



# **Does Grandmother Get It?** **Tips for Communicating Better**



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Tips for Communicating Better

Excerpts from Barry Beckham's Free Electronic Newsletter  
Better English 101

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Tips for Communicating Better



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## INTRODUCTION

My basic approach to communications is that it's too stiff, too formal. Somehow we were told that being very proper was the way to impress people. So attorneys in particular, and then business executives, government employees, and maybe physicians too—have decided that they could impress us more if they used language that was elevated.

The main idea that I'll be pushing in each issue of my newsletter is that we should speak and write using diction (choice of words) that anyone in your audience can understand. That kind of communication can save time, money, and even lives.

Consider the language you would use when communicating with your grandmother. Use plain language and expressions that she would understand.

In urging you to consider that the best writing is clear and simple, I'll be pointing out where we go wrong.

Sometimes we stumble trying to be scholarly, sophisticated, urbane or even cute, and wind up using the word incorrectly anyway.

## YOUR EDITOR



Barry Beckham

Barry Beckham is a publisher, novelist and nonfiction writer who has taught at Brown University, where he directed the graduate writing program, and Hampton University where he directed the nation's first summer high school writing workshop for black students in Virginia. His new novel, *Will You Be Mine?* describes the narrator's search for his soulmate.

A recipient of a National Endowment for the Arts Fellowship, Beckham is on the board of the Author's League Fund and the George Polk Awards, and has served on the boards of PEN American Center and the Author's Guild. He was one of the judges of the 2005 Hurston Wright Foundation Award for the best novel by an African American. He has published prose in *Esquire*, *Black Enterprise*, *Crisis*, the *New York Times*, *Educational Record*, the *Washington Post*, *American Visions*, and elsewhere

## TRANSITIONAL PHRASES

Moving from one idea to another can be done easily with transitional phrases. When you move, you make a transition. When you move from one idea to another, one sentence to another, one paragraph to another, one chapter to another, you are making a transition. Transitional phrases help you make those moves smoothly.

Here are some transitional phrases that you should consider—

1. In advancing a major or minor idea, try a statement of fact, introduced by—

On the face of it; Similarly; Conventional wisdom is that

2. To add to an idea, try—

Equally important; Furthermore; Finally; Moreover

3. To show cause and effect—

Accordingly; In short; Otherwise; Therefore

4. Showing comparison—

Likewise; In a like manner

5. Conceding a point—

Even though; Naturally; Although this may be true; At the same time

6. Showing contrast—

On the other hand; Still; Although true; Even though; On the contrary; Yet; After all

7. Showing time relationships—

Meanwhile; Of late; At that time; Afterward

## **AVOID THESE COMMON ERRORS**

### Very unique

If something is unique, it is one of a kind, without an equal. It is sometimes called an absolute adjective. So it does not take a modifier, as in this publishing CEO's statement: "The group of companies involved in bringing this experience to readers is very unique."

### Myself is not a subject.

It is a reflexive pronoun. Like himself, myself, themselves; it's used for emphasis, and usually as the object of a verb or preposition. It always refers to another noun or pronoun.

Incorrect: John and myself went up the street. Satheesh, Marvin and myself decided to quit.

Correct: He himself had never thought about it. They are asking themselves big questions. He decided to represent himself. She passed herself off as a government employee. I surprised myself tonight.

### Impact is not a verb.

Use either Influence or affect as a much more accurate verb. The battle over this word ensues, with some arguing that chair is not a verb either, so what's the problem? The problem is the usual one: why not use normal plain language?

Incorrect: The turnpike crash will impact the northeast corridor. Activities in that area have impacted the oil prices. Immigration laws will impact prenatal care for some.

Correct: They will study the impact of AIDS on the Asia-Pacific economies. Global warming is having an impact on Texas. The environmental impact of sediment runoff remains to be seen.

## TERMS TO BORROW

Turning a phrase, or putting together a term that has a special sparkle is always an enjoyable feat. You may want to collect phrases and terms that can be reused in your own writing to add that special touch. Index cards are a good place to keep them, especially since you can divide them into categories. Here are some recent additions to my list.

A New York Times writer covering the sale of 110 buildings in Manhattan wrote of the “seismic cultural shifts” that would result.

Something represented just “the tip of a significantly larger iceberg.”

One argument could “tilt the wand.”

A legal case “presents those issues in bewildering abundance as well.”

A speaker “recounted the facts in granular detail.”

An “unbridgeable gulf” was created between X and Y.

Sometimes we have to “expand the frame of reference.”

DNA is “one of the bedrocks” that prosecutors use.

### **A GERUND NEEDS A POSSESSIVE**

What the heck is a gerund anyway? It's a verbal ending in "ing" and functions as a noun.

Typical examples--

He escaped by swimming rapidly.

Borrowing more money could be a mistake.

Skipping along the pier is dangerous.

Listening carefully was a trait he had developed.

But when we place a pronoun before the gerund, we must remember that it must be in the possessive form:

His [not he]swimming rapidly allowed him to escape.

Your [not you] borrowing money could be...

Their [not they] skipping along...

## LANGUAGE FOR TERMINATING

"The work force reduction notification is currently in progress. Unfortunately your position is one that has been eliminated," the e-mail read. That's how Radio Shack notified 400 employees that they had lost their jobs last month.

How's that for shoddy communications?

It brings up the issue of what kind of communication is proper when terminating an employee. Why do we have such difficulty in dealing tactfully and honestly with employees in these situations?

Karen DeYoung's recent biography of former secretary of state Colin Powell describes his inelegant dismissal. "The president would like to make a change," the chief of staff--not the president-- told him by telephone. His resignation letter was expected in two days.

An editor at William Morrow was told simply, "Things aren't working out."

A president of the then Chase Manhattan Bank was told by the chairman, "Some people think that we need a change; don't you?"

Part of the problem is lack of candor, says Jack Welch, former CEO at General Electric. He maintains that managers are stuck with a culture of not telling the truth. Instead of telling an employee that he isn't doing a good job, they replace him.

"We are too kind to tell him that his work is unacceptable," says Welch. No employee, according to the former CEO, should be surprised about her performance rating. We expect our kids to be graded in school, but we don't want to flunk anybody over the age of 21.

His approach: No employee should be surprised about how he is being rated. If you have periodic evaluations, three or four times yearly, everyone knows where he stands.

Still, the first question that a Radio Shack employee might ask is, "Why me?" followed by "why didn't you tell

me?”

The bottom line: having facility with all the techniques and rules of the English language still doesn't guarantee that you are imparting information effectively and with grace. You still must be courageous enough to tell the truth.

What do readers think? Send me an email and I'll share your comments in the next issue.

### **HI, I'M PATHANA**

Do you send these emails? Or receive them as regularly as I do? Many have decided that these are proper salutations:

Jim Robinson here from All Solutions Infotech

I am Roberta Rodriguez and I saw your post on Craigslist

Hi, my name is Mikolaj I'm 14 years old and I live in Poland [Oh sorry, he thinks I'm soccer star David Beckham]

So here's the lesson: Your name goes at the end of the message, which in a letter is called the signature. Not the beginning.

Here are four main parts of the letter that can be applied to your emails:

1. Salutation: Dear President Bush:
2. Body of the text
3. Complimentary closing: Sincerely, Best wishes, etc.
4. Signature and title: Bill Gates, CEO, Microsoft Corp.

Put your name at the end, not at the beginning. You are writing an email, not knocking on somebody's door.

## **GOBBLEDYGOOK, OR THE STRUTTING TURKEY**

First, I have a difficult time spelling gobbledygook...had to practice writing it several times, to be honest.

It refers to language that is overly complicated, nonsensical, unintelligible, pretentious, baffling. Credit Maury Maverick, chairman of a public corporation, for banning it in a 1944 memo. He was inspired by the strut of the turkey, "always gobbledy gobbling with ludicrous pomposity. At the end of his gobble, there was sort of gook."

(In a staff memo, Maverick warned that anyone using the words "implementation" or "activation" would be shot.)

Gobbledygook has gotten quite a bit of attention lately. Let's look at some recent headlines. All the while, keep asking yourself if that last sentence you produced made you sound like a strutting turkey.

## **PRESS RELEASE GOBBLEDYGOOK**

Consultant David Meerman Scott asked Factivia, a Dow Jones & Reuters Company, to study 388,000 press releases sent by North American technology companies from January, 2006 to September, 2006. Words or phrases determined to be gobbledygook appeared in more than 74,000 releases.

Here are some of the phrases:

--"Next generation" was the winner with 9,895 uses.

--Words with more than 5,000 uses include "flexible," "world class," "scalable," and "easy- to-use."

--Words with 2,000 to 5,000 uses include "cutting edge," "groundbreaking," and "market leading."

One way to get away from gobbledygook is to concentrate on your reader rather than yourself. Instead of strutting out language to impress, ask yourself what is it that the reader wants to know from me?

### **BANK GOBBLEDYGOOK**

Yes, most of the press releases in the study were sent by technology companies. But banks aren't technology companies, and we depend on them for a great portion of our lives. They can be as confusing as or even more confusing than the techno babblers.

A General Accounting Office study was heralded with this headline in the October 31 issue of USA TODAY: "Banks Use Gobbledygook to Mask Sleazy Practices."

According to the government, disclosure statements by major credit card issuers are just too complicated for the average citizen to read. Key information is scattered or buried, the print is too small, and complex phrases like "rolling consecutive twelve billing cycle period" could be replaced with "12 months."

The dense language hides practices that really are sleazy, and it points to the connection that communicators simply don't make between being clear and being honest. Let me predict that sooner than later, because of the speed and depth of global communications, consumers will rebel against this dishonesty in a manner that will turn companies upside down.

Meanwhile, the GAO is recommending that credit card companies simplify and humanize their language.

To be fair, Edward Yingling, president and chief executive of the National Banking Association, has pointed out that credit cost varies with consumer risk. In his own gobbledygook: "The pricing has gotten more nuanced."

The six credit card issuers examined in the study account for 80 percent of credit card lending in the country:

Citigroup Inc.'s Citibank;  
JP Morgan Chase & Co.'s Chase Bank USA;  
Bank of America Corp.;  
MBNA Corp.'s MBNA America Bank;  
Capital One Financial Corp.'s Capital One Bank,  
and Morgan Stanley's Discover Financial Services.

Sen. Carl Levin of Michigan asked the GAO to conduct the study--done from June 2005 to September 2006.

## LAZY LAPSES

We've become accustomed to using terms that are frankly unsuitable for clear expression. We are just too lazy to think of the phrase that would be clearer. My two favorite irritants:

“No problem.” That’s a lazy substitute for “I’ll take care of it,” or “you’re welcome.”

“I was like...” This started out as a cliquish phrase used by high schoolers and has now escalated to the senior citizen level. Substitutes: “I was thinking that,” or “I felt as if.”

## TWO READER REQUESTS

1. One publicist asked me to discuss “irregardless.” It fits into the category of nonstandard English and is also a double negative.

On the other hand, “regardlesS” as an adverb means in spite of everything; anyway. “Regardless as an adjective means unmindful, heedless.

2. Another reader asked me to distinguish “that” from “which.”  
Use “that” for persons or things. “Which” is used mostly for things.

But then it gets complicated--like most rules in English. Standard English says that we should use “that” to introduce restrictive clauses and “which” for nonrestrictive clauses.

## Does Grandmother Get It? Tips for Communicating Better

A restrictive clause limits, is essential and may not be omitted. It is not set off by commas from the noun or pronoun that it is modifying. Here's a sentence with a restrictive clause: "We will explore the beach that has seven miles of hidden fossils."

A nonrestrictive clause describes rather than limits, and is set off by a comma. Here's a sentence with a nonrestrictive clause: "We will explore the Atlantic City beach, which has seven miles of hidden fossils."

After all that, you can find the use of "which" in restrictive clauses to be considered grammatically acceptable. Sometimes it just sounds more natural. An example: "I'm looking for a website which will tell me all about simple and clear writing."

Quick tips--

That: restrictive, essential, no comma, people or things

Which: nonrestrictive, descriptive, comma, mostly things

### **THE "I WOULD HOPE SO!" TEST**

Marketing expert Mark Gamble says that if your copy doesn't pass the "I Would Hope So" test, then it's time to rewrite it. Let's face it; most of our writing is marketing copy. So we should approach it for what it is--usually trying to promote or sell something--an idea, proposal, subscription, date, donation--even friendship.

<http://www.howtoincreaseprofit.com/blog/podcast.html>

Gamble says that if the reader responds with, "I should hope so!" then your copy has been mindless, and lacking in creativity. When an insurance company sent a fax declaring that they "will be there for you when you have a claim," Gamble's response was, "I should hope so!" Avoid pointless declarations.

### **NETIQUETTE**

We send emails frequently as if manners don't matter and our thinking process has deadened. How many times are you confused by a subject line that has nothing in it, or even worse...some clueless phrase? My favorite irritants are subjects with "hi," and "hello."

Consider these suggestions before that next email.

1. Include a subject line that summarizes the email. Check to be sure that it isn't left from an earlier email some time ago when the subject was different.
2. Don't use all caps except to emphasize a word or phrase. Otherwise, you are "shouting" and making the email difficult to read.
3. Watch your sense of humor. Your tone is not always caught with text. And we all don't agree on what's funny.
4. Reread emails before you send them. Clean up grammar, cut unnecessary information.
5. Don't be overly familiar with a recipient you don't know. Use formal titles and last names until she advises otherwise.
6. Don't forget the spell check feature.
7. Don't send large files or attachments without permission.

### **HIP HIP FOR CUSTOMER SERVICE**

How's this for great customer service? I ordered a bathroom set for the office from Brylane Home in Indianapolis. In the box was...A UPS Customer Return Label! How's that for making it easy for the customer to send back a product? It's a way of communicating that your time is valuable. I won't be returning it.

## TO SPLIT OR NOT TO SPLIT?

Maybe William Morris, author of the Harper Dictionary of Contemporary Usage has the best approach: about split infinitives: “Proceed with caution but not in fear”

For decades, we were taught to avoid the split infinitive, resulting when you place a word between the infinitive. Instead of “to explain quickly,” where the infinitive “to explain” is not interrupted, you might use “to quickly explain” erroneously.

Now, however, we see the rule being dismissed as far too cumbersome. Yet, diehards insist that if splitting the infinitive sounds awkward, you should avoid it.

What to do? First, know what a split infinitive is, then decide if it’s used awkwardly. But what is an infinitive? It consists of two words--the word “to” followed by a verb in the present tense. Examples: to run, to kick, to complain, to address.

Here are some examples of recent splittings that could use thoughtful editing--

From the Associated Press: “Federal health officials issued stern new warnings Friday for doctors to more carefully prescribe widely used anemia drugs...”

At the [www.networkgeneral.com](http://www.networkgeneral.com) web site, we have a host of ambitious splits:

“To quickly solve performance problems...”

“To proactively ensure efficient network operations...”

“To effectively plan and manage a complex global network...”

Or maybe you think I’m being too much of a diehard and that these split infinitives should not be challenged.

## CAN YOU BEGIN A SENTENCE WITH “AND”? WHAT ABOUT “BUT”?

Why not? My intern, a graduate student at a Baltimore university, almost fell off her chair with relief when I assured her that it was perfectly all right.

It’s the outdated folklore of usage that insists that you should not begin a sentence with “and” or even “but.”

Here’s what William Zinsser, of “On Writing Well,” says: “Many of us were taught that no sentence should begin with “but.” If that’s what you learned, unlearn it--there is no stronger word at the start. It announces total contrast with what has gone before, and the reader is primed for the change.”

The framers of the Constitution certainly had no bias against the practice:

“But in chusing [sic] the President...”

“And if the House of Representatives shall not choose...”

“But Congress may by a vote...”

“And the Congress may by general laws...”

And almost everybody agrees that you should not add a comma after the word “but” when it begins a sentence.

## **BOOKS BOUGHT BUT NOT READ**

Of course I was concerned that the Beckham referred to was yours truly. Believe it or not, David Beckham's autobiography, "My Side," the fastest-selling autobiography of all time in the United Kingdom, was listed number three of nonfiction books not read.

A television news service, Teletext, conducted interviews with 4,000 Brits to discover what books they found hardest to read--and finish. At the top of the fiction list was "Vernon God Little" by DBC Pierre, followed by "Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire." Then came "Ulysses" by James Joyce, holding down the third spot, and Salman Rushdie's "The Satanic Verses," placed six.

Back to nonfiction, in the number two spot was President Clinton's 1024-page autobiography, "My Life."

So what's my point? Too long and too complicated make for reader disinterest. Reader disinterest makes for poor communication. The theory isn't limited only to emails, letters, and speeches.

Please call or write if you have some specific questions about communications or publishing your book through our unique joint venture program.

Sincerely,



Barry Beckham