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**When I was at *The Wall Street Journal*, it was pounded into you to write clearly, concisely, and free of jargon; and to write not just for your sources but so your mother could understand it too (or at least your readers' mothers).**

If my mother, an erudite and voracious reader, who was not steeped in the business world but followed every story I wrote, couldn't understand what I was writing about, then it was too "inside baseball" (oops, jargon). Now, usually it didn't get to that point, as copy editors at the *Journal* were fantastic about catching corporate-speak. But it wasn't easy. The problem was the subject matter: the corporate world was – and still is – so filled with spools of jargon and made-up words, that avoiding the lingo was nearly impossible.

The worst cases of word-crime often come under the category of firing people. It is a long and ignoble tradition. In the early 1990s, when "downsizing" was all the rage, Citibank wanted to avoid the pejorative and came up with "rightsizing" instead. Ah, that feels better. You've been rightsized. Only it sounds like a variation on the South Beach diet. Or liposuction. In the UK the phrase is even worse. You are "made redundant," a horrible term reminiscent of the "memory holes" in George Orwell's dystopian novel *1984*, where an unwanted fact or an inconvenient truth is wiped from history.

Jargon comes in many forms – the euphemism, the contorted metaphor, the "weasel words." But perhaps the most frequent deployment of jargon these days comes in the form of a noun converted into a verb – I will not call it verbization – of which there seems to be an epidemic. You onboard your consultants, cross-walk your materials, and bucketize your deliverables. Then, once you bulletize your key messages, you can socialize them with your colleagues so you can all calendar a meeting before finally laddering up your documents to senior executives.

After all, you'll need to check that they are operating at the right latitude (and no, we're not talking about an airline). Maybe do a little more dialoguing, to establish perimeters so people know who is doing what – keeping an eye on externalization points, of course, while increasing the numerator of delivery in order to effect change. Did you get that, or should I iterate with you? Orwell and William Safire are most certainly turning in their linguistic graves.

If you are involved in an M&A assignment or something highly confidential, you are over the wall or under the tent, but never over the tent. In the accounting world, there is the forward-facing forecast, not to be confused with the backward-facing forecast – which probably defies accounting logic anyway.

The "jargonization" of the business world is easy to ridicule and has been satirized at least since Dickens took aim at the legal profession. But creating a language is part of creating a culture. Societies need their own languages and terms, whether it's a small Appalachian community or a mega-company with 200,000

employees that needs a language to tether its people together. At best, it allows you to speak in shorthand and cements the fact that you are part of a group – and in the know.

Indeed, languages are constantly evolving or else they are dying. The English of *Macbeth* is not the English of *The Huffington Post* or CNBC. “Pick up Shakespeare, which was modern, educated English at the time, or the English of King Alfred’s time, which reads like German,” says Anthony M. Aristar, Professor of Linguistics at Eastern Michigan University and Director of the Institute of Language and Information Technology. “This is what language does – it changes over time.”

During the first Gulf War in the early 1990s, the US Army came up with the verb “to attrit” from the noun attrition. “It made total sense and served a purpose,” Aristar says – a shorthand phrase for the wearing down of an enemy army. Another reason why language evolves is to keep outsiders from understanding or infiltrating your group, whether it was “thieves’ cant” in 18th century London or the indecipherable language of the intelligence community.

Corporations have their own distinct goals for creating a language that is known to their employees and those that they collaborate with, such as consultants and vendors. “It rapidly encapsulates what they want to say and shows ‘I’m a member of the group.’ Belonging is important,” says Aristar. “I defy people to find any group that functions as a social unit that doesn’t have its own language.”

Journalists have no room to be smug. They are just as guilty as corporations or the military, though their quirky work-speak is mainly confined to their own strange communities, or even individuals. One of my beloved former colleagues at the *Journal* used to “run some traps” (do some digging with sources) before it

was time to “break some glass,” which was the journalistic equivalent of American football’s two-minute warning: a frenzy of calls to company spokespeople, increasing the chance of a leak, or that a company would upend (pre-empt) your scoop.

Widely used terms among journalists include the “nut graf,” which is the paragraph that distills the broader significance of a story. Then there is the “lede” (which just seems like a misspelling left to stand) that is the opening passage of a story; the 10-point (the *Journal*’s inside term for the “What’s News” summary on page one); and “upfiling” the “A-hed” – that is, filing to the editor the quirky story that used to sit in the middle of the front page of the *Journal*.

But corporations are the easiest targets for the language police. They must approach words with caution because of the potential legal implications and also have to consider diverse internal and external audiences – employees, shareholders, regulators, journalists, and so on. The effect can be to dull their corporate utterances as writers strive too hard to speak to everyone. Yet, in dealing with the vast flow of information of varying technical detail that comes out of any large company, the jargon still creeps in. But it is one thing to have your own language internally, quite another to export it when you try to communicate with everyone else.

Companies’ audiences are rarely sympathetic and targeting their use of language is often a shorthand way of criticizing “big business” itself. As Professor Aristar says, “It’s an easy way of criticizing a group you don’t like; and, of course, who likes corporations?” ☹

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## SIMPLE ISN'T STUPID: THE CAMPAIGN FOR PLAIN ENGLISH

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### So, how to reconcile good writing with the demands of your corporate bosses?

In his famous 1946 essay *Politics and the English Language*, George Orwell criticized ugly and inaccurate written English. Here are his six rules of good writing:

- ❧ Never use a metaphor, simile, or other figure of speech which you are used to seeing in print.
- ❧ Never use a long word where a short one will do.
- ❧ If it is possible to cut a word out, always cut it out.
- ❧ Never use the passive where you can use the active.

- ❧ Never use a foreign phrase, a scientific word, or a jargon word if you can think of an everyday English equivalent.
- ❧ Break any of these rules sooner than say anything outright barbarous.

His rules have aged well. Companies should have standards and stick to them – and yes, let it be known to journalists and others.

For guidance, many look to the annually updated *Associated Press Stylebook*. Another tool is Strunk & White’s *The Elements of Style*, which for many years has been required reading for English classes at American colleges.

The website [www.unsuck-it.com](http://www.unsuck-it.com) “translates” corporate-speak into everyday language. For example, the word: “touchpoint” is translated as, “the marketer’s erogenous zone – an interaction between a business and a customer.”

Another enjoyable website on language is the popular [languagelab](http://languagelab) <http://languagelab.ldc.upenn.edu/nll> published by the academic duo Mark Liberman and Geoffrey Pullum. Theirs is a rather biting commentary on the abuse of language and has a strong following.

Finally, as Shakespeare said, kill all the lawyers. You may get sued but your prose will sing.