

A plea for plain speaking in foundations  
**in other words**

Tony Proscio

The Edna McConnell Clark Foundation

Neither can his Mind be thought to be in Tune,  
whose words do jarre; nor his reason in frame,  
whose sentence is preposterous.... Negligent  
speech doth not onely discredit the person of  
the Speaker, but it discrediteth the opinion of  
his reason and judgement; it discrediteth the  
force and uniformity of the matter and substance.

—Ben Jonson, *ca. 1600*

This advice is respectfully recommended to the  
reader in the hope, perhaps over-sanguine, that it  
may not be too late.

—H. W. Fowler, *A Dictionary of Modern English Usage*, 1926

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## Foreword

All communication is, at best, an approximation of meaning. We mean both more and less than we say, and we understand both more and less than we hear. Conventions of style make matters worse—dulling memory, passion, imagination, creativity, and even common sense.

The fact that human beings are creatures of habit and for the most part lazy makes matters worse. We are constantly looking for shortcuts. Within whatever groups we live and work, we mush our language into common words, phrases, and even sentences that slip with barely a thought from our lips and word-processing fingertips. So accustomed are we to such stylized discourse that, if we bother to think about it at all, we quickly reassure ourselves with the false comfort that such ritualized social intercourse increases the efficiency of communication. And so we swim like fish in a sea of argot.

Some argot, of course, is charming, and from the outside may seem fascinating or quaint, like the dialect of the “Sopranos” of organized crime or teenage snowboarders or waitresses in roadside diners. We who work in foundations have our argot too. Ours is known to the rest of the world as “jargon.” Unfortunately, nobody, NOBODY, for even an eye-blink, would use the word *charm* in adjectival embrace with the term *jargon*. Rather it is almost universally criticized as the

soulless, devitalized, pretentious means we use to confuse words with things, opinions with truths, intentions with results.

We all know how our jargon comes about: a term that sounds fresh and evocative in January grows dry and meaningless by June, at which point its use begins to multiply exponentially. By September, the term is appearing regularly in every paragraph of every document, like milemarkers on an endless highway. It ricochets around our seminar rooms and conference tables and professional meetings. We utter it and type it without thinking. We hear it in our sleep. By this time, of course, we’re also hearing it from our grantees.

It is fair to say that The Edna McConnell Clark Foundation has, over the years, sacrificed more than its share of trees on the altar of jargon-laden prose. We have been committed through the strategies of our initiatives to the utilization of funding to assist persons and entities providing linkages and other services dedicated to improving systems whereby tools and best practices will when applied comprehensively to the sites we are funding empower the community and yield valuable learnings.

And that about says it all. Except not quite. Tony Proscio says more, and says it better, in the piece that follows. His wit, intellect, and sharp insights are worthy servants in the labor to restore meaning to the discourse of philanthropy.

Michael A. Bailin, *President*  
The Edna McConnell Clark Foundation

## A Plea for Plain Speaking

How foundations obscure their own message

Every field has its “inside” lingo, its technical code, its jargon. Foundations are no exception. But foundations, working in many fields, also tend to absorb the argot of all the other fields into which they wander. New phrases and trendy or obscure coinages stick to foundations like briars to a long-haired dog. Unless someone carefully picks them out later, the poor beast hardly knows they’re there.

Among foundations, the result of so much accumulated jargon can be especially hard to penetrate—a lethal combination of the dense and the tedious, a congregation of the weirdest and most arcane words, crammed unhappily together like awkward guests at an international mixer. Most of the time, this happens naturally

and unintentionally. It usually is not a conscious attempt to condescend, to pose, or to exclude. Yet that is understandably how it’s taken, and all too often, that is the actual effect.

That effect is even more destructive in philanthropy than it is elsewhere. In the world where most foundations and nonprofit institutions ply their trade—especially the fields of social policy and human services—jargon is not merely annoying, nor does it burden merely the weary program staff who have to read and write papers.

The repetitive, habitual use of insider lingo undermines the inherently *public* nature of the issues under discussion. Social issues, in a democratic society, are presumed to be the domain of ordinary people—voters, activists, volunteers, journalists, and other lay commentators—who feel (justly) entitled to participate in discussions equipped only with the general vocabulary of a reasonably well-educated person.

Start with an example, picked more or less at random: “Comprehensive community building naturally lends itself to a return-on-investment rationale that can be modeled, drawing from existing practice,” says a paper lately making the rounds in a foundation trade group. The paper goes on to argue that “[a] factor constraining the flow of resources to CCIs is that funders must often resort to targeting or categorical requirements in grant making to ensure accountability.”

All these buzz-words—return-on-investment, modeling, constraints, resources, targeting, accountability—are the borrowed cant of other fields: finance and economics, mostly, but also other social sciences, management theory, even (as we will argue later) military strategy. Each word carries so much professional freight that the reader ends up exhausted from hauling the load.

#### THE READER'S LAMENT

Most foundation officers' desks contain five or six such papers at any given time, running to 20, 50, even 100 pages apiece. For all but the most devoted readers, the accumulated effect is soporific at best, infuriating at worst. Yet the papers present important information, or at least many of them do. Reading them is a (frequently painful) obligation of a good program officer. Does that part of the job have to be so unpleasant?

To be fair, program officers also write some of this stuff. Worse, because their thoughts come reinforced with the armor of institutional power, reading their work will strike many people as a duty. And that duty becomes doubly

irksome if the paper reads like some inscrutable foreign art film, where the audience is helpless without subtitles and commentaries.

Here, in the manner of subtitles, is what the sentences we quoted earlier seem to be saying: Comprehensive community initiatives (a phrase that is itself a string of vague buzz-words) make up a field whose benefits, relative to their cost, one can easily imagine calculating and predicting. But instead, the people who support them tend to worry more about preventing misuse of the money than about how much is being accomplished. They therefore set overly narrow, inflexible limits on how money can be spent. The implication (spelled out in another difficult sentence later in the paper) is that measuring results would be smarter than niggling over the compliant use of dollars, but most foundations haven't figured out how to do that yet.

Excellent points, all—and written, not incidentally, by distinguished people who have a lot to say. So why didn't they just say what they meant?

One answer becomes clear if you set the original text and the translation side-by-side. The translation is longer. If the whole paper were subjected to this kind of plain speaking, it might grow by, say, 25 percent. That is the first, and most powerful, reason for the indestructibility of most jargon: It lets specialists convey complex ideas succinctly to other specialists. They can arrive more quickly at their main points without having to elaborate on things that, at their level of expertise, are already obvious.

There's nothing wrong—and much right—about that use of technical language. The mere fact that words are obscure does not make them bad. But when any occupation's

*cognoscenti* write to one another (and not, in the main, to anyone else) day after year after decade, they come to express themselves, like feral children, in unlovely grunts and wheezes that no one else can understand, and that in some cases lose their usefulness even within the discipline. (In truth, some of this impenetrable and unsightly vocabulary wasn't even all that technical to begin with. It was simply adopted out of clubbiness, fashion, or simple pretense—and now serves only as a secret code meant mainly to establish the writer's *bona fides*.)

#### FROM TERM-OF-ART TO ARTLESS METAPHOR

At the inside-the-clubhouse stage, the tediousness of the language is merely the experts' problem. It offends a wider society only when the arcane vocabulary and code phrases start to migrate, like the monsters in 1950s horror films, outside the academy or laboratory where they were hatched. When they reach the foundation door (or congressional hearing room, or classroom), and thus land in the domain of socially responsible generalists, they wind up in a type of discourse for which they were never intended, and where they quickly do more harm than good.

The problem with these migratory words and phrases isn't just that their use makes technical papers dense and boring. The problem is that, like many celebrities, they tend to become fashionable beyond their merits, and start turning up everywhere, hogging the spotlight and encouraging imitators, but otherwise serving no apparent purpose. Soon, it seems, a policy paper simply isn't *serious* if it doesn't include the latest exotic technical term or chic business-school phrase. Born as

precise names for arcane concepts, they soon take on the glamorous mantle of metaphor. More and more, they come to apply to everything that even faintly resembles their original meaning. Eventually, to the hapless, uninitiated citizen trying to pry some understanding out of all of this verbiage, the phrases cease to have any meaning at all. At that point, real public discussion ceases. Substance is lost, and only form remains.

#### INTO THE VOID

In American government, plain speech periodically arises as a kind of crusade. This happened with little consequence, for example, in the Jimmy Carter Administration, and as of this writing it's back for another round in the Clinton Administration, once again by an executive order of the President (plus a now-obligatory web site) directing agencies to write more simply.

The calls for plain speaking in and out of government, however quixotic they may seem, usually respond to a genuine cry of distress from truly aggrieved people: those who, for reasons of citizenship, scholarship, or public service, must read volumes of dense and convoluted language and try (also quixotically, oftentimes) to make sense or use of it. All too often they find, after much bootless effort, that the writing was in fact little more than the vain exhalations of someone trying to exert an obscure authority while stating the obvious—rather like the man behind the curtain in Oz.

Sadly, foundations are not immune to that sort of vanity, certainly no more so than government agencies. But lacking

an army to enforce their will, foundations usually hope to persuade their readers, rather than simply issue edicts. That hope is frustrated when what they write is more taxing than helpful, and the argument evokes only confusion and resentment. Which course is easier, after all: to pause over every sentence and try to unearth some buried meaning, or to slip the paper into a “read later” pile from which it will never emerge?

By this route, eventually, all the bluster and blather ends up doing as much harm to the writer as to the reader. The worst jargon, in the long run, is its own punishment.

## Origin of the Specious

### The journey from lab-speak to jargon

To illustrate how a word makes the passage from technical term to ubiquitous metaphor to jargon, consider that monstrosity of management research, **BENCHMARKING**. The word began its popular life as a metaphor drawn from the 19th Century surveyor’s lexicon. Originally, it described carved marks in a wall that showed, for example, how high a tide has risen or where, in a mine-shaft, sea level lies.<sup>1</sup>

Management consultants eventually borrowed it to refer to levels of business achievement that could be measured and, one presumes, eventually exceeded—with the help of the right consultant. Because the borrowed phrase (soon transformed into a verb) was never all that precise in its new context, it quickly grew to refer to almost any level of anything that is compared to any other level. It is now practically impossible to read a management paper (or plan, or evaluation) on any topic that doesn’t benchmark something.

Another example is **THROUGHPUT**. Born in the corridors of industrial engineering before World War II, the word traveled back and forth a few times between descriptive neologism and itinerant metaphor. After some years of disciplined life describing the pace and scope of work on old-fashioned

<sup>1</sup> Interestingly, the word has nothing to do with benches in the ordinary sense. The original surveyor’s mark was a kind of groove in the top bar of an angle iron (shaped like a 7) could be inserted. The angle iron then served as a “bench” on which to rest an instrument that measures deviations from the level originally marked.

assembly lines, or the delivery potential of fuel systems, the word made a mid-life career change and became a journeyman metaphor in the infant computer industry. It was such a hit there that it quickly grew to be a precisely defined technical term in its new field, infused with a tight new range of meanings.

That was the word's first definitional leap, but it was a small one. Its original meaning was in most senses still intact: The processing of information really was a new application of the ideas of productive engineering and fuel delivery; the new meaning was not a metaphor but simply a new use for the original concept. Instead of people assembling machinery or pipes delivering fuel, machines were moving and assembling information. The point, though, remained a combination of transportation, assembly, and production.

But the computer pioneers soon lost control of the word (as of most of their once-specialized vocabulary, starting with **THROUGHPUT**'s parents, **INPUT** and **OUTPUT**<sup>2</sup>). **THROUGHPUT** is now the universal metaphor for any interval between the moment anything is put into anything else and the moment it re-emerges, presumably altered.

The first step along the road from supple word to hardened jargon, then, is when the word leaps from technical term to techno-metaphor. At the next stage of transformation, the metaphor comes to be adopted as a sign of sophistication, even (or perhaps particularly) when the word is not actually needed, but simply makes familiar, homely ideas look sleek and up-to-date.<sup>3</sup> There, for example, we find **EXTRAPOLATE**.

Now, here is a once-lovely word whose useful life began, and largely remains, in the realm of statistics (the last great wellspring of metaphorical fads before the sensational debut

of personal computing). **EXTRAPOLATE** describes a mathematical process by which one makes predictions about unobserved phenomena by carefully noting and quantifying patterns among observed events, and then assuming that those patterns continue beyond the range of observation. The word has made a grand tour of the social sciences (in which people never like to be caught guessing, but are perfectly willing to indulge in the practice if everyone agrees to call it **EXTRAPOLATION**).

A paper on social disintegration that once circulated in the foundation world offers this example of the sad fate of **EXTRAPOLATE**: "From the compounded anomie of Vietnam, Watergate, and Iran, it is possible to extrapolate to a gradual erosion of the social compact on which community, commerce, and democratic governance are founded." It's a defensible idea, no doubt. What it is not is extrapolation. It's a reasonable surmise based on no quantitative measures or demonstrated patterns. It is, in fact, nothing more than a (doubtless accurate) assertion that things are going to hell, and that the road to hell has lately acquired some handsome new milestones.

An even sorrier fate has befallen **PARAMETER**, another once-useful staple of applied mathematics. At home in its proper field, the word means a mathematical constant that can be assigned different values and, once assigned such a value, will influence the behavior of other variables. This would seem a sufficiently arcane concept to prevent outsiders from borrowing the term idly. But poor **PARAMETER**, like the virtuous twin in a story of confused identities, was soon taken for its poorer brother **PERIMETER**—meaning a border. In no time, the well-bred statistical term found itself adrift and friendless in the mean streets of foreign towns.

<sup>2</sup> Toward the end of the 1990s, a five-year-old was heard to complain that the family pet had recently *output* on the living-room carpet. This usage seems a fitting reward for the prolific mutancy of the whole *-put* family.

<sup>3</sup> Former Texas Governor Ann Richards memorably described this process as "putting lipstick on a pig and calling it Monique."

Now, for example, a foundation paper can boast of giving its subject “the necessary parameters within which to examine [a topic] and explore its major elements.” Sorry, wrong -METER. As it happens, some of the elements that the paper explored might actually have turned out to be parameters in the true sense. But the intended meaning in the quoted sentence (revealed by the telltale use of “within”) is clearly “border.” Events may be governed by parameters, but they don’t live *within* them. By reaching needlessly for a loftier term, the writer of the paper simply missed, and landed... well, outside the perimeter.

The final, and to most readers the most annoying, stage in the journey from technical term to hardened jargon is the moment when a phrase becomes a shibboleth—too revered for its own good, *de rigueur* in any serious writing in the field. Besides computers and statistics, which we’ve already sampled, several other fields have introduced technical terms that went on to become, first, free-floating metaphors and eventually the obligatory adornments of foundation papers on nearly every topic. For the grandest and most grating of these wellsprings, there are no sources to match science and the military.

It is presumably from one or both of these that scholarly writing has borne the terrible force of IMPACT—which, like an uncivil word beginning with “f,” seems to have acquired all the powers of nearly every part of speech.

With apologies to Vietnam, Watergate, and Iran, the most certain sign that modern civilization is going to hell is its invention of IMPACTFUL. The earlier arrival of the verb TO IMPACT, rather like that of Rosemary’s baby, was a birth so diabolical as to herald an imminent and near-universal

perdition. Today, finding an evaluation in which nothing is IMPACTED would rank with bagging a live platypus.

IMPACTED was, in fact, the only form in which a verb “to impact” ever appeared for some four centuries. IMPACTED was useful for hundreds of years in geology, surgery, and a few other fields where things were frequently jammed in between, or up against, other things. Otherwise, IMPACT went about only as a noun, meaning, in the succinct definition of the *Oxford English Dictionary*, “the striking of one body against another; collision.”

But the word proved restless in a restless century, and soon traveled far from home. It has by now lost any trace of precision, and lately seems to refer indiscriminately to anything that has any effect whatever on anything else. (One astute but unkind observer offers this theory for why so many writers use the verb TO IMPACT when all they mean is “to affect”: Most, he believes, can’t recall whether “affect” begins with an “e” or an “a”).

Likewise AWOL from its military origins (and dressed far above its rank) is that wandering dandy STRATEGY. The word comes directly from the Greek *strategía*—“the office or command of a general”—and for centuries had clung loyally to that military meaning, until the dawn of the Industrial Age and all its perversions. Even then, until well into this century, the word preserved some consciousness of its high calling and, most important, of the crucial military distinction between STRATEGY and TACTICS. Even in the terms’ most metaphorical applications, until recently, the two meanings knew their rank and kept their place. “Etymologically,” as H. W. Fowler summed it up in 1926, “STRATEGY is generalship, and TACTICS is array.”

That distinction—if only it were preserved with any kind of integrity—would in fact allow **STRATEGY** to perform useful service far outside a military context. Like many retired generals, **STRATEGY** has a place in public service, so long as it does not pretend to be what it is not. In the social sciences, for example, there is great benefit to discussing and charting the broad movements of resources toward carefully selected targets and goals, by contrast with the on-the-ground deployment of those resources in particular places, numbers, and circumstances. The former is what's meant by **STRATEGY**; the latter is **TACTICS**.<sup>4</sup> But, rather like **PARAMETER**, **STRATEGY** has been conscripted into doing its brother's work. By now, virtually every decision, large or small, general or local, pins stars on its shoulders and struts about claiming to be **STRATEGIC**.

Many foundations and government agencies (perhaps envying the decisive world of armed combat, where an enemy once vanquished usually remains dead) have taken up **STRATEGY** with the giddiness of a soldier on leave. At its worst, **STRATEGY** in foundation parlance refers to transparently tactical decisions about particular grants, recipients, amounts, and points of intervention. A while ago, for example, a foundation “strategy” paper lamented that community organizations and foundations “often do not think through strategies for leveraging additional support, or how to sustain needed funding up front.” Discussing what such “strategies” might be, the paper talks about better performance measurement, avenues of accountability, and matching funding requests to outcomes. Those are indispensable calculations, but they are tactical, not strategic. They concern how to array

and command forces more effectively according to an already-determined battle plan, against an already-determined target.

But the main problem with **STRATEGY** is not that it is too often misapplied. Rather, like many retired generals of recent years, it has developed an aura of indispensability and universal relevance that grows wearisome even when it is not really out-of-place. It is possible—and indeed, for centuries it was normal—to discuss plans, goals, and resources without invoking **STRATEGY** at all. Because the word is becoming obligatory in many circles—such that no planning discussion is regarded as complete without it—the use of **STRATEGY** needs to be treated with the greatest distrust. It should, in fact, be treated the way the U.S. Constitution treats all generals—subject, ultimately, to a civilian review, answerable to ordinary people who are less at home with the argot of the war room and more likely to want their information in plain speech.

Most of the examples so far have been words whose once-precise meanings got watered down through trendy misuse. But some of the worst jargon consists of words that never had a very clear meaning to begin with—which is precisely what made them so attractive. We here turn to that miasmic masterpiece **COMPREHENSIVE**.

But first, a preamble: The temptation to use elegant fudge-words to camouflage vague meanings is a special affliction of the foundation world, and therefore ought to inspire a particular vigilance there. Those who seek to raise money—particularly if they are raising it from people whose exact aims they don't know—easily fall prey to grand ambiguities, the scholarly and political equivalent of sweet nothings. Grant-seekers are therefore especially susceptible, but

<sup>4</sup> The vocabulary of military theory helpfully includes a third level of decision-making about resources, *logistics*: getting people and materiel to the places where the strategists and tacticians want them. But for some reason, that word has stayed home and done its duty: its meaning remains in most contexts relatively clear, steady, and useful.

grantmakers are not immune, either. Fearful of creating premature or exaggerated expectations—and hoping, sometimes, to explore areas that no one understands very well—they may find themselves confronting the question: “How do I get this grant approved if I don’t know for sure what it’s supposed to accomplish?” In a pinch, they may end up substituting grandiloquence for an honest (if risky) admission that they do not know what, exactly, the results are likely to be.

That may help explain the celebrity status of **COMPREHENSIVE**. In recent years, perhaps as a reaction to the narrow “categorical” social policies of the 1960s and ‘70s, social thinking has ballooned into comprehensiveness at every opportunity. But so long as philosophers and scientists continue to puzzle over a unifying theory of everything, it is a safe bet that hardly anything will be truly comprehensive. Addressing more than one thing at a time is admirable, but calling that comprehensive essentially ducks the really important question: Just how many things are you addressing, and how realistic is that?

The boundless enthusiasm of **COMPREHENSIVE** is admirable (who wouldn’t prefer to solve everything, rather than just a few things?). But one chore of clear writing is to help such enthusiasm find—dare we say it?—some perimeters. A graduate-school research paper several years back began its concluding section with the cliché “All things considered...,” to which a weary professor scribbled the concise marginal put-down, “ambitious.” That is essentially the problem with **COMPREHENSIVE**. It implies the due consideration of a great many things, maybe even everything, but fails to own up to its limits.

A **COMPREHENSIVE** initiative conveniently purports to unify all the important targets and direct action at all of them at once. The unstated presumption is that unimportant targets are, of course, omitted. And exactly which ones are those? Ahem, well, now, surely that is obvious...

But, like **STRATEGY** and **IMPACT** and a host of others that we will get to next, **COMPREHENSIVE** has become all but compulsory in discussions of social policy and human services. Comprehensive planning, comprehensive reform, comprehensive alliances, comprehensive community-building. The word’s vagueness alone should be enough to arouse suspicions.

## Foundation-Speak, *ca. 2000*

Some of philanthropy's favorite buzz-words  
(at the moment)

For the theoretically minded world of foundations, it seems only fair to have started with a brief theory of jargon, of how it forms and when it crosses the line from merely grating to actually harmful. With theory safely out of the way, we can now continue more simply, with a few basic lists of words and phrases that have stormed their way into the philanthropic glossary, doing vast damage to clear thought and expression along the way.

The work of tracking down and exposing jargon would make a poor pastime for anyone who hopes to leave a mark on history. Like most fads, jargon is essentially ephemeral: Chic buzz-words eventually either acquire real value over time (like "community development," "exurbs," or "web site") and thus cease to be jargon in the pure sense, or else they recede like last year's party dress to the back of the lexical closet (remember the verb "to interface"? "change agent"? "management by objectives"?). Most of the terms we coin or condemn today will soon go the way of the leisure suit. The spread of electronic communication will only hasten that process.

Still, the effects of the most persistent jargon are noxious enough to call for at least some occasional, informal policing. That is especially true among foundations, whose supplicants feel bound, understandably enough, to parrot whatever verbal fads sweep the funding world at the moment. When foundations raise or lower their verbal hemlines, much of America swiftly follows. The results (as with hemlines) are not always attractive.

So we offer here an ephemeral (but perhaps still useful) glance at the foundation world's momentarily favorite jargon.

Headed for trouble for reasons we'd rather not mention

### **at-risk**

This mystifying expression owes its popularity to one embarrassing fact: The phrase almost always designates a category of people of whom it is awkward to speak honestly. Almost every branch of charity or human service uses **AT-RISK** to describe the people whom its practitioners are... well, *worried* about. Here is one sample definition, from *Education Week*:

**AT-RISK** describes a student with socioeconomic challenges, such as poverty or teen pregnancy, which may place them [*sic*] at a disadvantage in achieving academic, social, or career goals. Such students are deemed "at risk" of failing, dropping out, or "falling through the cracks."

Generalize from education to other fields of social concern, and **AT-RISK** becomes simply the polite euphemism for "headed into trouble." But in today's etiquette of upbeat and respectful neutrality, it would be considered grotesquely

prejudicial, not to say hostile, to describe people that way. **AT-RISK**, however, is regarded as abstract enough to be polite, even in mixed company.

Yet if those who use this word are honest, they must admit to being perfectly comfortable classifying people according to a vast realm of unspecified problems that those people *do not even have yet*. Many people therefore read with scant discomfort that a program “addresses the needs of at-risk youth,” never demanding the least description of what the youth are at-risk *of*. Everyone presumably already knows: The youth are headed into trouble.

Now, we are not so coarse as to suggest describing troubled people as “troubled.” But surely there are some descriptions slightly more explicit than **AT-RISK** that do not offend the sensitivity gendarmes. The sibling euphemisms “disadvantaged” and “underserved” are admittedly overused, but unlike **AT-RISK**, they are at least not transparently unfinished thoughts.

Even when a writer decides that no other expression but **AT-RISK** could possibly do, it may be healthy at least to spend a moment asking, *of what?* If it is possible to answer that question concisely—as in “of violence,” “of pregnancy,” or “of dropping out of school”—then it would be a step in the right direction simply to finish the thought that at-risk begins. “This program addresses the needs of youth who are at risk of dropping out of school” or “who may be drawn into gangs,” or “who risk early pregnancy.”

In some cases, of course, the writer genuinely may not know what a person’s real risk is. That is a sad fact—not about writers, or about jargon, but about life. Often, people

really are simply headed into trouble, and we can’t say exactly what that trouble might be. Would that it were different. But when it’s not, perhaps **AT-RISK** truly is the best we can do.

An empty word with a comfortably wide girth  
**capacity**

Foundations, to their great credit, have lately taken a more deliberate interest in the management, staffing, structure, and operating methods of the organizations they support. The unassailable premise of this interest is that good works do not accomplish themselves, but are carried out by organizations that may be managed well or ill, may perform their tasks efficiently or wastefully, and may need to change their methods as circumstances dictate. Making grants and providing expert advice (a/k/a **TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE**) to help these organizations run better is a profoundly philanthropic mission, and smart besides.

So why has such a good idea brought with it such an infestation of vague, quasi-occult terms, beginning with **CAPACITY**? Largely because it relies, of necessity, on the scholarly disciplines of management and administration for its ideas and its supply of experts. And those fields have for half a century been a wellspring of weird and abstruse vocabulary. The administrative disciplines, which together constitute more an art than a science, have been particularly rife (as are many of the arts) with terms and phrases that only their practitioners really understand. Turn those words loose in the generalist world of a foundation, and they are likely to proliferate out of all control.

Hunting down all the strange locutions that creep under the wallpaper of modern organizational theory would be a task far beyond the scope of this essay. We instead aim our fumigants specifically at **CAPACITY**, because it has thrived the most spectacularly in the groves of philanthropy—pastures in which, evidently, the word has no natural predators and so can multiply at will.

A single paper—produced by a respected program of management consultancy for nonprofits—speaks of “capacity assessments,” “capacity investment,” a “capacity shortage,” and the ever popular “capacity-building.” Most of the time, it seems, the word refers to some combination of personnel, computers, and operating procedures. Those are found to be in short supply, and need to be “assessed,” “built,” or “invested in.” So far, so good: As long as the term is meant as a deliberately nebulous reference to all the myriad things that make organizations run, it does its sloppy job reasonably well.

(Yet even then, the word invokes the strange metaphor of a jug or canister, whose “capacity” is measured by its ability to hold whatever is dumped into it. Is this really the image we want for high-performing organizations? But never mind.)

The problem is that **CAPACITY** is not content to halt demurely at the border between generalities and specifics. Even when a writer is trying to describe specific characteristics of organizations, **CAPACITY** often shows up as if it were denoting something in particular. One paper, for example, notes that an organization “lacks the capacity to manage so many projects at once.” Meaning what, exactly? There are not enough people to do all the managing? The people don’t have the technology to handle information on all their

projects? Or the people and technology aren’t working efficiently, and need better procedures? Any of those would be an interesting point, but each is quite a different point. And **CAPACITY** doesn’t actually express any of them. Worse, by seeming sophisticated, the word may fool people into believing they’ve been told something.

Often, the writer who uses **CAPACITY** genuinely doesn’t know what an organization’s problem really is. In a proposal to examine the problems and make recommendations, for example, it is more than reasonable to admit that fact. “There seems to be a problem of capacity here,” a frank paper might conclude, “but the contents of that problem are unknown and need to be studied.” Fine—when couched in that kind of honest uncertainty, the word is mostly unobjectionable. But when it appears to imply something specific (an act of imposture of which the word is constantly guilty), it ought to be deleted and replaced with honest, old-fashioned terms like “staffing,” “record-keeping,” “management” (or the specialized younger sibling “information management”), or something on that order.

Used liberally, it shows you care  
**empowerment**

Here is an example of that most pernicious of all forms of jargon: the ideological shibboleth. To establish one’s *bona fides* as a person concerned about the poor, the disenfranchised, or even ordinary people in general, it is essential in every setting to use **EMPOWERMENT**—as early (and, in some circles, as often) as possible.

The coiners of **EMPOWERMENT** invested it with only the broadest meaning, perhaps to make it usable in nearly every context—or anyway, that has been the effect. Foundations now must be careful to empower grantees, communities, individual residents of those communities, voluntary and civic associations, the poor, those who help the poor, and even those who do *not* help the poor, but would if they were empowered. Scarcely a grant is made anymore without someone or something being solemnly empowered, normally with a timely infusion of money.

The word is a synonym, says the *American Heritage Dictionary*, for “authorize,” but you wouldn’t guess it from the way **EMPOWER** is used. People are not “authorized” by community development organizations, but they are apparently “empowered” in the hundreds of thousands. No one is “authorized” by public opinion polls, the Internet, charter schools, community policing, a Patient’s Bill of Rights, civilian review boards, tax cuts, after-school programs, competition in the telecommunications industry, or community colleges. Yet every one of these things, and many more besides, has been described in recent public-policy or foundation writing as “empowering” people.

This **EMPOWER**-surge makes at least one thing clear: The *American Heritage Dictionary* has it wrong. In the ideological camps where **EMPOWER** is a ritual incantation, the word doesn’t mean “authorize,” it means “give people some ability to influence something they cannot already influence, or do something they cannot already do.” But that definition is so broad that it can apply to almost anything that is not an absolute impediment. (One might argue, just to be churlish, that even an impediment empowers people to impede things.)

Try this exercise, which we might call an **EMPOWER**-outage: Find five or six instances of **EMPOWER** among recent memos and papers, and mentally blot them out. Then re-read the paper, with the **EMPOWER** switched off. Most times, the meaning won’t have changed a whit. But the paper may grow shorter.

Precious little nuggets of what-we-find-out  
**learnings**

Foundations are far from alone in their fascination with **LEARNINGS**, the plural form of a noun meaning “something learned.” It is certainly correct to use the word as a noun, though the usage is still uncommon outside of business schools, consulting firms, and (lately) foundations. The popularity of the word derives from the equally popular phrase **LEARNING ORGANIZATION**, which burst noisily upon the management consulting scene in the late 1980s, championed by organizational theorist Peter Senge, among others. Effective organizations, the doctrine goes, are those that constantly incorporate what they learn (their **LEARNINGS**) into making better products, improving production methods, and generally understanding their customers and competitors better.

On the substantive merits of this idea, we can maintain a respectful silence. (We are not about to cast our lot with those luddites who ran the world before 1985, when everyone presumably believed that organizations should bar the gates to any information they did not already possess.) The trouble with **LEARNINGS** is not its substance but its form. Apart from being insistently trendy, the word’s main offence is that, most of the time, it’s just a needlessly exotic euphemism for the

common terms “information” and “knowledge.” Yet LEARNINGS tantalizingly seems to connote something *more* than those other words, some deeper meaning, which often fails to materialize.

“The Foundation will document our learnings from this grant,” says one perfectly ordinary memo. What does that mean, on close inspection? It implies that we don’t simply want to record *what happened* when we made Grant X, but more impressively, we want to document our *learnings* about it. And what might those be? Ahem, . . . well, as it were, we’re going to learn what happened.

Like most jargon, LEARNINGS is used too often, and consequently is used where something simpler would do just as nicely, without seeming to promise undue surprises and wonders. Outside its specific context of organizational management, the word is often just a clumsy disappointment. Even inside, it frequently presumes more than it delivers.

Aggressive in a passive sort of way

## proactive

This phony word, a creature of the 1970s, was invented to contrast with “reactive,” as in: “This program takes a proactive approach to sexually transmitted diseases, teaching prevention and informing young people of their risks.” A reactive approach to sexually transmitted diseases would surely be a day late, and the delay might well be deadly. But does PROACTIVE really express what makes this program commendable? Assuming the word expresses anything at all—a tenuous but defensible assumption—it is a poor

substitute for “preventive,” which is, we are told, exactly what the sexually transmitted disease program really is.

Sometimes, though, PROACTIVE is employed not to describe something preventive, but merely something done in advance of trouble. In that case, the word that writers are seeking might be “preparatory” or “pre-emptive,” or even just “early.” In some cases, the writer is trying to say that someone should take the initiative. The defenders of PROACTIVE, however, refuse to surrender to “preventive” or “pre-emptive” or “taking initiative” or anything else, because most of the time they want a word that means none of those things, but that really just means “aggressive.”

For instance: “This organization needs to deal proactively with revenue gaps between contracts.” Well, now. Take the word PROACTIVELY out of that sentence, and how does the meaning change? The word is simply stuck in for emphasis—to imply that the executives need to hustle on this issue, not just sit around and mull it over, the way they usually do. Fine; in that case, “aggressively” would be clearer. So would “vigorously,” “forthrightly,” “assertively” “expeditiously,” “energetically,” or (when the implication is that problems need to be anticipated as well as aggressively solved) “ahead of time.”

All those choices have clear meanings, but they are not all the same. The surest sign that PROACTIVE is merely muddle-headed jargon is that, most of the time, it stands for a welter of hypothetical and unspecified thoughts, without ever committing itself to any one thought in particular.

At some risk of seeming pedantic, we feel bound to point out that the prefix *pro-* in this context does not convey the meaning that the coiners of PROACTIVE had in mind.

The most relevant definitions for the Greek prefix, “before” or “in front of,” would make the word mean “prior-to-acting”—which is not, of course, what anyone intended it to mean. The Latin prefix *pro-* means “for,” “in place of,” or “in favor of.” Relying on Latin might therefore give PROACTIVE the meaning “in favor of acting.” That is no doubt a fair description of the people who use this word, but not a definition of the word itself.

A place that talks  
**site**

With related grants scattered among many locations, foundations often find it necessary to compare the experience of grantees in one site to that in another. A typical case: “Progress in Columbus has been significantly faster than in any other site.” Fine. That is exactly the inanimate meaning—referring to a location, scene, or physical situation—for which the Latin word *situs* and all its European successors have done excellent service. So useful has this lineage been, in fact, that its simple locational meaning survived pretty much unmolested through a couple of millennia. Then weird things started happening, as in the haunted nurseries of certain horror movies: The inanimate began to speak. Sites acquired a voice (“Sites report several delays,” says one report, following later with “Many sites have expressed a desire...”). Ever since, the disembodied chatter from SITES has become deafening.

Some sites speak more than others. Amid the pressures of the Persian Gulf War, as the press carried its daily load of

leaks and pronouncements attributed solely to “The White House,” General Colin Powell started referring to the source of these statements as “the house that talks.” But the White House is far from the only instance of muttering masonry. By the 1980s all sorts of architecture, places, settings, positions, situations, and even mere attitudes had found their voice. (“We convened a meeting of all the sites in the third quarter of 1998,” said a recent foundation paper, “and several centers requested additional meetings on at least a quarterly basis.”)<sup>5</sup>

This usage would be merely funny, were it not for the often deliberate obfuscation hiding behind it. Why would buildings, places, and “sites,” rather than people, indulge in so much babbling? For precisely the reason that so frustrated General Powell: Someone is hiding the real source of the babbles. That may be normal in power politics, but it is destructive in places like foundations, whose second most valuable currency (after money) is information, discussion, and intellectual exchange. Sometimes, it is simply too much trouble to identify who, exactly, “reports,” “requests,” “expresses desires,” or whatever. Occasionally the source is obvious, and at other times it’s unimportant.

But the habit of using SITES to refer to unnamed people is deadly. Give this usage enough sway, and grantees with different views quickly find themselves lumped into talking “sites” that somehow speak for them without their knowledge or even agreement. Far better to say “several grantees in various places report” this or that, rather than to imply (no doubt inaccurately) that all grantees in all “sites” are unanimous. Similarly, to say that one or two “sites” accomplished something significant is not merely to deny credit to the people

<sup>5</sup> Fittingly enough, The Edna McConnell Clark Foundation shares a floor in a midtown Manhattan office tower with a room cryptically marked “Office of the Building.” Apparently the more articulate real estate now gets a furnished retreat from which to issue its dicta.

who really did the accomplishing. Worse, it denies *everyone else* accurate information about how things were accomplished, and by whom. One thing is certain: The *site* accomplished nothing whatsoever.

A stretchy word to flatter flabby substance

## Supports

A typical sentence in a grant memo reads: "The initiative will ensure that necessary services and supports are community-based." In this context, SUPPORTS shares the main appeal of CAPACITY: it means everything at once, and specifies nothing. (The context in which the word may have the most vivid meaning is in the realm of undergarments, about which the less said the better.) Most often, the word means nothing at all, but simply adds verbiage to an otherwise thin and unsatisfying mumble—a writer's equivalent of Hamburger Helper.

Yet most foundation and nonprofit writers are not trying just to mutter random vacuities. They actually do mean to communicate something. They are simply unaware, it seems, that their meaning will forever remain their secret unless they come up with a more specific word than SUPPORTS. Might the quoted sentence have been referring to community-based counselors? doctors or nurses? child-care centers? lenders? police officers? It could just as easily mean any and all of these things. But the writer probably meant only one or two of them. It would have been best to say which ones.

Sounds long and military, like a guided missile  
**targeting**

To those who nowadays consider the verb TO TARGET indispensable in all contexts, it will come as some surprise that the current sense of the verb did not exist until the 1970s, the decade that also gave us Debbie Boone and the energy crisis. The 1969 edition of the *American Heritage Dictionary* lists "target" solely as a noun. The *Oxford English Dictionary's* 1971 edition lists only the antiquated meanings of "shielded" or "marked for execution." Then sometime in the Nixon and Carter years, TARGETING blasted out of the Pentagon like a runaway rocket and landed smack in the fad-making salons of Madison Avenue. It's been ubiquitous ever since.

TARGETING illustrates a kind of Gresham's Law<sup>6</sup> of jargon: Bad words drive good words out of circulation. The popularity of TARGETING has all but obliterated the nice old-fashioned Saxon word "aiming," largely because the newer word sounds more complicated (and, not incidentally, more military). Those who like their writing to seem tough and imposing will always prefer three bellicose syllables over two quiet ones. Thus the cumbersome neologism nudges out the plain, easy word every time.

Yet apart from its pseudo-military cachet, TARGETING offers hardly any improvement over "aiming." It does, admittedly, lend itself to the adjective TARGETED—as in the many "targeted populations" who have become metaphorical bull's-eyes for the guided missiles of modern philanthropy. But TARGETED is an inherently ambiguous word: When you aim a sharp projectile at someone (your "target population," you might say), which one has been TARGETED? The projectile or

<sup>6</sup> Sir Thomas Gresham, 16th Century financier, observed that bad currencies drive good currencies out of circulation.

the intended victim? The fact is, the word is sloppy enough to mean both things at once.

Do we need TARGETING and TARGETED? In the typical sentence, "Services are targeted at three populations," it's clear that "aimed" would do very nicely. But what to do with the sentence "Target populations include inner-city youth, the homeless, and those leaving the criminal-justice system." Here, the word "target" is actually fine—but in its original form and sense. It's a noun, and should be used that way. "*The program's targets* are inner-city youth, the homeless, etc." The verb is not only avoidable most of the time, but actually inferior to the simpler alternatives.

Advice on almost anything

## technical assistance

Meant originally as a counterpart to FINANCIAL ASSISTANCE (itself a euphemism for "grants" or "loans"), the parallel phrase TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE has the advantage of designating helpful acts by foundations that do not entail the transfer of money, but may involve a special skill or professional service. "We will provide financial assistance in the first year," says one foundation planning paper, "and follow with technical assistance in Years 2 and 3." No harm there: When that juxtaposition is the main point, the two phrases are apt enough. But when the purpose is to describe actual activity, the phrase TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE conveys almost no useful information. Other than writing a check, what *isn't* technical assistance?

In actual use, the phrase (known these days almost everywhere by its initials) normally seems to mean "advice"—and

not always "technical" advice, either. But somewhere in the lower bureaus of philanthropy's sensitivity constabulary, someone in charge of official humility must have deemed "advice" too condescending. TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE, conveniently, sounds more like a visit from the electrician—cool, professional, all-in-a-day's-work, no reflection on the customer's essential savvy.

The trouble with this humility is that it's misplaced. When foundations provide technical assistance, it is because they believe they have, or can purchase, important knowledge that grantees lack. The premise of most technical assistance—giving advice or instruction to those who need it—is nothing to be ashamed of. Most often, in fact, "technical assistance" assignments come wrapped in the broader objective of knowledge transfer—itself a buzz-phrase, admittedly, but one that rarely applies to a visit from the electrician. If the goal is transferring knowledge, then the process is that of teaching or advising, not of performing a "technical" task. The practitioner is therefore a teacher, consultant, trainer, or adviser.

So "instruction," "consulting," "training," or "advice" are all better words than the murky phrase TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE, because they are more precise and more ordinary. Any of those words will convey, in reasonably concrete and understandable terms, just who is supposed to do what for the grantee. By contrast, TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE treats that essential information as practically a state secret.

Among these four common words, circumstances will normally dictate which to choose. "Training" and "consulting" are most often used to refer to the work of professionals—teachers, trainers, and consultants—who transfer knowledge for a living. Some technical assistance is in fact intended to be

delivered by such professionals, and in those cases, “training” or “consulting” would be the best choice—as in, “The proposed grant provides money to hire a consultant” or “to send employees to a training program.” In other cases, though, the intent is not to hire a professional, but to introduce grantees to people who simply have useful expertise or experience to share. In those cases, the plain English word “advice” is made to order.

## A Verbal Bestiary

### Common jargon and how to spot it

Most of the expressions in the previous chapter have a distinct status in the philanthropic world—either because they are related to foundations’ daily business, or because foundations have devised especially irksome applications for them. But plenty of jargon is just as common outside foundations as inside them, and philanthropy bears only a fraction of the blame for the trouble it causes. Nonetheless, avoiding pomposity, vagueness, and tedium is a duty of any good writer, in whatever field. And in foundations, where billions of dollars, the well-being of needy people, and the seeds of national policy are often at stake, that duty is arguably greater than average.

This section discusses the two most common categories of jargon afoot in modern writing: genteelisms and words that sound good but mean little. A third category, made up of annoying words that are not truly jargon at all, is considered at the end.

## HIGH-CLASS WORDS

The first category consists of words that the venerable British style critic H. W. Fowler condemned as “genteelisms”—euphemisms designed to skirt blunt realities with needlessly frilly or effete language. Fowler’s exact definition bears quoting:

**GENTEELISM:** The rejecting of the ordinary natural word that first suggests itself to the mind, and the substitution of a synonym that is thought to be less soiled by the lips of the common herd, less familiar, less plebeian, less vulgar, less improper, less apt to come unhandsomely betwixt the wind and our nobility. The truly genteel do not *ask* but *inquire*, may detect an *unpleasant odor* but never a *nasty smell*,... never *help* but *assist* each other to potatoes, of which they may have *sufficient*, but never *enough*.

And thus we begin with...

A fine gown for the humble help

## assist

Sixty years after Fowler first complained about it, ASSIST still haunts the halls of government, academia, philanthropy, and everyplace else where good is supposedly done. Evidently afraid of patronizing their beneficiaries with mere “help,” charities are irritatingly prone to offer ASSISTANCE at every turn. “Training modules are designed to assist programs and trainers reach the least job-ready.” “This grant will assist the organization to plan a comprehensive response to mental illness and homelessness in the targeted areas.” In both cases,

the excessively dainty reliance on ASSIST led the writer into an ungainly or even ungrammatical expression (the first example, stripped even of the modestly correct “to,” is especially unforgivable). The clear meaning was “help.” ASSIST was pure frippery. Yet it would be hard to find a more common example of posturing anywhere in the human services.

A lot more tasteful than cold, hard cash  
**funding**

Ask any “development” consultant (itself a genteelism for “fundraising”) and not one of them will tell you that she or he does anything so crass as raise money. They SEEK FUNDING. Nonprofit organizations, because they pursue only the loftiest ideals, do not spend money. They APPLY FUNDING, or they FUND. One good exercise for any foundation writer would be to pick some paper at random from the shelf, strike out every instance of FUNDING, and substitute the phrase “worldly lucre.” This would do no service to either clarity or good taste, but it would be a profoundly therapeutic exercise. It would illustrate, by contrast, that the word “money” is actually a perfectly neutral way to describe what makes the philanthropic world go around. Avoiding it, especially in favor of the puffed-up FUNDING, is evasive and unnecessary.

Because only lowly persons say people

## persons

For reasons no doubt buried in the ancient political sensitivities of the human services, it is considered woefully déclassé to refer to human beings as “people.” “Emergency

shelters in New York provided accommodation [you'd never catch them "giving a bed"] to 35,000 persons last year," a paper recently announced. Why **PERSONS**? Would anyone, in conversation, ever have said that? "This budget assumes four sessions per week, serving an average 30 persons each." **PERSONS**? Go figure. Evidently the term "people" takes too little account of the dignity of those being helped. Sorry: assisted.

More blessed than to give/get

## provide/receive

This is simply the verb equivalent of "funding." No one wants to "get" or "give" anything. It seems too ordinary, not to say materialistic. But they would be pleased to **RECEIVE**, and feel duty-bound to **PROVIDE**. It's another example of how a well-meaning writer inadvertently takes a plain idea and turns it into something pompous, without the least intention of doing so.

Best utilized in place of use to mean use

## utilize

This word actually has a meaning of its own, different from "use." But you'd never know it, with the near-universal tendency of formal writing to describe every use as a **UTILIZATION**. Strictly speaking, something is utilized when it starts off being useless, but someone cleverly makes it useful. By that definition, you cannot "utilize" a hammer to pound a nail. It is already expressly useful for that purpose. When someone wrote "Funds will be utilized to employ two new account managers," the result was a double folly. Not

only does money not need to be "utilized" (it is already just about universally useful), but money cannot "employ" anyone. The writer meant to say that the funds would be used to *pay for* two new staff people. In the ethereal realm of philanthropy, we evidently don't like to speak of people being *paid* to do things. Too bad, since that is precisely what most foundation grants actually do.

## MEANING-LESS WORDS

A second category of jargon contains words that are troublesome not so much because they're too ornate or grandiose, but because they mean much less than they seem to mean. We have already spent time on one high-ranking member of this list, **COMPREHENSIVE**. But there are plenty more where that came from.

Any thinking process that takes time and money

## analysis

This long-suffering word once enjoyed a clear, useful meaning, rooted in the Greek classics. **ANALYZE** is to logic what "dissect" is to biology: taking apart the pieces and thus, by examining them, understanding the whole. Sadly, it has now come to mean "thinking about anything for more than a few minutes." It is nowadays a challenge to find any paper that does not purport to analyze its subject, no matter what approach the paper actually takes—dissection, description, deduction, or mere rumination.

Describes anything except chaos

## entity

In foundation-speak, this is usually just a synonym for “thing” or, at best, for “organization.” “The study will determine the structure of a regionwide program, answering such questions as the scope of activity, the participating entities, and possible sources of funding.” Outside the dusty realms of metaphysics, where it was born, ENTITY scarcely has a meaning at all (here’s the best the *Oxford English Dictionary* could come up with: “a thing with distinct existence, as opposed to a quality or relation.” Ah, well, thanks anyway.) For the non-metaphysician, at a minimum, it is mere noise, sound without meaning.

More or better by any increment, however small

## intensive

The usual meaning of this word (when it has one at all) is “more than the norm.” As in: “the curriculum consists of four weeks of intensive training”—presumably a welcome reassurance to students that, in those four weeks, they will not be getting the school’s customary casual and nonchalant training. When papers describe intensive services, collaboration, staffing, follow-up, and the like, they seem to be referring to something superhuman and remarkable. But they could very well be talking about merely making a better-than-average effort. The word provides no way of knowing. Because it means nothing in particular but carries a self-flattering aura, a careful reader will view the word more with suspicion than admiration. (The same, by the way, goes for IN-DEPTH, whose meaning is pretty much the same as INTENSIVE, though the hyphen makes it jauntier.)

A connector for every association, including pure coincidence

## linkage

Here, likewise, the sense is probably just that of “link”—that is, one thing connecting to another in some unspecified way—but the word seems wiser when it is *-aged*. “The organization will form linkages with community groups, child care and after-school programs,” said one program description. By sounding technical, LINKAGE makes this promise seem concrete, till you think about it. What will the organization do with these other groups and programs? Conduct joint activities, share information, refer clients, or just put up their flyers on the bulletin board? No way to know. In contexts like this one, which are common, the word is little more than sound and fury, signifying...well, the point is clear.

Discrete but inscrutable processes, laws, or forces

## mechanisms

It’s hard to say, frankly, just what this word is supposed to mean when it turns up in a context like the following: “The objective of this program will be to create mechanisms by which government, service providers, and community organizations can develop new methods of serving the target population.” It may be that MECHANISMS, in this sentence, is simply a euphemism for “ways” (“the objective...will be to *find ways* in which...”) but it hints at something more specific than that. “Forums,” perhaps—gathering places where they can talk about “new methods”? Or maybe newly formed institutions or types of contracts? The trouble with MECHANISMS in this context—an extremely common context, to be sure—is that it says very little but appears to designate

something very important. Either it is misleading, by pretending to say more than it says, or it is confusing, by trying to say something whose meaning an ordinary reader could scarcely guess.

#### NOT JARGON, BUT STILL ANNOYING

As a first step in compiling this essay, we asked around, informally, for suggestions about current jargon that ought to be included here. Most of the words and phrases mentioned in the preceding sections were the results of those inquiries. A few suggestions, though, didn't fit the definition of jargon that we have been following. They may be overused, unclear, or just irritating, but for whatever reason they aren't jargon.

Here are a few examples, as a kind of sympathetic nosegay to those weary foundation writers who have to live with these words, but wish they didn't:

Anything good that is done by our favorite people  
**best practices**

Here's a commendably simple, agreeable little perennial that has somehow been allowed to overrun the garden. It refers to the most effective things that organizations do—things, presumably, of which other organizations should be made aware. To refer to the best of an organization's practices as its, well, **BEST PRACTICES** is hardly an affront to clarity or plain speaking.

The trouble is that, lately, every time a nonprofit organization manages to get through the day without falling into bankruptcy, a team of researchers moves in, often with generous

support from a major foundation, casting about for **BEST PRACTICES**. The phrase has gotten out of hand.

**BEST PRACTICES** was coined—advisedly, it seems—to refer to the *very best* of the practices in a field, not merely all the good ones that could possibly fit into a 100-page report. And in some new and evolving fields, as the nonprofit organization Public/Private Ventures recently argued, there are not yet *any* practices that can be canonized as "best"—only promising ones that deserve close study and discussion.

Our recommendation here is simply to scrutinize the phrase before using it. Are the practices referred to in this context really the *best* ones? Or are they just effective or interesting? If one of the latter, then it's best to say so, and save the **BEST** for later.

A corral for keeping people together in your own mind  
**community**

Few words irritate careful writers and editors more than this one, which has become a catchall term for any group of people with practically anything in common. Its etymology (literally "unity together," with the original Latin meaning of "fellowship") would seem to make this word apply only to a deeply close-knit group that shares some fundamental, spiritual connection. But there is no justification for insisting on such a narrow definition. In English, **COMMUNITY** has applied for centuries to practically any association among people, whether profound or superficial. The almost boundless vagueness of this word is therefore not a new invention, an affectation, or a subterfuge. Jargon it's not. But vague it is, and therefore an invitation to mental sloppiness.

In some recent expressions like “community development” or “community organizing,” the word started off as real jargon—trendy and obscure, with multiple meanings—but it has gained a certain practiced precision, built up over time. **COMMUNITY** now means, in these contexts, a group of people living near one another who share, by reason of their common residence, some political or economic interests. In this sense, the word can actually be preferable over more precise words like “neighborhood,” because some such communities aren’t urban enough to be clustered into neighborhoods.

But more often, in phrases like “the intelligence community,” “the arts community,” or “the child-welfare community,” the word drops a deliberate scrim in front of a bunch of shadowy people whom no one is expected to identify. Most of the time, those who use such phrases really mean to say “people in these fields whom I consider important, but can’t or won’t name.” Used that way, the word falsely pretends to give information, while actually blotting out important details.

Worse, that use of **COMMUNITY** is sometimes deliberately misleading. It implies a unanimity among members that rarely occurs in reality. These **COMMUNITIES** that speak so conveniently in unison may suit the polemical purposes of some writers, but not without seeming a little fraudulent. When “the Harlem community” supports or opposes a new shopping center, it is a near certainty that a group of individuals, and not all the residents of Harlem, share one view of the development. Used this way, as with **SITE**, the word may be just the result of careless diction, but it exposes the writer to suspicions of dishonesty.

A word that does everything, including multiply  
**initiative**

Gone, we presume, are the days when parents clucked at their children, “You lack initiative!” Surely no one lacks initiative anymore. **INITIATIVES** are everywhere, common as crabgrass. Practically every police station has an anti-drug initiative, churches have youth initiatives, city halls have clean-streets initiatives, and California civic groups cook up ballot initiatives by the score for every Election Day. But no one has more initiatives than foundations—at least one, it seems, for every area of human endeavor.

To be fair, the word attracts more derision among editors and other language watchdogs than it deserves. It is most often used merely as a synonym for “effort,” “activity,” or “project.” It is pretty much a fair trade for any of those words, which are themselves fairly vague and unambitious. Whether something is called “The Welfare Project” or “The Welfare Initiative” is really a matter of indifference.

**INITIATIVE** is not really jargon at all, in fact—it wears its meaning (minimal as that may be) on its sleeve, with nothing deceptive or obscure or falsely implied. It is really just jargon’s humbler cousin, a cliché. We include it here mostly because, as clichés go, **INITIATIVE** has turned into something of a juggernaut, and to many foundation writers and editors, it is becoming annoying. There are, after all, other perfectly good terms that boast less tentative meanings than **INITIATIVE**—which the *American Heritage Dictionary* defines as “a beginning or introductory step; an opening move.” But those other words—“project,” “venture,” “drive,”

"enterprise"—are in overly wide use already, and most lack the sheer pluck of INITIATIVE.

Anyone who comes up with a good alternative is sure to be hoist onto the shoulders, metaphorically at least, of communications staff in foundations everywhere. Meanwhile, though, INITIATIVE is here to stay.

How things get done, anthropologically speaking

## systems

This is not just a word, but a world-view—and an impressively ancient one, by the fleet-footed standards of most buzzwords. SYSTEMS, as in the anthropologists' catch-phrase "systems thinking," goes back at least to the 1940s, when no less than Margaret Mead was apparently involved in its coinage or promotion. It applied, then as now, to the discipline of understanding and analyzing human organization, whether social or industrial. And it no doubt still has some far narrower meaning in the more rigorous academic circles.

Elsewhere, though, SYSTEMS has sometimes become little more than a catchall euphemism for "how things get done." It is an honest term with many dishonest uses. Thus it is that "systems reform," that touchstone of modern philanthropy, was recently derided by a frustrated grant-seeker as meaning nothing more than "changing the way things get done around here." That frank definition admittedly yanks a few unneeded plumes out of the feathered bonnet of systems reform. But it goes a bit far.

The popularity of SYSTEMS is not based just on a pilfering of its anthropological cachet. The word is so popular because, used for its proper purpose, it is practically without

synonyms. Dr. Mead, who was a fairly clear writer and a brilliantly clear thinker, did not need fancy words to make herself seem important. She did, though, need a word that would describe the many-headed organism that people become when they weave their separate tasks and ranks and enterprises into a larger functioning whole. She used SYSTEMS because she needed it. And so do many others.

For example, when writing about schools and their regulatory superstructures, one can refer to "districts" or "hierarchies." But in describing the formal universe that comprises all the districts, institutions, boards, and bureaucracies in a city or state, it is most concise and accurate to use "education system." There is no other term for it. We are talking about something much too formal and regimented to be captured by the (admirably modest) phrase "how things get done in education."

The trouble with SYSTEMS is that it has too many friends, and it is constantly being lured into bad company. The mere fact that a process is complicated, has many parts and participants, or serves multiple purposes doesn't make it a system. The business of making a soufflé is a stupefyingly complicated and delicate procedure, but it is not a "system" in any sense that Margaret Mead would have understood. Neither are most organizations, government agencies, or Tax Code provisions "systems" in that strict sense, however much they may require the genius of a Margaret Mead to explain.

Strictly speaking, a system emerges when many independent actors engage in a mutually reinforcing collection of endeavors, the whole of which may be unknown to its various participants, and produce results that no individual players

sought to (or could) produce on their own. The challenge for users of **SYSTEM**, therefore, is not automatically to find a more ordinary word. The challenge is to make certain that the putative “system” is really worthy of the name. If so, then the word isn’t jargon; it’s a technical term, properly applied.

Handy for showing that we’re practical, too  
**tools**

Someone (who may be watching too much television) recently opined that the word **TOOLS** suddenly became ubiquitous when beefy construction workers started showing up as the stars of TV commercials. All at once, it was alleged, every useful thing was rechristened a **TOOL**, and any collection of practical methods, standard procedures, or handy resources was fashionably described as a **TOOL BELT OR TOOLKIT**.

We harbor no doubts about the corrupting power of TV commercials over all intellectual pursuits in this country. And certainly **TOOLS** has become unbearably trendy at the moment, for whatever reason. That is sufficient to make it a cliché, surely. But it’s hard to imagine an argument for condemning this humble word as jargon. Those who use it are simply making the (refreshingly honest) acknowledgement that their favorite techniques, processes, and rigmaroles are really just means to an end, and are only as good as the person who uses them.

The word is sometimes used, it’s true, to refer evasively to some collection of things that are supposedly useful but conveniently unidentified. But that same charge can be leveled against many other plural words and phrases like “methods,”

“procedures,” and the ubiquitous **BEST PRACTICES**. The only real reason to avoid **TOOLS** is that practically everyone is using it, and (like the TV commercials that may have boosted its popularity) it is quickly becoming tiresome.

## A Final Thought

### Some hints for avoiding tomorrow's jargon

The preceding sections have provided just a rough air-boat ride over the vast swamp of philanthropic jargon. It would be pointless, if it were even possible, to catalogue all the evasive and deceptive phrases that periodically keep foundations and other nonprofits from making themselves understood. The list of current jargon changes too fast, and is probably too long, to justify a really thorough treatment.

Instead, it is probably most useful simply to encourage discussion on the subject. Many excellent writers will no doubt take issue with some items on this list, or with the (occasionally intemperate) remarks attached to this or that word. That, we believe, is all to the good: The best treatment for unclear writing—in fact, for bad writing in general—is to shed the light of criticism on it. If this essay has been unduly hard on one word, or too easy on another, subsequent debate is sure to set the balance right.

So leaving aside, for the moment, the relative merits of one term or another, how does a conscientious writer avoid jargon and other opaque or muddle-headed writing *in general*? Without attempting to produce a condensed textbook on

Without attempting to produce a condensed textbook on good writing (of which many good examples are in print), it may be useful instead to suggest a few practical exercises that can help weed out the fuzzy thinking from which the worst jargon springs.

#### 1 CONJURE YOUR AUDIENCE WHILE YOU WRITE.

If you are writing for a general audience, meaning well-educated people who don't happen to share your line of expertise, it may be helpful to envision one typical reader—preferably a friend—and write as if you were sending a letter to that person. If your friend wouldn't understand a term or phrase, don't use it. Better still, ask yourself how your non-specialist friend *would* describe the same idea, and borrow the language, in a sense, from him or her. Experience suggests that the first few attempts at this method may feel hopelessly limiting (and may be so time-consuming that it jeopardizes deadlines). But regular practice is an effective way of weeding out arcane, obscure, or "inside" expressions.

#### 2 MAKE UP YOUR OWN JARGON LIST.

As you sit through meetings—the boring ones are best for this—start a list of the buzz-phrases you hear others overusing. The fact that these phrases annoy you should be reason enough to avoid them yourself. Yet you may be surprised (and humbled) to discover that you do not, in fact, always avoid them. That painful discovery is no fun, but many people find the making and keeping of such a list both helpful and (during the worst meetings)

therapeutic.

### 3 OUTLINE IN PLAIN PHRASES.

Outlining is one of those tasks from college that you probably left behind with your French irregular verbs. And ordinary outlining can, it's true, be a little burdensome. The key exercise in this context, though, is not really the outline itself, it's the words you use in the outline. The rules are roughly these: (a) use just half a dozen words for the average numbered item, with a maximum of 10; (b) use only words and phrases that would fit naturally in *USA Today*. The point is definitely not that your eventual *writing* should mirror *USA Today*—only that the topics should each be expressible as a headline suitable for a very general newspaper readership. “Comprehensive initiative impacts system reform” won’t do. “Wide-ranging project changes how City Hall serves the neighborhood” is better. Eventually, your full written product may have to contain a few technical phrases, if the subject is at all technical. But in making the outline, you will at least have given every topic an ordinary, clear name. And the process of making up those names usually focuses creative attention on concepts that would otherwise have been expressed in jargon.

### 4 READ YOUR FINISHED WORK OUT LOUD.

This may not work for everyone, but when it works, it’s powerful. Hearing long, convoluted sentences and dense phrases read aloud can be shocking and revealing. The benefit of *hearing* text, rather than just reading it, is that it gives the writer an opportunity to ask, “Would anyone

really say that?” When the answer is No—and it often is—then the odds are good that a rewrite is in order.

The connection between written and spoken language is far more intimate than most people are taught to believe. The typical reader (that is, almost anyone who is not a “speed reader”) actually *hears* the words internally while reading, as if they were spoken. The more the words sound like real conversation—preferably interesting, lively conversation—the more likely they are to be understood and remembered. Writing should sound, at least in the main, like the remarks of a clear, congenial speaker.

Some time ago, a major national foundation circulated to some of its consultants this order about a paper the consultants were to submit: “Papers for our board,” wrote a foundation officer, “may not contain contractions. We write ‘does not’ but never ‘doesn’t;’ ‘will not’ but never ‘won’t.’” To this, the only healthy response can be: *Who on earth talks like that?* The board in question is obviously not a body that wishes to be addressed as normal people, but as some august and disembodied presence, like the smoky face of Oz.

Fine for them, but most readers prefer humanity over stilted formalities. And jargon is really just one branch of the latter. That’s particularly true of the pseudo-professional jargon that some writers use in order to sound “serious”—the likes of IMPACT and EXTRAPOLATE and PROACTIVE. The *whole point* of these words is that ordinary people don’t use them, and the writer hopes to be recognized as anything but ordinary. Instead, the usual effect is to seem merely dull.

Cleansing jargon from foundation writing would be nice, but it would amount only to treating a symptom. To treat the cause, it would be enough just to make the writing clear,

friendly, and conversational, rather than solemn and abstruse. Do that, and the jargon will melt away on its own.

## Afterword, or *Confiteor*

The author hereby confesses to having abused, at some time or other, nearly every term and phrase discussed in this essay.

In fact, most of the jargon criticized in these pages can be found here and there in the writings of serious and eloquent people. For some (rare) circumstances, there simply is no alternative. In other cases (when time is short, purposes modest, and the audience just a small group of insiders), it simply isn't worth the trouble of finding and using clearer terms. Sometimes jargon, like other unpleasant things, simply happens.

But most often, murky language turns out to be camouflage for murky thought—an offense of which few people are consistently innocent. Hunting down and deleting jargon is therefore a constant challenge, an essential part of the continuing duty to critique and refine one's own ideas. Even the most vigilant will sometimes stumble, but that is no excuse for giving up.

— T. P.

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A lethal combination of the dense and the tedious  
**jargon**

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