Interpersonal Communication and Role Play: Channeling Your Inner Diva

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As You Like It (whether you like it or not): The World Is Your Stage

Consider Shakespeare’s notion that the world is a stage and that we are merely players. Imagine for a moment that your life is an endless series of semi-improvised scenes, acts, and plays, complete with sets, lights, costumes, props, entrances, and exits. Some scenes are comic. Some are tragic. You frequently play a major role, but sometimes you are just a sidekick. Regardless, you have no choice but to play it out, because the show will go on, with you or without you. It is simply a matter of how well you play the role. Unfortunately, you are often obliged to play multiple roles in a single day, including bit parts that do nothing to showcase your talent. To complicate matters, the plot lines will change without warning, forcing you to adapt as best you can to new settings, new characters, and new obstacles.

So, how will you prepare for your next audition? What steps are you taking to prevent an understudy from replacing you in the role you are playing right now? What, specifically, are you doing to extend your range, expand your repertoire, and please the critics? Do not ignore the critics, because whether you like it or not, whenever you are in the presence of other people, you are on-stage and every facet of your performance is being scrutinized.

The Drama in Your Life: An Interpersonal Communication Dilemma

♦ You are always on-stage, so to speak, and you can never actually leave the stage completely. You can only move from one theatre to another.
♦ You are always being judged by the audience and the critics, but this is not necessarily a bad thing, especially if they approve of your performance.
♦ Essential character exposition is shared with the audience by your words, your deeds, your appearance, your gestures, your walk, et cetera.
♦ Your interaction with other actors will provide you with essential exposition about their characters. You can use this to your advantage.
♦ When two characters have conflicting objectives, drama ensues.
♦ If you are the protagonist, what does that make the other person?
♦ Drama is not always harmless entertainment, especially in real life.
♦ In order to master interpersonal communication in the business world, you need to channel your inner diva and commit to playing the role.
Character Exposition in the Interpersonal Communication Process: The Multi-Faceted Mind Game That We All Play All the Time

In a general sense, the interpersonal communication process is comprised of a relatively even exchange of commonly-understood verbal and non-verbal codes between, or among, a small number of individuals (approximately 2-6 people). However, interpersonal exchanges are not always even. The exchanges are often dominated by one of the participants. To complicate matters, verbal and non-verbal codes can be misinterpreted, perceptions may change quickly, and some conversations will seem like an assault on your self-concept. In addition, your specific communication objectives and intentions might very well require multiple modifications or adjustments during the exchange. Therefore, interpersonal communication tends to be extremely difficult to analyze objectively.

Here is an idealized example of just how complex interpersonal communication can be, even when there are only two people present. It is drawn from Dean Barnlund’s widely-accepted communication model in which there appears to be six points of view, or “people”, in every two-person conversation:

1. Person A’s self-concept.
2. Person B’s self-concept.
3. Person A’s perception of B.
4. Person B’s perception of A.
5. Person A’s assumptions regarding how B perceives A.
6. Person B’s assumptions regarding how A perceives B.

This is a static model, however, that merely represents a point of departure. In reality, interpersonal communication is not this simple, because character exposition is continuous, cumulative, and irreversible. Accordingly, changes in self-concept, perception, and assumptions will occur almost continually as new character information is exposed. Consequently, the original six people will evolve into six new people, or perspectives, by the end of the conversation.

As complicated as Barnlund’s model appears to be on a two-person scale, when a third individual joins the scene, the “people” are difficult to track. Here is a simple extrapolation on Barnlund’s model: Smidt’s Eighteen Relationships, Plus the Perceptions of the Twelve Observers, in Every Three-Person Conversation.

♦ Six people in the A-B relationship.
♦ Six people in the B-C relationship.
♦ Six people in the C-A relationship.
♦ Plus the perceptions and speculation of A, based upon observation of relationships 3 – 6 that exist between B and C.
♦ Plus the perceptions and speculation of B, based upon observation of relationships 3 – 6 that exist between C and A.
♦ Plus the perceptions and speculation of C, based upon observation of relationships 3 – 6 that exist between A and B.
A Brief Glossary of Communication Terms, Drawn from the Fields of Cultural Anthropology, Psychology, Sociology, and Theatre

Code
A sound, motion, look, or object that conveys meaning within a culture or subculture, such as a word, gesture, facial expression, symbol, or garment.

Confirmation
A positive feeling that occurs when others treat you in a manner that tends to support your self-concept.

Culture
The general attributes of the population or society with which you are most closely identified, such as age, gender, nationality, and race.

Disconfirmation
A vaguely unsettled feeling that occurs when others fail to respond positively to you and seem to be neutral or apathetic. Compare this to rejection.

Empathy
The capacity to comprehend and relate to someone else’s emotional or physical struggles, such as hunger, anguish, oppression, and despair.

Experiential Being
The intangible and complex intellectual and emotional sum of everything you have ever experienced over the course of your entire life. In a sense, this is your brain, your “soul”, and everything you have ever learned, felt, and sensed. In some, the experiential being transcends physical age and education.

Given Circumstances
The specific context in which you are communicating. This includes social status, location, time, date, and the multitude of cultural and subcultural variables relating to everyone who is present during a conversation.

Objectives
Physical and psychological needs and desires tend to influence our choices and our actions. At any given moment, we may be influenced by multiple forces that compete for our attention. In a conversation, an objective is an overall goal to which all other needs and desires are subordinate.

Intentions
An intention is a sub-set of an objective, usually expressed with the infinitive of an active verb. Intentions provide you with moment-to-moment guidance that supports your objective and influences your vocabulary. Ultimately, it guides you toward the correct subtext.

Passive or Objective Perception
The impartial sensing and assessment of objects, sounds, tastes, and smells in your environment.
Perception
The act of sensing objects, sounds, tastes, and smells, through which you understand yourself, others, and your environment.

Perceptual Constancy
The theory that your past experiences tend to shape your future expectations.

Rejection
A feeling that occurs when others treat you in a manner that tends to challenge or refute your self-concept.

Role
A role is one of multiple identities that you will adopt and manifest throughout your lifetime. It is something that identifies you to others. The ability to play a role well has a strong impact upon your self-image and your self-esteem.

Self-Concept
Your consciousness of your individual being, comprised of self-image, self-esteem, culture, subculture, and your experiential being.

Self-Esteem
Your attitudes and feelings toward your self-image.

Self-Image
Your own definition of who you are and what you do. This could also be viewed as a critical assessment the role you play at any given moment.

Semantic Noise
This is an unintended disruption of the focus of your audience. This can occur if they hear a word or phrase for which they have an alternate association. The response to semantic noise can vary widely, from blank stares and loss of concentration, to laughter, anger, argument, or even violence. Semantic noise is not 100% preventable.

Subculture
The specific attributes of the society or societies with which you most closely identify. Depending upon the role and the given circumstances, each person might identify with several subcultures in sequence or simultaneously.

Subjective Perception
The interactive and evaluative (judgmental) sensing of objects, sounds, tastes, and smells in your environment.

Subtext
This is the implied meaning behind your words, usually conveyed more by the exact manner in which your words are spoken than by their literal meanings. Regardless of what you say or how you say it, a subtext will always present itself in the mind of the audience. Depending upon the subculture of the audience, the inferred subtext can vary widely.
Appreciation of Culture, Sub-Culture, Perception, and Role:
The Fast Track to Understanding Character Motivations

As you discover essential cultural, sub-cultural, and motivational information about the other person, you will begin to deduce which facet of your self-image is most appropriate for the “character” with whom you are communicating and for the given circumstances in which you find yourself. Bear in mind that the other person is role-playing, too, so the person with whom you are speaking is merely a character that has been fabricated to deal with your character.

Your understanding of the given circumstances and your growing knowledge of the other individual, or character, will help you determine which role to play and which verbal and non-verbal codes to use. Likewise, your selection of a role that is advantageous to you will influence the role and the objective of the other person; in turn, their selections for their character will further modify your selections for your character, et cetera. Ultimately, every verbal and non-verbal code that you transmit is being decoded and interpreted (accurately or not) by the other person, and it is used to help the other character adjust to the role you are playing, and vice-versa. Theoretically, the more you know about the other person, the easier it can be to make good character choices.

Test this theory for yourself. Below is a list of cultural and sub-cultural variables. Use these variables to work through the following six-part exercise:

1. Examine the list of cultural and subcultural variables and try to speculate about the impact that various permutations might have on someone’s self-concept and, in turn, on their perceptions of other people.
2. See where you fit on this list at this particular point in your life.
3. Evaluate how you tend to perceive people whose cultural and sub-cultural variables are different from your own.
4. Evaluate how the people whose cultural and sub-cultural variables are different from your own would tend to perceive you.
5. Determine whether or not your self-concept is secure enough to permit you to communicate peacefully and productively with individuals from diverse cultures and subcultures without forcing yourself to play roles that you do not wish to play.
6. Project yourselves into hypothetical situations in order to determine how you might preserve your self-concept and achieve your objectives while permitting the other(s) to preserve their own self-concept(s) and achieve their own objectives.

♦ Accent, Dialect, or Articulation Nuance
♦ Circle of Acquaintances, Associates, or Friends
♦ Clothing or Dress at Work, at Home, or at Play
♦ Culinary Preferences, Nutritional Habits, or Dietary Restrictions
♦ Educational Level or Extent of World Knowledge
♦ Employment Situation or Employment History
Scene Study

Before you utter one word, you need to know as much as possible about how your character should be presented. In preparation, you must evaluate the upcoming scene to understand how to dress, what to say, and how to say it.

♦ What are the given circumstances?
♦ What do you know about the other person?
♦ What does the other person know about you?
♦ What are your motivations and what are your objectives?
♦ What are the other person’s motivations and the other person’s objectives?
♦ What character exposition do you wish to share through your selection and use of costume, make-up, and props?
♦ What character exposition do you wish to share through your eye contact, your walk, the way you sit, and other physical mannerisms?
♦ Is there any new information that you need to share with the other person?
♦ How can you adjust your vocabulary, phrasing, diction, and volume, to avoid semantic noise, encode the best messages, convey the desired meaning of your moment-to-moment intentions, and support your objective?
♦ How can you adjust your physical gestures and general demeanor to support your verbal messages?
Costume

Your clothing is merely a costume. As a costume, your clothing is a physical representation of the role you are playing. Like language and gestures, it sends a message that reflects your character and your character’s objectives. For example, a pin-striped pant suit tends to send a very different message than cutoffs and a tube top. Your costume does not have to please you or anyone else. All it has to do is support your objective by conveying information that is consistent with your character. So, what costume will serve you best?

✦ Pant suit, jacket and trousers, skirt and blouse, or a dress?
✦ What about color, pattern, sleeve length, skirt length, and neck-line?
✦ Shoes or sandals? Closed toe or open toe? Heels or flats?
✦ Consider the weather, time of day, location, and duration.
✦ How much sitting, standing, or walking can you expect?
✦ Will you be observed entering and exiting a vehicle?
✦ Will there be a snack or a meal? How does that affect your selection?

Make-up and Accessories

Like your costume, your make-up and accessories should be a reflection of your character and they should support your character’s objectives. Here, too, make-up and accessories are not meant to please you or anyone else. They are an extension of the role you are playing.

✦ Is your make-up appropriate for the occasion?
✦ Can your hair tolerate some wind?
✦ What character information are you transmitting with your fingernails?
✦ What character information are you transmitting with your jewelry?
✦ What should you do about personal religious symbols or body art?
✦ If you need a prop to occupy your hands, consider a note pad and a pencil.

Manners, Protocol, and General Demeanor

✦ Wherever you are, physically speaking, is your setting. Assess the set and figure out how your character should relate to it.
✦ Take mental notes about how the other character relates physically to the set and to your presence in it.
✦ Does the other character display any strong preferences or tendencies in physical greetings, use of space, or movement within the set?
✦ How would you categorize the “aesthetic distance” between you and the other character?
✦ Observe the other character’s use of props, especially if a beverage or food item is offered, and be prepared to adjust your manners accordingly.
**Fundamental Assumptions Regarding the Importance of Language**

1. Success in your career may depend more greatly upon how well you can communicate than upon what you actually know. In a situation where individuals of fairly equal abilities are being evaluated for a promotion or a contract award, communication skills may very well be the deciding factor.

2. Regardless of your appearance, nobody can determine your educational level, intelligence quotient, or social status just by looking at you. However, by hearing you speak anyone can, and will, make certain assumptions. People who speak well are generally perceived as being intelligent and highly educated. In turn, this tends to affect perception of social status.

3. Popular culture has such a tremendous influence over the manner in which you speak that you may not necessarily be aware of the extent to which you have become accustomed to expressing yourself with grammatically incorrect sentences that are bound by a limited vocabulary. While this may be acceptable or even preferable in casual conversations, everyday English is not well-suited to business conversations. Although everyday English is not necessarily objectionable in the workplace, it does nothing to distinguish you from everyone else.

4. Whenever you speak, people are evaluating you—and they are passing judgment on you. They evaluate your vocabulary, your grammar, your eye contact, and every single gesture. By default, when you participate in any conversation you are encoding and transmitting messages for others to interpret, or to misinterpret. Indeed, since you can not stop other people from interpreting your words and your gestures, it stands to reason that what you say and how you actually say it will tend to inform people about your culture, your sub-culture, your education, your intellect, and your attitude toward the people with whom you are speaking. If you fail to control the things you say and the manner by which you say them, you risk misinterpretation and an inaccurate perception of who you really are—or an inaccurate perception of the character that you wish them to believe you to be ...

**The Actor As Playwright: Your Most Challenging Role Ever**

Although the metaphor of the theatre is useful for comprehending character, culture, motivation, and role-playing, in real life you are not provided with any scripts to memorize. You are completely on your own. Whatever you say must be improvised on the spot. Effectively, you are the playwright. You are solely responsible for creating your own lines of dialogue in your head at the very moment of their utterance. This can be tremendously challenging, even under the best of circumstances, but when you are meeting a potential business client for the very first time, the pressure to speak well and make a good impression can be overwhelming.
For many people, the ability to improvise dialogue (speak extemporaneously) is closely related to academic achievement. Generally, the higher one’s educational level, the greater one’s command of the language. At least, this seems true in principle. So, if you wish for well-educated and intelligent individuals to perceive you as being similarly well-educated and intelligent, you need to rehearse in everyday life and train yourself to speak well all the time.

In preparation for increasingly formal interpersonal communication situations in your professional life, consider reacquainting yourself with the fundamental grammatical rules of the English language. When the stakes are high, you really need to be absolutely certain that you are using the language correctly. Unfortunately, in everyday conversations Americans tend to overlook and accept improper usage of the English language, and this has led to a lack of distinction between what is acceptable in formal conversations and what is not. If you can become aware of words, phrases, or sentence construction patterns that are not necessarily precise or accurate, you can be well on your way to avoiding similar abuses in your own conversations, formal or not.

Along with a grammar review, it is important to solidify and expand your vocabulary. Try to spend a few minutes each day with a vocabulary tutorial. Then, find ways of incorporating your newly discovered words into your daily life. Likewise, look for opportunities to speak with whole sentences that are grammatically correct. (This is not as easy as it seems.) After that, see if you can incorporate increasingly complex sentences into your business routines.

Ultimately, you need to train your playwright to acknowledge the flaws in your own conversations and to recognize them in the conversations of others. Then, you need to coax your playwright into correcting your flaws as they occur. The next developmental step will be to identify and correct your flaws before they occur, while your unspoken sentences are still being formed in your mind. When fully developed, you should be able to objectively assess anyone’s speaking skills, even when you fail to comprehend their messages.

As an easy means of training your playwright, try to focus on just a few imprecise or incorrect uses of the English language—little things that can trigger you to evaluate and correct them in your own mind. For example, you might focus for an entire day on acronyms, slang, jargon, pronouns, prepositions, salutations, subject/verb agreement, regional peculiarities (“y’all”, “fixin’ tuh”), or vowel substitutions (“bah” instead of by, “fur” instead of for, “ketch” instead of catch, “e-juh-kay-shun” instead of “ed-u-kay-shun”).

Where do you go to perform with your developing language skills? Community theatre, of course, which happens to be all around you. Simply improvise out in the community among people who do not know you and with whom there is no expectation of a professional relationship. As long as the other characters are not in a position of offering you money in exchange for your professional services, what is the risk of rehearsing your act in front of them?
The PROPER Procedure:
Pause, Relax, Organize, Proceed, Evaluate, and Reciprocate

Casual conversations do not necessarily require a great deal of thought or structure. After all, in a casual conversation the objectives of the participants are often rather inconsequential, serving mainly to accomplish a low-value task or to reinforce a pre-existing relationship between the participants. Typically, nobody is seeking employment, nobody is offering work, and no big decisions are being made. By contrast, a business conversation, no matter how brief, has the potential to be of high value, especially on a financial level. Whether you are seeking new work, managing an existing project, or providing guidance to a subordinate, there may be financial consequences for your actions, such as making money, spending money, or controlling losses.

Like it or not, you are always being judged for your interpersonal communication skills. Apart from your vocal and physical presentation, people will assess your knowledge, your efficiency, your mood, your level of cooperation, and they will make mental notes to file away for future use. So, what can you do to affect how you are perceived in a business conversation? Here is a formal procedure that can help you gain control over what you say and how you say it:

*Pause*
Even if you are ready to speak, pause for a moment. This brief moment of silence will create a sense of anticipation, so your words will carry more weight.

*Relax*
Check for tension in your shoulders, face, throat, jaw, and any location that can interfere with your composure, vocal production, or physical gestures.

*Organize*
Do not rush into a discussion of any topic without knowing what, specifically, you can or should say about it. Remember that even a short discussion should have a beginning, a middle, and an end.

*Proceed*
Construct complete sentences that make sense to you, and try to allow each sentence to lead logically to the next one, and the next, et cetera, as though you were writing a paragraph in an essay.

*Evaluate*
Evaluate yourself while you are speaking to see if there are any adjustments you should make in volume, diction, vocabulary, et cetera. You should also evaluate your audience to see if they are providing any useful feedback.

*Reciprocate*
Whether you have just finished a presentation, or have stopped for a chat with a friend, be sure to provide your audience with the same level of consideration that you would expect from them. Let them speak, too.
Oral Interpretation and Subtext:
The Art of Saying Exactly What You Mean

Traditionally, oral interpretation courses in the United States are devoted to the study of the English language with a specific focus on the public recitation of great literary works, such as poems or biographies, in a manner that is perceived to be consistent with the intentions of the authors. To this end, a great deal of class time is often spent on the intellectual understanding of the overriding objective of each literary work, determining the moment-to-moment intentions of the author, and arriving at the clearest means possible of conveying those intentions vocally to a live audience.

Although the intellectual interpretation of an author’s intentions may be relatively easy to determine, a corresponding vocal and physical expression of that intention can be quite difficult to achieve. (If it were easy, we would all be great actors.) Likewise, in a formal business discussion, you will probably always know what you wish to express intellectually, but unless your word choices, your voice, and your physical gestures support your moment-to-moment intentions, your audience might misinterpret the subtext of your words.

Look at this simple sentence: “Where were you last night?” Superficially, it appears to be nothing but a question without a context. The literal meaning seems fairly obvious, but the subtext does not. Without the benefit of supporting information regarding the given circumstances and the moment-to-moment intentions of the person asking this question, the true meaning remains vague and is prone to gross misinterpretation. In fact, depending upon your moment-to-moment intention, it might not be a question at all.

Consider applying a variety of active verbs to the subtext of this question, and see what happens. If you formulate a clear intention with the infinitive of an active verb (“I want to ...”) you will naturally reveal a subtext and you will quickly understand the requirements for “encoding” messages appropriately, both verbal and physically, thereby preventing any chance of misinterpretation.

The Art of Conveying Subtext: Things That You Must Control

♦ Diction
♦ Eye Contact
♦ Facial Expressions
♦ Grammar
♦ Phrasing, Pauses, and Breathing
♦ Physical Gestures and Physical Proximity
♦ Rate of Delivery
♦ Vernacular and Vocabulary
♦ Vocal Pitch and Volume
Performance Anxiety or “Stage Fright”

Performance anxiety, or stage fright, is a completely natural phenomenon. Simply stated, performance anxiety is really nothing more than the involuntary response of your body to the anticipation of a performance situation. In most people, performance anxiety manifests itself in a fairly predictable manner and it is often accompanied by an equally predictable set of symptoms. These symptoms might include one or more of the following physiological conditions:

♦ An increased flow of adrenaline, leading to a sharp rise in blood pressure and a sensation of “feeling” every heartbeat.
♦ An increased rate of respiration, leading to shallow breathing, hyperventilation, and a dry mouth.
♦ An increase in perspiration, leading to clammy hands, cold feet, and overall physical discomfort.
♦ A sense of dizziness, vertigo, or nausea, accompanied by a strong urge to urinate (even if you don’t really have to go).

If any of these symptoms actually occur in your body, there will be a sharp rise in your overall physical tension and self-consciousness, and your ability to concentrate on your performance will be impaired. Although it is virtually impossible to completely eliminate the physical manifestations of performance anxiety, they can be reduced by conscientiously working on both your body and your mind in semi-improvised rehearsals of any upcoming performances (presentations, interviews, discussions, or meetings).

Before you rehearse for any impending performance situation, you should exercise quite vigorously—even working up a sweat—in order to reduce muscular tension while, at the same time, inducing an increased flow of adrenaline, an increased rate of respiration, et cetera. This will help you to simulate the changes that your body might undergo during actual performance conditions; and, by rehearsing under performance conditions, you will learn in advance how to cope with your body while performing.

Likewise, before you perform, you should also exercise to work off the edge of adrenaline that tends to accompany the anticipation of the performance situation. Ultimately, by increasing your adrenaline flow before rehearsing, and by working off extra adrenaline before you perform, you should eventually be able to arrive a plateau of energy that is fairly consistent between your rehearsals and your performances.

Along with a physical regimen, you must learn to free your mind of all the extraneous thoughts that might be sources of insecurity or stress, because they will only cause you to experience more anxiety. You need to address the performance situation with as clear and focused a mind as possible. If you can eliminate or reduce some of those extraneous sources of anxiety, you will have a much better chance of concentrating on your performance.
Basic Training for Your Playwright:
An Exercise on Substitutions for the Verb “To Get”

By eliminating the verb “to get” from your vocabulary you are, in effect, elevating your speaking skills to a plateau that is distinctly higher than everyday English. As you become comfortable speaking in this manner, you should notice that your sentences are more carefully planned, more complete, and contain fewer errors.

Objectives of This Exercise
♦ To illustrate how excessive usage of the verb “to get” can lead to involuntary dependence upon slang, colloquialisms, and poor sentence construction.
♦ To understand how the substitution of another verb, in place of “to get”, can help you construct sentences that are accurate, original, and formal.
♦ To demonstrate how you might focus upon a single aspect of vocabulary or sentence construction in your daily life and thereby improve your formal interpersonal communication skills almost immediately.

The Process
♦ Deliver one of the sentences from the accompanying list as you might if you were conversing informally with one of your peers, perhaps outside of work.
♦ Consider how you can eliminate the verb “to get”, remove any slang, and improve or correct the grammar. You are free to change the sentence to suit your own taste, as long as the new sentence is capable of conveying the same meaning, or subtext, as the original.
♦ Deliver the new sentence in a manner that is appropriate to its new style and structure. It does not have to be complex, but it must be flawless.

1. Are you getting along O.K?
2. Did you get all that stuff taken care of?
3. Don’t you get it?
4. Get away from there.
5. Get your act together.
6. He has a hard time getting around.
7. Hey, get out of there.
8. Hurry up, I’ve gotta go...
9. I get it.
10. I gotta split.
11. I’m not getting anything done.
12. I’ve got it!
13. I’ve gotta get those shoes.
14. Let’s get it over with.
15. Let’s get it on.
16. Now, let’s get this straight...
17. She just got it in the mail.
18. Someday I hope to get married.
Advanced Language Training for Your Playwright: The Excruciating Minutia of Really Good English

Each of the following items represents a facet of spoken American English that can be evaluated and used to your advantage. By dividing the language into these small facets for concentrated study, you can train your playwright incrementally to recognize the difference between what is merely accepted and what is actually correct. Much like the exercise with the verb “to get”, the purpose of studying these annoying little things is to help you gain greater awareness of the language. With awareness comes judicious selection. With judicious selection comes increased control of your presentation and a corresponding decrease in the potential for misinterpretation. An additional benefit is to help you avoid mistakes that could bring about an adverse judgment of your professional capabilities.

♦ Abbreviations, Acronyms, and Initials
♦ Adjectives Versus Adverbs
♦ Articulation and Pronunciation
♦ Clichés, Idioms, Slang, and Vernacular
♦ Consistency of Tense
♦ Contractions and Elision
♦ Exaggeration and Hyperbole
♦ Non-Essential Verbal Utterances, or NEVUs
♦ Placement of Prepositions
♦ Redundancies
♦ Run-on Sentences
♦ Subject/Verb Agreement

What Is An Acronym?

Although all acronyms are abbreviations, not all abbreviations are acronyms. Conceptually, this is a bit like saying that although all gentlemen are men, not all men are gentlemen. An acronym is a special type of abbreviation that is comprised primarily of the initial letters of a series of closely related words. The series of words is often a formal title or a descriptive phrase. The initial letters of an acronym are meant to be pronounced as a single word, not spoken as individual letters. The following “words” are examples of acronyms that we now accept as independent nouns:

FEMA   Federal Emergency Management Agency
HUD    Housing and Urban Development
LASER  Light Amplification by Stimulated Emission of Radiation
NASA   National Aeronautic and Space Administration
NATO   North Atlantic Treaty Organization
NOAA   National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration
POTUS  President of the United States  
RADAR  RAdio Detection And Ranging  
RAM  Random Access Memory  
SCUBA  Self Contained Underwater Breathing Apparatus  
SETI  Search for Extra Terrestrial Intelligence  
SWAT  Special Weapons And Tactics  
UNESCO  United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization  
WBENC  Women Business Enterprise National Council  
ZIP  Zone Improvement Plan (or ZIP code)

It is not unusual for college-educated individuals to mistakenly refer to an abbreviation or set of initials as an acronym, but you can avoid that mistake hereafter. Just remember that as a general rule if you can not pronounce it comfortably, simply call it an abbreviation and you will always be correct.

Idiomatic Words or Phrases

An idiom is a phrase or sentence that grammatically inaccurate and does not make literal sense, but conveys a specific meaning to a certain cultural group. Seek alternatives that convey your message with originality and accuracy.

An’ I’m all like …  
An’ then she goes …  
Blow your nose.  
Do the laundry.  
Do you know what time it is?  
Don’t blow it.  
For sure.  
Go uptown. Go downtown.  
Grow sales. Grow the business.  
Hang out.  
He blew out his knee.  
He is really screwed up.  
Hook up.  
How are you?  
It blew my mind.  

Make love.  
Make the bed.  
On a date.  
On a diet.  
On drugs.  
On the pill.  
Push the envelope.  
She was totally in his face.  
Sit up. Sit down.  
Stick around.  
Take ownership.  
That blows.  
Think outside the box.  
Wanna mess around?  
Where you at?

The Placement of Prepositions

In formal English, no sentence should end with a preposition (except this one, because in this instance it is a noun). Learn to anticipate the need to include a prepositional phrase as you speak. Restructure your thoughts to incorporate the preposition earlier in the sentence, even at the very beginning. Note how common it is for idiomatic English phrases to end with propositions. The proper placement of prepositions can be used to distinguish you.
1. She has a lot to put up with.
2. Let’s get it over with.
3. What did you do that for?
4. What are you running away from?

**Run-on Sentences**

A run-on sentence is a series of sentences that are joined with conjunctions, such as *and, but, or so*. The excessive use of conjunctions weakens the points you are trying to make. It also tends to make each additional point sound suspiciously like an after-thought. Train your playwright to reduce the use of conjunctions. Deliver a complete sentence, then stop talking. Repeat, as needed.

**Subject / Verb Agreement**

If the subject is singular, your verb must be singular. If the subject is plural, your verb must be plural. Know which noun is the subject of your sentence. Conjugate your verb accordingly. Try to ignore any nouns that are contained in prepositional phrases. Your verb does not have to agree with any noun that is contained in a prepositional phrase.

**Somewhere in Time: Past, Present, and Future**

Before you speak, determine the time-frame and use the correct verb tense. If you are relating something that has already occurred, use past tense. Do not describe an event from the past using the present tense. Be consistent.

**Exaggeration and Hyperbole**

Exaggeration is a subjective distortion of fact that tends to reflect the opinion of the speaker. As such, it is a useful literary device that can make story-telling interesting. Exaggeration might also be present through the overuse or inappropriate use of superlatives, such as marvelous, brilliant, splendid, wonderful, awesome, atrocious, hideous, horrid, super, et cetera. Hyperbole is a gross exaggeration of fact. The overuse of exaggeration and hyperbole can result in loss of impact and credibility.

1. I have told you a million times ...
2. I nearly jumped out of my skin.
3. I’ll bet you paid a fortune for that.
4. If my mother finds out she will absolutely kill me.
5. Oh, you always say that.
6. You never answer my calls.
Additional Things to Ponder While Getting Into Character

1. Avoid false or insincere associations or identification.
2. Avoid gender-specific issues. They are often divisive.
3. Be honest in your assessment of your professional capabilities.
4. Compose complete sentences that are devoid of excess words.
5. Conceal your true feelings, unless you have the opportunity to agree.
6. Control your impulse to offer gratuitous compliments.
7. Demonstrate professional knowledge with industry-specific vernacular.
8. Do not apologize unless you really mean it.
9. Do not assume that anyone else shares your views or cares to hear them.
10. Don’t be needy.
11. Each and ev-er-y syllable must be pronounced accurately and fully.
12. Establish a suitable physical distance.
13. Fingernails.
14. Focus on your objective.
15. Hold your friends close; your enemies even closer.
16. How should you treat clerks, valets, porters, and food service staff?
17. How should you treat your client’s support staff?
18. Leave your ego at home.
19. Leave yourself alone, unless it is a deliberate gesture from your character.
20. Limit the use of regional, colloquial, or idiomatic phrases.
21. Limit the use of fragrances.
22. Maintain complete control over breathing, posture, eye contact, gestures, and facial expressions.
23. Monitor your vocal pitch and rate of delivery.
24. Other women are not necessarily “feminists” and do not necessarily promote or support women’s causes.
25. Prepare carefully for informal meetings, such as lunch-table discussions. What will you eat? What is the protocol?
26. Prevent the need to make apologies.
27. Select your props with great care and rehearse with them.
28. Silence your phone.
29. Stay in character.
30. Subtext is of paramount importance.
31. Take control of every facet of your presentation.
32. Take notes.
33. The ends justify the means.
34. Tolerate your client.
35. Travel incognito.
36. Watch the placement of prepositions.
37. What are the given circumstances?
38. What does your jewelry say about you?
39. You are being watched. They have spies everywhere.
40. Lastly, a paraphrase of George Burns’ observation on acting: in communication, sincerity is everything. If you can fake that, you’ve got it made...
Sexist Men Thrive in the Business World: Prepare for the Worst

1. Among men, the sincere expression of empathy is uncommon.
2. Business men tend to be more predator than partner.
3. Men are less likely to award contracts to married women than to singles.
4. Men are prone to exaggeration, if not prevarication.
5. Men consider women inferior.
6. Men do not really care one little bit about you or your petty problems.
7. Men resent having women in the trades.

Where is the Discussion Going?

1. Art or ornaments that represent sexuality or fertility.
2. Comments regarding your clothing, your hair, or your eyes.
3. Comments regarding his physical health, or yours.
4. Inappropriate looks, eye contact, touching, or physical proximity.
5. Interest in your Facebook page or exchange of private e-mail addresses.
6. Off-topic discussions of preferences in alcohol, food, and/or music.
7. Recommendation to meet off-site or after-hours, or both.

Which Adjectives Describe You? Which Ones Describe Your Clients?

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