

Be Short; Be Familiar; Be Specific

Long ago, the following characteristics of good writing became a talisman against the swarm of temptations trying to mire language in quicksand:

- Favor short words over long.
- Favor familiar words over fancy.
- Favor specific words over abstract.
- Use no more than the number of words essential to make your meaning clear.

The following excerpt clarifies the hazards of abstraction:

The Anemia of Abstractions*

by Rene J. Cappon

"Certain abstract nouns tend to create clusters of surplus words: *issue, case, situation, question, condition, facilities, activities, experience, field, factor, proposition, basis, character, nature, process, problem*. Often these nouns are tacked onto specific words: Heavy traffic becomes *a heavy traffic problem* or *the congested traffic situation*.

"Besides being stuffy, these nouns are vague. What is a facility, an issue, a problem? A facility can be an airport, a hotel, a park, or a kitchen. An issue is anything people discuss or disagree about. A health problem can be an ingrown toenail or terminal cancer.

"A man who gets his throat slit in a dark alley is a *victim of violence*, but much is lost in the transcription. That is how abstract words work. Call a spade a spade, and you evoke a clear picture. Call it an agricultural implement, and you might be talking about a plow, a rake, or an air-conditioned tractor.

"Obviously, these long-faced, abstract nouns have some use, but the following examples show why you should treat them with reserve:

The *situation* poses a danger to the public because of the tendency of persons on probation to commit more crimes.

It's risky because people on probation often commit crimes.

The Legislature has threatened to suspend all strip mining *operations*.

. . . all strip mining.

Ample space for recreational *activities* was provided.

Ample space for recreation was provided.

The loss of skilled workers will be a crippling *factor* in the economy of Germany.

. . . will cripple the economy of Germany.

Another worrisome matter is the the *question* of productivity.

Another worry is productivity.

They receive their checks on a monthly *basis*.

They receive monthly checks.

He is an acknowledged leader in the *field* of economics.

He is a leader in economics.

Half of the town lives in *conditions* of abject poverty.

. . . lives in abject poverty.

The state's hospital *facilities* must be upgraded.

The state's hospitals must be upgraded.

"The prepositional phrase *in terms of* enjoys a peculiar vogue today, perhaps because of its technical aura. Useful in expressing some relationships -- *The dollar is worth less in terms of the Japanese yen*. -- it is frequently used in ways that turn sentences into fudge:

He would not predict the effect of service cuts *in terms of* revenues and riderships.

He would not predict how service cuts would affect revenues and ridership.

The company pledged improvements *in terms of* labor relations and efficiency.

The company pledged to improve labor relations and efficiency."

*from "The Word," by Rene J. Cappon (New York, N.Y.: The Associated Press, 1991), pp. 11-13.