



## Jargon

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Newspapers are full of this stuff — and the situation isn't improving.

Stories that use a lot of jargon often involve sports or business. I've devoted a good part of my career as an editor trying to eliminate jargon from sports stories, so this tome will deal with business stories.

Pompous euphemisms (a favorite term of the author and scholar William Zinsser) or elegant variations (that's what the late Theodore Bernstein of the New York Times called them) abound in business writing. And sometimes reporters and editors aren't even aware that they're using them.

When you suggest to some journalists that this jargon hurts the credibility of their stories, you often get an answer like this:

"That's just subtle shorthand between us and our readers. They know what we mean."

Forgive me if I refer to that defense mechanism as the last refuge of insecure reporters, one that is often encouraged by equally insecure editors.

One of the more common bits of jargon is the phrase **blue chip stock**, which defies definition the way it usually appears in business copy. Reporters and editors use the term without knowing what it means. Equally important, those who might think they know what it means don't agree.

What is a blue chip stock, anyway? Ask 10 people, and you'll likely get 10 answers (Dow Jones, Fortune 500, Standard & Poor's, old money, expensive stocks, etc.).

I know this because, at many of my workshops, I pass out blank index cards and ask journalists to define *blue chip stock* for me. Dutifully, the participants write a few words on the cards and pass them back. I get a variety of answers, and many of the participants are sure that their definitions are correct and are surprised that the people sitting in the next chairs would have different definitions.

The term *blue chip stock* is vague. It means different things to different people. Without instant recognition by most readers, a catch phrase such as that is useless.

By the way, the term *blue chip* began with poker. In friendly games, the white chips are worth \$1, the reds \$5 and the blues \$10. Hence *blue chip* refers to the most expensive chips.

If you don't know that, why would you use the term in a story?

And that leads to the most insidious forms of elegant variation:

**Simple synonymymania** and its trite cousin **T\*A\*N synonymymania**. These represent a distracting penchant for seeking synonyms when it's not necessary.

Let's start with simple synonymymania. Here are examples:

*First she said that the documents would be finished today; later she mentioned that she had run into minor problems and wouldn't finish the work until Monday; finally she stated that she would work overnight and have them ready first thing Tuesday morning.*

*The dollar reached a 12-year high against the deutschmark and a 13-year peak against the guilder.*

*The litigants were Joseph Kowaski of Roxbury, who purchased 41 acres, and Peter Kunzler of Holmdel, who bought 174.*

*Wal-Mart fell \$1.40 to \$55.25; Coca-Cola declined 78 cents to \$56.86, and General Motors stumbled 56 cents to \$65.68.*

Where's the virtue in seeking synonyms in those examples? In each case, a constant has been turned into a variable. The readers become uncomfortable with that. They start concentrating on the differences instead of the similarities.

The word *said* is perfectly valid and can be used repeatedly without distracting a reader. Unless your meaning is something other than *said* (maybe *shout* or *whisper*), you should stick with *said*. Doing that tells the reader exactly what you mean, and, sometimes, the repetition is good for emphasis:

*First she said that the documents would be finished today; later she said that she had run into minor problems and wouldn't finish the work until Monday; finally she said that she would work overnight and have them ready first thing Tuesday morning.*

As for the three other examples, if the repetition bothers you, don't use the lazy technique of simple synonymymania. Rework the sentences:

*The dollar reached its highest point in 12 years against the deutschmark and 13 years against the guilder.*

*The litigants were Joseph Kowaski of Roxbury, who bought 41 acres, and Peter Kunzler of Holmdel, 174.*

*Three major stocks declined: Wal-Mart \$1.40 to \$55.25, Coca-Cola 78 cents to \$56.86, and General Motors 56 cents to \$65.68.*

Which brings us to **T\*A\*N synonymymania**.

As with simple synonymymania, this technique isn't limited to business copy, but it's

certainly prominent there. Once a noun is used, it isn't used again. Instead it is replaced by a multi-word synonym: the word *the*, an adjective and a noun. So you see writing like this:

*Gold closed at \$320 Monday on the London market. The yellow metal has rebounded sharply against world currencies over the past three weeks.*

*Intel said Wednesday that it expected a fourth-quarter loss. The world's leading chip-maker blamed a soft economy and stiff competition from Advanced Micro Devices.*

*Tropicana revealed Friday that citrus canker might cause major shortages for its processing plants. The orange juice giant only recently recovered from the effects of Hurricane Andrew, which had wiped out hundreds of acres of South Florida groves.*

*Microsoft announced Tuesday that it would offer incentives to customers who bought early versions of some of its applications packages. The Redmond, Wash.-based software behemoth had come under scrutiny from the federal government for what several lawyers called predatory pricing practices.*

**The yellow metal? The world's leading chip-maker? The orange juice giant? The Redmond, Wash.-based software behemoth?**

Does anybody talk that way? Did anyone ever hear anyone *say* any of those phrases? They are jargon — journalists writing and editing for other journalists. (Besides, I thought *the world's leading chip-maker* was Mrs. Fields.)

If the facts contained in the T\*A\*N synonyms are important, find a more natural, more conversational way to work them into the stories. Otherwise, replace them with pronouns.

Another example of jargon, again not exclusive to business copy but common enough, is the penchant for making nouns into verbs. This happens a lot with *access* and *impact* — as in these examples:

*He was unable to access the company's balance sheets over the weekend, so he couldn't produce a report until Monday.*

*She knew that releasing the financial statement would impact the market.*

Some dictionaries are beginning to accept these unnatural verb creations as secondary definitions, but the standards of print journalism are higher than those of dictionaries — which are, after all, common denominators.

More business jargon:

**bellwether**

*Cisco, a network equipment-maker and technology industry bellwether, stopped short of predicting a recovery, after climbing \$3.19, or 24.4 percent. . . .*

The word *bellwether* is a derivative of two words, *bell*, which is obvious, and *wether*, which is a castrated sheep. So, specifically, it is a castrated sheep who wears a bell while leading a flock of other sheep.

A more liberal definition might be any castrated leader of a pack, but that's a long way from the loose definition that appears in many business stories, which is an *industry leader*.

If you don't know the definition of *bellwether*, why would you use it in a story? What's wrong with the simple word *leader*? One newspaper has used *bellwether* as an incorrect elegant variation of *leader* 787 times over the past 20 years, most of them in the business section.

### **an estimated**

*An estimated 2,000 businessmen were late getting to their offices Tuesday morning because of subway delays.*

Unless you say who is doing the estimating, this passive, weasel technique should be avoided. Such usage tells the readers that you're guessing at a number. Why not say where the estimate came from?

### **sharply lower**

*Stocks were sharply lower in heavy trading Wednesday.*

Is this definition of *lower* the opposite of *lower* in a *dull* fashion? Why not just say *how much lower*? *Sharply lower* tells the reader nothing. Reporters use it because they see it in other business stories.

### **subsequent to**

*Subsequent to the merger, Elliott was able to sell 25,000 shares of the stock.*

Why use an affectation like *subsequent to*, when you're trying to say *after*? That's like writing *prior to* when you're trying to say *before*. Aren't they the same things?

### **challenge**

*AOL Time Warner will have to deal with a long list of challenges before resuming its position as one of the market's better investments.*

Why use *challenges*? Don't you really mean *problems*? Silly euphemisms like that are what you might expect from a hotel that tells its employees never to talk to guests about *problems* — only *challenges*. You don't need that kind of softening in a newspaper story. Say what you mean.

### grow the business

*Chico's is looking for ways to grow the business, which has become a Wall Street favorite as its stock hit a 52-week high of \$37.25.*

Unless you're talking about crops, a garden or a beard, avoid this unnatural transitive use of an intransitive verb. Business stories had almost freed themselves of this jargon until Bill Clinton ran for president in 1992 and promised to *grow the economy*.

### finalize

*The executives wanted to finalize work on the merger because they all had important afternoon appointments.*

Why use a made-up verb by adding *-ize* to the already-busy adjective *final*? The much better verb *complete* already exists. It's shorter, the accent is on the last syllable (always a good quality for a verb), and it means exactly what you're trying to say.

### creative financing moves

*Some of the keys to the turnaround have been Clark's creative financing moves, which have generated almost \$300 million in capital.*

Without amplification, an expression such as that one tells the reader nothing. And, if you *are* going to amplify, get to the point immediately, without cluttering the story with jargon.

### anticipate

*Wall Street's weakest sector was again technology, widely anticipated to be the last to enjoy a long-awaited turnaround.*

The concept that belongs here is *expect*. To *anticipate* requires taking action before something happens. It does *not* mean *to look forward to*. A promoter *expects* a big crowd for his concert; he *anticipates* it by adding bleachers.

### seasonally adjusted

*The labor department reported Thursday that new claims for jobless benefits dropped by a seasonally adjusted 10,000 to 418,000, the lowest since March 31.*

Does anyone except a government statistician understand the formula for adjusting the seasons to come up with these figures? If you don't have some perspective to explain how the adjustment was arrived at, you might as well leave it out.

### Wall Street's growing conviction

*Technology stocks slid again Thursday, on Wall Street's growing conviction that battered high-tech companies will be the last to recover from recession.*

Can a street really have a conviction? Even if you assume that the readers know that *Wall Street* means *the entire financial community*, can such a community have a conviction?

### lion's share

*Toyota and Honda again captured the lion's share of the U.S. automobile market last year.*

That's certainly not true. The *lion's share* is *all* of the market, or at least *all but the crumbs*. Toyota and Honda sell a lot of cars in the United States, but they don't have all — or even nearly all — of the market.

Other jargon that seems to appear a lot in business stories. Some of these have value if used occasionally in situations that make immediate sense to most readers. But, generally, they're over-used to the point of becoming hackneyed:

bargaining chip  
beneficially held shares  
big-ticket  
business climate  
consolidated volume  
consumer mindset  
corporate raider  
corporate restructuring  
cutting-edge  
damage control  
derivative transaction  
economic indicators  
eleventh-hour  
entitlement  
exceeding expectations  
fast track  
globalization  
industry convergence  
linkage  
long-range profitability  
market indicators  
marketing strategy  
mission statement  
no-holds-barred  
one-time charge  
portfolio diversification  
powered by strong results  
pre-owned  
purchase accounting  
pursue other interests  
quarterly outlook

restructuring  
revenue enhancement  
revenue stream  
roll out  
state-of-the-art  
strategic alternatives  
supply-side  
sustained recovery  
technology sector  
top-to-bottom reorganization  
trade pact  
trickle-down  
troubled  
turnkey  
venture capital  
watchdog