

Dare to Be Different: Imitate Mark Twain

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Mark Twain once quipped,

I never write metropolis for seven cents because I can get the same price for city. I never write policeman because I can get the same money for cop.

Why aren't we imitating Mark Twain? Why is our business writing riddled with large words that bog our messages down, confuse our readers, and even lull them to sleep? At least two factors are involved: 1) We have few models of simple, straightforward language to follow; and 2) We want our writing to sound educated and impressive. Writing guru, William Zinsser, sums up the problem this way:

Our national tendency is to inflate and thereby sound important.

Unfortunately, inflated language is hard to read. When on the receiving end, we appreciate clear, direct writing that is easy to read. Maybe it's time we take the lead and be models of simple, Twain-like language in our professions. Maybe it's time we let our employees and colleagues know that we are impressed with simplicity, as suggested by the authors of *Writing that Works*:

Reliance on long words, which are often more abstract than common short ones, can be a sign that you have not worked out exactly what you want to say. If you have distilled your thinking to its essence, you will probably be able to express it in simple words.

Dare to follow a Twain-like standard. Encourage your colleagues to do the same. Your office will be a better place!

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