

STRONG BUSINESS WRITING

Avoiding Vague Language

The following words and phrases are considered vague language and should be avoided in business writing:

it, they, them, their, its, this, that
you, your, I, my, we, our
people, someone, a person, others, one
there are/there is, it is

The Problem with Ambiguity

Vague language is undesirable in business writing because of the possibility for the misunderstanding of the meaning of a sentence. The ease and brevity of pronouns in particular makes these words the greatest culprits in ambiguous writing. In the example text below, the pronouns *they*, *it* and *their* can refer to several antecedents, *e.g.*, Android, Apple and stockbrokers.

Android is competing with Apple to be the market leader in the smartphone industry. They are one of the most popular mobile phone operating systems. Stockbrokers are hoping that it will cause an increase in the price of their stock over the next few months.

Writing with Strength

Avoiding vague language is also one vital aspect of articulate, powerful writing. In the examples below, notice how the revised sentences are more vigorous and compelling.

Weak: There are four key components of successful cross-functional teams.

Strong: Successful cross-functional teams include four key components.

Weak: It may also be necessary to assess how the current portfolio of products and services adds value to our customers, especially in comparison to our competitor's value proposition.

Strong: Another frank assessment might be undertaken of how the current portfolio of products and services adds value to customers, especially in comparison to competitors' value propositions.

Weak: Through this process, we should begin to understand our unique selling point in the marketplace.

Strong: Through this process, an understanding should emerge of the unique selling point of the organization in the marketplace.

In some business writing contexts, such as e-mails among colleagues, precision is not as necessary and the use of pronouns is more acceptable. In the College of Business, students are asked not to use pronouns so as to cultivate the habit of precise language. Professors may permit pronouns (even personal pronouns such as *I*, *you*, and *we*) on certain assignments, but unless permitted otherwise, students should default to pronoun-free writing.

Writing with "This"

The words "this" and "these" can be used in business writing if used as adjectives qualifying a noun. For example:

Weak: The study found a direct correlation between a company's involvement and investment in the local community and the amount of business received from community members. With **this** in mind, the company's current community interactions will be reviewed.

Strong: The study found a direct correlation between a company's involvement and investment in the local community and the amount of business received from community members. With **these results [this correlation]** in mind, the company will review current interactions with the community.

Four Strategies to Avoid Vague Language (OSCaR)

When writing or revising, four different strategies can be applied to limit the use of vague language, ranging from very simple actions (Omit) to the creation of a more complex sentence structure (Rephrase). Use **OSCaR** (Omit, Substitute, Collapse, and Rephrase) to remember these strategies. One approach to applying these techniques is to start by testing the first strategy (Omit) on the vague portion of a sentence. If simple omission is not possible, test the next strategy, and so on, until finding a strategy that works.

Omit

Sometimes vague language can simply be removed from a sentence without needing further revision.

Original: Managers can use **their** employees' testimonies to convince **their** coworkers to embrace a new idea.

Revised: Managers can use employees' testimonies to convince coworkers to embrace a new idea.

Substitute

Occasionally vague language can be substituted with a more precise word or phrase. The words *this* or *these*, *such* and *said* may be used to refer to an antecedent without using pronouns or repeating full phrases or names.

Original: This shift will fail unless **they** convince **people** that marketing activities are relevant.

Revised: This shift will fail unless the organization convinces employees that marketing activities are relevant.

Original: If you question an outfit choice, do not wear **it**.

Revised: If you question an outfit choice, do not wear said clothing.

Collapse

When a pronoun is used to avoid repeating a word or phrase, the two parts of a sentence (or in some cases, the two individual sentences) can be combined together. Look for ways to avoid structures that require a subject or possessive; sometimes a variation on a key word can help, such as using *practicing* instead of *they practice* in the second example.

Original: Driven, passionate professionals may be a rarity in the business world. Nonetheless, **they** are effective in building a vibrant organization.

Revised: Driven, passionate professionals may be a rarity in the business world but are effective nonetheless in building a vibrant organization.

Original: Presenters can cultivate authenticity if **they** practice with several goals in mind.

Revised: Presenters can cultivate authenticity by practicing with several goals in mind.

Rephrase

Often a sentence will need to be reworked quite significantly to avoid the use of pronouns. Take the opportunity to create a more vigorous sentence structure by using strong nouns and verbs.

Original: **There is** nothing more important to an employer than an employee's trustworthiness.

Revised: Nothing concerns an employer more than an employee's trustworthiness.

Original: **It** takes commitment to break that silence, but **it is** strongly recommended for executives to emphasize and drive open conversation.

Revised: Commitment is necessary to break that silence, but executives are strongly encouraged to initiate and advance conversation.