

The Art & Science Of Persuasion - Part Two

Clarity

Any type of professional communication should be expected to endure or stand up to the rigors of time, and be constructed to minimize misinterpretation of its message. Often there's a significant harm, whether legally, physically, or to one's reputation, when we aren't clear.

"Keep it simple", is a crude way of saying that we should write in a concise fashion. Some disciplines value a complex writing style, but most, especially those intended for a multinational audience, avoid slang or cultural references. This is because they do not endure and tend to be geographically or culturally specific.

A single sentence for a paragraph generally suggests that the topic wasn't important, but conversely, paragraphs over a page in length will challenge the reader to remember what the topic sentence was about. Minimize the use of pronouns. "They", for example, is often used to avoid speaking about a group, by their names, over and over, but further, this pronoun is used when those names were given. The more likely the reader begins to ask, "Who is they?"

Avoid being rude. Don't say something is obvious, or clearly stated. It can be assumed that something is not obvious to every reader. These words are often used as a crutch, because the author is having a hard time making the topic relatable.

Terminology of discipline

The jargon of a discipline is meant to minimize misunderstanding, while not needing page over page of description each time the topic is mentioned. There is nothing wrong with using this terminology, provided the audience is just as well versed in it as the authors.

Be especially careful with the use of terminology that is not understood by your general discipline of study, but rather it is specific to a specialization. You can narrow your audience perhaps more than was anticipated.

Quantification versus qualification

The difference between opinion and fact is rarely clear, but we should endeavor to communicate in the manner which the audience expects and where clarity is supported.

For some topics or audiences it will be appropriate to say, "It got bigger" - which is an opinion. Whereas in some other cases, we are expected to say, "It increased in length by 20%" - which takes much longer to say, but is more factual. Seek out mentors if you are not certain what is appropriate.

Verb tenses

Selection of writing in the past tense or present tense is generally a discipline specific issue, though some publications or publishers have a preference. Consulting the publisher or society, or association guidelines can help.

Reported research by other authors is almost always in the past tense. Certain social rules or laws of nature that have been, and will continue to be in effect in the future are often stated in the present tense, even when past tense is the norm.

The most common error for new communicators is to switch the tense in a sentence, without realizing. Future tense is rarely used, though in some cases, it is expected that the author is expected to talk about future recommendations.

Abbreviations

A long sequence of words which are expected to be used very frequently in a communication is often abbreviated selecting one or more letters from the start of each word. The long sequence of words must be stated for the first time, along with the abbreviation in brackets. Sometimes a list of abbreviations is required at the start of the document to make it easier to look up their meaning.

It is often not acceptable to define an abbreviation in the abstract, but to be introduced as soon as possible in the introduction of one's work.

Be mindful of the literature for your field. It is generally not appropriate to come up with a new abbreviation for a common sequence of words if there's already an established norm.

Expressing numbers

We commonly turn to the American Psychological Association manual for guidance on when to express a number as a digit, or a word in a sentence or caption.

Usually, a number less than 10, and stated without decimal, or a series of numbers is written as a word.

A sentence or title should never start with a digit.

Common fractions should be written as words, like a 'half' or a 'quarter'. In most other cases, the digit should be used in the body of text.

Finding your voice

One's voice in a document or presentation refers to whether its intent is qualitative or quantitative. Most of our day to day communications are a mixture of opinion and evidence.

VIDEO CLIP:

- *"The forecast believes there is a 90% chance of rain today."* - *Weather Reporter*

- *"I think my new rain jacket will work better rather than my old one."* - *Opinion by a person wearing rain jacket*

Opinion is usually identified with personal pronouns: "**I, you, we, us...**".

Researchers strive for a wholly objective narrative in documents or presentations, but there is always some opinions present when we reach the boundaries of what can be measured. For most disciplines, it is never desirable to include personal pronouns in one's writing.

Another voice to consider is active versus passive. Active voice is preferred, since it is more concise. However, the passive voice is very common in scientific reports as a means to avoid misunderstandings.

In the passive voice, the subject of a sentence is acted upon, or performing the action which tends to make sentences longer, and is often highlighted by grammar checkers as an error.