

Written any gobbledygook lately?

By Dr. Henry T. Price

So far, it's been a good year for states and their revenues. It's a good thing, too, because a lot of states are finding out that the declining writing skills of many of their employees are costing them money.

The National Commission on Writing for America's Families, Schools, and Colleges released a report, "Writing: A Powerful Message from State Government," based on data provided by human resources offices in 49 of the 50 states.

Even though writing is a hugely important and costly job requirement for private sector employees studied in an earlier survey, the report revealed that it is even more so for the nearly 2.7 million people who work for state governments. Training programs in writing skills for these state employees are estimated to cost taxpayers more than \$220 million a year.

Almost two years ago, the State of Washington, according to an Associated Press report, became concerned with the bureaucratic gobbledygook it saw in its agency communications.

To help address the problem, the governor ordered all state agencies to use "plain talk," and more than 2,000 state employees attended classes to receive instruction on how to write in everyday language.

Has it paid off? According to the AP, just one letter from the state's Department of Revenue that used plain talk resulted in the collection of an extra \$800,000 over two years in "use tax," the generally ignored equivalent of sales tax on items bought out of state. That one letter caused the number of businesses complying with use tax regulations to triple.

Thom Haller, executive director of the Center for Plain Language in Washington, DC, has said plain-language initiatives are spreading to other states.

"We're seeing them embrace it because they're recognizing that clarity in structure and language is important," he said. "It enables people to get their jobs done more efficiently."

Here are a couple of examples the AP used to illustrate simplifications Washington state is using in its official documents:

- **The Department of Labor and Industries:**

Before: We have been notified that you did not receive the State of Washington warrant listed on the attached Affidavit of Lost or Destroyed Warrant Request for Replacement, form F242.

After: Have you cashed your L&I check yet? The state Treasurer's Office has informed us that a check we sent you has not been cashed.

- **The Department of Ecology:**

Before: Specific to the CO2 mitigation program, Ecology recommends that the reviewing authority assure compliance with the approved mitigation plan on an annual basis, unless project circumstances indicate that a more or less frequent compliance review is appropriate.

After: Reviewing authorities conduct annual reviews to assure compliance with the mitigation plan.

The same kinds of gobbledygook problems can infect communications that businesses depend on to sell their products. One of the points I stress with students in my "Good Writing Is Good Business" seminars is that, in many cases, you have never met the person you are trying to persuade, to impress, or to sell when you send them a written communication — and that includes e-mail.

The only means those people have of forming an image of you and your business is through the words they see in front of them. It's up to writers to see that the image they create is the best it can possibly be.

Bob Kerry, the former U.S. senator and governor from Nebraska who is chairman of the National Commission on Writing, has said he shudders to think how the Declaration of Independence would read if it had been written in today's bureaucratic gobbledygook.

We all know the adage that "time is money." Apparently, words are money, too.

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