

# In Other Words

Association for Creative Business Writing  
November 18, 2009



**Hi everyone,**

In this issue, we explore ways to add polish and pizzazz to your business writing. Seven tips offer new ways to connect with your creativity, stay abreast of current events, and write with panache.

AFCBW board member Sandy Bjorgen ([www.ImprovableResults.com](http://www.ImprovableResults.com)) shares three valuable tips to help us think fast and speak confidently when under pressure.

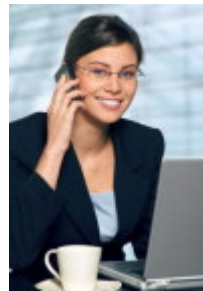
Check out the other regular features listed below, and let me know anything you'd like to see in upcoming issues of **In Other Words**. You can use the members-only online forum or write to me directly at [director@afcbw.com](mailto:director@afcbw.com).

## In This Issue

## Stand Out From the Pack

"I've never thought of business writing as creative," a smartly dressed businesswoman recently told me. "I'm not sure what you mean."

For a moment, I was at a loss for words (an uncommon occurrence!:-). I knew when I included the word "creative" in the association's name that I would make a few synapses smoke, but her response still surprised me. Why would we purposely exclude creativity from any part of our lives? And especially our businesses?



I learned that she was a technical person, and to her, writing was just something she did to get the facts down, not unlike someone without taste buds who eats just to stay alive. I've talked to plenty of technical writers who like to write that way. But what about their audiences? I've also talked to plenty of people who roll their eyes when asked what it's like to read that stuff. (And, as I've mentioned before,

I know that many of them simply delete dense, boring writing!)

I made a conscious decision to include creativity in the association's name. Creativity is the best way I know to enliven our workaday lives and take our writing from ho-hum to how-about-that! We communicate our message better, engage our audiences more fully, and brighten our days. In the process, we stand out from the pack.

Of course, the word "creativity" is emotionally charged for some people. As I write in *Words at Work*,

*That word—creativity—causes a lot of people a lot of*

## **1. Stand Out from the Pack**

## **2. Communicator's Column**

Sandy Bjorgen contributes "The Art of Thinking and Speaking Under Pressure."

## **3. Find 'N' Fix**

## **4. Edit for Success**

## **5. Creative Challenge**

## **6. Writing With a Full Deck**

## **7. Answers**

## **8. Board of Directors**

### **Find 'N' Fix**

*These sentences from a marketing letter to prospective clients are headed in the wrong direction. Use your GPS—grammar, punctuation, and style—to turn them around.*

1. With a primary focus on maintaining profitability while keeping costs down many times the reliance upon computer hardware and software technology is overlooked.

2. Once the computer crash happened, they knew that they could restore from the week old backup, but there was a fear that they would just hit the capacity barrier and crash the database again.

*problems. The mere mention of it makes them freeze, something like panic flashing in their eyes. "Oh, I'm not creative," they say, quick to clear up that misunderstanding, just in case I thought they were capable of writing something more interesting. But, I'm not talking about creativity like a giant jolt of electricity that lights up our lives once in a while (though that's great, too). I'm talking about a steady current that feeds us daily. The juice that inspires us to write a successful sales proposal, a persuasive proposal, or an interesting blog. (Page 40.)*

In the weeks ahead, we'll delve into simple ways we can bring more creativity into our business (or any) writing. Here are a few suggestions to get you started.

### **1. Read the "Week in Review" section in the Sunday New York Times.**

(Online at [www.nytimes.com](http://www.nytimes.com).) Not only will it keep you current with news and opinions, the outstanding writing will energize your own writing. This week, I noticed these techniques: scene-setting, shocking statements (explained later in the article), comments written directly to the reader, plays on words, and questions.

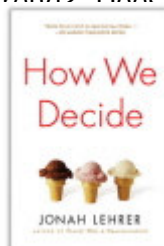


A few weeks ago, Thomas Friedman started his column with a future dateline of 2012. He wrote a paragraph (set in italics) as though it were fact about a positive scenario in Afghanistan. Then he wrote (in plain type) what we have to do to make that a reality. This "what if" approach can enliven reports, proposals, Web copy, even memos. Try it when you want people to think bigger. Or when you want to scare them about thinking too small.

In that same section, I also saw a political cartoon that gave a new twist to the infamous line from the used-car industry—"What would it take to put you in..." It sparked my creativity and reminded me to have a little more fun with business writing (when appropriate).

### **2. Tie your articles, reports, whatever you write, to current events.**

"Week in Review" not only illustrates great writing techniques but keeps you up on the news. When you can, write about how your subject relates to what's going on in the world. Is it in synch with or in opposition to a current trend? Does it offer a solution or an opposing view?



**3. Read Jonah Lehrer's new book, *How We Decide*.** Not only does Lehrer share fascinating information about how our brains work, his writing style is scintillating. Similes, comparisons, stories, examples, parenthetical

## Edit for Success

*How would you improve this paragraph? (No one right answer—there are dozens of ways to make it better.)*

*Keep in mind concepts such as "buried lead" (page 74, Words at Work); Inverted Pyramid (page 64); and writing in a clear, concise style (page 121).*

The damage was not only the cost, the lost time, and the use of a paper based manual system during the recovery period, but the potential for deadly criminals being put back on the street due to the lack of proper tracking techniques for evidence had greatly increased because of the crash. In a sense, this technology crash became a life-and-death matter.

## Brag a Little!

Please send in your success stories about your writing. We're looking for real-life examples that illustrate techniques for improved writing—and results. Did you do a Brain Dump that helped you discover a new approach? Edit an extra time or two to end up with a better report? Did you find a simile that tells your story? These techniques work, and everyone will benefit from your experiences.

comments—all of these help take complex issues and make them compelling and easy to understand. *How We Decide* reminds me that I can get a little lazy with my own writing, and it inspires me to dig deeper. [www.jonahlehrer.com/books](http://www.jonahlehrer.com/books)

**4. Tell tales.** Maybe I'm a frustrated novelist, but I love sharing stories in business writing. One, it's not expected. Two, stories add so much punch through real-life experiences with your product, proof positive that your service helps people, examples of how something has benefited others, etc. Here's what Sam Horn, author of *POP*, has to say about stories: [A story] *takes people out of their critical left brain and switches them into their emotionally engaged right brain. They are no longer on the outside judging your idea; they are inside experiencing it. That's the essence of buy-in.* (Pg. 174.)

**5. Observe.** Remove ear pods, take the bus, walk instead of drive, hang out where people buy your product, listen in the lunchroom, eavesdrop at cafés, go to a big library, pay attention. That's how you find stories to write about.

**6. Write them down.** Oh, the great ideas I've lost just because I was sure I'd remember them! Carry slips of paper or buy yourself a small (and refillable) notebook. Don't assume you'll remember.

**7. Think like your audience.** Get out of your own head and get into the minds of your audience. If you're writing to:

- Support staff: Make sure you know what they're thinking, not what you want them to think.
- Clients: Send them a survey to get on their wave length.
- Potential customers: Get back to "beginner mind" and write to them from that perspective.
- Prospective employers: Let them know how you'll make their lives easier and their companies stronger.



We'll go over each of these in detail in future issues, but I wanted to share some easy ways you can start using today to set yourself apart from the pack. Give them a try and, and let me know how they work for you.

## Answers to Find 'N' Fix

1. With an eye toward primary focus on maintaining profitability and while keeping costs down, we can forget how dependent we are on many times the reliance upon computer hardware and software. technology is overlooked.  
—Too much passive voice.  
—"maintaining profitability" and "keeping costs down" seemed redundant. I know they're not exactly the same, but close enough for this letter.  
—"Forget" and "dependent" are stronger and more active than "is overlooked."

2. Once the computer crashed happened, they feared knew that even when they could restored the data from the week old backup, but there was a fear that they feared they would still overload would just hit the capacity barrier and crash the database again.  
—"Feared" is stronger/more active than "was a fear."  
—Verbose. This would be fine for a first draft. Remember: Bad writers just stopped too soon!  
—Do you see the deleted words "week old"? They were unnecessary and confusing. For the record, those two words should be hyphenated (week-old) as a compound adjective. (Unhyphenated compound adjectives add greatly to reader mystification.)

## Communicator's Column

*Sandy Bjorgen, founder of IMPROV-able Results® in Seattle, provides improvisation (or improv) training that helps people speak under pressure with more cool than they ever imagined. She shares some tips with us.*

### The Art of Thinking & Speaking Under Pressure

During any given week, you have to think on your feet—in front of groups or one-to-one. And there are times when you wish you could do it better. You can! "If you're always ready, you don't have to get ready," says actor Will Smith.

The play of life comes with no scripts. Scripting and rehearsals are certainly desirable in preparation for various scenarios and roles we expect to play out, but we have to be ready to go off-script and improvise.

What's the secret to getting ready and staying ready in order to deal with the unexpected? Three basic principles. If you keep them on the top of your mind and ready yourself through daily practice, you can train yourself to think quickly and choose the best response in the moment.

**1) Clear the mechanism.** In the baseball movie *For Love of the Game*, Kevin Costner takes his stand on the pitcher's mound. We enter his mind and hear the roar of the crowd. He tells himself, "Clear the mechanism," and all of the noise fades to silence. He holds the distractions at bay so he can focus fully upon the catcher and collaborate on the best pitch.

When you focus intently upon the person you're talking with and "clear the mechanism," you're mentally available to notice important cues that will guide you in choosing your next response. You reduce your chance of becoming distracted and pitching the wrong words.

**2) Listen with a willingness to be changed.** In his memoir, *Never Have Your Dog Stuffed: and Other Things I've Learned*, actor Alan Alda says, "There's one skill that I really make use of in a big way, and that is listening. If you don't listen deeply, the connection won't take place... [You have to be] willing to be changed by the person you're listening to, where you're not just waiting for a pause so you can say your thing, but you're actually letting them have an effect on you if they can."

## One Way to Improve Edit for Success

The effect of this crash went beyond the cost, the lost time, and the frustration of using a paper-based manual system during the recovery phase. This technology crash was a life-and-death matter. Without the tracking techniques for evidence, violent criminals could be back on the streets.

**NOTES:** You could add more drama and start the paragraph with "This technology crash was a life-and-death matter. In addition to the cost, the lost time, ...." Either way, the new lead helps readers know where the writer is taking them.

—The new version is more concise and much clearer.  
—The hyphen between paper and based (paper-based) cuts confusion by creating a compound adjective. (Ditto earlier comment.)

**For more information, review *Words at Work* or ask questions on the AFCBW Online Forum.**

**(User name: your e-mail; Password: member)**

## AFCBW Board of Directors

Connect with these top-notch professionals when you want to take your career

When you "listen with a willingness to be changed," it doesn't mean you don't have your own opinion, agenda, or goal. It simply means you're open to learning something new that could change the course of your conversation—relationship—thinking—business—even your life!



**3) Ready, aim, fire.** This phrase is a sequence of commands used to order soldiers to carefully fire their weapons. If you fire without first getting ready and taking aim, you'll probably miss your intended target and cause collateral damage.

When you remind yourself to carefully fire your words, you take a beat to think first. You give yourself a chance to consider the cues, your intention, and the desired results. You decide whether or not it's better to withhold fire. You can't take it back. If you decide to fire, you make sure your target is still in focus and your timing is right. Now you fire—and hope you've calculated correctly.

You certainly will find many opportunities every day to practice these three principles. They will become a part of you, ready at your disposal for the tougher situations when you have to think and speak under pressure. You'll get better results with people because you'll make better, faster decisions about what to say, how to say it, when to say it—and when to stop!

## Writing With a Full Deck

Last week's card featured similes. Did you craft one or two? I spoke with one AFCBW member who said he'd never been very good at them. That's what I used to tell myself. Then I started practicing more, and I got a lot better at it.



One thing I wanted to add about similes: Make sure your comparison is relevant or appropriate. Every year, the Internet abounds with stories about the worst similes and metaphors that teachers allegedly turn in. I'm not sure they're all legit, but I've certainly seen plenty of bad ones over the years. They can be pretty funny, like these:

1. Her face was a perfect oval, like a circle that had its two sides gently compressed by a Thigh Master.
2. She had a deep, throaty, genuine laugh, like the sound a dog makes just before it throws up.

Amusing to read but definitely not the effect you're going for with your business writing. Keep your comparisons clear and germane.

to the next level.

**Careers & Employment**  
Matt Youngquist  
[www.Career-Horizons.com](http://www.Career-Horizons.com)

**Stand in Your Power!**  
Randy Siegel  
[www.BuildYourInfluence.com](http://www.BuildYourInfluence.com)

**Personal Branding**  
Peg Marckworth  
[www.Marckworth.com](http://www.Marckworth.com)

**Writing, Editing,  
Publishing**  
Virginia McCullough  
[www.VirginiaMcCullough.com](http://www.VirginiaMcCullough.com)

**Inspiration & Change**  
Melody Ivory  
[www.MelodyIvory.com](http://www.MelodyIvory.com)

**Networking &  
Communication**  
Jenny Capella  
[www.thecapellagroup.com](http://www.thecapellagroup.com)

**Speaking & Presentations**  
Sandy Bjorgen  
[www.ImprovableResults.com](http://www.ImprovableResults.com)

Upcoming cards include:

- Calls to Action
- Unique
- It is/There are
- Benefits

Let me know if you have any questions as you focus on each of them.

## Creative Challenge

Over the next couple of weeks, keep an eye out for writing that excites you. Make a list of the approaches and styles you admire. While you're at it, pay attention to writing that bores you. Why is it uninviting? How would you fix it? Keep a list of these creative ideas. Before you know it, they'll be a regular part of your writing repertoire.

I'd love to see what you create—and publish a snippet in an upcoming newsletter. And be sure to ask questions on the AFCBW forum at [www.lyndamcdaniel.com/forumlogin.asp](http://www.lyndamcdaniel.com/forumlogin.asp) (User name: your e-mail address, Password: member).

Remember, your words are your wardrobe at work. Dress for success!

Happy Thanksgiving,  
Lynda

**Association for Creative Business Writing:**  
[www.afcbw.com](http://www.afcbw.com)

**Word 4 Word Blog:** <http://bit.ly/enkdJ>

**Tips on Twitter:** <http://twitter.com/WordWardrobe>