

Seven Cs of Writing ~ Issue 5

For those of you who have been waiting with bated breath for the fifth edition of our ezine, apologies for the delay. As promised, this edition is on Clarity in writing which, of all the 7 Cs, is frequently ignored and underestimated.

When I broach the topic of Clarity with my students, I usually uncover a huge misconception which is that we do not write to IMPRESS, but to INFORM. Some think that pages of dense, undecipherable, longwinded prose are the norm and what clients, business partners, bosses etc. expect. "After all, they are paying us to do this" one particular student once pointed out to me! Nothing could be further from the truth. Your average business reader is very busy and wants to be able to grasp the message at first glance. In addition, if you are prone to producing overly complex sentences, you are more likely to make grammatical mistakes. So here are a few tips:

Short paragraphs

- One main idea per paragraph
- Paragraphs of more than **six lines** put the reader off
- **Break down** longer paragraphs to keep the reader's attention
- **Link** your ideas between paragraphs

Short sentences

- One idea per sentence
- Don't use over-long sentences. In most documents, any sentence of more than **20** words may be too complex for the reader to take in.
- Follow the **KISS** principle – Keep It Short & Simple. A reader should **never** have to re read a sentence if he/she did not get the meaning the first time
- Check your use of *and*. You need to use connectors (e.g. however, moreover etc.) to show the relationship between ideas – but if the relationship is simply **additive**, wouldn't a separate sentence be better?

Punctuation - Correct punctuation aids clarity; it is not a luxury!

- Have you joined more than one sentence with commas instead of full stops?
- Rules surrounding the use of the comma, apostrophe and capital letters differ in English

The comma (,) is used:

- Like a brief pause in speech, to make the sentence easier to read
- To separate items in a list (except for the last two items where we use 'and')
- After most linking words that come at the beginning, or in the middle, of a sentence (e.g. however)
- Before and after a non-defining relative clause (a clause which adds non-essential information e.g. ***Everest, which is the highest mountain in the world, is in Nepal.***

NB: In English, we do not use a comma before a defining clause (a clause which adds essential information e.g. *He criticised the system which had been introduced the year before*).

Capital letters (also called 'upper case' letters) are used:

- To begin a sentence
- For names of people, places, events and organisations
- For job titles
- For nationalities and languages
- For calendar information such as days, months etc.

The apostrophe (') is used:

- To indicate possession e.g. IBM's policy
- To replace missing letters in contractions (shortened forms) e.g. don't, I've etc.

NB: In English, the apostrophe is NOT used to form the plural

Correct sentence structure

- Correct English word order = SVOMPT

Subject	Verb	Object	Manner	Place	Time
The police	caught	the thief	red-handed	in Brighton	last night

NB: The time can also go at the beginning of the sentence

- Have the subject as close as possible to the beginning of the sentence.
- Have any key information near the beginning of the sentence.
- **Do not** separate the verb and object when possible.
- **Do not** separate a modal verb (e.g. will, should, could etc.) from its dependent verb(s) whenever possible.

So your mantras this month are SVOMPT and KISS! The next ezine will be on **Conciseness** and will include nifty tips on how to keep those sentences under 20 words. Until then, have a very happy Christmas and all the best for 2011