(In)Appropriate Language – Jargon, Pretentiousness, and Slang

The choices a writer makes about words affect both the tone of the written work and the reader's perception of a piece of writing. Appropriate language fits the writer's voice, the topic, and the audience.

The best way to avoid inappropriate language is to remember who your audience is. If you think the audience might find a phrase confusing or frustrating, take another look at your language to see if it is appropriate.

Jargon

Jargon is language that is specific to a field or trade, and people outside a particular field are often unfamiliar with the jargon of that field. Jargon consists of technical terms and common turns of phrase that are used regularly to streamline communication with others in the field.

Some well-known types of jargon:

- Legalese: uses phrases such as *pursuant to*

- Corporate speak: words like *synergy, action item*

- Technical terms:

    s*tern* (nautical term)
    disk drive (computer term)
    ordnance (military term)
    cardiac (medical term)

Sometimes jargon words are shared by multiple fields, and occasionally two fields might use similar terms for very different purposes.

Example:

register—in linguistics, this often refers to levels of language used for specific purposes, such as formality or genres. In computer engineering, however, this refers to a device used for storing information, and in music this refers to a sound quality of a note or melody.

When *should* jargon be used? Use jargon only when it improves communication with the audience. If the intended reader is not likely to understand the jargon that you are using, then it is inappropriate to use jargon.

Pretentiousness

Pretentious language is unnecessarily lofty, extravagant language that is designed more to impress than to inform. Pretentious language usually comes about when the writer attempts to make his or her writing sound more profound or poetic than it actually is. More often than not, this effort results in language that sounds disingenuous, stilted, and wordy and may obscure the original point the author is attempting to make.

Ways to identify pretentious language:

- Read what you have written out loud, imagining yourself reading someone else's writing.
- Is the point you are trying to make difficult to identify?
- Are you frequently using "big" words?
- Is it possible to say the same thing with fewer words?

Clearing up pretentiousness:

- Replace lofty words with simpler words ("begin" instead of "commence")
- Remove metaphors that get in the way of simple points ("Gas prices have become more and more burdensome" instead of "The war of attrition fought at the gasoline pump has escalated beyond all reason")

Slang

Avoid using slang in formal, academic writing.

Like jargon, not all people understand the slang of a particular group. Slang also tends to change rapidly, dating writing that uses it. Further, slang a writer as a member of the group that uses that slang, which may alienate some readers. Remember:

- slang brings with it context and connotations that may be inappropriate in a particular piece of writing
- slang terms change rapidly, so that a word may mean something different at the time of reading than it did at the time of writing