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## Say What You Mean

Saying what you mean is not always easy. You have to consider your audience, you have to know your topic, and you have to have a solid grasp of the English language.

Communicating better takes work. It's not for slackers. You have to care about the words that you use and how you use them.

It helps to wonder whether common words and phrases are the *correct* ones. For example, fast-checkout lines often display "10 items or less" signs. This common phrase is *incorrect*. "10 items or fewer" is the *correct* phrase. You should use "fewer" when you have distinct items that you *cannot* subdivide. You should use "less" for quantities that you *can* subdivide (e.g., "5 miles or less to the next rest stop").

If you don't have a natural curiosity about words or phrases, develop one. Look for opportunities to write or speak with greater clarity. When a physical dictionary is not handy but I'm online, I like to use Dictionary.com. For example, telephone companies often misuse

“premise” to refer to a customer’s physical location. Dictionary.com has a superb explanation about why the correct word is “premises” instead. In contrast, I saw a McDonald’s restaurant use the proper word — “premises” — to refer to its location on its “Your car will be towed.” sign.

Saying what you mean doesn’t depend only on word choice. You have to use correct punctuation, too. “Let’s eat Grandma!” and “Let’s eat, Grandma!” show how a comma can save a grandmother from cannibals. The book *Eats, Shoots & Leaves* is a humorous guide to how to use apostrophes, commas, etc. It’s filled with examples of changed meanings when someone misplaces an apostrophe or comma. You can find links to this and other recommended books [here](#).

Studying a foreign language can help you to write better, too. You’ll learn linguistic terms such as *indicative*, *subjunctive*, *imperative*, and *conditional*. Studying German in college taught me English-language concepts that I never knew. It also helped me to re-learn English-language concepts that I had forgotten. Studying Spanish much later, I once again became re-acquainted with many of these concepts. For example, I learned to question whether I should write “If I was” or “If I were” in a given situation.

Your communication will improve when you become more aware of slang words and phrases. It helps to know that “fixing to” (or “fixin’ to”) is regional slang for “preparing to”. It helps to appreciate that “you guys” and

“you’s guys” and “y’all” are regionalisms for the plural “you”. It helps to appreciate that not everyone will understand “how the cow ate the cabbage”. It helps to appreciate that everyone won’t understand “knee-high to a grasshopper” immediately.

Developing an outsider’s perspective can help you to communicate better, too. For example, look at “woulda, coulda, shoulda”. It’s a slurring of “would’ve, could’ve, should’ve”. This is short for “would have, could have, should have” — an American pop-psychology phrase. “Don’t ‘should’ on me.” is another American pop-psychology phrase, but this one comes from a ruder expression. If you’re communicating with a non-American audience, your awareness of Americanisms will help.

Developing a curiosity about definitions of words is another way to become a better communicator. A little knowledge can lead you astray, though. For example, you might know that the prefix “a” often means “without” or “not” or “the opposite of” (e.g., “typical” vs. “atypical”). But, would it be correct to say that the opposite of “apathetic” is “pathetic”? You might believe at first glance that the opposite of “disgruntled” is “gruntled”. Try looking up the latter in a dictionary; you won’t find it.

As you become more curious about words, you might develop a new hobby. You might notice how people’s surnames seem to affect their occupational choices. “Dr. Butts, Proctologist” comes to mind. At one point the

surname of the chief of police for Houston, Texas, was Hurtt. This fun little hobby likely will feed your curiosity about words.

As you become more curious about words, you might also become more curious about American English in general. I have a hypothesis about what's happening with American English. I call it the "Devolution toward Simpler" hypothesis. You can follow me on [KirkMahoney.com](http://KirkMahoney.com) as I publish observations that seem to confirm this hypothesis. I have no idea whether someone with a Ph.D. in linguistics already has proposed a hypothesis like mine, but I don't care. My goal is to explain what I observe. American English at times seems to be going down the toilet. The hypothesis that I'm working to prove gives me comfort that I can at least predict *how* it will go down the toilet. You might have your own hypothesis. I want to help you to step back, get a bigger picture, and become a better communicator by discussing mine with you.

Finally, please don't let "I wasn't an English major." dominate your thoughts to the point that you abandon your dream of becoming a better communicator. There are plenty of English majors who can't compare to what you can achieve when you set your mind to it.

— *Kirk*

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