

Speak Like the News

Inform, Persuade and Train About
Plain Language

Plain Language Action and Information Network

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This booklet is available as a color PDF.

Hank Wallace, J.D.
Write & Speak Like the News
3001 Veazey Terrace, NW
Washington, DC 20008

hankwallace@WSLN.com
<http://WSLN.com>

202 966-7866
Fax 202 966-8080

Seminars and consulting on business writing and speaking

1. What to say.

a. Lead with the future (rather than with background).

Emulate: **Simplify** phrases like “perform a simplification of”: that’s the first of 5 plain-language skills we’ll cover today. Looking **forward** to working with you and your team now, Pat.

Improve: Sorry I **got** here late. Traffic **was** really bad. When I **got** your email—the one where you **invited** me—I **decided** to look at your website, and I’m sorry but I **found** it wordy.

b. Speak your audience’s language.

Improve: There are **nominalizations**, as in “Speeding is in violation of the law.”

Emulate: Save words. “Speeding is in violation of the law” includes a **nominalization**.

Emulate: G.M. to **Triple** Investment in European Turnaround . . . The company said it now will pitch in €1.9 billion, or \$2.6 billion . . . G.M. had previously said it would provide €600 million. (*International Herald Tribune*, 3/3/10, 16. <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/03/03/business/global/03opel.html> .)

c. Inspire confidence.

Improve: **I think** distilling strong verbs from phrases like “is in violation of” will save you words. And **I think** you should activate passive verbs.

d. Capitalize on challenges, interruptions—even your own errors.

e. Motivate your audience to commit to plain language.

2. How to say it.

a. Relax your voice.

b. Say it loud.

c. Overcome “uptalk?”

d. Pause before, and emphasize, key words. Speed through the rest.

Emulate: Distill | **strong verbs** from many | **weak nouns**. For example—and imagine you’re a citizen reading your website—what should we do with the second noun in “Speeding | **is in violation of** the law”? What do you think of “Speeding | **violates** the law”? I’m talking about what linguists call | **nominalizations**.

e. Pronounce each sound.

- Final sound.

Emulate: To keep our Web readers, let's try originality. Trite, we tried.

- The big resonators: "m," "n" and "ng."

Emulate: A million bad men meaning to sing *MmmBop* by the rocking group Hanson.

Avoid resonating in your nose:

b
d
k

Resonate in your nose too:

m
n
ng

- Medial "t."

Emulate: Cat-ha-lyt-hic con-vert-her.

- Vowel.

Emulate: Government. Punctuation.

- Syllable.

Emulate: Police laboratory. Vegetable.

f. Pronounce only the sounds that are there!

Emulate: Doubling, tripling. Gambling.

3. Plain-language fun.

Improve: It was a one-eyed, one-horned, flying, purple people eater.

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