

Writing Effectively

Jim Schakenbach

Managing Partner, SCT Group Inc.

I don't need much encouragement to get up on my soapbox and rant about any number of topics near and dear to my heart, but one topic in particular is in dire need of a good airing and that's the King's English.

Now, I can hear the heavy sighing, see the eyeballs rolling back in your collective heads, but bear with me because what I am about to say can give you a considerable leg up on your competition. And it has to do with learning to write effectively. Sound simple? It isn't. It requires discipline, practice, and rigorous self-denial of lazy, dangerous habits to which we all fall prey.

Those of you who have been in and around the corporate world for any length of time know exactly what I am talking about. Fuzzy, convoluted weirdspeak like "authoring solutions-based metrics". Why is it that perfectly rational human beings, capable of holding intelligent conversations, suddenly start typing odd, tortuous phrases when confronted with even the simplest of business communications? You know who you are. If you've used words such as "implementation", "impacting", and "facilitate" within the last thirty days I have two words for you: STOP IT.

Don't get me wrong. I'm not necessarily a word nazi (although there are worse things to be), slavishly devoted to outdated definitions, grammar, and syntax. No. What I'm talking about is the art of writing simply and effectively. Of choosing the most common, easily understood word or phrase and not being afraid to use it. When did we stop writing and start "authoring"? There is a power and elegance to the English language that falls further and further into disuse every day. You can turn this to your advantage by swearing off trite, overused, ill-defined words and writing in the clearest, most easily understood language possible. This will take some getting used to, so think in terms of "could my mother understand

© 2005

You are free to duplicate this material, with proper attribution to Jim Schakenbach, as long as it is for the purpose of learning and will not be resold.

this?” when you sit down to write something. This will work wonders on a business plan, a marketing strategy report, even plain vanilla, everyday e-mails. Purge your writing of the trendy and the corporate and use, as my old journalism professor used to say, a nickel word instead of a twenty-five-center. You’ll be amazed at the transformation. Potential investors will see more quickly and clearly the real value of your product or service. Clients will immediately discern the advantage you have over your competition. Your company will avoid becoming mired in muddy language and your vision and message will stay focused and intact.

This won’t be easy. But it doesn’t cost a thing and the potential benefits are enormous. Start today. Right now. Before you hit “Send” on your next e-mail, take a long, hard, critical look at it, yank out “utilize” and type in “use”. Then sit back, confident in your newfound ability to cut through the very fog that is blanketing your competition.