

Jargon, Clichés, Vagueness, Slander and Metaphors

In my role as a Series Editor and reviewer, I end up reading a lot of material which has been written by other people. I also have to read a great deal of project reviews from student, so I can spot poor writing. One book I reviewed was filled with throwaway jargon terms, with very little background information on them. Some of the best included:

Voice-activated OS
Multitasking machines
Download bespoke solutions
Grunt work

Another thing that is important in formal writing is not to make it too light-hearted, and try and avoid being slanderous. The next example might offend Mac users, Volvo drivers and Volvo with the following:

loyalty runs strong and a Mac user might have a sense of identity from using one of these machines in a similar way that a Volvo owner might feel about a car

You must also watch for throwaway lines or statements which are lacking in background:

with the advent of voice operating systems the goal posts have changed

Serious artists are using 48 megabytes or more of working space (RAM)

Voice activated OS, optical tracking devices, sub vocalisation techniques (?) and biofeedback control devices... Often we are held back from these advances by the vested interests of large companies

Bill Gates... benign dictator in a chaotic market, even to the extent of supporting his competitors when convenient and turning on a sixpence

Apple have put a lot of effort into developing a new operating but the share prices of the company maintain a steady dive with occasional upwards blips, and billion pound losses

It is a common pattern that the larger and more successful a hardware or software company becomes the less flexible it can be

Bill Gates... benign dictator in a chaotic market, even to the extent of supporting his competitors when convenient and turning on a sixpence

and I think that Apple, and possibly the stock market, might be upset with the following:

"Apple have put a lot of effort into developing a new operating system but the share prices of the company maintain a steady dive with occasional upwards blips, and billion pound losses"

Sometimes the English that is can cause the user to lose interest and even to lose understanding. For example:

New technology is also filtered through our own receivers, whether we receive by TV, e-mail ...

It is part of a first world culture to see science and art grow closer together but this doesn't mean that the language to do this has been developed

Planning needs open, 'divergent' states of mind to generate ideas and more focused 'convergent' thinking to analyse and evaluate them. Each activity is associated with a different side of the brain and a different set of skills and it is using both in tandem, than can produce good design, a 'mark of genius' as Einstein might have said

We think nothing of putting more computing power onto the front of a greeting card than there was in the world a short time ago, before long we will have chips with everything

One manuscript I read was full of few metaphors, especially in the use of goalposts such as:

Nanotechnology ... is likely to shift the goalposts again within the decade

And finally, in formal writing, humor should be involved. A real-life example that I read in a manuscript was;

You can order up a Star Trek mouse with logo shaped mouse mat, you can buy your mouse a small furry pink jacket with nose, whiskers and tail

A few pieces of advice that I gave one author where:

- Always properly introduce subjects.
- Focus on the objectives of a chapter and avoid adding extra material which loses the readers attention.
- The introductory chapters to the book are the most important and should lay the foundation for the rest of the book.
- Too much text makes the learning boring. Readers like bullet points, tables and diagrams to explain key points.

- Avoid humor and vague statements.
- Avoid personal, unsubstantiated, quotes (calling Bill Gates a benign dictator could result in litigation if it is not backed up with evidence or a reference).
- Avoid using quotes which will age the book (especially related to electronic memory sizes or certain types of computer hardware).
- Avoid metaphors (such as "changing the goalposts").
- Do not assume that the readers will understand the industry jargon.

For this type of book, the text should be read as a person who has just left school and has never heard of terms such as ISDN and multitasking. A good test is to let a 'non-computer literate' person read the text and ask if there are any sentences that they cannot understand.

Oh, and before I finish, I would like to promote a few Scottish words which really should be used in general writing. I favouriate is outwith. I really think that this is a much better word than outside of, which sounds a little too formal. I couldn't believe it when a copy editor scored out the outwith word and replaced it with outside of. My other favourite Scottish words are:

Pinkie -> little finger
Janitor -> caretaker
Dreich -> dreary
Swither -> hesitate
Loch -> lake

Oh, and remember when you come to Scotland don't to say: 'Where's the nearest lake?', try and say: 'Where's the nearest loch?'

-- William J. Buchanan, Feb 9, 2001