

# Something **FUNNY** about Business Communication:

12 Oddball Theories and 38 Tips  
for  
Getting What You Want on the Job

---

By Lynne Franklin

# Table of Contents

---

<b>Introduction</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>The Hydrant Theory</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>The World Is Screening Its Calls Theory</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>The “It’s Not About You” Theory</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>The Begin with the End in Sight Theory</b>	<b>7</b>
<b>The 5’1” Editor from New Jersey Theory</b>	<b>9</b>
<b>The Few the Proud Theory</b>	<b>10</b>
<b>The Gruel Theory and the Dog Pile Theory</b>	<b>12</b>
<b>The Communications Is Like Manufacturing Theory</b>	<b>14</b>
<b>The Words Make Bad Lovers Theory</b>	<b>15</b>
<b>The Misplaced Passion Theory</b>	<b>16</b>
<b>The \$64,000 Word Theory</b>	<b>17</b>
<b>About Lynne Franklin</b>	<b>18</b>

# Introduction

---

I've been in communication long enough to notice what works and what doesn't—and to have a skewed view of why these things are so. That has led me to do some slightly dangerous and very useful things in the field—depending upon my mindset and the situation.

**Slightly Dangerous** It was my only corporate job—and you're about to see why. I joined the company three years after it had a major loss and laid off a number of people. The person in charge of the bloodletting was Mort Zalk, a subsidiary president who had been kicked upstairs to corporate, ostensibly to take the heat so the chairman wouldn't have to.

Mort had bad arthritis. That meant he would drive into the underground parking garage and take the elevator up to the executive floor and stay there, until it was time to reverse his actions and go home. He didn't believe in management by walking around.

However, in the days of the corporate jet, Mort did like to fly. I'd heard from several people that he had a tendency to sit next to the newest employee and ask that person to justify his or her salary throughout the entire flight. I was grateful never to experience this personally.

After being hired to lead the public relations effort, I decided to make my contribution to the corporate culture. This involved creating Mort Zalk Day, wherein Mort comes out of his office, sees his shadow, and we have six months more of budget cuts and layoffs. And if you see Mort on Mort Zalk Day, *you're fired!*

**Very Useful** No doubt you've also had some rueful communication experiences. You shake your head at the foibles of your supervisors, clients and colleagues. I say, laugh about this stuff—maybe create your own day!

One of the reasons you can feel better about this is because you will now have more tools to handle these frustrations. That's because this tome—which I'm hoping will be very useful for you—not only tells you the problems but shares specific tips on how to get through the issue.

Use what you find here to turn frustrating experiences into situations that help you get what you want at work.

# The HyDrAnT Theory

---

All communications are like a hydrant and reviewers are like dogs—they have to whiz on it a bit to show you they’ve walked there.

My first encounter with this theory was after being hired to start the Public Relations Department at a Fortune 1000 Services company. One of my jobs was doing the company’s annual report. Each of the four subsidiaries had traditionally written the section that described its operations. “Let me!” I said, with youthful enthusiasm. “That way, all of the information will be consistent, so will the tone, and it will make us look like one united company instead of four loosely confederated operations.”

So I interviewed the subsidiary presidents and the corporate executives, did some industry research, and happily created what I thought was a solid first draft.

And then the reviewers descended: the chairman, president, subsidiary leaders, my boss, the VP of administration, the general counsel, the outside legal counsel, the accountants . . . By the time this six-month project was over (it felt as though it had taken double that), the number of people giving me a piece of their minds on the copy had swelled to 20.

My personal favorite horror story on this project was dealing with the legal counsel. He informed me that we couldn’t use the term “division” to describe the company’s different operations—although we had for decades. The legally correct term was “strategic business operating unit.” This was the only phrase we could use—and it couldn’t be abbreviated as “SBOU” but must be spelled out each time.

How can you satisfy the needs of 20 different reviewers? You can’t. But here’s what you *can* do.

## **Tip #1: Know Who’s the Boss**

Just because people are being asked for their comments doesn’t mean their suggestions should receive the same weight. Know the most important people for each communication, get close to them and listen to their ideas. When you reflect what the power brokers want—and earn their trust for doing so—they will likely support you should others start to grumble.

## **Tip #2: Tell Reviewers What You Expect from Them**

You’re really looking for two things: 1) to make sure everything is correct (editing for facts), and 2) to ensure everything is said correctly (editing for target audience understanding).

I call it the “two colored pen” approach. Let reviewers know if they see something that isn’t right, to mark the change in red pen on a hard copy (or for an electronic file, highlight it and attach the correction in a comment box in Track Changes). Any other suggestions—such as word choice or style—should be marked in blue (or altered in Track Changes but without a comment box). Inform reviewers that you will correct inaccuracies but you will use editorial judgment on the style suggestions—because that is why they hired you.

Remind them that the goal is not to have the piece sound as though *they* have written it, but to create something that *readers* will understand.

## **Tip #3: Invoke the Price Tag**

Remember that legal counsel? My approach to this was to go to the report designer and ask how much space would be added if we changed every “division” to “strategic business operating unit.” We agreed that it would add a page. I returned to the attorney and informed him this would add four pages to our report—because it was a saddle-stitched (stapled) book. Since I didn’t have the money to do this in my budget, I’d be happy to make the change if he would pony up the dough from his budget for the extra pages. Apparently, he had better uses for his money and chose not to do so. “Division” won.

I’ve often found that when people request a change and find out they must pay for it, they suddenly become more flexible.

Don’t be at the mercy of your reviewers—and become the hydrant yourself! Remind people of the purpose of the communication. That can help all of you base your decisions on whether or not a change supports this.

# The World Is **SCREENING** ITS **CALLS** Theory

---

People are looking for reasons not to read what you send. When they see typos, grammatical errors and misspellings, they think the writer is sloppy, stupid or self-involved. Then they send the communication to the actual or virtual wastebasket—and the opportunity is lost.

There are several traps we can stumble into when communicating for business. We can fall in love with our ideas. There's a rush to get information on to the computer screen because we feel passionate about sharing our thoughts. Or—let's face it—the communication is something that we *have* to write. So our rush is to get it over with. Or we're really pressed for time, so that's our rush. Then we hit the “print” or “send” button and move on to the next task.

When our communication reaches its intended, these people glance at it and see an error. And that's *all* they see. They miss any of our ideas because they're focusing on what we've done wrong.

***They think we're Sloppy:*** “She doesn't think I'm important enough to take a minute to proof or spell check this before sending it? I'm not even going to bother reading it!”

***They think we're Stupid:*** “Didn't he know this is a run-on sentence? Where did he learn how to write? I don't have time to correct his mistakes—forget it!”

***They think we're Self-involved:*** “Did she think I'd be so entranced with her idea that I wouldn't mind she's treating this memo like a text message? How unprofessional is that!”

Don't be an “S.”

## **Tip #1: Always Spell Check**

It's true: spell check won't catch everything: like “firs” for “first.” But it will get the most egregious items—and it doesn't take that long to do, even when you're pressed for time. If you haven't already set your email program to do this automatically before it sends a document, do that right now!

## **Tip #2: Read it Out Loud**

This slows you down, and you're less likely to think you see a word there because you expect to see it (which happens a lot when you read). This has an added bonus. When you speak your text and hit something that's awkward to say, it's just as awkward for your audience to read. That means it's time to change it. You've just used proofing as an opportunity to improve your text—and that's time well spent.

## **Tip #3: Have Someone Else Read It**

This is particularly important for proposals and communications that also are supposed to leave readers impressed with you. When you've looked at something one too many times, you can't see it any more. Have someone you trust be your extra set of eyes.

---

### **Tip #4: Line Up Writing Resources in Advance**

Unless you're a particularly anal former English major (I'll cop to this), you probably don't have instant recall on grammar and usage rules. That's OK—use those brain cells for something else. It pays to have several resources at hand—because if you have to search for them, you're likely to guess (wrong!) instead.

1. Have a stylebook for quick grammar, punctuation and usage rules. (I like *The Associated Press Stylebook*.)
2. Have a more detailed business writing reference to show you examples of communications, and because sometimes you need to know the difference between an “em” dash and an “en” dash. (I like *SkillPath's Business Communications Style Guide*.)
3. Have a dictionary. Printed versions are fine, but make sure they're not more than five years old (you'd be surprised at how rapidly the English language changes). Reputable online dictionaries generally stay up-to-date, but you must learn to ignore all the ads on the page. (I like [www.merriamwebster.com](http://www.merriamwebster.com).)

Having a thesaurus—which gives you synonyms when you realize you're using the same word too often—can be helpful, too. But make sure the new word you're choosing isn't so obscure that it makes readers go, “huh?”

Remember: the presentation is just as important as the message. When people get out the “red pens in their minds,” they're too busy feeling superior to see what you're trying to say—or they've already hit the “delete” key.

# The “It’s Not About You” Theory

---

People can spend more time considering what *they* want to say about their topic than what those they’re trying to reach want to know. This misplaced focus can make a communication *dissuade* rather than *persuade* the people who receive it.

You see it everywhere. There’s the memo written by someone who puts “I” in each sentence (just try to find a “you”—especially one that doesn’t involve what “you” should be doing for the “I”). There’s the LinkedIn page that drones on (for pages) about this person’s excellent qualities, until you scream, “This is too much—why can’t she just hit the high points!” There’s the PowerPoint presentation that spends the first 10 of a 20-minute talk focused on the wonderful company in whose presence you’re now lucky enough to sit.

What do you do in these situations? I’ll confess—my choice usually two of the three “D”s: dismiss it, dis it and dump it. Chances are good that none of these were the goal of the person creating the communication.

This is a pretty easy trap to fall into. Here are some tips to help you sidestep those It’s Not About You Theory holes.

## Tip #1: Know Your Target Audience

Is it a group of engineers that wants information in excruciating detail (and would consider a short communication a sign you hadn’t given something adequate thought)? Is it a CEO who wants a one-page summary (and would be annoyed with a 10-page plan)? Is it a group of people with varying levels of attention span (so it would be wise to include the executive summary and the details)?

What time of day will your audience likely see your communication (when they’re fresh in the morning or after a long day when they want to go home)? What device will they use to view it: a computer at the office, a tablet or a smartphone? How important will they consider what you’re sending (and if they think it’s unimportant, what can you do to move up your ideas on their food chain)?

In other words, be a method actor when it comes to communication—become your target audience. When you look at the communication from *their* perspective, you’ll automatically make it more effective.

## Tip #2: Solve Their Problems

It’s Marketing 101: people run away from pain faster than they run toward features and benefits. When your ideas can put an end to something that’s been plaguing the people you’re trying to reach, you’ve just made it easier for them to say “yes.”

## Tip #3: Use Language They Understand

Specifically, watch the jargon. If it’s an internal memo and everyone understands certain abbreviations, use these without spelling them out (because detailing something everyone knows slows down and annoys readers). If it’s going to a group that might not understand jargon, then either spell it out or define it, or don’t use it (otherwise you risk making those who aren’t familiar with it feel stupid—so they’re less likely to give you what you want).

If you’re writing to a specific person, understand his learning style. There are three main ones:

1. **Visual learners** get most of their information through their eyes. Use words such as “see,” “visualize” and “look” to connect with them. Since this is 75% of the population, you usually can’t go wrong using this language in communications to a group.
2. **Auditory learners**—20% of people—prefer to receive information through their ears. Use “hear,” “listen” and “sounds like” for them—or just speak with them.
3. **Kinesthetic learners**—the last 5%—get information primarily through touch. These folks like to take things apart or put them together. Use “feel,” “taste” and other tactile words with them.

Don’t be afraid to replay a person’s favorite phrases, too, as long as these aren’t clichés or sound fine when spoken but look foolish in writing. I had a college biology professor who incessantly said “in terms of,” so I used to drop one or two of these into my essays—because she liked them. I’m still sure that doing this helped my GPA in a subject where I wasn’t too hot!

# The **B**egin **W**ith **t**he **e**nd **i**n **S**ight Theory

---

Before creating any communication, know what it should accomplish. That will help you build the right content and words into it—increasing the chances you’ll get what you want.

Let’s face it: all communications are meant to persuade. The proposal to get management to accept a new idea or to choose to work with your company. The invitation to a brainstorming session you wish people to attend. The news release on a new product or service. You want the people who read it to *do* something.

Here’s the irony. *The most common failure in communication is that the writer does not include a call to action.*

How many times have you read an email about a change in your company, and then asked yourself, “So, what do they want me to *do* about it?” Or you see the new strategic plan and wonder, “How am I supposed to support this?” Or you get a pitch from a vendor on a new service, which includes all the features and benefits—and just ends there.

The best piece of compelling copy will be for naught if people don’t know what to do next. Because what they will do next is toss it out or hit the delete key.

Here’s what I do to make sure my readers know what’s expected of them—and that I’ve made it easy for them to take that next step.

## **Tip #1: Know What You Want**

How many times have you fired off an email response or returned a phone call and not thought about what you hope will happen? The next time, spend that extra few seconds before and actually answer this question: “What do I want people do after this?” If you believe in visualization, picture them taking the action you’d like. Then ask yourself some simple questions:

1. What problems will my approach solve for them? (Once again—people run away from pain faster than they run toward features and benefits.)
2. What will they need to know so they can agree with me?
3. What barriers would prevent them from taking the actions I want?
4. How can I include information—in this communication or somewhere else—that will overcome objections?

By knowing what you want—and how you can make others want the same thing—you’ve automatically increased the chances your reader will be persuaded by what you propose

## **Tip #2: Write with “Yes” in Mind**

Have you ever had to write a memo and thought, “They’ll never sign off on this!” And, of course, you were right. It’s the reverse of positive thinking. When you’re sure your ideas will be rejected, that negativity will leak out in a million ways: the words you choose, the way you organize the information, and how much time you spend answering possible objections in advance.

If you can’t write with the belief that your ideas will be accepted, then do something else until you can. Listen to Henry Ford: “If you think you can do a thing or you think you can’t do a thing, you’re right.” Don’t shoot yourself in the foot before you begin. If this is an important communication, also know when is a good time to write it. If you’re a morning person, don’t start at 3:00 in the afternoon when you’re at low energy.



---

### **Tip #3: Include the Call to Action**

Tell your readers what you want them to do—and how to do it. If it's a proposal, media “pitch” letter, or formal communication, the call to action falls at the end. You have used the rest of the piece to present your case so they will agree with you, and now you tell them how this should look.

If you're writing an email, then put the call to action at the top. You may even want to put it in the subject line. This is a shorter communication, so let your reader know right away what you want and then provide the (brief) details. Most people scan their emails. If your request falls at the bottom, they may not choose to scroll down several paragraphs to find out what you want and might miss it.

By the way—don't make this a “call me if you want to discuss this further.” You have no idea how important this is to them, or how many other things are hanging fire on their desks. Let them know *when* you will call to discuss the ideas—and then follow up.

These three easy steps increase the chances you'll get what you want—or at least get a fair hearing of your ideas. And even if you are turned down, you're likely to know why and can fix this the next time out.

# The 5'1" EDITOR FROM NEW JERSEY Theory

---

To keep a strong connection between a message and the people you're trying to reach, envision an editor who has gotten yet another article "pitch" letter from someone who hasn't read her magazine, standing with her hands on her hips and saying, "Frankly, honey—who cares?"

This woman really does exist. She was an editor from *Seventeen* Magazine, giving a seminar on how to interest magazine editors in a story pitch for an article. I realized there probably was not a tougher person on the planet to convince, and that if I could meet her needs, anyone else would be easy.

I'll confess: I never *did* send her a pitch. After looking through *Seventeen*, and looking at my life and interests, it was clear I was the wrong demographic. If nothing else, her workshop prevented me from sending an uninformed pitch that would have been quickly discarded, so you could say she saved us both some time and grief. But her lessons still resonate and should be widely applied: no matter what the goal is for a communication—and who is the "goalee."

## Tip #1: Do Your Homework

It's so simple but often the first thing we forget. If we're trying to reach a publication (print or electronic), then spend some time reading it. Apply the same approach if it's a television or online program. If we're trying to reach a person, find out what you can about him or her first. Google, LinkedIn, Facebook, Twitter, Pinterest: you can gather all sorts of information. If it's someone in your organization—or another organization where you have connections—talk with people who know that person.

If it's a company—a potential client or employer, perhaps—then check out its website (particularly the news releases) and competitors' sites. And if it's a public company, read its financial reports, quarterly financial conference call transcripts or analyst research reports.

This will separate you from all the other folks who have just done a cursory job, or haven't even bothered. It also will fulfill the need of those you're trying to reach: the belief that we're all unique and the world should only send messages tailored to us.

## Tip #2: Show You Know

Now that you have this intelligence, weave it in to your communication.

1. Explain why the story you're proposing would be of interest to the publication's readership or program's viewership. (This shows you know who reads it/watches it and what they want.)
2. Reference an important point you discovered about the person from your online research or from people who know him or her. (This shows you value that person's ideas, opinions, feelings, etc., which helps to create a bond.)
3. Mention the issues you know the company faces and how you have addressed them for other firms. (This shows how you can reduce the company's risk in working with you—because you already know and have applied information these people need.)

## Tip #3: Take Your Ego Out of the Equation

Let's face it: even though you're reaching out to this person or organization for your own purposes, as far as the recipients are concerned, it's all about them. Focus any communication on their needs. Editors and producers want good stories: to keep their readership/viewership up and advertisers happy. Businesspeople and organizations want good ideas, or to improve their implementation: so their departments or operations are stronger, more cost-effective and competitive. Give them a taste of how you can solve their problems—rather than a dose of how wonderful you are.

The truth is that not every pitch you toss will be a good one.. You often have no control over the reasons why the batter won't take a swing. But if your approach is well crafted, you've eliminated the most common reason for being turned down—and sooner or later, your proposals are going to connect.

# The **Few** **the** **PROUD** Theory

---

Most communication could benefit from more thought and fewer words.

We've all been subjected to them. The memos that go on forever. The 200-page self-help book that was really only one good magazine article. The presentation that takes 10 minutes before getting to the first salient point. And invariably within these communications are the sentences that become a paragraph—or at least so long that by the time you reach the end, you can't remember what the subject was.

And worse—sometimes we were the author! But we're smarter now and have learned to watch for the signs of flabby prose.

My husband, who has lived for 20+ years with my tendency to edit, uses a line from Lewis Carroll's poem "Jabberwocky" to describe my approach: "One, two! One, two! And through and through/The vorpal blade went snicker-snack!" Here are the blades I carry.

## **Tip #1: Build a Super Structure**

Organize your thoughts *before* you write. If you're not certain where you're going, get your ideas down and then review them for the most logical progression. For example, if your intent is to persuade, put your strongest argument first—if you put it last, readers might not get that far and your best thinking will be missed. (See *The Begin with the End in Sight Theory*.)

## **Tip #2: If a Word Doesn't Add—Subtract It**

Be merciless until there's nothing left to tighten. Start with clichés. Never again write "enclosed please find" instead of "here is," or "due to the fact that" instead of "because," or "at this time" instead of "now." Also know that if a sentence is 30 words, it's too long, and there must be something you can cut. The average length in business writing should be 10 to 15 words. Change that to eight to 10 if the material is complex, or when you're writing emails.

## **Tip #3: Practice Word Choice Variety**

Don't begin several sentences in a row—or consecutive paragraphs—with the same word (especially "I"). Read each paragraph to ensure you aren't repeating a word or phrase too often. But use that thesaurus sparingly: don't signal readers that you're searching very hard for another word to use. Also vary your transitions. My personal failing is to frequently use "so," which means I look for that. Repetition—unless it's effectively used for emphasis ("government of the people, by the people and for the people")—is boring and makes readers zone out.

## **Tip #4: Use the Active Voice**

It's the difference between "I will do it" versus "It will be done by me." The first is much stronger—and shorter. The only reasons to take the passive approach are if you don't know who did something, or don't wish to identify that person.

## **Tip #5: Watch for Consistency**

Keep an eye on changes in tense, such as sliding between past and present. Choose one and stick with it—unless you're actually discussing different time frames. Do the same thing with capitalization: it's either "Company" or "company" in the middle of a sentence. (I default to the latter because the former can look like legalese or bespeak a firm's ego.) And watch that your subheads use the same approach: all bold, or underlined or the same color.

---

**Tip #6: Keep Writing Reference Materials—or Buddies—Handy**

If grammar, punctuation and usage are not your strong suits, know where to get help. (See *The World Is Screening Its Calls* for my favorites.) Spell check is a good start but doesn't catch everything. So have those books by your desk or as favorites on your computer, where you can easily access them—because if they're down the hall, you're more likely to guess, and perhaps wrongly. (You noticed I used "so" didn't you?) Or find that grammar maven who always seems to know the obscure rules. (That would be me.)

Brevity is more than the soul of wit. It is a tool for sharpening your ideas, prose and presentation. While not easy to achieve, it's a welcome addition to any communication and always appreciated by those who read it.

# The **GRUEL** Theory and **DOG PILE** Theory

---

*Gruel:* When writing a document that will be reviewed by a number of people, put more content in the first draft than you know will survive.

People are more likely to remove information than add it. And if your first draft isn't strong enough, by the time reviewers are done, all you'll have left is gruel.

Perhaps it's because I deal with accountants and attorneys on a regular basis, but often it seems reviewers are at their happiest when they can cut something out of your copy. For some—such as the groups just named—it's a need to be conservative and reduce risk. For others, it can be a way of feeling superior. And occasionally, when you're really lucky, it's because you've found a good editor who improves your writing by tightening it up. (See *The Few the Proud Theory*.)

There is, of course, the inverse:

*Dog Pile:* When people see that others already have edited your text, they want to add their comments, too. They pile their changes on top of each other—like a bunch of grade school kids playing tackle—and the result is a meaningless heap.

This just happened to me. The 600-word article I sent to a client two weeks ago returned with more than 900 words today. If it had been 300 more words of worthy content, I would have been happy to see it. Instead, it was just bloat.

Here's what I do to deal with both theories:

## **Tip #1: Laugh**

The article I wrote was about a diabetes management program. My laugh was that it went out thin and came back overweight—the opposite of what the company intended for the program I was writing about. My greatest chuckle came from reading a 63-word sentence, with the end repeating words from the beginning. It was so long that even the re-writer forgot where it started!

## **Tip #2: Don't Look for Imagined Sights**

Don't begin with thinking, "People don't like my ideas (or me) and took them out," or "They don't think I covered everything adequately so I had to add something." People make changes for all kinds of reasons—and many have nothing to do with you. It could be someone had a bad day and is taking it out on your copy. It could be that someone hates a particular turn of phrase and will remove it whenever it appears. It could be that one reviewer doesn't like another, so feels compelled to alter that person's suggestions. You can only guess, so don't start by feeling inadequate.

## **Tip #3: Ask for Clarification**

If someone makes a change you don't understand—or don't agree with—ask about it. Most people are happy to explain their suggestions. This situation presents two opportunities for you: 1) to learn something you might not otherwise know (ask me about the subjunctive tense ...), and 2) to show you cared enough about what a commenter said to inquire further. Who knows: by discussing something, you might even convince the person that *your* approach is better!

---

**Tip #4: Ask “Does the Change Improve the Copy?”**

Did it take too long to say something, and now it’s more concise? Did I need to include a longer explanation so the ultimate audience for this piece has a better sense of what is meant? Did I get sloppy and use incorrect grammar and punctuation, which someone has corrected to my shame?

Remember, you want to have the final piece meet your goal: to persuade, to educate, to whatever. If someone’s comment moves you closer to your goal, that person has actually helped you.

Sometimes you’ll be forced for whatever reason to make changes that don’t improve the text, for reasons beyond your control. Here’s a trick for that, too. I call it the “brown thought cloud.” In my head, I give the person the talking to I think he or she deserves about the stupid change I must make. I get really snarky about it. Then I let it go—and return to Tip #1.

# The COMMUNICATIONS IS LIKE MANUFACTURING Theory

---

Instead of the old “push” model—making as many products as the equipment had capacity for—manufacturers now use a “pull” model—creating demand for their products and then making the right number of them.

Effective communication focuses on the other party and creates an interest in receiving information (pull), rather than the communicator shoving out more data (push).

You don't have to look far for abuses of this one. The email thread that started two years ago and is still bouncing around with no resolution—because it's so easy to hit “reply” and “forward” without thinking. The nearly daily e-newsletters you receive from people you don't remember ever meeting. The analytical personality who sends you volumes of information on a topic because he truly believes “more is better.”

No wonder we're all on information overload! It seems too few people are thinking about what *we need* versus what *they want us to do*.

It's up to us to break this cycle. Here are some questions to keep us from being part of the problem.

## **Tip #1: Is this Communication Necessary?**

In general, we default to wanting to share information. But we need to take that extra second to think about what the people we're trying to reach really want from us. If it's that analytical guy mentioned earlier: he can hardly wait until you send more data, so go ahead! But what if it's someone who already received hundreds of emails a day—and is unhappy about it?

Do we need to send the email with a bit of information this morning, another with some more this afternoon, and a third tidbit tomorrow morning? Sometimes it's better to wait until you have it all and can send just one. Why risk annoying the person you're trying to reach?

## **Tip #2: Is this the Best Way to Communicate?**

Back to that endless email—like those mythical fruitcakes at the holidays that circle the globe. One of the main reasons this happens is no one picks up the phone and has a five-minute conversation—or even worse, people won't walk down the hall and poke their heads into someone's office for a quick decision. Ask what's the *most efficient* way to get something done—rather than what's the *easiest way* for you—and take that approach

## **Tip #3: Am I Really Adding Value?**

This is my beef about e-newsletters. I understand the theory: provide some good information to showcase the value my company offers, which encourages potential customers to contact me. But most of the ones I see seem to scream “me, Me, ME!”

They may begin with a chit-chatty tidbit about what the author has been up to lately. They may follow up with a project they just completed, which they thought was interesting (so you should, too). They may give you platitudes about your industry to show they know it (aren't you tired of reading about “what you can do in a difficult economy”—which begins with hiring their firm?).

The best ones—and the only ones anyone really reads—are the e-newsletters that give us ideas we can use to make improvements right away. So when you're doing this, put the value up front—and save the happy talk about your latest holiday for a Twitter or Facebook posting.

As long as I borrowed from the evolution of manufacturing to make a point, let me take a page from science, too. “Just because we can do something doesn't mean we should.” By showing respect for the needs of the people you're trying to reach, you will earn theirs. This increases the chance they'll take or return your call and actually read the emails you send.

# The WORDS Make BAD LOVERS Theory

If you fall in love with a turn of phrase you've created,  
you won't want to change it—even when you should.  
You'll make the words around it do backbends so you can keep it.  
Reviewers will be uncannily drawn to your phrase and try to change it.  
And you will react out of proportion to their criticism,  
which could leave you frustrated and cost you credibility points.

It's that phrase or sentence or paragraph you think really shines. You smile every time you read it—and congratulate yourself on the moment of inspiration that led you to create it. Then why in the world is everyone who reads it trying to change it?

It's up to us to break this cycle. Here are some questions to consider ensuring we're not part of the problem.

## **Tip #1: Whose Purpose Does It Serve?**

Does our deathless prose actually help readers understand the point we're making—or is its point to make us look good?

Let's be honest: anyone who writes something for others must have a bit of an ego—otherwise she wouldn't be *able* to write. But let's keep the emphasis on “bit of” rather than “an ego.” It's quaint to read Victorian novels that address us as “dear reader,” reminding us that the author has an active role in what we're reading. However, it's death to a communication or piece that's meant to persuade when our writerly fingerprints smear the important points.

## **Tip #2: Do Others' Suggestions Improve What We've Written?**

This is perhaps the best test of the amount of ego in your writing. Spend that extra second asking, “What will my readers better understand: my presentation or the new one?” And if it's the new one, make the change. (Then find a way to work your beloved phrase into a conversation with friends who will appreciate it.) When your purpose is to communicate with others, their needs trump yours.

Sometimes the suggestion doesn't improve the text, and your approach is the better solution—then keep it. Some people don't believe they've done their job unless they change something they're reviewing, so know when this is happening to you.

## **Tip #3: Don't Argue about It.**

If you are (inwardly) jutting out your jaw as you explain to someone why your words are better than theirs, then you've already lost the battle. There's no way you can come off as anything but defensive or egotistical—calling your credibility into question. It's just not worth it. Over your career, you'll create many wonderful communications—if you don't antagonize the people who pay you to do this. Live to write another day.

OK, I'll fess up. I liked the “writerly fingerprints smear the important points” line. What do you think: did it improve this piece or should I change it?



# The MISPLACED PASSION Theory

---

When people are passionate about a subject,  
they want to tell everyone everything.  
But people don't want to know everything—  
they just want to hear what's important to *them*.

Business owners will spend all day speaking about their products' or services' features and benefits, their company's history, their mission and vision . . .

CEOs and CFOs of public companies will bend investors' ears on what makes their companies so great and why people should buy their stock today . . .

And you—where's your passion? What will you talk about ad nauseam—long after people have stopped rolling their eyes and have started shutting them? (I'm guilty, too. For me, it's how good communication can solve just about any kind of problem with customers, employees, investors and the media.)

Although people love your passion, they hate wading through the pile of prose between them and what they really want to know. So as much as we love our subject, we need to give a little love to the people we're trying to reach. Here are the two tricks I use to keep my intoxication with a topic from pushing people away rather than drawing them to me.

## **Tip #1: What Am I Trying to Do?**

It's Communications 101: what's the purpose of all this? Am I trying to educate people on a topic? Am I trying to get their agreement? Am I trying to get them to take action (and what would that be, by the way)? Am I trying to get information from them?

You'd be surprised by the number of people who don't consider why they're speaking or writing before they start. Don't be one of them. If you know what you want, you've exponentially increased the chances you'll actually get it.

## **Tip #2: Who Am I Trying to Reach?**

Let's face it: your family and friends will cut you a lot more slack on your latest love than anyone else. But not your boss, when you're trying to convince her that you have a great idea for a new project. But not your client, when you're trying to convince him to spend more money with you when he's already feeling budget constrained. But not the reporter on the phone, when you're trying to convince him that this is a great story his readers can hardly wait to know more about.

So when you're spending that extra few seconds deciding what you want to accomplish before the communication, spend a few more thinking about the people on the other end of it. Here's your checklist.

- Why would they want to hear from you?
- When would they want to hear from you?
- How would they want to hear from you?
- What's in it for them?
- What objections could they raise to your idea—and how could you address these up front so they don't get the chance to use them to end the communication?

And the all-important—and often overlooked—What do I do if they actually *agree* with me and want to move forward? That's another downside of passion: sometimes we're so busy waxing eloquent about our subject that we don't know when to stop! Then we can run the risk of talking people *out* of something they initially agreed to.

Before that next email, news release, proposal, phone conversation, tweet—mix compassion for your target audience with the *passion* for your subject. You'll create your own Love Potion #9.

# The M\$64,000 WORD Theory

---

Many people choose longer, more complex words because they think it makes them look smarter.

They don't realize the result takes longer to read, can send people (unhappily) to the dictionary, and gives the message that the writer is more important than the reader.

Experience has taught me there's only one legitimate place for \$64,000 words: academia. These people love big words—and often the longer and the more obscure, the better. If you're trying to showcase your intelligence with this group—or speak in the language these people prefer—then these words are one accepted way to do both. (OK, academics: feel free to take your potshots at me on this one—but I'm betting you'll do it polysyllabically!)

I'll cop to being a “wordie.” I like to run into unfamiliar words, check out their definitions, and use them as appropriate (which is mostly in my head or to share a laugh with friends and family). But I'm out of the mainstream on this.

For most people in a business setting, the \$64,000 word is, at best, an annoyance. If they don't know what it means, their first reaction is usually to feel stupid—and chances are, that's not what you intended. Their next reaction is anger—at you. Are you trying to make fun of them? Are you just being a show-off? Do you even know what the word *means*?

By this time, they've gotten so far from the ideas you're trying to share that they may never return—which means you won't reach your objective. Everybody loses: especially you, if you wanted them to approve something.

To avoid this situation, use these tips:

## **Tip #1: Know Your Audience**

If you're communicating with another wordie, go ahead and use challenging language. This person will appreciate it. (Honestly: I just wrote a memo with “purview” in it because I knew the CEO would like it!) If not, forget it. Most people read for content and not for style, and if you're choosing words that scream “pay attention to me,” then they're shouting over your content.

## **Tip #2: Watch for Jargon**

This falls into the same category as \$64,000 words for me. Those who don't know them feel excluded, stupid and angry. When jargon is appropriate, define your term the first time it appears. Those who know it will congratulate themselves, and you'll avoid negativity from everyone else.

## **Tip #3: Kill the Latinate Words**

These are the long ones that sound like legal terms, and have their origins in Latin. (For my money, there's a reason they call it a “dead language.”) This includes terms such as “therefore” (try “so”), “pursuant” (try “after”), “heretofore” (try “until now”), and “notwithstanding” (try “although”). When given the option of a complex versus a simple word, go for the latter—don't let your words get in the way of your meaning.

## **Tip #4: Use the Thesaurus Sparingly**

Most people pick one up because they're using the same word a lot and want to give their readers some variety. This is a noble gesture. But a thesaurus can also be a crutch. Instead of trying to find new ways to express yourself, you just want to change one word. And often you end up going several words deep among the synonyms to find one that will work—and the further you go on the list, the more obscure the term becomes. Remember: it's not just word choice—it's about thoughtful writing.

You want to keep your readers focused on the text—not the subtext (I'm smart, you're dumb, etc.). The next time you have a choice, select the shorter rather than the longer word. You'll find it usually takes you a much greater distance toward your communication's goal than the bigger ones.



# ABOUT Lynne Franklin

You could say Lynne started Lynne Franklin Wordsmith over 20 years ago because she was in danger of being made a partner at the world's largest investor relations agency. Or because a tarot card reader told her to. Or because she wanted to prove that wearing pantyhose didn't make her more productive. All of those would be true.

But the real truth is that being a corporate and marketing communications consultant and speaker allows her to do what she do best: create meaningful communications to help businesspeople solve their problems and get what they want. This takes a number of forms:

- 1. Author** Her recent book, *Getting Others to Do What You Want*, takes the position that business leaders screw themselves over every day because they think it's about them. She created a process, called "The Four Gets," to help people distinguish between *telling* others what to *do* and *getting* them to do what you *want*.
- 2. Speaker and Trainer** Lynne's programs provide a mix of 1) theory (neuroscience, body language, personality theory), 2) personal experience, 3) practice (based on learning theory), 4) having each person create an action plan for using what she or he learned—so the program really can make a difference, and 5) fun!
- 3. Executive Ghost Writer** Lynne has regular conversations with business leaders, then creates blogs, speeches, etc., in their voice. "Give me 15 minutes a week and I'll give you over an hour back." Her goal is to make you sound as smart as you are.
- 4. Outsourced Corporate Communications** Small to mid-sized companies often don't have a full-time need or can't afford a full-time professional. We give them the benefit of a senior counselor. We also create a customized marketing and advertising team for larger, ongoing programs.
- 5. Member of the Communications Team** Larger firms and communication agencies can be short-handed, have an uneven workflow or lack expertise in a key area. Lynne becomes another smart pair of hands.

**For more on her professional and educational background, visit [www.linkedin.com/in/lynnefranklin](http://www.linkedin.com/in/lynnefranklin).**

**If you like what you read here, sign up for her monthly neuroscience and communications newsletter—*In Communicado*—at [www.yourwordsmith.com](http://www.yourwordsmith.com).**

**To learn about how she can help you, contact Lynne at 847-729-5716 or [lynne@yourwordsmith.com](mailto:lynne@yourwordsmith.com).**



LYNNE FRANKLIN WORDSMITH

2019 Glenview Road Glenview, Illinois 60025