

USE AND ABUSE IN TODAY'S ENGLISH

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Princeton, NJ - OK. I am a language pedant! I admit it. I continue to be vexed (troubled, bothered, frustrated, annoyed) by English language usage that abandons norms, is vague and in written and oral forms fails the brevity test. What is the brevity test? For me, it is the pursuit of economy in language to reduce the superfluous, increase clarity and thereby allow more space or time for words that matter.

I don't bristle, but I do dislike the incessant use of "multiple" to refer to more than one of something. Multiple victims, multiple incidents, multiple times, multiple whatever. In the last few years, multiple has invaded our writing and speaking so much that it gives me multiple headaches. How many? More than one. What happened to many, a few, several, numerous? Do a search! I have not, but I will bet that "multiple" appears rarely as recently as three (or multiple) years ago.

Another new, vexing usage is around. Yup. Think about it. I have seen multiple times the use of around when, in my view, at least, it should be "on," or "about." For example, "to focus around." How does one focus around something? Around is vague, imprecise. And yet, we hear about programs, ideas, activities and other things "around" something. Can we imagine Einstein having asked us to think "around" the theory of relativity? I don't think so.

Speech and prose, furthermore, increasingly violate norms we were taught in grade school. These include split compound verbs, e.g., "She had, moreover, gone." And a singular subject with a plural noun, as in the recent promotion from a consulting firm: "The frequency and intensity **is** increasing." "The lack of civility and respect **are** common occurrences...." The image and brand **is** tainted," and "Research after research and journal article after journal article **says**...." Finally, the use of "first" for point one, but "secondly" for point two! Help!

Speakers and writers, furthermore, seem compelled to state and write tired, over-used and often meaningless phrases. They result in longer statements and reduce time and space for words that matter. Here are multiple examples of what we can do multiple times and in multiple ways around words that can help us be more brief, whether in speech or prose.

Across the company. Say "Throughout the company," "In the company," or "company-wide."

Amongst. Say "among."

Around the issues, focus around. Say "About the issues." "Focus on."

At this moment in time. Say "now."

At that moment in time. Say "then," or "at that time."

Currently serves as. Say "is."

Different than. Say "different from." But "bigger than, greater than...."

Different countries, e.g., in twelve different countries. Say/write "in 12 countries." They, like languages, are all different.

Each and every one of you. Say “Each of you.”

Elected office. Say “elective office.” People are elected; not offices!

First and foremost. Say “First” (first *is* foremost, ergo, a redundancy), a bad habit

Have a conversation about... Say “discuss.”

In any way, shape, or form. Say “In any way.”

The State of New Jersey. Say “New Jersey.” (The only New Jersey is a state.)

Last, but not least. Say, “Last,” or, “Finally” (why should we assume that the last is the least?)

Official announcement. Say “announcement.”

Oftentimes. Say “often.”

Official swearing in. Say “swearing in” (Is there an unofficial swearing in, an unofficial report?)

Multiple. Say “Several, a few, many, at least five, or five or more....”

People that ... Say “people who...” “That” is for things; “who” is for persons.

Period of time. Time period. Say “period” or “time.”

Single biggest. Say “biggest.”

Single most successful. Say “most successful.”

Towards. Say “toward.”

Track record. Say “record.” Is this an athletic event?

There was one person who gave Say “One person gave....”

Within. Say “in,” e.g., in our organization, in this sector, in whatever.

Without further adieu ... Do not say it! Meaningless! A bad habit. Just introduce the person!

Yup. That’s the pedant rearing his ugly head multiple times across multiple environments. Across multiple years in which I have written and spoken around multiple issues and learned multiple things, I have concluded over a long period of time that first and foremost clarity and brevity matters!

In speaking, conciseness is less important than in writing – where space matters. In both cases, however, one should strive for brevity and clarity. Writing and speaking economically are the hallmarks of effective communication.

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