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How To Avoid Being Seen As A Pompous Or T-Shirt Communicator

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What style do you want? UNSPLASH-KEAGAN-HENMAN

By Dianna Booher

Emails and presentations mimic conversation. That can be both good and bad. Good, because our words can sound warm, personal,

honest, or sincere. Bad, when our words sound angry, sarcastic, aggressive, or flippant.

To get a clear understanding of tone, consider the following passages written in different styles:

T-Shirt Communication:

You've already been told this once. We gotta cut the cost of gas. It's gonna be up to you guys to put it to your people about how they drive their company cars. Evidently, some people don't have a clue about how much we're spending on their racing around town on company wheels. If those gasoline bills don't come down, somebody's gonna be kicking butt.

Appropriately Informal:

You're already aware that one of the main themes for division managers this quarter will be overseeing and controlling gasoline usage. This theme will be hammered at hard and heavy throughout the year and, I'm sure, in the years to come. It will be up to you to set strict guidelines to help your people better plan their schedules and to see that they operate company cars efficiently. I'm convinced that a number of our people do not give the same attention to the company cars as they would to their own family cars when they have to buy gasoline out of their own pockets.

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Formal:

As you are aware, one of the main objectives for division managers will be supervising and regulating gasoline usage. The company will repeatedly emphasize automobile economy throughout the years to come. Managers must set firm guidelines to help employees better plan their schedules and use company cars efficiently. Such objectives should encourage employees to give company cars the same careful attention as they give their personal cars.

Pompous:

As all management is cognizant, one of the principal objectives for division managers will be the supervision and regulation of gasoline usage by personnel. Economic and efficient usage of automobiles will be a recurring concern in the years to come, and it is incumbent that stringent objectives be established for all personnel with due respect to efficient juxtapositions of appointments within the same geographical region and to the prudent utilization of company vehicles. These objectives should incorporate incentives for personnel to render company transportation the same meticulous attention as would be afforded personal vehicles.

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In general, to choose the appropriate style for a document, consider how you would express your ideas in conversations with the same reader or readers. Show concern, be sincere, be direct. But if you intend to be more formal in your writing or presentations, then take

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care to omit repetitive details, awkward sentences, and grammatical errors that may creep in as you speak or write.

If you intend to be informal, by all means, use the personal pronouns *you, we, they,* and *I.* And you can toss in the occasional cliché and colloquialism if they get the point across with impact. Also, put people into your speech or document. That is, use active voice: Say "All managers have scheduled feedback sessions." Not the passive: "Feedback sessions have been scheduled by all managers." Who does what makes things precise.

Plus, active sentences are generally shorter. For example, you don't read this sign at a traffic intersection: "All vehicles must be brought to a complete stop." Instead, you read, "Stop."

With a more formal tone, personal pronouns still serve you well. They come across as sincere and direct. Just omit the awkward sentences and grammar errors.

To select the appropriate style, consider three issues in determining the formality or informality of your email or presentation:

1) Your relationship to the reader(s) or listeners

2) The subject of your email or speech

3) The purpose of your email or speech

For example, if you're writing to reprimand an employee, your tone should be firm and objective. On the other hand, if you're wishing your staff a nice holiday, you'll probably want to use a light, informal style.

Finally, the third issue: purpose. The purpose of your email or presentation may dictate either a formal or informal tone. Although

you may be writing to someone you know well, the recipient of your email may intend to pass it along to the board of directors as supporting evidence of a newly proposed idea. In that situation, of course, you might decide to change your usually informal chit-chat to a more formal approach, without colloquialisms or intentional sentence fragments.

Whether writing or speaking, your relationship to the reader, the content, and the purpose—all three—will determine the appropriate style.

Suggestion: Leave T-shirt communication to the clothing manufacturers.

Dianna Booher is the bestselling author of 50 books, including **Faster, Fewer, Better Emails**. *She helps organizations communicate clearly and individuals increase influence with a strong personal presence.*
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