

The GRUMPY WRITER'S GRUMPS

...COMPLAINING FOR COMPLAINING'S SAKE...

What if I didn't see?

I was preparing for one of my classes the other day—Managerial Oral Communication—and I decided to revisit some videos from past sessions to see if there was anything specific I should address. There was one video in which one of my students, while giving a five-minute speech, used the phrase “If we see” about 25 times, an average of once every 12 seconds.

Here are a few examples of how the phrase might be used:

- * Here, if we see that Customer A wants to purchase two units of widgets. . .
- * If we see the infant mortality rate in this village, it is 15%.
- * If we see the cropping pattern, paddy is grown in most of the cultivable land in this district.

The way it is used reminds me of the overuse of “like” in US English (well, California English in particular). It is essentially a placeholder, or an opportunity for presenters to organize their ideas (although, as any presenting or speech coach will tell you, this method of pacing your speech sounds really amateurish).

OK. Fine. When we speak, we sometimes need to buy some time, and long pauses can be awkward for everyone. But why would you put this in writing?

“Aw. Come on!” you say. “You don’t really see this in writing.”

Except that I do. . . quite often, actually. Sometimes, the samples are similar to the ones I’ve already pointed out, but more often, I find it being used like “If we see Table 1, this presents data about. . .”

So, what if I didn't see?

Well, if I didn't see, that would be somewhat horrible. But if my students realized what they were doing to my eyes, then I might get to observe more streamlined writing and speaking. I could simply read “Table 1 presents” (3 words instead of 7) or hear “The infant mortality rate in this village is 5%” (9 words instead of 13). Perhaps, if they saw what I see, the work delivered to me would be more concise and effective.

An aside. . .

I've written in the past about my policy about not grumping about spoken English and instead, focusing on what I can actually observe in writing or what crosses over from spoken English into written English. This week's example, fortunately, doesn't apply to everyone, the same way that not everyone in California says “like” when they are speaking.

Also fortunate is that the frequency of use in writing is much lower than what you will hear in speech—particularly lower than what you'll likely hear at a presentation in India. I would estimate that for those who use the expression while writing, the frequency is about once every 800 to 1,000 words (once every three or four pages). The frequency does tend to vary according to the number of tables or charts in the report though, matching with my observed standard usage of the phrase.

So, how do you correct this vision problem? See Issue 4 of the Grumpy Writer's Grumps for hints about establishing personal stylesheets. . . .

Mr. Grumpy



Don't always write what you say #3