



Is Your Writing Driving Away Clients?

By Ernest Nicastro

Leverages a proprietary coaching framework...purposeful investments in human capital...aligning people and systems in pursuit of...

Why do people write that way?

To dramatize the absurdity of this type of non-communication I'm going to stage a scene.

"Bob" runs a consulting and training business that helps entrepreneurs, business owners, and managers become more effective leaders. He's going over a few details with his new receptionist when a sharp-dressed man (any ZZ Top fans out there?) in a suit and tie walks in.

Bob looks up, smiles, and says, "Good afternoon, sir. How can I help you?"

The man replies, "Sir, I'm a business owner and I've been *searching* for a good consulting firm that focuses on leadership issues. I was in this building for a meeting with my accountant, and when I walked by your office and saw the name of your business...well, something just *clicked* with me. Got a few minutes to talk?"

Bob shows Mr. Sharp Dressed Man to his office, and they both take a seat.

"So," the man asks, "can you tell me exactly what it is Leader Coaching does?"

"Sure, I'd be happy to tell you about us," Bob says. "Leader Coaching leverages a proprietary coaching framework, proven over years of practical application and success, to collaborate with clients in pursuit of shared goals."

As a confused look washes over the prospect's face Bob attempts to "clarify" his answer:

"In other words, sir, Leader Coaching's services meet the expectations of business leaders who recognize the value of purposeful investments in human capital—often beginning with themselves—as a means of preparing and aligning people and systems in pursuit of growth."

At that, Mr. Sharp Dressed Man says, "O...K. Well, um...thanks. I...uh...I'll...I'll keep that in mind." And he leaves, never to be heard from again.

[How to Write Copy that Wins Clients](#)

[The 10 Don'ts of Writing a Winning Business Proposal](#)

[How Empty Words Can Cripple Your Sales Writing](#)

[A Simple Test for Writing Excellent Web Copy](#)

Can you blame him?

Don't Succumb to the Disease of "Corporatese"

Leverages a proprietary coaching framework? Purposeful investments in human capital? Aligning people and systems in pursuit? Say what? Can you imagine yourself *ever* talking to a client or prospect that way? Of course not. And neither would you put such gibberish on your website. (You wouldn't, would you?) Yet, save for the first four words of the second quote, all of the highlighted copy was taken verbatim from an active website—a website written almost entirely in "corporatese."

Corporatese, as you might expect, is the collective term for the jargon, phrases, and fad words many writers use to make their communications and businesses seem more substantial and important. NOT!

Those who write in corporatese love a paradigm, whether it's new, shifting, or otherwise. And they would never think of simply using something when they can leverage it. Those who write in corporatese are really into activities such as aligning people—or should it be aligning human capital? (What a warm, fuzzy term. Who among us does not enjoy being referred to as human capital?)

So if corporatese is the problem, what is the solution? I'll present two. One is a strategy; the other is a tool. To highlight the strategic solution, I'll turn to Mark Twain, Ralph Waldo Emerson, and, surprisingly enough, *The A-Team's* Mr. T.:

"I notice that you use plain, simple language, short words and brief sentences. That is the way to write English—it is the modern way and the best way. Stick to it; don't let fluff and flowers and verbosity creep in."—Mark Twain

*"It is not enough to write so that you can be understood; you must write so clearly that you **cannot be misunderstood** [emphasis added]."*—Ralph Waldo Emerson

Or, if you prefer your tenets to be even more succinct, here's how Mr. T puts it:

"Don't gimme none o' that jibba-jabba!"

Whether you prefer the more eloquently worded advice of Twain and Emerson or the more terse counsel of Mr. T, acting on the wisdom of these words will serve you, your writing, and your readers well.

A Helpful but Overlooked Tool

Now, on to the writing tool solution, which I'm happy to report, is literally right at your fingertips. As everyone knows, the "Spelling & Grammar Check" feature in Microsoft Word identifies obvious spelling and grammatical errors. In some instances it even offers suggested revisions. In addition, once the application has finished checking your text, a window pops up. This window gives you a readout on 10 components of your writing, the four most helpful being:

1. Words per sentence (average)
2. Percentage of passive sentences

3. Flesch Reading Ease score
4. Flesch-Kincaid Grade Level

Let's review how paying attention to these four readouts can improve your writing:

- **Words per sentence**—In general, the longer the sentence, the harder it becomes for your reader to follow along. That's not to say you should always write in short sentences. What you should strive for is a variety that makes for interesting and engaging reading. But if the sentences in your text are on average 25 words long, then your copy probably isn't as readable as you want it be.
- **Percentage of sentences written in the passive voice**—If your objective is to engage, involve, and influence your reader, which almost always is the case with any type of marketing copy, then write predominantly in the active voice. Note the difference between, "Once the button has been clicked, the order is generated..." and "When you click the button, we immediately generate your order...."
- **Flesch Reading Ease (FRE) score**—The FRE score was developed in 1948 by author and writing consultant Rudolf Flesch. Widely considered one of the most accurate readability formulas, the FRE score is based on a range of 0-100, with lower values for harder text and higher values for easier text. For example, a typical issue of *Reader's Digest* earns an FRE score of around 65 while *Time Magazine* scores in the low 50s. Lincoln's *Gettysburg Address* scores a 74.2.

By comparison, the "about us" text in the consultant/prospect scene has an FRE score of 16.8, and the "clarification" text scores 14.8. In both instances the copy is less readable than even a U. S. tax form.

- **Flesch–Kincaid Grade Level (FKGL)**—The FKGL score, developed by Rudolf Flesch and John P. Kincaid, is basically an add-on to the FRE score. As its name implies, this score indicates the number of years of education generally required to understand your text. And generally speaking, you want to write at a level ranging from the seventh to the tenth grade. For example, most newspapers in the U.S. are written at a seventh- to eighth-grade level. By contrast, in the consultant/prospect example the "about us" line is written at a grade level of 16.8, while the grade level for Bob's "clarification" is 21.4. Not good.

So, how would one make the bad writing in our staged scene better? I'll tackle the "about us" line. Currently, the "about us" line reads, "Leader Coaching leverages a proprietary coaching framework, proven over years of practical application and success, to collaborate with clients in pursuit of shared goals."

I would recast it to read as follows:

"Leader Coaching uses a proven coaching system to help clients manage their people and their business for greater profit."

I've edited the sentence down from 24 words to 19, raised the FRE score to 49.5, and lowered the grade level to 11. "But," you might say, "you left out the fact that the firm uses a 'proprietary' system." My retort to this point is that the person reading this line doesn't care about that fact. Proprietary is a "me" word, not a "you" word, as in... "Oh, we need to let people know that this is a

proprietary system that we developed ourselves." Having that fact posted on your website might be good for your corporate and personal ego, but it doesn't mean anything to the prospects visiting your website.

Why Do People Write This Way?

I don't know for sure. What I *do* know is that it's flat out bad communication, and bad communication is bad for you, bad for your reader, and, if you're communicating in a commercial way, bad for business.

But it doesn't have to be this way. Even if you're not a professional writer, even if you're not a particularly good writer, if you ...

1. Keep the words of Twain, Emerson—and yes, even Mr. T.—within eyesight when writing
2. Take full advantage of the helpful tool that is, literally, right at your fingertips

...you CAN and you WILL write better.

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Reader Feedback

Thanks for this entertaining and insightful piece. I have also found that [Gobbledygook](#) has a free grading tool that is also a great for checking readability and policing the "corporatese." I agree that business writing has become incomprehensible and, in many cases, riddled with mistakes. Where have all the proofreaders gone? Errors are rampant and seem to be gaining acceptance in the digital world. Have we lowered our standards and did I miss that meeting?

— *Gail Ludewig*
President, TotalWorks

Author Response: Thanks for your kind words about my article. I'm glad you found value in it. And it's nice to know about the Gobbledygook Grader. — Ernest Nicaastro

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