

# TECH

## TECHNICALLY SPEAKING

# Electronic communication exposes our illiteracy

The stainless steel bell on the navy blue Corian counter in the reception area represents much more than the absence of a receptionist. Each ring of the bell announces a loss even more significant than the loss of a personal greeting.



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You see the loss in the email you receive every day. Some of that email has spelling and grammatical errors. Sometimes it's just badly written. Occasionally the tone is so off the message unintentionally offends you.

One reason for these failures is that the missing person behind the receptionist's desk was not just a greeter, but a secretary. That missing person, going back to the days of typewriters and word processing machines, served as the preserver of a minimal level of correct, accurate and quality communication.

Look at the email you receive. You've probably already noticed that some people don't realize they have spell check turned off.

Here's a bigger problem. In some research I completed for this column, I tested Outlook's grammar check. Working from an excellent textbook, Choy and Clark's Basic Grammar and Usage, I prepared a set of sentences covering more than 20 rules of grammar and usage. Outlook's grammar check flunked the test. My simple test results are confirmed by tests other people have conducted on grammar checking programs available for purchase. They're all bad.

Perhaps most people already know Outlook's grammar check is bad. Some of these writers take special steps to cope with the loss of the office secretary. Sometimes you can see it in email that is simplistic, even curt. It's as if the writers are edging along a narrow and difficult path on a cliff of grammatical correctness. Extreme brevity is seen as a way to avoid an error so catastrophic a reader would wonder if the writer even graduated from high school. Smart phones compound the problem because the spell checking is iffy and "typing" is difficult.

As daily writers of email, all of us face many other challenges. One challenge is that we write a personal email one minute and a professional one the next. As a result, we're constantly at risk of being too casual or too formal, of forgetting to think about

our purpose or include a request for action when needed.

Here's another challenge: We are overwhelmed by receiving dozens or hundreds of emails a day. As a result, we make mistakes in handling them. We lose some email, fail to respond to others and waste time on dealing with spam. Then we dash off a vital email with the same attention we pay to emailing our spouse about what to get at the grocery store on the way home.

No one has told the ordinary email writer to keep sentences short. Use action verbs. Add bolded headers. Include relevant but limited detail. State the purpose. Ask for an action step when one is needed.

Smart phones have made writing effective email even more challenging. Before smart phones, writers could at least expect readers to be sitting at a desk when reading email. Distractions were limited. Now, research tells us the email we write will most likely be first seen not on a computer but on a smart phone. Our email may be read while our readers wait in line at Starbucks, or worse yet, as they wait for the traffic light to change from red to green. Now that's a distracted reader.

The truth is technology hasn't so much helped us as it has exposed us. Our weaknesses as writers are laid bare. More than ever, we have to get a reader's attention, express benefits and focus on a desired result.

In the end, what's missing is symbolized by that stainless steel bell on the blue Corian counter top in the reception area. What's missing is a secretary who gets paid to prevent embarrassment, clean up communication and help create and maintain the reputation an organization desires.

Instead, people have to figure out for themselves how to communicate without any help. People who are motivated enough can get help. Webinars and classes are available, both online and in person. You may be surprised to learn that The University of Arizona's Outreach College is offering an in-depth class on grammar and punctuation. I teach a four-week class on writing effective email at the Outreach.

Meanwhile, each time a bell rings in a reception area, anywhere, it may as well be noting the birth of another thousand badly written emails and the erosion of our ability to communicate.

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