

Avoid Alphabet Soup

By Philippa Anderson, CTM

Use words rather than letters to get your message across.

At a recent charity conference I was looking forward to a speech on children's health issues in the third world. Within a minute of the start, I was frankly bored with references to NGOs, USAID, WHO and MMR. This alphabet soup may have been palatable for some, but for most it was simply indigestible.

Acronyms are creeping into everyday language at an alarming pace. But they have little place in a speech – or do they? When is it acceptable to use them and when not? And is there a difference between acronyms and abbreviations?

An acronym is a string of letters from a phrase or title that together pronounce a word – such as KISS (Keep It Simple Stupid) and AWOL (Absent Without Leave). Initialism is using the first letters of words – as in UK or USA. An abbreviation is something completely different – such as *auto* for automatic or *demo* for demonstration.

Frankly I am not bothered with semantics. I am concerned that as Toastmasters we ensure that, whether it's an acronym, initialism or abbreviation, every member of the audience can understand the message.

Part of the problem is that because so many "short-forms" have become words in their own right, we assume that everyone will get the message. After all, we live in a world where people talk in letters rather

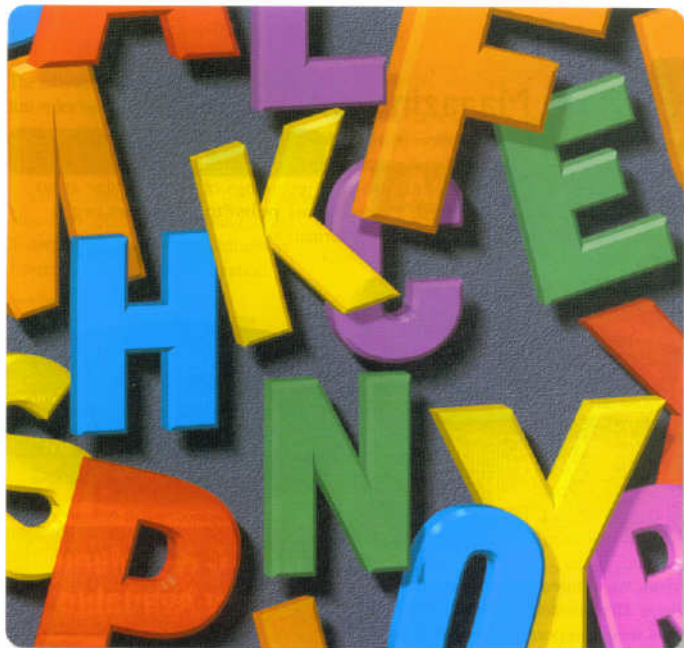
than words. Consider this recent phone conversation with a teenage girl. When questioned about her plans for the evening, she replied: "It's OK, Mom, we're just going to eat BLTs while we watch a DVD or listen to CDs, probably REM, U2 or UB40. Must go. TTFN" (that's "Ta-ta for now").

Just because we know what we are talking about doesn't mean that others do!

I'll give you an example. At a recent corporate event, the CEO (sorry, that's Chief Executive Officer) said: "CSR is part of our DNA." Should he have said: "Corporate social responsibility is part of our deoxyribonucleic acid?" With or without acronyms, his meaning was unclear – particularly as he had just referenced GM (genetically modified) ingredients in the company's foods. (It's my belief that non-scientists could confuse GM and DNA based on a sign I saw in a UK shop "Our tomatoes do not contain any DNA!") What he might have said is: "Corporate social responsibility is ingrained in everything we do." That is a clear statement with no confusion.

Since WWII (World War Two), the use of short forms has spread PDQ (Pretty Darn Quick). The U.S. Army seems to be where it all started. And now every organization seems to have its own *lingua franca*. Change jobs and you may find you need a guide to the local language.

Indeed there is so much competition for employees' attention that



agencies devise clever catchy acronyms for everything from a company's values to its programs. I recently encountered a Go *MAD* initiative, for example. Once I understood it stood for "Go Make a Difference," it made sense. Some acronyms, like this one, and SMART objectives, for example, fit well with the intended meaning but still require explanation.

Why is there this drive for clipped communication? Many things are fueling the change: increased literacy, a plethora of printed material, quickening pace of communication, less formal approach to talking and writing, the need for a "shorthand" to describe increasing complexity in organizations and technology – and, of course, text messaging, e-mails and the Internet. It's 21st century-speak.

Cyber language itself is evolving – from FAQs (Frequently Asked Questions) to HTTP (Hyper-Text Transfer Protocol). Many of these terms will simply become accepted words in their own right, just as

laser (Light Amplification by Stimulated Emission of Radiation) and *quango* (Quasi-Autonomous Non-Governmental Organization) have become. The important thing for us as speakers, however, is to note that although the Internet is "virtual," it is nevertheless mainly

words. When we give a Toastmasters speech, people don't have the visual recognition, or their own time, to work out what an acronym means. If you use an abbreviation or acronym that people do not understand, you may lose them not only for a few seconds, but for the whole speech.

So if you are giving a speech without visual aids or handouts, I recommend avoiding acronyms, initialisms or abbreviations altogether – simply say the words in full. There are a number of exceptions:

- Initialisms or acronyms that are widely understood such as GMT or NATO
- Well-known expressions that have become common parlance, such as ASAP (As Soon As Possible) – you could check to see if the expression is listed in a dictionary.
- Where you know your audience and their level of understanding well, so that spelling out meanings might be seen as patronizing. An example would be a presentation to a specialist team at work or college. If in doubt, you could spell out the word the first time (as you would in a written article) and thereafter use the short form.

Even these guidelines don't hold up when you consider an international audience. Why should we expect a non-English speaker to understand such idioms if native speakers often need translation? And at Toastmasters we are as guilty as any. How often have you heard references to CTM and DTM without an explanation for visitors? So beware:

"Words are, of course, the most powerful drug used by mankind." – RUDYARD KIPLING

Your club may be thinking of setting up a TAC (Toastmasters Acronym Counter)! **T**

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