



# How To Make Your Language Stick

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When you give a presentation, the verbal channel of communication refers to the words you use to communicate your message. We all hope our ideas “stick” with the audience. We want the audience to understand and act upon them. To make your language “stick”, it needs to be not only clear, but powerful as well. Here are five guidelines to add clarity and force to your language.

## ***1. Use Language To Express Rather Than Impress***

Audiences can immediately see through presenters who try to wow them with a large vocabulary. When I ask seminar audiences if they know anyone who uses uncommon words in an attempt to impress them, I get almost universal affirmative responses. I then ask them to identify the reasons for such behavior. The number one answer is: “to make us think they’re smarter than us.” If the presenter uses a malapropism (the unintentional misuse of a similar sounding word), he damages his credibility as well. I actually heard a presenter tell a group of training participants he wanted them to be sure to “conjugate” (rather than “congregate”) on time for tomorrow’s training. He could have avoided confusion, and embarrassment, by simply telling them to get to the training room on time. For those particularly adept at language, please subordinate skillful and correct use of your vocabulary to audience understanding.

## ***2. Use More Precise Verbs Than Do, Does and Done***

“Do” doesn’t do anything specific. In fact, dictionaries list over 30 ways to use “do” as a verb. That alone should alert you to the fact that “do” conveys no precision in language use. For example, it could mean “finish” as in “he *did* that report yesterday,” “suffice” as in “shrimp cocktail will *do* for an appetizer,” or even “killed” as in “he was *done*” in.” Because it fits in so many situations, we too often use it as a poor substitute for more precise wording. Sometimes, you can eliminate it completely.

*What the new policy does is to increase interaction with clients.*

*The new policy increases client interaction.*

*We need to do a thorough analysis of the situation.*

*We need to thoroughly analyze the situation.*

*He did a review.*

*He conducted a review.*

## ***3. Favor The Active Over The Passive Voice***

The active voice makes a sentence stronger and usually shortens it as well. Use the passive voice only when you want to avoid responsibility or depersonalize your presentation. In addition to eliminating unnecessary words, which makes your style leaner, speaking in the active voice creates a more emphatic delivery.

*Passive: Some of the pieces of our new policy have already been put in place.*

*Active: We have already implemented pieces of our new policy.*

*Passive: Three out of five top managers have been retained by the new CEO.*

*Active: The new CEO kept three out of five top managers.*

*Passive: The value of your money will be increased through wise investment.*

*Active: Wisely investing your money increases its value.*

#### **4. Use Parallel Construction**

Parallel construction simply means you should express coordinate ideas with parallel structure.

*They didn't like how much the proposal was going to cost and our implementation of it.*

*They expressed dissatisfaction with the proposal's cost and implementation.*

*We should be remembering the past, live in the present and be planning for the future.*

*We should remember the past, live in the present and plan for the future.*

*Accounting professionals are noted for accuracy, attention to detail and their honesty.*

*Accounting professionals are noted for their accuracy, their attention to detail and their honesty.*

#### **5. Use Vivid Descriptions**

Which of the following descriptions in each pair creates a stronger image?

*A teacher*

*A history professor at Harvard*

*The car*

*The red Mustang convertible*

*The sound*

*The high-pitched klaxon*

Yes, the second description in each pair uses more words, but the additional words serve a purpose. They help the audience visualize your ideas.

Some of these guidelines may be familiar, but we just haven't made adhering to them a habit. Becoming more conscious about our language choices and more deliberate about choosing clear and powerful expression will make our language more likely to stick.



*Joe Sommerville shows professional services firms how to increase visibility, enhance credibility and close more business. Download the first chapter of RainMaking Presentations: How to Grow Your Business by Leveraging Your Expertise at [www.RainMakingPresentations.com](http://www.RainMakingPresentations.com).*