

Translate jargon into language your audience will understand

“The well-meaning communicator, in opting for jargon, has lost a valuable opportunity to communicate. Knowingly or unknowingly, jargon has become the lazy man’s way to avoid wrestling with how to communicate clearly, concisely and with passion to others who may not understand the concepts that some of us live and breathe each day.”

—Joan Lowery, *Cut the Jargon*
www.thefreelibrary.com/Cut+the+jar+gon%3a+It+has+become+a+public+relations+nighmare+leading+to...-a080506757

It’s a little ironic that many educators have difficulty explaining things outside of a classroom. They may teach their subjects clearly to students but struggle to share information with parents or community members. When they talk about education issues, they often fall back on eduspeak, or jargon.

Jargon is not effective for communicating and can be alienating. Jargon tells the listener that he or she doesn’t belong in the conversation. Not only is jargon difficult for non-educators to understand, it may cause confusion among fellow educators who may have a different or incomplete understanding of the terms.

This is not a new problem, nor is it entirely the fault of educators. Educational jargon often starts with educational reform efforts. By the time new initiatives reach classrooms, educators have been trained in the jargon of the issue. They use it to convey the program or reform to parents and community members. By then, it’s not jargon to the educators; it’s familiar language.

Consider this example by author and educational correspondent John Merrow:
(<http://takingnote.learningmatters.tv/?p=5003>)

“Aligned instruction with buy-in by highly qualified teachers for authentic inquiry-based learning and student engagement in professional learning communities will produce 21st Century skills in our youngsters.”

Does this make perfect sense to you? Does this sound like you? Now consider how much of this sentence you would understand as a parent or visitor to the school. Liz Dwyer, education editor for Good Magazine, commented on that very quote in an online post:

“No one – not even the academic policy wonks that have convinced teachers and principals that this is how you have to talk in order to sound competent

(Over)

and professional – *really* knows what that means. It's no wonder many parents skip coffee with the principal or dread the bi-annual parent-teacher conference. Understanding this stuff is like translating a foreign language." (www.good.is/posts/is-the-education-reform-world-filled-with-too-much-jargon/)

If you don't use big words, how will people know how educated you are?

Every field has its own jargon. The challenge for any field that requires regular communication with the public is to ensure that the public can understand. Doctors are trained in complex medical terminology, but we are most confident in the ones who can put us at ease by explaining our particular medical concerns in plain language.

Big, complex terms should make you sound smart. Unfortunately, the opposite is often true. Merrow said these words can result in suspicion of educators and often mask a lack of understanding.

"Do some educators obfuscate because they think it makes them sound more professional? Are some educators so deep in the weeds of their profession that they have forgotten how to communicate with ordinary folks? And are some being duplicitous, saying, "We know what works" when in fact they do not? I suspect it's "Yes" to all of the above."

You can use jargon if your audience knows the jargon.

Joan Lowery suggests a simple solution to the jargon problem: Know your audience. "Effective communicators in any environment must understand the knowledge base of their audience." When speaking to colleagues, feel free to speak in jargon. On the other hand, you'll have an easier time establishing a habit of plain language if you try to speak plainly most of the time.

Please remember that school board members and education reporters may not understand eduspeak. In reports and meetings, it is important to define your terms and avoid too many buzzwords.

FYI: Replace acronyms with real words.

Acronyms are SOP in education. They are AKA jargon. To be completely PC and ensure maximum understanding, don't use this "alphabet soup" as your MO. If you do, be sure to be available for Q&A sessions or provide a list of FAQs to your community.

Seriously, most people probably know what a PTA is, but NCLB – even this many years after it started – may be gibberish to non-educators.

Laughing at us, not with us?

Some regular observers of school district business have found humor in trying to keep up with changing buzzwords. They have produced tools to help show the absurdity of too much jargon.

"Reporter Jackie Borchardt of the *Casper Star-Tribune* made a school board bingo card last year that included "literacy," "goal team," "rigor," "pathways," "research-based," "engaged," "high-access," "what's best for kids," "cohort," "strategic plan," and "21st century education." She didn't say whether she called out "Bingo" during a School Board meeting!" (Merrow)

21st century skills	Child-centered	Focus on learning	Data-driven	Professional learning community
Continuous improvement	Benchmark	Outside the box	Collaborative	Empower
Wordsmithing	Lifelong learning	Free space	Community	Outcome driven
Push the envelope	Innovative	Advocate	Visionary	Transparency
Differentiated	Mission driven	Transformative	Catalyst	Tipping point

This example was developed by a teacher and is posted Liz Dwyer.

There is an online Educational Jargon Generator that can help you “generate and leverage impactful interfaces in your conversations” (*please note: this sentence contains jargon*). The author developed it to “Amaze your colleagues with finely crafted phrases of educational nonsense!” (<http://www.sciencegeek.net/lingo.html>)

Learn how to make short words longer and long-words shorter with acronyms. For a humorous, tongue-in-cheek look at jargon in the business world, see this video interview at DailyIdea.tv: (www.youtube.com/watch?feature=player_embedded&v=8O9m92CAOOo#)

Decode the jargon.

Educational jargon may differ slightly among states for some state-related programs, but the standard words are likely to be found everywhere. An online search of educational jargon yields translation tools that may help clarify terms for non-educators.

- **A Lexicon of Learning: What Educators mean when they say...**
www.ascd.org/Publications/Lexicon-of-Learning.aspx
- **Dictionary of Educational Jargon**
www.teachervision.fen.com/pro-dev/new-teacher/48466.html
- **Edu-speak, the dictionary**
<http://ulfaq.home.comcast.net/~ulfaq/eduspeak.html>
- **Family Dictionary of Educational Terms**
www.governor.wa.gov/oeo/publications/dictionary.pdf
- **For Parents: Educational Jargon, Acronyms, and Abbreviations**
www.lincolnparkboe.org/jargon.html
- **Glossary of Educational Terms**
www.schoolwisepress.com/smart/dict/dict.html