

# A Modest Proposal to Eliminate “Acronyms”

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*Communication Strategies for Scientists and Engineers*

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## 1: No More “Acronyms”!

*“...before the design proceeds to FPU, it must go through PPI and TMS. Only then will the QA department of the DA issue a QER.”— Earl Shakespeare*

When we see passages like this, crawling with strange words and bold capitals, we contract a bad case of MEGO (My Eyes Glaze Over). Jargon, acronyms, and abbreviations seem to infect reports, manuals, legal writing — nearly everything our work requires us to read.

When it is our writing, though, matters seem quite different. We conjugate the problem this way:

- They write gobbledegook.
- You are obscure.
- We are professional.

Our jargon, our acronyms, our abbreviations are perfectly acceptable: After all, everyone we work with (well, almost everyone) knows what we mean. Besides, it has taken us years of study and emulation to master these words. We have worked hard to be unintelligible!

In our innermost hearts we know that even our “acronyms” confuse readers — but what can we do? Here's what: I propose we eliminate, with very few exceptions, all acronyms and abbreviations from our professional writing. The “how-tos” for this proposal appear in Section 5: **Easy Solutions for Getting Rid of Acronyms**, on page 10. But for those who need convincing, the “whys and wherefores” follow.

## 2: Why is “Acronyms” in Quotes?

What most of us call **acronyms** may actually be one of 3 categories of special language:

- **Jargon.** The special language of a trade or an area of expertise.
- **Acronyms.** Words made from the initials of phrases (Radar, Scuba, Laser). Acronyms are pronounced like words.

- **Abbreviations.** Phrases shortened either by using the initial letters of the phrase's words (“initialisms”) or by selecting a key word or words from that phrase. Initialisms are sounded out, letter by letter: IBM, FBI, p.m.

## Jargons Are Special Languages

“Jargon” means the special language of a profession or an area of expertise. It may take the form of a special use of a common word: For example, what lawyers call an “action,” the rest of us would call a “lawsuit.”

This use of jargon — the expert's “term of art” — is legitimate. Engineers speak one language, personnel administrators speak another, Latin scholars still another. Jargon is part of the “gear and tackle and trim” of our various trades. It is a tool. It helps experts communicate with other experts in the same field.

Unfortunately, jargon does not travel well. Fluency in one jargon does not mean proficiency in another. When you move from Electrical Engineering to Organic Chemistry, for instance, you move to an alien country, and the language changes from the familiar to the strange. You become a foreigner.

Reserve jargon for your peers. If you have a mixed audience, pitch your summary and introductory material to your most general reader. Address your fellow experts in the experimental and data sections of your document. Everything else should be available to all of your readership.

In short, develop the habit of translating even complex statements for the intelligent non-expert. Yes, it will take longer.

## Acronyms Are Pronounced Like Words

An acronym (“hidden name”) is a word made up of selected letters from other words. Acronyms are sounded as words, even when the speaker knows that the individual letters stand for other words. For example, we say “NATO” as one word — not “N-A-T-O” — even though we know it stands for North Atlantic Treaty Organization.

Some acronyms are spelled entirely with capitals. These capitalized acronyms tend to retain closer ties to their constituent words:

- ▶ AIDS, meaning “Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome”
- ▶ SIDS, meaning “Sudden Infant Death Syndrome”
- ▶ COBOL, a computer programming language, meaning “Common Business-Oriented Language”
- ▶ PERT, a business management tool, meaning “Program Evaluation and Review Technique”

Sometimes this close association misleads. Many users of personal computers know that DOS (doss) stands for “Disk Operating System.” Its pre-Microsoft version, however, was QDOS (que-doss), for “Quick and Dirty Operating System,” an engagingly honest title.

## Acronyms Are Hidden Names

Some acronyms are truly “hidden names.” They are spelled and treated as ordinary words and follow the capitalization rules for proper and common nouns. After a while, we may even forget that they were once special creations:

Some acronyms are truly “hidden names.” They are spelled and treated as ordinary words....

- ▶ Fiat = From the Italian *Fabbrica Italiana Automobili, Torino*
- ▶ Flak = Bursting antiaircraft fire, from German *Fliegerabwehrkanone* (antiaircraft gun)
- ▶ Gestapo = From the German *Geheime STAats-POLizei* (Secret State Police)
- ▶ Gulag = From the Russian *Glavnoe Upravlenie ispravitel'no-trudovyykh LAGere* (Chief Administration for Corrective Labor Camps)
- ▶ Laser = Light Amplification by Stimulated Emission of Radiation
- ▶ Quasar = Distant object emitting radio waves, from “QUASi-stellar radio source”
- ▶ Radar = RAdio Detecting And Ranging
- ▶ Scuba = Self-Contained Underwater Breathing Apparatus

As these examples demonstrate, true acronyms become true words.

## Acronyms Can Amuse and Instruct

Not all acronyms are created; some are discovered by attentive readers. Such “false” acronyms provoke unintended smiles. In the 1970s, Richard Nixon's opponents had great fun pointing to the acronym formed by the initials of the Committee to Re-Elect the President: CREEP.

The “word-likeness” of acronyms has suggested publicity ploys to many groups. Stunt acronyms (those created for a specific, often political, purpose) can help groups get attention and make their points.

MADD, for instance, tells us something about the mood of Mothers Against Drunk Driving. Perhaps you suffer from CHAOS (Can't Have Anyone Over Syndrome) and need to unclutter your house.

Acronyms can also insult. Local activists have sometimes been derided as CAVE (Citizens Against Virtually Everything) people. But unlike NIMBY (Not In My Backyard), CAVE has some pleasant associations, so the activists themselves now use it as a badge of pride.

Initial abbreviations — and not acronyms per se — are the greatest destroyers of meaning in modern writing.

These stunt acronyms are not the problem. They can be entertaining and even useful. Physicists, a humorous lot, have named the universe's small bits of dark matter “WIMPs,” for Weakly Interacting Massive Particles. There are more WIMPs than MACHOs — MAssive Compact Halo Objects — which are brown dwarfs, black holes, and large dark-matter entities: big stuff in space that does not shine and is hard to detect.

Down to earth, we trainers strive for memorable acronyms to reinforce learning. For example, creating SMART — Specific, Measurable, Agreed-upon, Realistic, Timed — goals is indeed intelligent. And I am fond of my acronym for active listening skills: EARS (Empathize, Ask, Reflect, Summarize). A colleague developed SOAR as a mnemonic for an aviation organization.

Acronyms can be handy. The real problem lies with initial abbreviations, the greatest destroyer of meaning in modern publications. All acronyms are abbreviations, but not all abbreviations are acronyms. Most initial abbreviations are ugly to look at and difficult to understand.

## Abbreviations Are Sounded Out

By now it is probably obvious to you that not all the words we commonly call “acronyms” are truly acronyms. Instead, much of our professional and organizational jargon appears as abbreviations — shortened forms of words and phrases, which usually are not pronounced as words.

In fact, you can quickly check whether a letter cluster is an abbreviation or an acronym by saying it. If you pronounce it as a word, it is an acronym; if you spell out the letters when you say it, it is an abbreviation.

We say, for example, “a em” for a.m. — not “am.” Similarly, we spell out the abbreviations of academic degrees, as in “bee a” for BA (rather than “bah”).

Even when abbreviations could be pronounced as words, we continue to spell them out. Granted, one cannot easily pronounce IBM or FBI as one word. But no one says “saws” for “SOS”; “gop” for GOP (grand old party); or “mit” for MIT (Massachusetts Institute of Technology).

I must qualify that last assertion. No speaker of American English would say “gop” or “mit.” But as my resident Englishman points out, readers abroad might very well sound the abbreviations as words. Non-English speakers will be particularly flummoxed.

## 3: Speaking in Code

Acronyms and abbreviations become jargon within jargon. Professions and organizations generate new words and special uses of old words. These words tend to congregate in phrases, which inevitably mutate into acronyms or abbreviations, rendering professional and organizational speech nearly unintelligible to outsiders.

### U R I C E T E A

Every profession generates its own code. For example, psychologists speak of “UR” (sounds like “you are”). If you are a “lay person” (anyone who is not a psychologist), you may be baffled by this term. If you realize the sounds are those of the

letters, you may inquire as to their meaning. Matters do not improve much when you learn that UR stands for “Utilization Review,” but at least you hear words, not letters with confusing sounds.

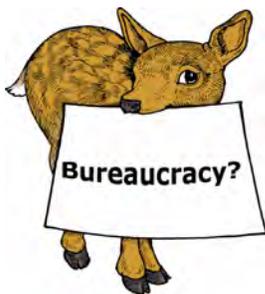
Not only lay people, but also a profession's novices may misunderstand an abbreviation or acronym. For example, the Federal Highway Administration has a program known as “ISTEA” (pronounced “ice tea”). Naturally enough, the acronym gets misspelled as “ICE TEA.”

Such confusion indicates that these writers do not really understand the term (since they clearly do not know what the letters represent), but want to sound knowledgeable. In fact, the words forming this acronym — Intermodal Surface Transportation Efficiency Act — can be understood only by a highway engineer or a government agent overseeing the program.

## Bambi Versus Bureaucracy

Look at organizational language: the greatest source of abbreviations and acronyms. Every business, school, laboratory, and agency has its own language, which comprises unique abbreviations and jargon.

For instance, many federal agencies and their contractors are concerned about “ES&H,” an abbreviation that may not mean anything to people outside those organizations.



Unfortunately, even when it is spelled out, “Environmental Safety and Health” may carry more complex meanings and associations for a federal worker than for someone else. The average person may think of clean water, deer browsing in the forest, fresh air, and rosy cheeks.

But a state or federal worker may associate “Environmental Safety and Health” with reports to be filed, procedures to be written, processes to be analyzed, and inspectors to be satisfied. In short, what makes one person see Bambi makes another see bureaucracy.

The problem of organizational jargon is more complex than just limiting communication with the public. Even insiders can get confused, as we've seen with ISTEA.

To confuse matters further, large organizations often have more than one organizational language. An organization with 1,000 workers, for instance, will typically have at least 3 major languages. These languages usually reflect the focuses of its major departments and the regulations that control their activities.

To the Shipping Department, for instance, the abbreviation "QA" may mean "Quick Action," while for the Manufacturing Department, "QA" means "Quality Assurance." "CD" may refer to "certificate of deposit" in Accounting, "coefficient of drag" in Engineering, and "compact disk" everywhere else.

## What Does "PC" Mean to You?

To illustrate how abbreviations proliferate (and debase their meaning), consider the list below. Here is what "PC" means to people in one (1) organization. I am not making this up:

1. Printed circuit
2. Polymer concrete
3. Photo conductive
4. Port contenders
5. PEL controller
6. Physician's certificate
7. Protective clothing
8. Personal computer
9. Politically correct

If this organization were British, "PC" would also refer to "Police Constable"! If it were Canadian, it might include *La Presse Canadienne* (Canadian Press News Service), while in Spain it might refer to *Països Catalans* (Catalan Lands). A pharmacist might read it as *Post Cibum* (Latin: After Meals). When one abbreviation can refer to so many different meanings, it is useless.

## DLAs and TLAs

When its definition contains yet another abbreviation (PC = PEL controller), the abbreviation becomes pernicious. Some of my clients refer to this as a “DLA” (Double Level Abbreviation) and jokingly compete to see who can devise the most obscure DLA.

The “TLA” (Three Letter Acronym) is notorious in the computing world (for starters, think DOS, DLL, and CGI) and has inspired its own contests, whether for creating reverse acronyms (IBM = I Blame Microsoft) or adding to the pile (TDM TLA = Too Darn Many TLAs).

## Breaking Bad Habits

Everyone knows many stories about the confusion abbreviations and acronyms create. Everyone knows how ugly alphabet soup looks on the page. So why do we use abbreviations and acronyms with anyone, much less with readers outside of our organizations or our immediate area of expertise? Basically, we abbreviate from habit, laziness, and vanity.

## 4: The Evils of Abbreviations

### Abbreviations Waste Paper



We use abbreviations for their apparent efficiency: An abbreviation takes up less room on the page. This supposed efficiency, however, has nothing to do with the reader's ease of understanding but everything to do with the writer's labor and the cost of paper.

Abbreviations have been used whenever paper, postage, or labor is expensive. Medieval manuscripts, for example, were written on parchment — sheepskin that had been scraped and soaked and stretched repeatedly over many weeks. The final product was such precious stuff that scribes took great pains not to waste it. Instead, they cultivated a tiny hand and abbreviated everyday words so they could get more on each page.

In modern organizations, where paper is cheap, the cost of labor has justified shortening frequently used phrases. Many writers claim that “if we did not use abbreviations, we would need to cut

down even more forests.” But *the greatest waste of paper is using it for reports no one can read!*

True, if a human being has to enter “Environmental Health and Safety” more than once or twice on each page, carpal tunnel syndrome — or serious tedium — soon sets in. But the need to help the typist (in this matter, at least) no longer applies.

### **Save Labor with Word Processors**

No one who uses a word processor should cite “labor” as an excuse for abbreviating phrases. Machines do not tire; neither do they suffer repetitive movement injury.

Word processors take care of the concern about entry time. Auto-correct features, macros, and other time- and keystroke-saving devices mean that the task of replacing initials with complete phrases is reduced to a few easy steps.

## **Abbreviations Abuse Readers**

Abbreviations are writer-centered, not reader-oriented; they are unfriendly writing. Writers who use abbreviations thoughtlessly risk abusing their readers.

Abbreviations hinder careful readers and reduce their comprehension. Abbreviations may save space on the page or screen, but they do so at the cost of clarity. The plain truth is that *abbreviations take more time to read and understand.*

Think of your own experience. When we read an abbreviation, we tend to do one of two things: Either we mentally spell out and translate the abbreviation, or we skip over the letter cluster entirely. Sometimes we skip over the letter cluster because we are so familiar with the abbreviation we read it as a word.

But many readers will simply skip over an abbreviation because they do not know what it stands for — and the process of trying to figure it out bores or frustrates them.

## **Abbreviations Are Buzz Words**

We all like to feel “in.” Professional jargon and organizational language take a long time to learn, after all, and they distinguish insiders from outsiders.

Such jargon may become mere “buzz words.” Buzz words do not mean anything real. Their main purpose is to elevate the user. Buzz words confer status on their users by leaving the rest of us embarrassed to ask what such a word means.

Far be it from me to urge universal intelligibility for organizational or professional jargon. The pecking order will be preserved, whatever the grammarians say.

But know this: When you abbreviate jargon — creating initialisms and acronyms — you write a nearly impenetrable code. If you really care about efficiency and good customer relations, decode your writing. Enlighten your readers — don't abuse them!

## Abbreviations Are Junk Words

Abbreviations have short lives. If they do not die, they evolve within their parent organization or profession (EQ becomes QE). Documents filled with abbreviations may be unreadable by even their authors after only a few years.

Abbreviations are parochial: They rarely mean the same thing in two departments of the same company, much less in two different companies (remember **What Does “PC” Mean to You?**, on page 7).

# 5: Easy Solutions for Getting Rid of Acronyms

## What Not to Do

Let us begin with “what not to do.” The first two items concern practices you probably follow (and were told to follow). These practices do not help your reader as much as you think.

### ■ Do Not Create Lists of Acronyms for Reports and Manuals

Many well-meaning agencies issue glossaries of acronyms for their managers, professional staff, and technical writers. Perhaps you do, too.

Why? It's nice to think of your readers this way, but do you really expect them to keep their copy of the “Acronym Glossary” at hand when they read your report? If you have so many acronyms

and abbreviations that you need a glossary for them, then clearly you have too many acronyms and abbreviations!

■ **Do Not “Write Out the Phrase Once, Use Its Abbreviation Thereafter”**

Forget the old rule of “write out the phrase once, with the abbreviation in parentheses” (hereafter referred to as “WOTPOWTAIP”). Though the WOTPOWTAIP rule at least acknowledges the reader’s unfamiliarity with the abbreviation, WOTPOWTAIP does not really solve the problem.

What should readers do, for instance, when the abbreviation disappears for ten pages, then suddenly pops up to challenge their memory? Stop reading and rifle through the report for the original appearance? Look for a glossary of terms? The WOTPOWTAIP rule, though motivated by the best of intentions, really will not do.

The next two precepts correct the myriad problems abbreviations create for international readers.

■ **Do Not Be a Yokel: The World is Reading You**

Avoid all abbreviations in documents with international readerships. A harmless “acronym” in English may be obscene in another language. A standard American abbreviation may confuse a foreign reader — even one who speaks English!

For example, “E-Z,” as in “Three E-Z Ways to Eliminate Acronyms,” will be read by Americans as “easy.” The British will read it “E-Zed” and be quite confused (we say “zee,” they say “zed”).

Which brings me to a central point: We are all foreigners. Any reader, whether down the hall or on another continent, may be confused by even “standard” abbreviations. Therefore:

- Never presume that your readers know what is being abbreviated.
- Never presume that your readers could write out the full phrase.

## Do Not Speak Latin

*Denuone Latine Loquebar?* Was I speaking Latin again? So many of us do — in abbreviation, of course, and often badly. Many common abbreviations derive from Latin, a language few study anymore. Most readers know that “AM” refers to morning, and “PM” to night (though the British may also hear “PM” as standing for “Prime Minister”). Few readers know, however, what the letters represent: *ante meridiem* (before midday) and *post meridiem* (after midday).

Now, most readers will not be confused by a reference to a business meeting scheduled for 10:00 AM. But many people will be stymied about setting their video recorder for a movie that starts at midnight: Should it be 12:00 AM or 12:00 PM? The answer: Midnight is 12:00 AM. But to avoid confusion, write or say 12:00 midnight or 12:00 noon. Better yet, use the 24-hour clock, as the US Military and most other cultures do.



Similarly, most readers do not know what “i.e.” and “e.g.” stand for, even though many will venture that one means “that is” and the other means “for example.” And even those who know which is which cannot tell you the Latin phrases they abbreviate (*id est*, of course, and *exempli gratia*). We won't even talk about the abuses of *et al.*, *n.b.*, *etc.*, *ad infinitum*, *ad nauseam*.

In short, do not abbreviate foreign words for English-speaking readers. Do not abbreviate Latin words unless you are writing for the Vatican. It's so very *infra dig.*

## What Good Writers Should Do

Writers who want their readers to understand their ideas will follow these guidelines for using abbreviations.

### ■ Consider Your Audience

If you are writing for the American public, do not abbreviate unless the abbreviation is in common parlance and use caution even then.

If you are writing for your organization or your profession, do not abbreviate unless the abbreviation is in *the common parlance of your organization or profession*.

If you have to add a “list of abbreviations and acronyms used in this report” page, then *clearly* the abbreviations and acronyms are *not* in the common parlance of your organization or profession.

If you are writing for the international public, do not abbreviate at all unless the letters are the legal name of the entity or the only commonly understood word for the person, place, thing, or idea.

There are few reader-friendly uses for abbreviations, yet some abbreviations are so conventional that they may be the best way to express the idea:

#### **Usage Note**

*Abbreviations are dropping their periods: “Mon.” becomes “MON,” “Ph.D.” becomes “PhD.” As a dreadful typist, I can only applaud this trend. As a reader, I am happy to skip those extra dots.*

- **Legal names or trademarks:** ATT, IBM, or GE, for example
- **Names and places commonly abbreviated,** such as St Joseph, MO
- **Professional and social titles,** such as Dr and Mrs
- **Days, months, and time signifiers,** such as MON, AUG, and BCE (for American audiences)
- **Scientific Terms** (used with carefully defined audiences)  
Abbreviations can shrink bulky terminology in writing and in speech. “Potential of hydrogen” is a mouthful; pH trips lightly off the tongue. TNT is much easier to say than trinitrotoluene. DNA may be difficult to understand, but try pronouncing deoxyribonucleic acid quickly.
- **Internet terms** — but only when you are on the net, know your audience, and have no other choice



read WOTPOWTAIP and that the point has been adequately made about using initials to abbreviate.)

Some long phrases resist this method. Environmental Safety and Health comes to mind. All of its words are key words.

But most long phrases can be shortened to their key words or used less often in full. Instead of abbreviating Manzano Major Laboratory, for example, to MML, you can shorten it to Manzano Lab, or to just Manzano.

### Use the Tools

Automate the process of spelling out acronyms with your word processor. Remember: “Auto-correct” features, macros, and other time- and keystroke-saving devices mean that the task of replacing initials with complete phrases is reduced to a few easy steps. The variables feature in Framemaker will help its users save entry time.

## 6: Living Happily without Acronyms

Do these rules mean more work for the writer and editor? Of course they do! But in this day when we all say we strive to serve our customers and produce quality products and achieve that evanescent goal of excellence, what is a little more work?

Let us recall with Dr. Johnson that “what is written without effort is read without pleasure” — and without understanding. And we would do still better to remember what Shakespeare (Will, not Earl) once observed:

Who understands thee not, loves thee not.

## 7: Resources and Acknowledgments

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*The Chicago Manual of Style*, 15th edition. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003. The introduction to Chapter 15, “Abbreviations,” presents an excellent overview of use and style choices for acronyms, abbreviations, and initialisms.

An excellent 3-part article, by Diane F. Miller, on acronyms and initialisms was published during the winter of 1996 in *Intercom*, the monthly magazine of the [Society for Technical Communication](#).

### Sites on Acronyms

<http://www.acronymfinder.com>. Defines thousands of acronyms.

<http://foldoc.doc.ic.ac.uk/foldoc/index.html>. The “Free Online Dictionary Of Computing” is the ultimate resource for all those TLAs (Three Letter Acronyms).

<http://www.wordspy.com/index>. Much more than acronyms, Paul McFedries’s site reports on fads, neologisms, and other changes in our vocabulary.

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