

***CE News* “Risky Business” No. 24**

“We have a full flight today.” Frequent flyers know that means the window and aisle seats are taken, and even some of the middle seats. Because “full,” although an absolute (i.e., nothing can be fuller than full), does not mean full in airline lingo. Nor does “really full flight,” which implies that just a few seats are empty. So what word or expression does mean “full” to flyers? “We’ve oversold today’s flight.”

Regrettably, as a civil engineer, you do not have the luxury of misusing language. You should assume that your ultimate reader is a jury of your peers; i.e., people who have not even the foggiest notion of what it is you do or how you do it, and you therefore need to be crystal-clear. Why? Because it helps you manage your risk. If someone files a claim against you, it will probably be for a project “event” that occurred two or more years before. The most compelling evidence will be in writing: your website, your brochure, and your marketing letters, all of which may be used to characterize the promises you’ve made; your proposal and contract, of course; any reports you submit; and whatever project correspondence you may have issued. Is everything you have written unambiguous? easy to understand? It should be. Plaintiff’s attorneys love imprecision, especially when it can be attributed to professionals who are in the accuracy business, as you are. And that’s not a knock on lawyers: They are duty-bond to use every lawful tactic they can to achieve their clients’ goal; i.e., getting their hands on your money.

So what does it take to be unmistakably clear? A column of this length can only give you a glimmer. As brief suggestions...

First, avoid taboo words. Among these are absolutes, like “full.” While an airline employee’s “full” may not mean “no more room,” yours does. Thus, in your professional capacity, you should not say that a glass is “full of water,” because, first, the glass probably is not full and, second, even if it appears full of water, you know it also contains things such as dust, detergent, and who knows what else that can be measured in parts per

billion. Likewise, your glass cannot be empty, if only because of that parts-per-billion thing.

Taboo words also include those whose true meanings are treacherous. Consider “certify,” which many engineers assume means “state” or “declare.” Wrong. “Certify” means “guarantee.” As such, should you certify that a structure, as built, complies with code, you could radically expand your liability by guaranteeing the contractor’s work and, should something about that work be amiss, you would be uninsured for the exposure, given that your professional liability insurance covers your negligence, not the contractor’s.

Second, avoid subjective modifiers; they usually miscommunicate, if only because your “tall,” “heavy,” or “fast” is not the same as your reader’s (try, instead, as examples, “six-foot-five,” “200 pounds,” or “ten miles per hour”).

Third, simplify your language. Why say “in regard to” or “provide with” when “about” and “give” work just as well? The oft-heard dictum about not using ten-dollar words when ten-centers will do also applies. If a seventh-grader does not understand what you’ve written, rewrite. (Thought: Time permitting, have a seventh-grader review and comment on what you write.)

Fourth, watch out for pronouns. They’re often used in statements that are clear at the time they’re written, but foggy later; e.g., “I just signed a check with my new pen, and now I can’t find it.” Repetition, while not elegant, can achieve clarity: “...and now I can’t find my new pen.”

Fifth, write in the active voice: subject/verb/object (when the verb is transitive; e.g., Jack carried a bucket.), or subject/verb/modifying prepositional phrase (when the verb is intransitive; e.g., Jill ran down the hill.). Avoid the passive voice (The bucket was

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carried.), because it results in convolution, omissions (who carried the bucket?), and any number of grammatical problems that lead to imprecision (e.g., “Smiling triumphantly, the bucket was carried by Jill.”). We think in the active voice. We speak in the active voice. We should write that way, too.

Sixth, learn how to proofread; it’s the only way you can QC your writing. If you proofread solely by reading something from start to finish two or three times, you do not know how to proofread. That can be deadly to professionals whose every word has the weight of a number. (Thought: Work with a “proof buddy” who also knows how to proof, and who will review your work even on short notice, providing you reciprocate.)

Help is available, especially from ASFE/The Best People on Earth. Its website – www.asfe.org – has information about writing courses and written resource materials. If you need help, get it.