

# JAIL BULLETIN

Number 74

April, 1991

## DEFICIENCIES IN WRITTEN COMMUNICATION

Most people will generally agree that any type of written communication will require CLARITY and CONCISENESS. While they nod their agreement, they will go back to the office and write something like the following:

*One of the major issues, based upon our evaluation and that of Albert Sampson of Pythier County, involves the custody, security and control of the facility. The architectural design was a concept of angles to a considerable degree which, in addition to being costly and spatially dysfunctional, exacerbates the requirement of staff observation of prisoner movement and activity. In addition, the location of the control center is questionable. Not only is it distantly separated from the main entrance, but it poses some problems due to its proximity to inmate housing areas and the two level configuration which will necessitate additional personnel to staff the post. Another major consideration involves the need for an override system in case the control center is ever surrendered, lost or otherwise given over to the inmate population. The same staffing difficulties present themselves in the area of the female control center area. If such control center were positioned or situationally located in or near to the corridor rather than the interior of the structure, it would serve the dual purposes of housing and corridor security. In addition, the need to physically transport unruly or sick inmates up and down the stairs and around narrow corridors will pose more security problems.*

Obviously this written communication, if grammatically correct, is confusing and violates the principles of clarity and conciseness. It contains many useless words and phrases and is confusing. It requires more than one reading and may possibly lead the reader to the wrong conclusions about its intent.

The reason people communicate this way is a mystery. One can only suppose that they are trying to impress others. The result is confusion, and failure to achieve the objective of communication, which is the transfer of ideas and messages.

## **BASIC RULES OF WRITTEN COMMUNICATIONS**

In order to write more effectively, we can look to some simple rules which were violated in the above cited excerpt. The first rule is **KEEP IT SIMPLE**. Look at the following words and attempt to define each:

**SUPEREROGATION**  
**SUPERFLUITY**  
**SURPLUSAGE**

They have basically the same meaning! But only 3% of persons can define supererogation, 10% can define superfluity, and 25% can define surplusage. If the word surplusage was in a letter, 75% of the audience would be excluded from the message. Would more people have understood it if words such as “excess” or “too much” were used?

The second rule is **AVOID ARTIFICIAL EXPRESSIONS**. Often we use phrases such as “make an attempt” when we really mean “try”, or “at this point in time” when we mean “now”. The problem with using artificial expressions is that it may confuse the reader, or it may take more than one reading to decipher the intent.

A third rule is to **AVOID GOBBLEDYGOOK**. Say what is meant and **STOP!!** Instead of referring to a “video screen with multi-color capability”, say “color monitor”.

Technical terms such as “Sallyport” are called **JARGON**. Such a term is acceptable if the audience is experienced in corrections. But it may be Gobbledygook to a county commissioner.

A fourth rule is **AVOID REDUNDANCY**. Redundancy is saying the same thing twice. Instead of writing “inmate population,” write either “population” or “inmates”. Instead of saying “architectural design,” say “architecture” or “design”.

A fifth basic rule of written communications is the **RULE OF TWENTY WORDS**. This simply means that sentences should be no longer than twenty words. People have limited interest and abilities to comprehend long sentences. It confuses them and their minds wander. Therefore a sentence should be short and to the point.

The sixth basic rule is the development of a **PARAGRAPH** which expresses both **UNITY** and **COHERENCE**. Often writers violate the simple rules of the paragraph by including a variety of ideas in one paragraph. To avoid this pitfall, consider the following.

A sentence should start with a **TOPIC SENTENCE** identifying the subject of the paragraph. Next come **SENTENCE(S) WHICH DEVELOP THE TOPIC**. This may be one or more sentences which add facts to or explain the topic. The paragraph ends with an optional **CONCLUDING SENTENCE** summing up the point of the paragraph.

If the point of the paragraph is rather simple and clear, one need not have a concluding sentence. The more complicated the topic, or if the paragraph is very long, a concluding sentence may

be helpful to direct the attention of the reader. It may also test the writer's logic and suggest that the paragraph be rewritten if the concluding sentence does not express the UNITY and COHERENCE necessary for a paragraph.

The key to applying these rules is a desire to communicate most effectively. A writer does not want the audience to receive the wrong message nor have them INFER meanings which are not intended.

Nothing suggested above means to say that a person has to be simplistic or insulting to his audience. It suggests that the writer be SENSITIVE and ATTENTIVE to his readers and transmit his message CONCISELY and CLEARLY.

Finally, most persons of average intelligence read at the SIXTH GRADE level. Most magazines, newspapers and even classics are written at that level.

In summary, the official and legal consequences of the inspector's letters, reports, decisions and recommendations are important. He does not want a jail administrator scratching his head wondering what the inspector REALLY means.

*This issue of the "Jail Bulletin" was adapted from information contained in the "Jail Inspector Programmed Instruction Training Program", Thomas A. Rosazza, Author.*

# QUIZ

Nebraska Jail Standards require that jail staff receive eighteen (18) hours of in-service training each year. The Jail Bulletin may be used to supplement in-service training if an officer studies the Bulletin, completes the quiz and this process is documented by the jail administrator for review during the annual jail inspection.

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COMMUNICATIONS

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NAME \_\_\_\_\_

DATE \_\_\_\_\_

1. Underline the most clear and concise sentence in each group.

Call the Sheriff at home.  
Telephonically contact the Sheriff at his place of residence.

Go upstairs.  
Proceed to the upstairs area.

In the near future, I propose a staff visit of your facility.  
I will visit the facility soon.

2. Circle the simpler word or phrase in each group.

watch  
maintain surveillance over  
visually monitor

presently  
currently  
now  
at this point in time

advise  
tell  
inform  
communicate verbally

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