I'm John Sturtevant, and this is Say What?! A weekly podcast with quick tips to help you communicate clearly at work, at home, and everywhere else you go.

Welcome to Say What?! Episode 13

This week, we continue our series: Ten Quick Tips for Terrific Email

And today's Quick Tip is: ASAP? That's next week for me!

When we write, we use language that has meaning for us. We use certain words to describe our ideas to others.

But words are elusive and evolving. The meaning of a particular word often changes. Over time, by geographical location, or based on your reader's perspective.

And, you may not think about what happens after you click send.

Those words you wrote, now disguised as 1s and 0s, leave your outbox and fly mysteriously through the ether to arrive at your reader's inbox.

And there they sit. Waiting for your reader to interpret them.

And I don't mean your reader will translate the words from 1s and 0s into English, or the language you wrote them in.

I mean your reader will interpret them and give them a meaning your reader chooses. Which, may not be the one you intended.

ASAP for example. When is as soon as possible? When I want it, or when you have time to do it?

What day is next Friday? Is that tomorrow, or a week from tomorrow?

We toss vague phrases into our email and assume other people will give them the same definitions we do.

When I write please send me the updates as soon as possible, I may think that means you should send them to me before I get to the end of this sentence.

But for you, as soon as possible might mean you'll get around to it after you finish all the other work on your to-do list.

People interpret your words based on their own perspectives and their own priorities.

Now, if I were to write, please send me the updates by 11:00 o'clock this morning, there's a high probability you and I would interpret 11:00 o'clock this morning the same way.

If I write July 17th instead of next Friday, I can be fairly confident you and I agree on what day that is.

Or let's say I'm your manager and you know when I say as soon as possible, you should stop what you're doing, and focus on the task I requested.

So, using specifics like 11:00 o'clock instead of generalizations like as soon as possible will help you more accurately communicate your ideas to your reader.

I'm not saying vague words are bad and you should always avoid them. They're useful in certain ways.

For example, the word sometimes. I might write "we have staff meetings every Monday morning, and sometimes Robert brings bagels."

My goal there isn't to tell you precisely how many times a month Robert brings us bagels, just that it happens from time to time.

So vague words are useful when you simply want to communicate a general idea about something.

But when you do want your reader to learn a specific idea, use specific language.

And when I say language, I mean all of the symbols available to us – letters, numbers, charts & graphs – everything we use when we write.

If you're describing quantities, or percentages, or times, or dates, numbers do a better job of communicating those ideas for you.

Your reader will more quickly understand 78% if you use the numbers 7 and 8 and the percent sign, rather than if you write the words seven, eight, and percent.

Now, I know some grammar books and style guides have rules about when to use words instead of numbers. But that's a discussion for a future podcast.

Another way of thinking about using specific language is thinking about giving your reader context.

As I mentioned in a previous podcast – use specific language to give your reader the why, not just the what.

For example, a couple of years ago, I was running a series of workshops for a company.

A week or so before one workshop, my client sent an email saying
One of our participants needs all course material sent to her ahead of time so she can review it.

My assumption was the employee wanted to determine if it was worth her time to attend the class.

Not sure I liked that idea. Because just looking at the workbook and PowerPoint wouldn't give her much insight about attending the workshop.

She wouldn't listen to my presentation, participate in the discussions, hear people's comments, or have other in-class experiences. She'd get an incomplete picture of the workshop.

And so, I deemed it a somewhat annoying task and added it to my to-do list.

Where it sat for a few days, inching a bit farther toward the bottom of the list each day.

But in the back of my mind, I wondered why did she need the material? Why would she want to review it? What did she hope to accomplish?

So finally, I decided to ask my client those questions. And I learned the employee is sight impaired.

Ah, now had the context I needed! And it completely changed how I had interpreted the situation.

Now I knew why she wanted the material.

And I knew how to give it to her in a way that would be most useful for her.

Instead of sending her PDFs, I reformatted all the material so it was sight-reader compatible.

Plus, I was better prepared when she attended the workshop the following week. She ended up having a great time, and referred a few of her staff to attend a future class.

Context cleared my confusion and gave my reader a better experience.

So this week, as you craft your email, use words with intention, choose specifics over generalizations, and give your reader context – the why not just the what.

Who knows? You just might achieve clear writing sooner than you think.

That's Say What?! for this week. Thanks for listening!

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