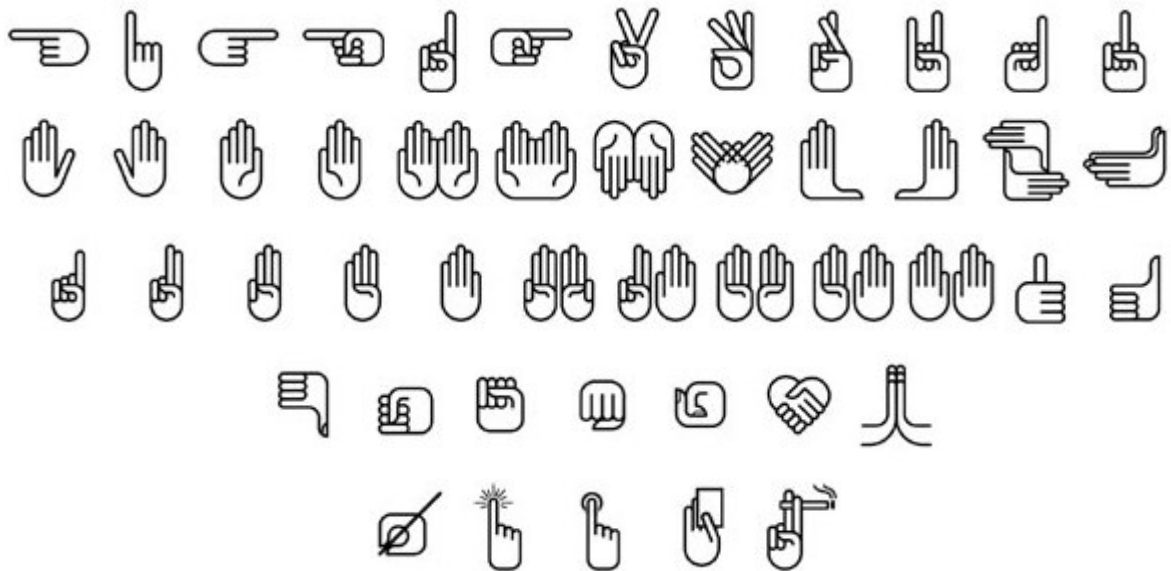


# “Selling it straight”

Straight-talking communications and clear marketing sell products, services & ideas more effectively to clients, customers, colleagues & constituents



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Hand symbols from IIT Bombay

## 1. GRAB. HOLD. HARMONISE. INSPIRE.



Bore your audience and you don't have a chance. Waffle at all and you'll lose them. Worry them and you can forget about winning them over. Fail to guide them swiftly to action and you've missed a rare and often expensive opportunity. Not only do you have to grab the attention of your audience, you've then got to hold it long enough to get your message across; you've got to make that message harmonise with their thoughts or situation; and then you've got to inspire them to act before they move on to the next offering.

Good verbal and written communications that achieve those effects will help a business or organisation succeed across all facets: sales, people management, team work, efficiency, supplier management etc. However, achieving the quality of communication is not itself straightforward; it requires time, effort and a certain amount of skill.

One reason for the need for so much time and effort is the need for clarity of thinking. Before a message has any real chance of being delivered with impact, it has to be clearly worked out in the mind of the person delivering it. For some, this clarity comes quickly and early on in the preparations, for others it only emerges gradually and possibly after many drafts of the message.

Then, you may know very well in your own mind the message to be delivered, but there is still the problem of getting it across, or clarity of expression. In the 1<sup>st</sup> Century AD, Roman rhetorician Quintilian wrote: "One should aim not at being possible to understand, but at being impossible to misunderstand." What is clear to you in the words you have put down will not necessarily get to the reader in the same state. Ambiguity and vagueness can infect a sentence in many places and need time and effort and skill to edit out.

More effort is required, too, because so many people fall into bad habits such as jingoism. Unfortunately, the lingo of different sectors perpetuates itself as the people in them imitate the technical or verbose styles they have come across in college and in industry-related texts, thinking it will enhance their credibility among their peers and impress others. However, for those who want to break out of the vicious circle and communicate more plainly, internally with colleagues and externally with customers, the prognosis is good: jingoitis can be cured.

As for skill, mostly that is required to dress up the message in such a way that it is appealing, that it excites or evokes a powerful response. This requires a feel for language, an understanding of how language works and a degree of creativity.

Read on to learn more about grabbing, holding, harmonising and inspiring.

From <http://www.abcsmallbiz.com/funny/big-words.html>

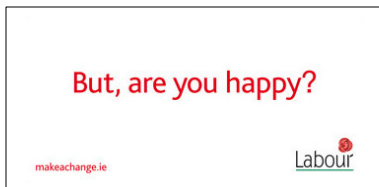
“Next time, in promulgating your esoteric cogitations, or articulating your superficial sentimentalities and amicable, philosophical or psychological observations, beware of platitudinous ponderosity. Let your conversational communications possess a clarified conciseness, a compacted comprehensibleness, coalescent consistency, and a concatenated cogency.

Eschew all conglomerations of flatulent garrulity, jejune babblement, and asinine affectations. Let your extemporaneous descantings and unpremeditated expatiations have intelligibility and veracious vivacity, without rodomontade or thrasonical bombast. Sedulously avoid all polysyllabic profundity, pompous prolixity, psittaceous vacuity ventriloquial verbosity, and vaniloquent vapidty. Shun double-entendres, prurient jocosity, and pestiferous profanity, obscurant or apparent!!”

\*\*In other words, talk plainly, briefly, naturally, sensibly, truthfully, purely. Keep from slang; don't put on airs; say what you mean; mean what you say. And, don't use big words!”

## CASE STUDY

Labour's “**But, are you happy?**” campaign in the last general election, struck a lot of people as being an own goal.



First of all, the question implies a previous acknowledgement of many things being right, which doesn't seem like a good starting point for an opposition party. Secondly, there is the implication that happiness is what politics should be delivering for us. Surely not. Thirdly, the disembodied nature of the design, with no context of unhappiness offered, is too weak and vague to convey a powerful message.

Yes, perhaps, it “makes you think” but pre-election campaigning, most would agree, needs to be to the point and pull no punches. Finally, with no hint of what we might not be happy about, there's always the danger that we'll end up thinking it's the Labour Party we should be unhappy about. Ooops!

The agency argued that the ad itself generated a lot of comment and column inches, but that itself implies failure in that the ad clearly overtook the message. And many of the column inches were dominated by the inevitable parodies, à la, “But, are you happy with Pat Rabbitte?”

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## 2. THE BENEFITS OF SIMPLIFIED COMMUNICATIONS



**“Think like a wise man but communicate in the language of the people.”**

**(WB Yeats)**

Communicating “in the language of the people” can benefit organisations in many ways:

**Increase sales/persuasiveness.** With quality communications the sales message or the idea gets delivered to better effect, converting more of your existing leads into sales/ audience into followers.

**Access new markets to find more leads.** Why would you want to restrict who can buy from you, or understand you? Complicated sentence structures, overly clever concepts, ambiguous meanings and technical language can prevent many people from actually even understanding your company’s products. Particularly in diverse markets, when selling products that could appeal to anyone, in order to maximise the resulting new business opportunities, communications should use straightforward language in ads, contracts, and manuals.

**Save time and money.** A recent survey by the Plain English Campaign in the UK found that 59% of those surveyed have contacted a company at least once to ask for a document to be explained. Unclear writing could be costing your company thousands of Euros in such areas as credit control, print costs and telephone calls.

**Enhance internal efficiency.** Concise reports and easy-to-read briefings reduce the amount of time that staff requires to learn new tasks, absorb information and act.

**Improve public relations.** The Plain English survey mentioned above also revealed that 83% of people believe that organisations sometimes *deliberately* write in a manner that is difficult for the average consumer to understand. Plain wording is fair and welcomed. It allows those without specialist knowledge to comprehend their financial, legal and consumer rights and while this might not appeal to those interested short-term gain, it is the only way to produce a sustainable operation. Producing clear documents, brochures, contracts, letters, annual reports and other texts will strengthen the relationship between your company and your stakeholders and customers.

### 3. SUCCESS STORIES TO EMULATE



Apart from the innumerable examples of better communications generating increased sales, here are a few well-known instances of measurable success in terms of efficiency and cost savings:

**British Telecom** reduced customer queries by 25% by using straightforward language on their telephone bills.

**Royal Mail** claims to have saved £500,000 in nine months by re-wording just one commonly-used document.

In the US, **General Electric** rewrote user manuals, apparently saving USD\$275,000.

After **British Aerospace** rewrote a 150-page international leasing agreement, summarising it to 50 pages, a £120 million deal took just three weeks to complete. The previous average was six months.

#### CASE STUDY



This is an online ad for Ireland.com. What do they offer?

A new address for WEATHER? I don't get it at first. With some effort I can see that the weather idea connects with the "going out" bit (versus staying in if the weather is bad). [Confirmed by finding the small weather forecast bit on the ireland.com homepage when you go there and study the page closely.] But I'm being asked to do too much work to see the connection.

The Light the Barbie reference in the fake web address that flashes up next ([www.lightthebarbiebeforeitlashes.com](http://www.lightthebarbiebeforeitlashes.com)) also eludes me (I think of the doll!) until it is pointed out to me that it's as in barbeque; which then makes sense of the Before it Lashes weather reference.

The ad excludes too many people. Advertising doesn't have to be obvious to the point of being banal, but it shouldn't be so awkwardly clever that people who may well want the product or service are lost.

What convinces me that this ad is a bit of a communications mess is the way the Cocktail button symbolising going out flips to the question, "Stunned?" Stunned by what, I ask? And I just can't figure that one out at all. By the fact that there's a new website for weather? Maybe if the message said, "Confused?" the entire concept would come together for me and I'd call it a great success.

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#### 4. WHO NEEDS TO WRITE WELL?



Clear communications are being especially promoted in the following sectors:

**ADVERTISING** – In April 2007, the Advertising Standards Authority for Ireland won a European Advertising Standards Alliance Best Practice Award for the revision of its advertising code. The code for the self-regulatory body requires that all marketing communications should be “legal, decent, honest and truthful”; their design and presentation should allow them to be “**easily and clearly understood**”; and they should not mislead consumers with “inaccuracy, ambiguity, exaggeration, omission or otherwise”.

**FINANCE** – In July 2007, the Irish Financial Services Regulatory Authority (IFSRA) enforced a new Consumer Protection Code that requires all regulated entities to ensure that information provided to consumers is “**clear and comprehensible**”.

**LAW** – In 2000, the Irish Law Reform Commission published a report about the use of plain language in statutory drafting and legislation. The report recommended a “comprehensive programme” of reforming Irish law by replacing statutory provisions with **plain language alternatives**.

**CONSUMER CONTRACTS** – Ireland falls under the European Union directive on Unfair Terms in Consumer Contracts which states that contracts must be written in “**plain, intelligible language**.” The directive states that if there is any doubt about the terms of a contract, the interpretation most favourable to the consumer will apply.

**GOVERNMENT** – The Irish Government established a Statute Law Revision Unit in 1999 to make legislation more accessible to the public. This paved the way for the Statute Law (Restatement) Act 2000, which allows the Attorney General to restate legislation in a more **readable format** without having to seek re-approval in Parliament.

**EUROPEAN UNION** - To mark the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the European Union in 2007, a “**people friendly**” Berlin Declaration was launched, described by German Chancellor Angela Merkel as free of bureaucratic technical terms and the “traditional language of the EU”.

**SCIENCE** – The Medical Research Council offers the annual Max Perutz science writing award to PhD students who describe their research in a clear, jargon-free way.

## 5. SOME TIPS FOR COMMUNICATING MORE EFFECTIVELY



**Get your ideas out there on paper first.** Work out what you're trying to say the old fashioned way – pen and paper. Allow yourself a specific period of time and a quiet place to “scribble” and “doodle” for a while. Use arrows and bubbles to connect the ideas.

**Get the ideas straight.** From the mess of the initial sketch, try to put some shape on the ideas by organising them into a list in a reasonably logical order.

**Start from the audience's perspective.** While drafting, use phrases such as “You might agree that ...” or “As we know ...” to create a WAY IN for your audience, a point of empathy or a shared perspective. Alternatively, you may need to startle your audience out of their peaceful state with something quite shocking or surprising, and then take them on a journey from there.

**Have one main idea plus elaborations in each paragraph.** Allow yourself to have more than one sentence per paragraph. A paragraph is like a unit of thought, and more often than not a thought requires more than one sentence to deliver and define. ~~(When do you move onto a new paragraph?)~~

You move on to a new paragraph when you are addressing a new thought, answering a new question or approaching the same thought from a very different angle. Try to ensure a link between paragraphs based on questions: so, at the end of each paragraph there should be an unwritten question about that paragraph, which is then answered in the next paragraph. ~~(What is the importance of all this stuff about paragraphs?)~~

As the reader goes through the text, from sentence to sentence and from paragraph to paragraph, they will feel the pull of the logic that you have set up based on anticipating their questions and then answering them without even needing to be asked. They will appreciate that, and at the same time open up more to your message.

**Use strong titles/headings.** Breaking up information into sections with headings makes text look less intimidating and reduces the likelihood of the reader skipping over the entire thing. It means the reader has more than one route into the text, and allows at least the gist of your ideas to be gleaned quickly before the reader decides whether or not to delve deeper.

**Simplify sentence structure.** Long sentences can usually be improved by breaking up the information. Don't think that simple sentences are childish. They do the job. Be wary of multiple



clauses, sub clauses and a lot of punctuation in one sentence. Consider using vertical bullet points or numbered lists whenever possible.

**Keep sentences naked at first.** Don't dress up or connect your ideas too much, at least in the first draft. Conjunctions and adjectives and adverbs should only be added after the simple content and shape of the piece is worked out. Your ideas should be clear and clearly on display in the text.

**Personalise the message.** Use "you" and "we" rather than phrases such as "the user", "the customer", "the applicant" or "the company" to establish a stronger connection with the reader.

**Remove unnecessary words and phrases.** Why use a wordy phrase when clearer and more direct options are available? For example, "*for the purposes of*" is just a longer way to say "*for*". "*In the event of*" is silly when "*if*" does the job.

**Use adverbs, adjectives and superlatives sparingly.** Rather than adding emphasis and making your offering sound better, words such as *absolutely*, *very*, *really* and *completely* often weaken a message, as do claims of being the best, the most successful, the fastest growing - making you and your message less believable. Think carefully about any claims: is your offering truly "unique" or "unbeatable"? Bear in mind the advice of C S Lewis: "Don't use words too big for the subject. Don't say 'infinitely' when you mean 'very'; otherwise, you'll have no word left when you want to talk about something really infinite."

**Avoid lingo and jargon.** "Blue-sky thinking" may be a fashionable phrase in your office but it is not universally understood, leaving you open to misinterpretation and limiting your market. Many such phrases call too much attention to themselves and so only distract from the message, as in "Did he really just say more face-time going forward?" And because they are faddish they may be already outdated and therefore irritating for the very people you are trying to impress.

**Cut out clichés, mixed metaphors and figures of speech.** At the end of the day, clichés are tired and don't let you shine forth to the best of your ability by putting your best foot forward. Figures of speech, as they go, more often than not, don't serve their master and amount to nothing more than totally lost opportunities to have your audiences eating out of your hands.

**Use the active voice.** Put the message as directly as possible, unless you need to emphasise the object of the sentence over the subject. So, "We have now closed your account" would usually work better than "Your account has been closed by our company", but not always.

**Punctuation needs attention.** Be careful with commas and semi-colons. Slip-ups can lead to ambiguity, and such misunderstandings can cause wars. Check that your sentences convey only one meaning – the meaning you mean them to convey.

**Use everyday words.** For example, use “*find out*” instead of “*ascertain*” and “*require*” rather than “*necessitate*”. A good list of word replacements can be found at <http://garbl.home.comcast.net/stylemanual/words.htm>

**Accentuate the positive.** If you are making a request, a positive sentence is more appealing to readers than a negative or threatening one. “To continue your membership, please pay by the 14<sup>th</sup> of the month” is more likely to appeal than: “If you do not pay by the 14<sup>th</sup> of January, your membership will cease.”

### CASE STUDY

3 ([www.Three.ie](http://www.Three.ie)) had a poster that certainly did catch the eye. Unfortunately, the copy failed: both because it is just too clever and JUST A FRACTION too loose in its logic.



I assume "Broadband" is being used as a pun on "broads banned" (very Joycean) and therefore a reference to the fact that women were traditionally not allowed to swim at the 40 foot, favoured as it was naturist men (shown in poster with parts covered).

So what we're witnessing is NOT a bunch a crazy women deciding on a whim to go swimming naked in the sea - but a version of something that actually happened, when women in the 70s decided finally to demand an end to the restriction. Brilliant, yes, but surely a bit over the heads of a few too many people.

Gracefully accepting that most people would just miss that and see this as simply a Monty Python type moment (or Benny Hill, maybe), the ad could save still itself with a logical return to the product and the message. But the "Can you resist?" doesn't take the mind far enough along the path to business. What, can I resist taking off my clothes and jumping in the sea? Can I resist making political points through attention-grabbing gestures? Can I resist fiddling with my thingie when I see naked women? If 3 was as established as, say, Crunchie (as in "Friday Feeling") this might work, but not when both broadband and the companies selling it require so much more work yet to get basic information across.

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## 6. NEED HELP FROM EXPERTS?



**“The letter I have written today is longer than usual because I lacked the time to make it shorter.” (Blaise Pascal)**

Powerful communications can be difficult to achieve and just too time-consuming for some. Condensing and simplifying texts without omitting important information and links or changing the meaning requires time and a certain amount of skill. And dressing up messages to evoke a response from the market needs experience and talent. To improve your communications efficiently, you may want to consider hiring some expert help.

Penhire is a team of highly experienced and professional business writers and communications specialists. We are very good at clarifying messages, packaging them in convincing forms, and getting them across to their intended audiences. We offer a wide range of communication services including:

- Writing, editing and proofreading.
- Concept development / branding advice.
- Design management.
- Sales strategies.

Using Penhire’s services ...

- You’ll be saying the right things about your company/offering to your customers.
- You’ll be thinking differently (more freshly) about your own company.
- You’ll stand out from your competitors.
- Your products/services will seem more convincing.
- You’ll save time struggling with the writing yourself.
- You’ll get your marketing up & running sooner.
- You’ll be able to use our text for a number of purposes (e.g. cover letters, website, brochures, press releases, advertisements, sales scripts).



Visit [www.penhire.ie](http://www.penhire.ie) to find out more about our company & terms of business.

Call Paul on **01-4151229** or **086-8135672** to have to chat or arrange a meeting.

Alternatively, email [paul@penhire.ie](mailto:paul@penhire.ie) with your enquiry.

## 7. USEFUL LINKS



[www.penhire.blogspot.com](http://www.penhire.blogspot.com) - The place where we put on record our own thoughts on business communications, often including examples of poor writing undermining messages. You can even submit your communications for a fresh opinion at no charge.

[www.plainlanguagenetwork.org](http://www.plainlanguagenetwork.org) – Formed in 1993 as the Plain Language Network, this is the website of Plain Language Association International, a non-profit organisation of people who promote the use of plain language.

[www.plainenglish.co.uk](http://www.plainenglish.co.uk) - This is the official site of the 25-year-old UK campaign for Plain English in government policy, documents and departments. The campaign has since extended its focus to areas such as consumer rights and education. Their website offers downloadable writing guides and a great A – Z of alternative words.

[www.nala.ie](http://www.nala.ie) – The Irish National Adult Literacy Agency website.

[www.clarity-international.net](http://www.clarity-international.net) - Clarity is a worldwide group of lawyers and interested people who promote the use of clear language in the legal profession.

[www.plainlanguage.gov](http://www.plainlanguage.gov) – The official US government site for Plain Language.

[www.garbl.com](http://www.garbl.com) – A free portal of writing resources including an excellent dictionary of alternative phrases and words.

<http://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/600/01/> - Some advice on making your sentences easier to understand.

<http://www.rte.ie/radio1/thebusiness/1078634.html> - John Murray of RTE Radio 1's The Business programme loves to make fun of jargon, and his listeners keep a close eye out for offenders.

