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Work toward clear communication

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If you've ever spoken to a native of Great Britain, you may have felt you were two people separated by a common language. While we all rely upon the same words and fundamental rules of grammar, sometimes language can actually get in the way of good communication. Worse still, language can even become a weapon and a means of deception.

I've noticed recently that wordiness must be associated with importance and relevance. Legal analyses of simple issues can ramble on for pages in one single sentence, the boredom only broken by commas, semi colons and colons.

An Occupational Safety and Health Administration notice published in the Federal Register on Aug. 24 revising the existing Respiratory Protection Standard to add definitions and requirements for assigned protection factors contains 62,493 words in 6,777 paragraphs. Clearly, a document like this is not designed with readability in mind.

But quantity doesn't mean quality. Consider the documents that underpin the strength of our society, like the Preamble to the Constitution (52 words) and the Gettysburg Address (a scant 267 words). They are simple, straightforward communications. Heck, the entire Bill of Rights -- the first 10 amendments to our Constitution -- contains only 461 words.

While most confusion is due to simple wordiness, some documents appear to be intended to deceive. If you don't believe this, just look at a bag of water-softening salt.

The kind I buy proudly proclaims that it is "up to 96.4 percent pure salt," which means it could be only 3.6 percent salt. It all depends on the impression you want to create.

Before this diatribe grows longer than the Preamble and the Gettysburg Address and fast approaches the Bill of Rights, let me say this: It's time to stop. When writing, keep it short and sweet, to the point and help readers get your message quickly and easily. If you must include long descriptions, summarize at the start so readers don't need to wade through pages of text to find the key messages. Take your cue from journalists, who put the most critical information at the top of their stories, not buried deep within.

Do this, and your readers will thank you. Enough said.

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