



Fat and Skinny Words: Levels of Abstraction *By Patricia Fripp, CSP, CPAE*

Nothing can turn your audience off faster than using fat words when they're hungry for skinny ones. Or vice versa. I learned this exciting concept from Dr. David Palmer, a Silicon Valley negotiations expert. In his talks on negotiations, he describes "levels of abstraction." Unless you can match your message to the expectations of your audience, or talk at the same level at which they are listening, you won't connect as well as you would like to. This is true whether your audience is one person or one thousand.

Suppose you write the word "automobile" on a pad. A simple concept. Going up to the next level of abstraction, you could write above it that the car is a "wheeled passenger vehicle," then "surface transportation," then "major force in the world's economy." This is making the word "automobile" fatter and fatter, larger and larger. These big ideas and abstractions are "*fat words*." They are great for conveying the big picture, inspiring ideas, motivating.

Now, let's make the word skinnier. Underneath, you might write "sedan," "Ford sedan," "red four-door Ford sedan." Eventually, you would be talking about a specific car with the VIN. Those are "*skinny words*." They are essential for conveying instructions and solving technical problems. No one holding a screwdriver, camera, or have a blank screen on their computer wants "fat" words. You'll just frustrate them, maybe make them furious. They want to know minute details and specific who, what, when, how.

Many of my clients hire me to coach their sales teams. After giving them the automobile illustration, they learn to be more effective by evaluating each other by saying, "your words are too fat" or "those words aren't skinny enough." "When you are presenting a sales overview to an executive or senior management, I ask, "Should your words get fatter or skinnier?"

Upper management needs fat words. After a successful initial interview with an executive, you will be invited to present your offerings to a middle management team. For this group, your ideas need to be brought down the level of abstraction by using "skinner words and phrases."

Let's assume you were very effective and persuasive. You made the sale. Now you are dealing with the individuals who make the technology work. That is when the words and phrases need to get "skinny." The who, what, when, how, where do I turn it on?

At what level should you present your information so that you get your message across? It all depends on the audience.

As a professional speaker and trainer I ask my clients, "What do you want the theme of my remarks to be? What is the purpose of the meeting?" For years I have been hearing, "Get them to sell more," or "Motivate them." My reply would be, "How much are they selling now? How much more?" or "Motivate them to do what?"

Can you see the challenge? Their words are too fat for me to get a clear picture of how to meet and exceed their expectations. With my questioning I need to drive their comments and expectations down the level of abstraction by saying things like, "Can you help me understand specifically what you mean by that?" This simple concept has made my training more effective.

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Are You Guilty? The Unconscious Goof that Can Hurt Your Credibility

by Patricia Fripp, CSP, CPAE

Fifteen times in a thirteen-minute period. That's how often Steve Forbes, President and CEO of Forbes Inc. and Editor-in-Chief of Forbes magazine, did it during an otherwise brilliant presentation at the National Speakers Association convention in New York, August 2008.

President Obama did it twice while he was on *The Tonight Show* talking to Jay Leno.

Russell Crowe did it multiple times speaking to David Letterman about promoting his latest movie.

My high-level corporate clients do it—including Presidents, Chief Financial Officers, and Sales Vice Presidents of America's greatest companies.

Celebrity speakers, best-selling authors, and top consultants do it before I work with them.

Each time they do, I reach over and give their hands a quick slap. When they ask, "How can I kick the habit? Nobody ever told me I did it so much." I tell them, "You must give your spouse and subordinates permission to tell you when it happens. First, notice when you do it. Second, recognize the negative impact. Third, replace this blunder with something more appropriate."

You may not have noticed this verbal affliction yet, but once you do, you'll have fun spotting examples everywhere. Some of your friends and associates are guilty. The blight has invaded television in the news and commercials, newspapers, magazines, and the Internet. It crosses all professions and levels of education. Recently, I counted dozens of examples at a four-day meeting with some of the most brilliant and successful professional speakers and consultants in the U.S. Even you may be doing it!

What is this Crime against Credibility?

It's a single, suddenly-popular buzzword that makes me feel like fingernails screeching on a blackboard every time I hear it. It's "stuff."

Even communication experts are guilty. I maintain that professional speakers, coaches, and consultants are paid for their lifetime knowledge, innovative ideas, leading-edge strategies, and, most important of all, their eloquence in putting their ideas across to their audiences. Yet, I overhear these communicators saying to each other, "The group loved my stuff" or "I gave them my best stuff."

At a dramatic time in our nation's history when precise and powerful communication is most needed, employees and sales teams, many who have English as a second or third language, are hearing this vague, imprecise language from their corporate leaders. Sales professionals in my sales presentation skills training are talking about their products and high-ticket technology in the same non-specific, low-value way.

Even worse than "stuff" is "and stuff." Some individuals don't seem to know that a period at the end of a sentence is a great way to stop. I've heard:

"This will decrease absenteeism and stuff..."

and

"We had a great conversation and stuff..."

In Shakespeare's time, "stuff" meant woven cloth—"such stuff as dreams are made on." It has come to mean "miscellaneous" and even acquired the negative connotation of junk, debris, or rubbish. Surely you don't want to clutter your speaking, leadership messages, and sales presentations with rubbish?

The worst thing about "stuff" is that it is not specific! As my associate David Palmer, PhD has programmed me to think, "Specificity builds credibility."

Each time one of my speaking clients says "stuff," I ask what exactly they mean to say. Some are amazed at how often they use the word, even people with graduate degrees. Yet, their education isn't obvious in their language because of that one useless and irritating word.

If you're asking yourself what difference it could make, I'll tell you. A huge one! You are hired because what you say sounds like it is worth paying for. Language that is fuzzy, clumsy, and unclear destroys your credibility and your claim to professionalism. You might as well be delivering your message in Valley-Girl speak, grinding your toe in the rug and murmuring, "Whatever—"

Your audience of one or a thousand deserves clear, forceful, and specific language. Toss out all that meaningless "stuff" and show them what a leader you are.

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The 10 Biggest Traps to Avoid When You Speak:

How to Turn Dull into Dynamic!

A Special Report by Patricia Fripp, CSP, CPAE

Whenever you open your mouth, whether your audience is one person or a thousand, you want to get a specific message across. Maybe you want your opinions heard at meetings, or perhaps you are giving a formal presentation, internally or externally. Possibly your sales team needs to improve its customer communication, or you're in a position to help your CEO design an important speech.

Anyone who sets out to present, persuade, and propel with the spoken word faces 10 major pitfalls.

1 UNCLEAR THINKING. If you can't describe what you are talking about in one sentence, you may be guilty of fuzzy focus or trying to cover too many topics. Your listeners will probably be confused too, and their attention will soon wander. Whether you are improving your own skills or helping someone else to create a presentation, the biggest (and most difficult) challenge is to start with a one-sentence premise or objective.

2 NO CLEAR STRUCTURE. Make it easy for your audience to follow what you are saying. They'll remember it better—and you will too as you deliver your information and ideas. If you waffle, ramble, or never get to the point, your listeners will tune you out. Start with a strong opening related to your premise; state your premise; list the rationales or "Points of Wisdom" that support your premise, supporting each with examples: stories, statistics, metaphors, and case

histories. Review what you've covered, take questions if appropriate, and then use a strong close.

3 NO MEMORABLE STORIES. People rarely remember your exact words. Instead, they remember the mental images that your words inspire. Support your key points with vivid, relevant stories. Help your listeners "make the movie" in their heads by using memorable characters, engaging situations, dialogue, suspense, drama, and humor. In fact, if you can open with a highly visual image, dramatic or amusing (but not a joke!) that supports your premise, you've got them hooked. Then tie your closing back to your opening scene. They'll never forget it.

4 NO EMOTIONAL CONNECTION. The most powerful communication combines both intellectual and emotional connections. Intellectual means appealing to educated self-interest with data and reasoned arguments. Emotional comes from engaging the listeners' imaginations, involving them in your illustrative stories by frequently using the word "you" and by answering their unspoken question, "What's in this for me?" Use what I call a "high I/You ratio." For example: Not, "I'm going to talk to you about telecommunications," but "You're going to learn the latest trends in telecommunications." Not, "I want to tell you about Bobby Lewis," but "Come with me to Oklahoma City. Let me introduce you to my friend, proud father Bobby Lewis." You've pulled the listener into the story.

5 WRONG LEVEL OF ABSTRACTION. Are you providing the big picture and overview when your listeners are hungry for details, facts, and specific how-to's? Or are you drowning them in data when they need to position themselves with an overview and find out why they should care? Get on the same wave length with your listeners. My friend Dr. David Palmer, a Silicon Valley negotiations expert, refers to "fat" and "skinny" words and phrases. Fat words describe the big picture, goals, ideals, outcomes. Skinny words are minute details and specific who, what, when, and how. In general, senior management needs fat words. Middle management requires medium words. Technical staff and consumer hot line users are hungry for skinny words. Feed them all according to their appetites.

6 NO PAUSES. Good music and good communication both contain changes of pace, pauses, and full rests. This is when listeners think about what has just been said. If you rush on at full speed to crowd in as much information as possible, chances are you've left your listeners back at the station. It's okay to talk quickly, but pause whenever you say something profound or proactive or you ask a rhetorical question. This gives the audience a chance to think about what you've said and to internalize it.

7 IRRITATING NON-WORDS. Hmm—ah—er—you know what I mean—. One speaker I heard began each new thought with "Now!" as he scanned his notes to figure out what came next. This might be okay occasionally, but not every 30 seconds. Tape record yourself to check for similar bad verbal habits. Then keep taping yourself redelivering the same material until such audience-aggravators have vanished. You could also give your friends permission to point out when you are using these filler words.

8 STEPPING ON YOUR PUNCH WORDS. The most important word in a sentence is the punch-word. Usually, it's the final word: "Take my wife—PLEASE." But if you drop your voice and then add, "Right?" or "See?!" you've killed the impact of your message. (To discover if you do this, use the tape-recording test described above.) Don't sabotage your best shots.

9 NOT HAVING A STRONG OPENING AND CLOSING. Engage your audience immediately with a powerful, relevant opening with a high I/You factor. It can be dramatic, thought-provoking, or even amusing, but never, never open with a joke! Get your listeners hooked immediately with a taste of what is to follow. And never close by asking for questions. Yes, take questions if appropriate, but then go on to deliver your dynamic closing, preferably one that ties back into your opening theme. Last words linger. As with a great musical, you want your audience walking out afterwards humming the tunes.

10 MISUSING TECHNOLOGY. Without a doubt, audio/visual has added showbiz impact to business and professional speakers' presentations. However, just because it is available, doesn't mean we have to use it! Timid speakers who simply narrate flip chart images, slides, videos, overheads, or view-graphs can rarely be passionate and effective. Any visual aid takes the attention away from you. Even the best PowerPoint® images will not connect you emotionally. Use strong stories instead if at all possible. Never repeat what is on the visuals. If you do, one of you is redundant. Make technology a support to your message, not a crutch. The trap is that information presented through technology tends to be about the speaker and the speaker's organization, while communication should be about the AUDIENCE.

As part of one of my sales training seminars, a salesman was on stage, role playing with me in preparation for a presentation he was about to give that could be worth \$20 million to his company. When I asked him about his PowerPoint®, he admitted he had 60 slides — 58 about his company and only 2 about the prospect. After the training, I heard that they reversed the ratio for this and all future presentations, based on my advice.

When you can avoid these 10 common pitfalls, you're free to focus on your message and your audience, making you a more dynamic, powerful, and persuasive communicator.

I hope you enjoyed my special report. What you have read is just a small part of the advice I give in my work coaching individuals and teams.

If you believe you are falling into any of the "Fripp's 10 Biggest Traps" in your presentations, you may be in the situation where you qualify to be one of the handful of new clients I will work with in the next six months.

But I've found through experience that there's only one way to be sure. And that's to have a short conversation on the phone.

In our conversation, I would ask you to tell me about your speaking and presenting goals and experience, so I can assess whether this training is appropriate for you or your company.

The initial conversation is no charge.

Just like you, my time is limited, but I would enjoy discovering if my advice can help you accomplish your goals and have the impact it has for my clients.

To find out about my availability for a no-charge, no-obligation conversation, please call my office toll-free at (800)634-3035 or send me a short email at PFripp@Fripp.com.

Thank you...I'm looking forward to speaking with you.

Sincerely,

Patricia Fripp

Contact Patricia and discover how you can accomplish your sales goals:

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