



Dear Tics, and Other Unnecessary Copy Leeches

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A few months ago, a friend invited me to a lecture about one of my favorite writers. As a bonus, the lecture was given by another one of my favorite writers. Win-win, or so I thought.

About two minutes into the lecture, my attention was drawn elsewhere, namely the ‘ums’ and ‘like’ and all the filler that filled up his speech. I couldn’t pay attention to his presentation because I was too distracted by his verbal tics. At one point, I started counting how many times he used the word ‘like,’ and he clocked 47 in two minutes. You know what I wasn’t doing while I was counting how many times he used the word ‘like’? I wasn’t listening to what he wanted me to hear.

A few years ago, I broke my ankle on a run. I went to the ER and the attending physician used the word ‘coolio’ so much that, at one point, I thought I was being filmed for a viral prank. When I realized it was a nervous tic rather than a prank, I became more concerned. Using ‘coolio’ as an adjective, noun, verb, and superlative didn’t instill the most confidence. Everything ended up being fine, but when she suggested I follow up with her in a few days, I opted to find care elsewhere.

Crutch words and tics aren’t unique to speaking. We rely on them when writing, whether we realize it or not. My first week of college, my professor concluded the class by declaring, “Have me a 5000-word essay by this time next week or drop my class. Those are your options.”

I was terrified. I had never written anything approaching that word count. And to write that amount in a week? No, thank you. So, I embarked on that time-honored college tradition of faking it.

I wrote long, meandering sentences that said the same thing in various ways of saying the same thing that never actually made a point and were not even grammatically correct, and simply went on and on and on for the sake of going on so that, for no other reason, the word count would go up and I could finally get to the end of the excessively long paper. I used adverbs, acutely, disproportionately, and unnecessarily. I relied on crutch words designed to make my essay amazing, great, and, actually, very strong. I filled the pages with more clichés than you could shake a stick at, which, looking back on it, probably stuck out like a sore thumb, but at the time, ignorance was bliss. My professor was not amused.

I like to think my writing has matured since then. However, as writers, we all rely on tics, crutch words, and even crutch punctuation. I know I do. A few years ago, I was unaware that I enjoyed the word ‘indeed.’ I used it in a lot of my writing. Indeed, it became a distraction.

Of course, as writers, we know there are always exceptions to the rule. Contra Hemingway, adverbs have their place. Clichés do as well. But the minute a reader or (in our case) a listener seizes onto one of our tics, they’re taken out, and the message gets lost. When writing copy, always consider what the listener will hear.

Be mindful of everything included in your copy. Filler, tics, and crutches don’t always present themselves in words. For example, sound effects can detract as easily as they can enhance copy. You might be surprised how many times you use the same sound effect in ad after ad. Or use sound effects as filler when more copy is appropriate. Instead of using fluff or sound effects or unnecessary adverbs to meet the time requirements, why not repeat the CTA or pull some information from the company website or, if the brief allows for it, use dialogue? Nine times out of, well, nine, a client will always prefer a repeated CTA rather than a six-second sound effect. Remember, they’re paying to get their brand, event, or cause to stick in the listener’s mind.

The best way to catch your own tics, crutches, and fillers is to give your copy a quick read before submitting. In fact (if you’re not already doing it), why not read your copy out loud before submitting it? Not only will you catch grammatical mistakes you might not otherwise, but you can hear how it flows. Does the adverb strengthen what you are trying to convey? Does the sound effect enhance the copy or would more information be appropriate? When you’re reading it out loud, do you hear filler or fluff that you might not have been aware of when writing it? Have you repeated the same word to the point that it might be distracting to the listener?

We’re all in a hurry. The nature of our platform doesn’t always lend itself to careful review. But taking a few more seconds to look over your copy and tighten it up will make a considerable impact. And that impact is often what the client is looking for when selecting scripts for production.

Faulkner may have implored us to kill our darlings, but when writing copy, perhaps just a tad more self-editing will do.