

Speak Plainly, Please – Five Tips for Keeping Audience-Alienating Jargon Out Of Your Communications



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In ten years of working with researchers, educators, academics and public officials at a number of government agencies and nonprofit organizations, I have learned to navigate through a jungle of jargon. It can be a challenge to separate someone from the language they use everywhere, every day, to talk about the work they do. That language has served them well and it can be difficult to translate it for other audiences. But jargon-busting is possible.

Why do some have trouble breaking free? They say fish will be the last to discover water. That's why we need to help the jargon-immersed to discover another way to communicate with the wider world about their work and why it matters. Researchers who use the insiders' language with their colleagues often don't notice the glazed-over eyes when they speak to donors, legislators, or the media. A researcher may lapse into "proposal speak" – that is, often relying on words and phrases that better belong in a proposal or report to a funder. Thus, "help" becomes "technical assistance," "use" becomes "utilize," and "assistance" becomes "capacity building for a range of stakeholders."

Of course, jargon and specialized terms are used by for-profit as well as nonprofit companies and in nearly every profession, making communication faster and easier among like-minded colleagues. Problems arise when these organizations come to believe they can use the same language and short-hand with everyone else. This only serves to cloud their message and keeps potential allies at bay.

At a university, a hospital, or a think tank, good researchers don't take shortcuts. They are by trade methodical and detail-oriented. They seek to provide the full picture of their work and explain the niche or nuance of what they do. Unfortunately, as the jargon-laced explanations roll on, many people tune out. Most listeners, and that generally includes the media, just need to get to the heart of the matter. Over-long descriptions, insider short-hand, and acronyms should be saved for others familiar with the work. It can take several rounds of "what do you mean by that?" to get to the point and why it matters.

But long-held habits are hard to break, and many are resistant to change for a variety of reasons. Some don't see the need. Some feel it would oversimplify the work. And perhaps some prefer "text-based resource" for example, because it sounds much more serious and important than the lowly "book."

But translation *is* needed. Jargon is exclusionary. It keeps a speaker at arm's length, preventing others from understanding and relating to your mission, your area of expertise, and your results. When speaking with a potential donor, reporter, policymaker, or any potential partner, clarity of message is essential.

These tips are gathered from a workshop I've given for several years.

1. Recognize that your primary goal in communicating is to be understood. Everyone appreciates good writing and articulate speech.
2. Know that using plain, jargon-free language is not condescending and it's not "dumbing down" your mission or your message – it's the opposite. Plain language alienates no one in the room.
3. Place the work in context and provide examples. One example can do more to explain how and why a program is working than 1,000 words.
4. Use "banana" words (a term attributed to Prof. Carl Sessions Stepp of the University of Maryland). Banana words are those that have crystal-clear meaning: "banana," "sidewalk," "dolphin." By contrast, "capacity," "sustainability," and "intervention" convey abstractions. Don't use "assessment" if you can use "test" for most audiences.
5. Start with Uncle Bob. If you can explain your work to a family member without him tuning you out, you're doing fine. If greeted instead with "what does that mean?" it's time to start again.

Talking and writing about what your company is achieving or how the community is benefiting requires the use of everyday language. So too, does becoming part of the public debate — through letters to the editor, opinion pieces, media interviews, or public presentations. Clarity of message and mission is essential to recruiting volunteers, spreading the word, promoting results, and fundraising. Some may never become truly jargon-free, but with effort and practice, instead of "incorporating generic components of efficacious interventions," we can all "learn."