



How to Right Write

By Dr. Kathleen Begley, Book Author and Professional Speaker

Note to Readers: Here's another offbeat blogletter on business communication and current events from Write Company Plus, a corporate communications training firm located outside Philadelphia. In respect for your busy schedule, writers and editors have arranged seven at-a-glance ideas at the end of this article. Skip directly there if you lack the time to read the entire document.

A few days ago, while driving near my home in suburban Philadelphia, I passed the beautifully landscaped nursing home. A handwritten sign posted near the curb caught my eye. "Dementia training," it said. "Good news," I thought to myself. "If I don't get the training, I won't get dementia."

In all probability, the facility was trying to say that it was providing caregivers with classes on dealing with patients with memory loss and other cognitive impairments. I suspect that the sign-maker wanted to keep the announcement eye-catchingly short and sweet. As fate would have it, the retirement residence wound up with message like those mocked with great regularity by NBC television talk-show host Jay Leno: a literary oopsie.

Such bloopers are so commonplace that several book authors, most notably a guy named Richard Lederer, have made a career of bringing them to the public's attention. Two of his book titles are "Anguished English" and "Fractured English." In the introduction to one of his collections, Lederer writes, "Welcome to the blunderful world of bloopers, where crimes and misdemeanors against the English language go unpunished, but not unpublished. Some people are bird watchers. I watch word botchers."

The dementia sign got me thinking about all the mangled English stories I have heard over the years giving communication training to executives and employees across the United States. Many have taught me important lessons on how to avoid embarrassing myself. They may help you as well. Some examples:

Pay close attention to names. About 10 years ago, an executive with a large telecommunications company shared a story about a man named Sherman Wilkerson. After a horrific start on a large cross-functional project, Wilkerson had averted disaster for the entire team by applying his project management skills. At the end of the day, he had made everyone look good. In an effort to give Wilkerson the acclaim he deserved, the team sent an email to 100,000 employees and executives praising their hero's efforts with lines such as "Sherm stepped up to the plate" and "Without Sherm, the project would not have been nearly so effective." The last sentence was "We can't say enough about our admiration for Sperm."

Remember eyeball check. In my opinion, spell check and grammar check programs are the best inventions since word processing. But beware. I recently heard a tale about a female author who innocently arrived to lecture on her latest publication at a public library. The huge sign on the door promoting the event called it a "Boob Signing."

Specify exactly. A business person I met about five years ago was in charge of sending materials ahead of time for large training sessions. In one such case, she matter-of-factly sent six huge boxes of workbooks, notepads and supporting objects to an office in Portland, Oregon.



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They were supposed to go to Portland, Maine. No one discovered the error until one hour before the seminar in question. To say the least, the speaker lost his department.

Consider punctuation. As a big-picture thinker, I used to minimize the importance of those little squiggles. Then another business person I met gave me a personal example of the uproar caused when she forgot to use proper punctuation in an email to a colleague. "After eating our manager, Joan and I went back to the office to discuss the project." A comma after "eating" would have prevented weeks of employees asking her if she and Joan had spiced up the boss with ketchup or mustard.

Rethink American sayings. While speaking to a group of Japanese business men about the need to end negotiations and sign a formal contract, a salesman told me that he had impatiently told his listeners that "It's time to show me the money." After glancing nervously at one another, the Asians took their wallets from their pockets and placed their currency on the table.

Consider words carefully. English abounds with confusing words with even more baffling names. Consider, for example, a group called homophones. They are words that have the same or close pronunciation as another one, but a different meaning and sometimes a different spelling. They often show up as typos. Another story from my collection: A newsletter editor shared with a class that she had sent a company-wide memo to get contributions for her next issue. Her subject line: "I want nudes." She meant "news."

Locate ideas in the right place. Sometimes, simply putting a single word in the wrong location can cause havoc with your meaning. For example, if I write "Only I like working," it means you and everyone else on Earth do not. If I write "I like only working," it means I have no other interests. Both statements are false, particularly the latter, which I'll prove right now by knocking off for the day and reading on the deck with my three dogs. Sea, eye no the write weigh two relax.

Dr. Kathleen Begley owns and operates Write Company Plus communications training outside Philadelphia. She has written seven books and gives corporate seminars on topics such as writing persuasively, presenting confidently, and managing positively. You can call her at 610-429-1562 or e-mail her at KBegley@writecompanyplus.com. She responds to everybody!