

Bad Writing Can Get in Way of Good Government

Coaches Teach Workers To Drop Jargon, Communicate Clearly

By TOM BREEN

Dangling participles, misspellings, sentence fragments, butchered punctuation and generally confusing writing are causing increasing problems for the federal government.

Mike McClory, a longtime writing coach for government employees, said such problems afflict internal memorandums, reports, e-mail, vacancy announcements, regulations and most other government text.

McClory said disjointed writing and misuse of words that could produce negative connotations interfere with the government's mission. "Government cannot serve itself and the public effectively if people cannot communicate clearly through the written word," said McClory, director of the Write Smart program in Arlington, Va.

McClory has spent 20 years coaching government employees on the importance of clear and purposeful writing. He has taught writing to students from scores of government agencies, including the FBI, the Veterans Affairs and State departments, and the Marine Corps.

The Merit Systems Protection Board provides evidence of how poor writing can impair an agency's effectiveness. "Sloppy writing can quickly create an image of the government as unprofessional," the board said in an April report.

Lack of Training

Most government workers lack professional experience and training as writers and need help and guidance, McClory said.

Pam Hurley, a writing consultant like McClory, said government employees often do not realize how a poorly written report, or even an e-mail, can interfere with the government's mission and possibly hurt their careers. Hurley is particularly concerned about e-mail's negative influence on writing skills. "The problem with e-mail is that people see it as a conversation, but it is not," she said.

Hurley and McClory say poor writing can be found at every level of government. McClory pointed to an FBI report on crime statistics that included this burdensome paragraph: "While there are many influences which dictate the volume of crime occurring on our nation's street, the efficiency of law enforcement is an integral ingredient in combating the crime problem. It has long been accepted that greater citizen involvement in crime resistance is equally significant in diminishing lawlessness in our society."

How does McClory react to that paragraph? "It could have been reduced to one sentence: 'Efficient law enforcement and greater citizen involvement have helped reduce crime,'" he said. "People really need to start thinking more about clarity and eliminating long-winded sentences."

Generation Gap

Steve Kelman, a professor of public management at Harvard University's John F. Kennedy School of Government, also has concerns about writing weaknesses among younger people. He said he believes young people do not receive proper grammatical and syntactical foundations throughout their early school years.

"I never cease to be amazed at how poorly writing is being taught to young people these days," Kelman said. "I think these writing problems could present difficulties for government people down the road." The Kennedy School, which prepares people to work in virtually every layer of government, previously required students to study memo writing, but abandoned the classes because the "students didn't feel they needed it," Kelman said.

Dr. Philippa Smithy, a former Foreign Service employee, also worries about some "younger employees who have grown up in a culture that really does not encourage reading or literacy." However, Smithy, a former student of McClory who now edits grant proposals for the Montgomery County, Md., school system, sees signs of improvement because of greater attention to the problem.

This is a condensed version of the article. To request a copy of the complete article, send an e-mail to mharwood@federaltimes.com.