Writing Clearly

All writing should be clear, concise, complete, and correct. Good writers use plain language to express clear meaning. They write in a simple style that uses everyday words, which is different than writing academically or for leisure reading. They do not use showy words and ambiguous expressions in an effort to dazzle or confuse readers. They write to express ideas, not to impress others.

What do you think this manager meant in the following message?

“Personnel assigned vehicular space in the adjacent areas are hereby advised that utilization will be suspended temporarily Friday morning.”

You would probably have to read that sentence several times before you understand that you are being advised not to park in the lot next door on Friday morning.

Clear messages contain words that are familiar and meaningful to the reader. Whenever possible, use short, common, simple words to say what you mean.

Familiar Words

Look at the following list. Can you decide which words your audience would be more familiar with?

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Ascertain | Find out |
| Conceptualize | See/visualize |
| Encompass | Include |
| Hypothesize | Guess |
| Monitor | Check |
| Operational | Working |
| Option | Choice |
| Perpetuate | Continue |
| Perplexing | Troubling |
| Reciprocate | Return |
| Stipulate | Require |
| Terminate | End |
| Utilize | Use |

Precise Words

When you consider what you need to say and how to say it, don’t give up a precise word if it says exactly what you mean. For example, “The report was on time,” is not as precise as, “The detailed, twelve-page report was submitted on time.”

Likewise, “There is a change in our budget,” is less clear than, “There is a 10% reduction in our budget.”

Another example: “The president of the company said we should contribute...” vs. “The president of the company [urged, pleaded, demanded] that we contribute.”

Concrete Nouns

Concrete nouns help readers visualize the meaning of words. Concrete nouns name objects that are more easily imagined, such as desk, car, or an earring. On the other hand, abstract nouns name concepts that are difficult to visualize, such as automation, justice, integrity, and environment.

In business writing, you should help your reader see what you mean by using concrete language whenever possible.