

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 number 2. This week: What are your words worth?

Given the mandates restricting travel and social gathering, I am happily forced to spend more time at home, and with that comes the luxurious pleasure of more time to read.

Yesterday morning I read a George Orwell essay called Politics and the English Language. He begins it with this passage.

"Most people who bother with the matter at all would admit that the English language is in a bad way, and it is generally assumed that we cannot by conscious action, do anything about it. Our civilization is decadent, and our language must inevitably share in the general collapse."

Orwell goes on to describe the cause and effect of this decline, how sloppy language incites careless thinking, and that, in turn, produces reckless language. And so on it goes getting progressively worse with each passing decade.

But his essay soon shifts to an optimistic gear as he invites us to consider how we can reverse this pattern of decline. And I like that way of thinking.

You know, I don't believe we're subjects to our language, but rather, I believe we are kings and queens of our linguistic domains. In my writing workshops, we talk about this idea in several ways.

One idea we explore is to use words with intention. And when I say words, I mean all of the symbols we use in writing letters, numbers, illustrations, graphics, even Emojis. In fact, a few months ago I read an article about how emojis are the fastest growing language in the world. The author talks about how, because those pictures look the same in Seattle as they

do in Singapore, emojis have become sort of a digital Esperanto. You'll find a link to that article here: <https://www.sturtevant.com/podcast/>

So one aspect of using words with intention is that writing is not a process of filling up space, and it's not a process of keeping everything short. Rather writing is you giving your reader what your reader needs to understand your topic, or make a decision, or take action of some type.

You know, I don't share the belief that acronyms and jargon and slang are inherently wrong to use. In fact, they're often exactly the right things to use, depending on your reader and your purpose.

Think of this analogy - we are all chefs and language is the ingredients we use. And we have a nearly infinite assortment of words available to us - those ingredients, and they're all free!

I wouldn't add garlic to my chocolate chip cookie recipe. I would use my ingredients with intention. But last night I did add some garlic to my wife's amazing white wine and butter broth for the poached salmon we made, and it was delicious.

Using words with intention means thinking about your reader, thinking about what you want, your reader to learn, and then using words that help you achieve that goal and avoiding words that don't help you achieve that goal.

I would happily use slang and emojis when I text with my 21 year old son, but I wouldn't use those words when I write an email to, let's say, a V P at one of my client companies.

Thinking about your reader and using words with intention also means considering the level of understanding your reader has about your topic. So maybe you're a hydro geologist and your reader is, a manager with a background in operations or finance. He probably won't know all the terminology you know. So part of your job when you write, might be to interpret or translate your words, into words that he knows.

I'm not talking about dumbing it down. I'm not talking about keeping it simple, stupid. I don't agree with those misguided pieces of advice.

Instead, I like to think of it this way. Imagine you're walking side by side with your reader and you see something and you're directing your reader to see it, too. As if you're pointing out a funny-looking cloud, or unusual bird, or a beautiful flower, something useful and interesting and relevant to your reader.

If you think of writing this way - of using words with intention, it can actually make your writing easier.

Your goal is to help your reader recognize something they'd be able to see if they were looking in the right place.

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

The music on today's episode is from guitarist Robbie Sturtevant. His band, The Quins, are one of the hottest new groups coming out of Boston. Check them out at <https://www.thequinsband.com/> and on Facebook and Instagram @thequins.