

Hip to the jargon

Every profession, occupation or group has its own buzz words, slang, doublespeak, and techno-talk, which are all forms of jargon. Some common forms of jargon appear in sports, politics, banking, medicine, military, law and science to name a few groups. You can recognize jargon when someone uses specialized words, phrases, acronyms, and expressions when writing or talking to others.

An example of doublespeak occurs when someone refers to a garbage collector as a sanitation engineer to make the job sound more important. Computer technicians may use the term URL when they really mean Web address. The sport of baseball provides a wealth of jargon. Who hasn't used "ballpark figure" when asking for a quote or "keep your eye on the ball" to advise someone to concentrate on an object or task?

In a positive light, jargon is a type of professional shorthand. It is used out of convenience or need to be specific on a subject rather than intending to deceive others. The use of jargon within specific groups actually helps promote clear, concise, and accurate dialog between members.

Some benefits of jargon include the following:

- A way for groups to have their own language
- Give one a sense of belonging to a specific group
- Make it easier to communicate with fellow employees or friends
- Show expertise in a field

Jargon gets a bad name when persons who are outside of a specific group do not have a common understanding of the terminology. In these instances, using jargon diminishes the effectiveness of communication and can have the following effects:

- Creates a negative impression
- People tune you out
- Creates barriers within and outside of groups as term meanings evolve
- Becomes a crutch
- Shows lack of respect for listeners and readers
- Prevents people from understanding your concepts and meanings

There are times when you need to use jargon and there are times when it is better to leave your jargon at home. The following points will help you understand the appropriate times to use jargon:

A. When to use jargon:

- When communicating with those who understand it
- When it helps convey specialist information

B. When not to use

- In conversations with people who cannot understand it
- When you don't know the true meaning of the jargon terms

What you can do to increase understanding:

- Use plain English
- Explain what the words mean

Jargon, when used appropriately, can be effective to the delivery of your message. If used incorrectly, jargon can undermine your message and alienate your audience.

About the author

Bill Janke has extensive experience in writing for print and electronic media. His work has appeared in materials for training, documentation, marketing, advertising, and public relations. He works as a technical writer and instructional designer for WAUSAU Financial Systems, Inc. in Omaha, Nebraska. He also enjoys photography and sells his work at art fairs. You may contact Bill at billjanke@gmail.com.

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