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A Bizspeak Blacklist

by Bryan A. Garner | 10:00 AM March 21, 2013

It's mission-critical to be plain-spoken, whether you're trying to be best-of-breed at outside-the-box thinking or simply incentivizing colleagues to achieve a paradigm shift in core-performance value-adds. Leading-edge leveraging of your plain-English skill set will ensure that your actionable items synergize future-proof assets with your global-knowledge repository.

Just kidding.

Seriously, though, it's important to write plainly. You want to sound like a person, not an institution. But it's hard to do, especially if you work with people who are addicted to buzzwords. It takes a lot of practice.

Back when journalists were somewhat more fastidious with the language than they are today, newspaper editors often kept an "index expurgatorius": a roster of words and phrases that under no circumstances (except perhaps in a ****ing quote) would find their way into print.

Here's such a list for the business writer. (Thanks to my [Twitter followers](#) for their contributions.) Of course, it's just a starting point — add to it as you come across other examples of bizspeak that hinder communication by substituting clichés for actual thought.

Bizspeak Blacklist actionable (apart from legal action), agreeance, as per, at the end of the day, back of the envelope, bandwidth (outside electronics), bring our A game, client-centered, come-to-Jesus, core competency, CYA, drill down, ducks in a row, forward initiative, going forward, go rogue, guesstimate, harvesting efficiencies, hit the ground running, impact, incent, incentivize, impactful, kick the can down the road, let's do lunch, let's take this offline, level the playing field, leverage, liaise, mission-critical, monetize, net-net, on the same page, operationalize, optimize, out of pocket (except in reference to expenses) paradigm shift, parameters, per, planful, push the envelope, pursuant to, [putting lipstick on a pig](#), recontextualize, repurpose, rightsized, sacred cow, scalable, seamless, integration, seismic shift (outside earthquake references) smartsized, strategic alliance, strategic dynamism, synergize, synergy, think outside the box, throw it against the wall and see if it sticks, throw under the bus, turnkey, under the radar, utilization, utilize, value-added, verbage (the correct term is *verbiage* — in reference only to verbose phrasings) where the rubber meets the road, win-win.

Many of these phrases have become vogueish in business — abstain if you can. Sometimes people use them to enhance their own sense of belonging or to sound "in the know." Or they've been taught that good writing is hyperformal, so they stiffen up and pile on the clichés.

Hunt for offending phrases: Start looking for bizspeak in all kinds of documents, from memos to marketing plans, and you'll find it everywhere. You'll eventually learn to spot it — and avoid it — in your own writing. You'll omit canned language such as [Attached please find](#) and other phrases that only clutter your message.

Writing plainly means expressing ideas as straightforwardly as you can — without sacrificing meaning or tone. Think of it as bringing your written voice into line with your spoken voice. Bizspeak may seem like a convenient shorthand, but it suggests to readers that you're on autopilot, thoughtlessly using boilerplate phrases that they've heard over and over. Brief, readable documents, by contrast, show care and thought — and earn people's attention.

This is the fifth post in Bryan A. Garner's blog series on business writing. The series draws on advice in Garner's new [HBR Guide to Better Business Writing](#).