

## 7 writing tips from RHETORICA® — a toolkit of 21 everyday writing techniques

### TOP TIP #6: Write plain English

An important concept in English is *register*, a scale of the formality of writing.

The scale has formal words at the top and slang at the bottom. Let's populate the register with synonyms for *money*, a classic, mid-register word.

At the top of the register, we have words like *remuneration*, *consideration*, *liquidity*, *finance*, *funds*, *legal tender*, *emolument*. In the middle of the register, words like *cash*, *pay* and *salary* accompany *money*. In the depths of the slang world, we have *wonga*, *dosh*, *dough*, *lucre*, *moolah*, *spondooliks* (?1) and *bucks*.

Formal, upper register words tend to be longer and harder to spell. They're more elevated, exclusive, solemn, aloof and harder to understand. They put distance between you and your reader.

Something else happens as we move up the register: the language also becomes more *abstract*. Abstract language is harder for the human brain to process. Adopting a formal, high register style makes your reader work hard to get your meaning. The harder they work, the likelier they are to stop reading.

Generally, the best place to be is in the middle. Where upper register lingo derives from Latin and Greek, mid-register is the home of good old Anglo-Saxon, aka plain English (PE). Here the words are shorter, pithier and universally understood. Everyone knows what *cash* is and what it does. Not everyone knows what an *emolument* is — and why should they?

If *emolument* is the appropriate technical term in the context, use that. But if all you mean is, 'you'll get more cash in your pocket at the end of the month', say that.

Here are some PE alternatives:

**Posh-speak**

assist  
attain  
commence  
construct  
depart  
purchase  
utilise

**Plain-speak**

help, aid  
reach, meet, hit (eg a goal)  
start, begin, kick off  
build, make, create  
leave  
buy  
use, apply

Besides the obvious benefit of clarity and readability, there's another reason to use plain English over formal language: it has more impact. Because it's concrete and more visual, it has greater emotional effect. It packs more of a punch.

Take the sentence

*This law will negatively impact on our profits.*

No emotional kick there. And the phrase *negatively impact* is ambiguous: it could be a huge impact or a tiny one. It's weasel-worded, hedging-your-bets, sit-on-the-fence, non-committal language. If you wanted much more impact, you could say

*This law will cripple / crucify / wreck / ruin / maim / destroy / hammer our profits.*

But if you think that's a bit over the top and want to be more measured, you could say

*This law will hurt / damage / harm our profits.*

Can you hear and feel the difference between all those alternatives and *negatively impact*?

That's plain English.