"Simply" Isn't So Simple

Submitted by Dave Young

I'm a do-it-yourselfer, and I've followed a lot of instructions for everything from mixing concrete to baking bread (and, sometimes for baking bread that was more like concrete-but that's another story). As a writer and editor, I've written a lot of instructions. Along the way to becoming what I am, I've become sensitized to several words and expressions. When I read them, an alarm sounds in my head.

"Various" is a word that can usually be omitted. "Towards" and "toward" mean the same thing (opt for the simpler term). And "if" should be paired with "then" while "whether" should be paired with "or not" are just a few examples of my internal alarms.

But I think the one that simply beats all is "simply." Years ago I read a recipe that said "Simply boil a few eggs…" I spent several years (I'm not kidding!) reading cookbooks and asking other cooks how to "simply" do that. Ask me sometime and I'll share the secret of how to consistently hard-boil eggs without getting that greenish-grey coating around the yolk. But I digress.

An author who writes "simply (do this)" assumes a lot of the reader. Those assumptions may be true, but more likely are not true. It may be simple for the author (who, we presume, knows how to do the task) but the reader may be completely ignorant. It's always better to assume that your reader is a novice and that you must explain the "simple" stuff too.

Some things sound so easy. I recently heard a speaker say "There are thousands of templates for tri-fold brochures available on line. Simply pick out the one that suits your needs and fill in the blanks." (The term "tri-fold" was coined by the person who chose "WWW" for Worldwide Web [two Ws]. A tri-fold brochure is a sheet of paper with two folds.)

So there you are with "thousands" of templates and you're supposed to "simply" choose the most appropriate one. Well, how do you know what's appropriate if you're new to brochure design? Why are there thousands of templates out there? Is it because there are thousands of opinions of what's appropriate? If you have no track record, how do you choose?

You'll need to know several things to make such a choice. Just what are your needs? What is the objective of your brochure (menu of services, promoting a sale, introducing your company, driving people to your web site, …). How will it be used (printed and mailed, used as a leave-behind at interviews, mailed on request, placed in a rack at conferences, …) Will you use relevant graphics (not just "decorative" clip-art that doesn't help achieve your brochure's objective. And, how will you recognize an "effective" brochure when you see one? These and many more questions will pop up as you "simply choose an appropriate template." After you "simply" design your brochure,

you may wish to "simply" design your own web site. There are thousands of templates on the web.

About 40 years ago I worked as a writer at Kodak. I was also "moonlighting" doing artwork and typesetting for local offset printers. After being asked to "simply" design flyers for several printing customers I got curious how "real" artists went about "simply designing" flyers, so I found some free time and visited several in-house art shops at Kodak. I asked "What process do you use to design flyers?" I was amazed to find that they didn't really know how to explain what they did. However, I was able to piece together a few clues.

First the artists would meet with the "customer" and ask what the flyer was to be used for (set the objective, such as "come to our bowling tournament"). Then they'd gather the facts (time, date, location, fees, etc.). That's the easy part.

Putting the facts on a page in an eye-arresting, motivating display was based on a mental search of having seen and designed hundreds of flyers and a physical search of a "clip file." In other words, the artist had been doing years of "research" about what catches the eye, appropriate use of type faces and sizes, organization of information, choice of color, etc. Some had kept files of examples gathered over several years.

Research is the step most novices overlook. It's the "simply" part. And, this is why I often say to people, "Why not have a professional do that for you-and be sure to choose a professional who's been in business for 20 or more years. That experience is what you're buying.

As consultants we assume our clients will recognize the need to hire us professionals, but we fail to see that we too need to get help with things that appear simple.