

Color, Clarity, Cut, and Carat: The Four Cs of Writing

By Patrice Rhoades-Baum

My father, a jeweler, loved to look through a loupe into a diamond's brilliant, prismatic depth. Whenever he thought something was perfect, he likened it to "looking inside a diamond."

Even as a child, I could recite the four Cs to discern a diamond's quality: color, clarity, cut, and carat. Today, as a professional business communicator, I've used the same four Cs as a touchstone to improve my writing. And you can, too.

Check your writing project against the four Cs:

Color

Replace commonplace verbs with active, colorful verbs. For example: "Broke again, Johnny had only two quarters in his pocket" versus "Broke again, two lonely quarters clinked in Johnny's pocket."

Tips to add color:

- **Watch for tired verbs**—Be on the alert for ho-hum verbs and verb clauses such as: to be, to do, to get, to go, to have, to see, there is, there are
- **Vibrant verbs at your fingertips!**—Quickly replace stale verbs with precise, colorful verbs with the help of an online thesaurus:
 - Microsoft Word (go to Tools / Language / Thesaurus)
 - Merriam-Webster Online (go to <http://webster.com>, enter a word in the "online thesaurus" box at the top center of the page, and click "Go")
 - Dictionary.com (go to www.dictionary.com, select the thesaurus button at the top center of the page, type your word into the box, and click "Search")

Clarity

Does each sentence say what you mean? Be specific, untangle lengthy sentences, and steer clear of the passive voice ("the ball was caught") when you can more effectively use the active voice ("Diana caught the ball").

More tips to add clarity:

- **Visualize your message**—If you close your eyes, can you visualize the idea behind every sentence? Is every sentence as tangible and concrete as possible? If you can't wrap your arms around your

message, neither can your readers. Rework sentences to ensure they're clear and concrete.

- **Sketch abstract concepts**—If you're struggling to explain a technical or abstract concept, grab a pencil and sketch it. This exercise forces you to simplify and distill your idea and may spark helpful ways to present the concept to your readers.

Cut

Just like a skilled diamond cutter, you must trim excess material to let your message shine. For example: "The nostalgic charm of our town is perhaps as no where as evident for young and old alike as in the old-fashioned arcade" versus "The old-fashioned arcade evinces our town's nostalgic charm."

Tips to cut extraneous words:

- **Edit your copy**—This is an important step in the writing process, even when you plan to hire a professional editor. Because extra words drown your message, it's critical to be as objective as possible during this step. Look for every opportunity to trim extra words, sentences, and even paragraphs.
- **Go away!**—Write your first draft, and then put it aside for a few hours or a few days. When you return, you'll approach your draft with a fresh perspective.
- **Put your red pen to work**—Print your writing project and review it on paper. You'll be surprised how different your words look—and read—when you view them on paper instead of on your monitor.

Carat

Does your message carry weight with the people you're writing for? Ensure your main message is meaningful for your target audience.

Tips to ensure your message is hefty and adds value:

- **Clarify the main benefit message**—Think about your audience. In fact, bring a specific person to mind. How does the main message in your writing project benefit that person? Take time to ensure your message is clear and useful for your audience.
- **Add depth by connecting the dots**—Don't ask your readers to work hard to absorb your full message. Carefully step through your points in a logical order, reinforce your main message throughout your writing project, and "bookend" your introduction and conclusion.

Whether you're creating the great American novel or a business brochure, use the four Cs to polish your writing. Your writing can sparkle with the brilliance, depth, and perfection of a diamond.

For help creating your business communications projects, you can reach Patrice Rhoades-Baum at Patrice@SojournArts.com or (719) 761-5646.