

# INTRODUCTION

## **Why Do We Need To Learn To Communicate Better? Isn't What We Mean More Important Than What We Say?**

There's a very definite answer to that last part: yes and no. I'm not being ambiguous. Of course it's important to say what you mean, but communication should be more than just getting your point across. You should make a conscious effort to convey your ideas in the best, most precise, most understandable manner. I may be the greatest wordsmith in the world, but if you don't understand what I mean, we're not communicating effectively.

I believe our language is the most important part of our lives. It's what sets us apart from the animals—and from each other. Our words are the cornerstones of everything we feel, believe and obtain; they are the backbone of our economy and free enterprise system, because it's through language that we buy, sell and render services. We use words to express our innermost thoughts and acknowledge the feelings of others. We use speech to run our schools, governments, judicial systems, and every other aspect of our lives.

According to a study by the National Commission on Writing for America's Families, Schools and Colleges (NCW), good writing is taken as a given in today's careers. "It's not a frill for the few, but a necessity for the many."

Ernest Hemingway rewrote the ending to his novel, *A Farewell to Arms*, 39 times before he was satisfied. When his agent asked him why, Hemingway said with a shrug, "I'm just trying to get the words right." How many times have *you* struggled to get the words right or wondered how to put more power or more clarity in your writing?

No matter what you do in life or in business, you're faced with word choices. And, because our language is complex, and often confusing, it's important to understand the correct way to use it. Have you ever had a disagreement with a friend, child, coworker or manager because what you wrote down was not interpreted correctly? Have you ever had an argument with someone because what you meant was not what they heard you say? My experience has shown that too many people live by the motto *I know you believe you understand*

*what you think I said, but I'm not sure you realize that what you heard is not what I meant.*

According to the above-mentioned NCW's April 2003 survey of 120 major American corporations, writing in today's workplace is a "threshold skill" for hiring and promotion among salaried employees and a ticket to professional opportunity. According to one respondent, "... writing ability could be your ticket in ... or it could be your ticket out." In other words, it's hard to move up without good writing skills.

It's a strange world of language in which skating on thin ice can get you into hot water.

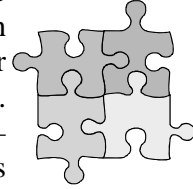
—Franklin P. Jones, 1887-1929  
American businessman

### **Are Grammar And Usage More Important Than Vocabulary?**

Vocabulary is certainly important, but the skill to weave words together and use them to their best advantage may be even more vital. The magic computer keys required for this ability is grammar. Words—as irreplaceable as they are—are only words; it takes a careful hand, study, practice, and knowledge of grammar and style rules to make words, as Rudyard Kipling called them, "the most powerful drug used by mankind.

## Why Is Writing So Difficult For Some People?

The more I work with people to help them communicate more effectively, the more I realize that the major problem with English is its rules, and the problem with the rules is their complexity. I believe the study of communication can be *fun*. Communicating, particularly in writing, is a skill of logic—just like the logic you use in a puzzle. The pieces are the parts of speech and the object is to put them together into a complete picture.



Good writing requires the ability to analyze, make judgments, discover relationships between words and phrases, and communicate with others in a way that makes sense and will cause action. If you can follow the instructions for installing software, beat the computer at Solitaire, put in spark plugs, read a cookbook, or keep up with the day-to-day problems of family, work and life, understanding the rules of composition and using them to write more effectively should be no problem at all.

Grammar is the logic of speech, even as logic is the grammar of reason.

—Richard C. Trench, 1807-1886  
Author of *On the Study of Words*

## Do The Rules Change?

Yes, indeed. English, like most languages, is a living entity and changes regularly. The purpose of communication is to get your point across and, as society changes, so do communication rules and style. I have a book of poetry by Robert Burns that I can't read at all because it hasn't been translated from *his* English into *ours*. Here's a sentence from the original *Beowulf*. Can you translate it?

Hawaet we Gar-Dean in geardagum theodcynginga  
thrym gefrunon hu that aethelingas ellen fremedon.

Believe it or not, that's English! It means "Listen! We have learned of the long-ago glory of the Spear-Dane kings and how the princes did deeds of heroism."

So, yes, the rules change to meet the demands and usage preferences of its users. The rules have changed in your lifetime; they have changed this year. People who write dictionaries are only historians, because all they can do is record how words have been used in the *past*. By the time a dictionary gets to the bookstore, some word has been added to, or deleted from, our language simply because the population began or stopped using it. Some expressions, once considered substandard usage, are now used by both speakers and writers (*OK, fax, nuke, compute*); nouns are used as adjectives and verbs (*impactfully, concretize, e-mail, benchmark*); adjectives are used as prepositions (*absent*); proper names have become verbs (*to Xerox, to Google*); and absolutes are being compared (*emptier, more unique*).

Like other sciences, [grammar] deals only with what can be brought under general laws and stated in the form of general rules.

—Henry Sweet, 1845-1912  
British phonetician and philologist,  
founder of modern phonetics

New words have been born (*legalese, palmtop, videophile, eldercare, immunodeficiency, cybrarian, byte, digitize, groupthink, phat, dis, stoked, Netspeak*); old words have died (*whence, amongst*). It's all right now in informal writing to occasionally begin a sentence with a conjunction like *and* or *but*, end it with a preposition (except *at*), use contractions, and split infinitives—as long as doing so adds strength to the sentence.

We can—and should—enjoy the flexibility, but we can't go crazy and lose all sense of discipline, because many of the rules and guidelines are steadfast and not open to personal preference or what *feels* right.

If you use punctuation improperly; use substandard, below-basement-level words like *irregardless, enthused, ain't* or *couth*; or ignore the difference between closely related words like *affect* and *effect*, you could destroy the respect and confidence you want to build in your colleagues, employers,

customers and friends. Worse, it could hurt your career chances. According to the NCW report mentioned earlier, a third of the responding firms said that one third or fewer of their employees possess the writing skills companies value, even though writing appears to be a “marker” of high-skill, high-wage, professional work.

The notion that a person can be a good writer and turn up his nose at rules of correct grammar and spelling is false. Bad grammar is like fingers across a blackboard. A reader won't stick with it very long.

—James J. Kilpatrick

Syndicated columnist and author of *The Writer's Art*

What we're going to discuss in this book are some of the writing problems we face in standard English—the kind you use every day. Why? Because that's the language of educated, careful users of the language (which includes *most* of us *most* of the time), and the language that's correct and acceptable in everyday speaking *and* writing. You may *want* to occasionally drop below this level, and you may occasionally *need* to rise above it, but that will be easier to do if you understand the difference and can properly use the most common level.

You can learn how to communicate effectively by reading well-written books, listening to classical actors, checking a good dictionary whenever you're unsure, and keeping *this* book close by for reference and restudy. Mark Twain said, “The existing phrasebooks are inadequate. They are well enough as far as they go, but when you fall down and skin your leg, they don't tell you what to say.” So I've tried to make Mr. Twain happy by giving you not only the rules but examples of improper and proper usages. Language is like love; it's there for you to enjoy if you can just see the beauty and fun—and don't skin your leg too often!