

Acronymymania and Winnie The Pooh

Acronymymania - a craze for forming acronyms ***(Chambers English Dictionary, 1990 edition)***

Acronyms were initially developed as abbreviations, constructed (sometimes with the addition of extra letters) to create a pronounceable word from the contraction. Many acronyms have become words in their own right (radar while others (BBC, ITV, UN) are so widely understood that they have attained word-like status. They can help us give out information quickly, cram more information on the page, and type our e-mails faster.

Those are the good things about them. The rest is not quite so helpful.

We know acronyms can be irritating, but they have more serious drawbacks too. The scale of the problem becomes apparent when you hear that Google shows about 1,620,000 lists of acronyms: the Acronym Finder prides itself on containing over 315,000 definitions in its database.

Acronyms exclude...

Acronyms exclude people from conversations: the group that understands the acronym becomes a clique of those-in-the-know. Imagine you have just been appointed to a Government post and are meeting a group of people from various departments. I introduce myself. "My name is Jane Bloggs: I run a research programme under the RNRRS"

"How would you feel? You might anticipate some in-jokes which could make you feel marginal to the meeting, and you would not hear my next sentences as you try to work out what RNRRS is.

Admittedly "Renewable Natural Resources Research Strategy" is a mouthful, but at least it does what it says on the tin.

Although acronyms make the conversation faster, they leave behind those who are 'too slow' to keep up. This is often frustrating but can be more serious if acronyms are used liberally in a mix of junior and senior people, or in front of newcomers. Those most disadvantaged by acronym abuse are less likely to speak up, but are often the ones who are trying to establish their credibility in the group and who most need the meeting. In the worst cases people can use acronyms to bamboozle, to deter sticky questions, or to create an inner circle within a group.

They are hierarchical and bureaucratic...

Acronyms reinforce hierarchies: senior people will generally have more acronyms at their fingertips and be able to wield them in an "I'm extremely busy, please deal with this quickly" sort of way. There are parallels here with the use of jargon – another form of shorthand. Both acronyms and jargon are useful for communicating complex ideas, but only if you know that the person you are talking or writing to already understands what you are going on about. If they don't, these people remain outside the clique, forever referring to glossaries and being too embarrassed to ask their colleagues for clarification.

Acronyms symbolise an organisation's culture: the more there are, the less likely you will be able to find your way around it. They prevent outsiders from looking in, keeping the poor wretches bemused

by a welter of mismatched letters and unpronounceable names. It is hard to understand organisational relationships at the best of times, but particularly so when its structure is spelled out in acronyms. Names like SESDG, AMED, CEFAS, tell you nothing about their work; and we often get stuck with an old acronym that doesn't reflect any more what the organisation does or how it works (ADAS). We communicate better with both outsiders and colleagues if we use names and titles that show clearly our position and our prime responsibilities.

Acronyms encourage bureaucracy and discourage personal responsibility, as people hide behind the post and its acronym rather than laying claim to what they have said or written. Is "HOD" any more powerful than Jo Jones, when Jo Jones is your departmental head?

Acronyms can also give outsiders the impression of a secretive, closed and bureaucratic organisation – an image that doesn't help build public trust or attract the best staff.

They slow you down and obfuscate instead of explain...

The higher we move in an organisation, the more pressure there is to shorten documents sent to busy people, but reducing word counts by using acronyms is generally a false economy. People retain information better if it flows clearly, which doesn't happen if you are laboriously flicking back and forth between text and glossaries. How often have you searched intranets to find out which organisation, programme or project someone is referring to in an email?

The Small Business Service is not the same as Save British Science or, let's not forget, the Special Boat Service (as any bloke will immediately tell you with this particular acronym); we're not sure if Fred Smith works in sustainable Development or Science Directorate; and were you asked to send the documents to the Scottish Agricultural College or the Science Advisory Council?

It's generally a mistake to assume we know what acronyms mean. We get it right some of the time, wrong some of the time, but mostly have to refer back to page vi (or was it viii? Where's the glossary? It's 3 pages long: how am I going to remember all that? Why is it after the executive summary? I've lost my place and spilt my tea. I'm going to do something else).

They are a problem for the writer as well as the speaker...

Acronyms create difficulties not just for the listener: like jargon, they are a lazy way of communicating. We understand better what we are writing if we are made to spell it out clearly. Making something snappier and more powerful is a matter of creating a strong and logical line of argument and saying it as plainly as possible, not of cramming as much information as you can onto the page by taking communication short-cuts. A journalists' rule for concise writing is to go through what you have written and cut out as many words as you can, and then to do the same again, while making sure you lose none of the meaning. Acronyms are only used with extreme caution.

Using acronyms when we write relates to our penchant for creating A Very Important Title out of a perfectly simple description. Why should a project on evidence based policy making become The Evidence Based Policy Making Project? It sounds pompous and will only become acronym-ised to the EBPM project, which tells us nothing. This Tendency to use unnecessary Capital Letters makes us write like Winnie The Pooh and is possibly the Driving Force behind Acronymia.

Developing an acronym etiquette:

Ordering people to abandon acronyms altogether seems drastic and unlikely to work. So here is the beginning of an etiquette.

1. Think carefully about the audience you are writing for or speaking to. This applies even when you talk to, or email, close associates. The extra few moments it takes to explain an acronym should be a common courtesy.
2. Use an acronym only if you are absolutely sure everyone who is likely to read or hear it understands it perfectly.
3. Otherwise, explain each acronym before its first use. Write the name or phrase out in full with the acronyms in brackets, not the other way round. In long documents, explain each acronym before you use it in each section.
4. If you only use an acronym once, don't use it at all. You don't need it.
5. Always think how you can say the same thing without using an acronym. Write "the project to abandon acronyms" rather than "The Acronym- Abandonment Project".
6. Ask people to explain acronyms if you don't understand them. The more people who ask what someone's talking about, the more likely they are to begin to explain themselves clearly.
7. If you are writing to Ministers, don't use acronyms. Ever.

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