

The Proof Angel Summary of

Writing resources: September 2013

Waffle indicators

Some words and phrases should always set alarm bells ringing in your head. Very often they are padding.

In speech, they can be giving time to think. I once worked with a Director of Human Resources who loved the phrase "in terms of". She could get it into a sentence several times, in the same way that ordinary mortals use "um". Ask her a difficult question at the end of a presentation and the first sentence of the answer would often include her favourite phrase 5 or 6 times.

If you find yourself using any of these waffle indicators, stop and think.

Do they need to be in that sentence? Are you really saying what you mean to say? Have you merely started to write before you have worked it out?

In writing it can be helpful to get something down & then tinker, but most of us find it hard to keep quiet until we have worked out what to say out loud.

Even when writing, why put down something that needs to be crossed out almost straight away?

If we can manage to avoid these words and phrases, we are automatically cutting down our chances of cluttering our writing.



The Proof Angel is the trading name of Sarah Perkins, freelance editor and proofreader.

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Here are some of the main culprits:



Writing a difficult email

Here is a post about how to avoid sending an embarrassing email from the Writers Write blog:

<http://writerswrite.co.za/nine-ways-to-avoid-the-emotional-email>

There are some very good points here, although I'm not convinced about the sign-off style. Some other strategies have always served me well over the years.

- It is usually good to write down exactly how you feel. When you are in a bad mood, it is usually bad business to tell the other person how you feel. So combine these two facts.
 - Go into your favourite writing app & say how you feel. Do it quickly, without too much effort. You are not in your email, so there is no chance you will hit send by

mistake. You will feel better for getting it out of your system.

- Then walk away. Go to a meeting, go for a walk, leave it overnight. Just don't dwell on it. Occupy your mind with something else - do not keep saying to yourself "and another thing..."
- When you come back, you will have created some space, which will probably make you calmer about the whole thing. NOW is the time to go into email & make a start.
- When you have finished you will probably read through to check you have said all you want to say. Now read it again, pretending you are the recipient & thinking of how it would be to get that email. Rewrite anything that might make you think:
 - Who do you think you are?
 - Have you read what I sent you?
 - Will you stop that sales patter?
 - Why do I care about that?
 - Or any other similar questions that are going to make things worse.
- If the situation is really difficult, get someone else to read it. Tell them that you are annoyed, but you don't want to make things worse. The hardest part is to listen to what this person says. Often they pick the best sentence & say it should come out. Try to remember that you asked for an unbiased opinion. If you don't value that person's opinion, why did you ask them?

- Try to think what the response might be to your email, and make sure you have an answer. This will stop you from backing yourself into a corner.
- If you are having an argument & you have a list of things to say, keep your weakest argument back. That way if you don't win with this email you have something new to say next time. Suppose you need to take the day off next Tuesday, & you come up with a list of reasons why your boss should say yes. Your boss says no. What is your next move?
 - Repeat the list & sound like a moaner?
 - Say, "O go on, please?" and sound weak?
 - Come up with another reason why the answer should be yes. Even if you only point out that you really need the time, that statement has more effect if it is not at the end of a long list.

It is surprising how often an argument is won by just one more message adding your weakest argument to "I'm sorry, but I don't agree with you. After all..."

Reducing a spell checker problem

One of the main problems with a spell checker is that it tells you whether the word you have typed is spelled properly whether you have used the right word or not. For example, it didn't notice I meant whether in that last sentence. The only way to avoid this completely is to pay attention & check what you type, but there are some words that cause more trouble than others. These are the words we rarely use, and can be hard to spot, but look silly and/or cause offence.

Like when you type that you were office manger. I wonder how many times in an average year most of us use that word outside the carol service?

Word has the solution to this problem: the exclusion dictionary. You tell it the words you want to be highlighted for you to review. It is useful for:

- words you rarely use and
- words you know you tend to muddle.

The detail of setting this up depends on the version of Word you are using, but this link has some step by step instructions to help you:

<http://wordfaqs.mvps.org/ExcludeWordFromDic.htm>

You will gradually find the words you need to add for the sort of subject matter you type, but here is a list to start you off:

- Manger (for manager)
- Leaning (for learning)
- Pubic (for public)
- Tropical (for topical)
- Tank (for thank)

Top tips on internet lists

List writers may not be the first group to spring to mind when you wonder who needs help, but I suppose they need some kind of framework as much as the rest of us.

Here are the top tips on list making from the Stroppy Editor, who blogs at <http://stroppyeditor.wordpress.com>:

1. Make the first tip short.
2. Make the second tip longer, with a few polysyllables and a subordinate clause, perhaps even a second sentence. This will create a sense of development and give readers the impression that your tips are carefully thought through.
3. Then chillax with some slang and an exclamation mark, to show that tips are fun!

4. "Base one tip on a dubious quote from someone like Einstein or Gandhi," as Shakespeare said.
5. Paradoxically, if you begin a tip by suggesting it's going to be complicated, you can get readers to swallow any old tripe as they won't want to think they're stupid for not getting it.
6. Tips that contain statistics make readers 74% less likely to think you're just making it up.
7. Are you a person? A question to which the answer is yes will keep readers feeling involved.
8. "It's all about having the right attitude" is a must for any list of tips, because the right attitude is a focus on attitude rather than ability. Nobody with ability will be reading.
9. Social media bring new opportunities but also new obligations. So you can safely follow a zeitgeisty mock-profundity with a non sequitur.
10. Everybody will skim over the penultimate tip, so you can say anything you like and I'm not wearing any pants.
11. Ten is a suspiciously round number, so adding an eleventh tip will stop you looking like you're a cynical self-publicist who's just dashed off a gimmicky list of worthless drivel.

It reminds me of Jack Point in *The Yeomen of the Guard* when he sings "Oh winnow all my folly folly folly & you'll find a grain or two of truth among the chaff."

Snappier emails reach readers: read how to do it

Email is a wonderful invention. It is also a pain in the neck. You turn your back for 5 minutes & there are a dozen more of the things in your inbox. Some of them are clogged up with time wasting phrases. This sort of language makes readers more likely to give up & move on to the next one. We all know that, because it is how we behave ourselves.

The trick is to recognise when we are falling into the trap. Why not start your own list of annoying phrases and make an effort to avoid them yourself? This list from Writers Write is a good starting point:

1. **I think...** When a sentence begins with this phrase, it tells the recipient that you are unsure about yourself. Your tone must be assertive and confident.
2. **Please be advised...** Be direct. If you are informing a debtor that payment is overdue then state the obvious. 'Your cheque is overdue' is to the point and unpretentious.
3. **Please do not hesitate to contact me...** People will contact you if they are interested in your product or have a query. This is an irritating cliché. The message you are sending out is that you are not an original thinker.
4. **Kindly...** 'Please' works better than this old-fashioned word.
5. **Attached please find...** This archaic phrase is impersonal, & the word 'find' shows a lack of confidence. It is better to say: I have attached...