses.	We will reimburse any employee for travel expenses paid.
If a customer pays promptly, he is placed on our preferred list.	A customer who pays promptly is placed on our preferred list.
A physician should treat his patients with respect.	A physician should treat patients with respect.

Make the reference plural.

Sexist	Nonsexist
If a customer pays promptly, he is placed on our preferred list.	If customers pay promptly, **they** are placed on our preferred list.
When an unauthorized employee enters the security area, he is subject to dismissal.	When unauthorized employees enter the security area, **they** are subject to dismissal.
A supervisor is not responsible for such losses if he is not negligent.	Supervisors are not responsible for such losses if **they** are not negligent.
When a customer needs service, it is her right to ask for it.	When customers need service, **they** have the right to ask for it.

Substitute a neutral expression.

Sexist	Nonsexist
If a customer pays promptly, he is placed on our preferred list.	If a customer pays promptly, **he or she** is placed on our preferred list.
When an unauthorized employee enters the security area, he is subject to dismissal.	When an unauthorized employee enters the security area, **he/she** is subject to dismissal.
A supervisor is not responsible for such losses if he is not negligent.	A supervisor is not responsible for such losses if **s/he** is not negligent.
When a customer needs service, it is her right to ask for it.	When service is needed, **one** has the right to ask for it.

Avoid words with a masculine origin.

Sexist	Nonsexist
man-made	manufactured, of human origin
manpower	personnel, workers
congressman	representative, member of Congress
businessman	business executive, businessperson
mailman	letter carrier, mail carrier
policeman	police officer
fireman	fire fighter
cameraman	camera operator
waiter/waitress	server

Masculine-sounding Words— No Masculine Origin

- manufacture
- management
- history
- manipulate
- mannequin
- manicure
- mandolin
- histrionic
- histamine

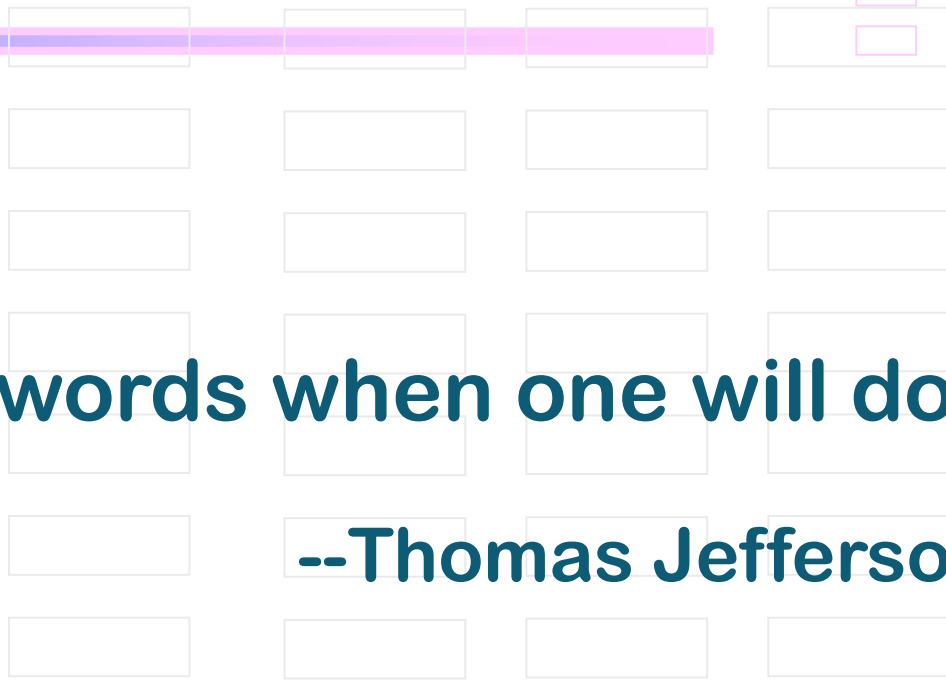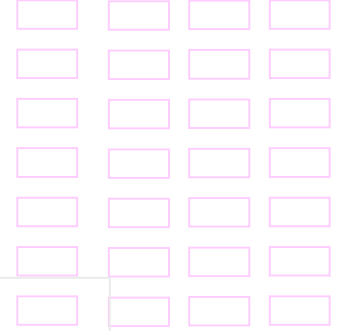# Avoid words that lower one's status.

Instead of		**Use**
▲ my girl	➔	my secretary
▲ lady doctor	➔	doctor
▲ authoress	➔	author
▲ actress	➔	actor
▲ poetess	➔	poet
▲ sculptress	➔	sculptor
▲ male nurse	➔	nurse
▲ male secretary	➔	secretary

Generally avoid words that stereotype by

- Race
  - a hard-working African-American
  - an honest Sicilian
- Age
  - golden ager
  - youngster
- Disability
  - deaf and dumb
  - crippled
- Sexual Orientation
  - homosexual
  - gay

"Why use two words when one will do."

--Thomas Jefferson