

NEED CLARITY BE TEDIOUS ?

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We all know that one of the precepts of good specification writing is clarity-- clearly stated information or requirements.

But have we all, at times, been tempted to or even fallen into the trap of, thinking we had to be so squeaky clear that we became tedious--and those icky attributes like redundant, nauseating, and overbearing. Yet more than likely we "went astray" for what we felt were good reasons.

Having been in both specification writing and code administration, I have been exposed to some "battles" over words--and most of them involved attorneys (the masters of the twisted phrase or word; those known for making something out of nothing, or nothing out of something). Ever been there? For the most part, no fun!

For example-- I had a lawsuit as a building code official, where the code said, ".....has the authority, if deemed necessary to inspect the premises prior to issuance of the permit....."
Now what does that mean to you?

The idea that we tried to convey was that where the submitted documents (for plan review) were murky or incomplete, we (code folks) has the discretionary authority to go onto the site, and inspect the indistinct areas, so we could better understand the problems. For the most part, this was authority unused.

Now both our department and the legal counsel for the jurisdiction went over this language. BUT in the lawsuit, this provision was turned around so the other side claimed that our department "had a mandate to go on the site, prior to permit issuance, and inspect that site for ALL hazards and provide a list of same to the owner/applicant"!!!!

Hot doggies!!!!

Long story short, the case was settled for \$28,000 in lieu of an award of the requested \$5 million, but still our legal counsel came back and wanted us to re-word the provision "to more clearly set out the authority and intent of the provision".

The point of all this? Say what you mean, in the least number of words that convey your thought; do so in words that are in common use and well recognized by, let's say, a high school graduate; use distinct and graphic words (you do know some other than the usual profanity, don't you)--and I'll even venture into No-No land, repeat the wording WHEN you feel it is important and necessary. Don't you dare assume the "other readers" will get your gist at first reading!

Chances are your writing skills are first-rate, but please, adjust to the situation--and be aware that the contracting and supplying folks will twist, to their advantage, anything we give them an opening to "mess with"-- even to turning things 180-degrees.

Example: Contractor claimed he didn't have to supply glycol for the entire system (specs mute there) but only for the equipment. BUT the specs called for him to energize and test the "system" and that did require a full supply of glycol through out the entire system.

See what I mean?

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We must always remember that good communications, between message sender and message recipient needs to be in a commonly understood format and form. It is useless to convey information that the receiver/user cannot make direct and prompt use of. This principle applies to all specifications writers no matter their years of experience or their perspective; to both professionals and industry specifiers.

Clarity is not a matter of volume, convolution, or clever turns-of-phrase. Rather it is direct, simply (ah ha, a new attribute that perhaps we should add to the four C's!!!) We need to place ourselves in our readers and end users position; their mindset; their educational level; their perspective; and their need for information. Specifications often need to be instructional in addition to descriptive and legally astute.

This is obviously another place or opportunity for CSI to reach out, and investigate. What, for example, is the big "rub" between contractors and our documents? We are not here to make things easy, but we can facilitate easier with required. We need to remove or adjust things that appear to be "hidden", needlessly convoluted or punitive.

It is well and good to measure our work against CSI standards and principles, but we must remember that the truest test is how easily our work is read, understood, assimilated, and used, not by our clients, but by the contractors our clients hire. We need to remember that we should be reacting to changes in the field (with our end-users) and we need to quit making unilateral assumptions of what is right and proper.

Whether we specify for use or information (in the case of the industry specifiers) we ever need to preen out information that only convolutes or muddies up good specifications. The end-users do NOT need all we know about the product (true for both professional and industry people). They need to know things like where the material or systems is available, who makes, it, how to install its, how to make it work properly, etc.

Clear/Concise/Complete/Correct are great guide lines. But we submit that these attributes need to be adjusted to the end-users' needs. And we suggest they can be enhanced by adding DIRECT and SIMPLIFIED. In this, we don't quibble over concise and simplify, since specs can (and should) be both. But to make concise does not necessarily mean to make simple. Direct is not necessarily clarity if we say the wrong things.

As a one-liner--we may need to re-assess our own goals and what our products do and don't do.

We're good!

We can (and should) get better!

We need to be aware of, and interface with, others to ascertain their input and views of our work; and adjust commensurately--as mutually agreed!!!

See what I mean?