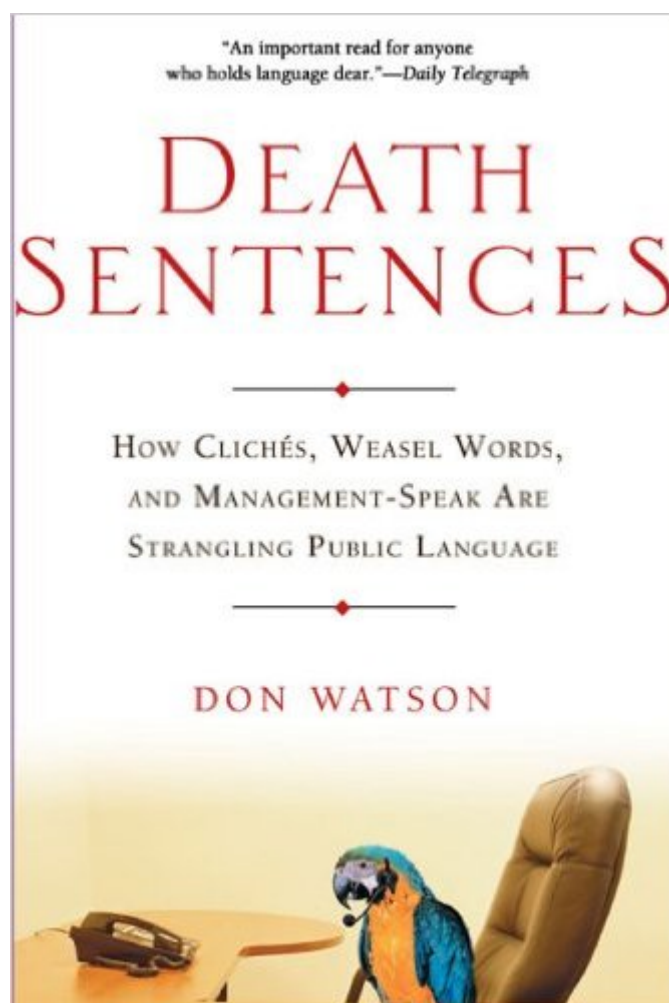


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Death Sentences: How Cliches, Weasel Words And Management-Speak Are Strangling Public Language



Synopsis

A brilliant and scathing polemic about the sorry state of the English Language and what we can and must do about it. When was the last time you heard a politician use words that rang with truth and meaning? Do your eyes glaze over when you read a letter from your bank or insurance company addressing you as a valued customer? Does your mind shut down when your employer starts talking about making a commitment going forward or enhancing your key competencies? Are you enervated by in terms of, irritated by impactful, infuriated by downsizing, rightsizing, decruiting, and dejobbing? Does business process re-engineering and attriting fail to give you ramp-up in terms of your personal lifestyle? Today's corporations, news media, education departments and, perhaps most troubling, politicians speak to us and to each other in clichéd, impenetrable, lifeless babble. Toni Morrison has called it the "disabled and disabling" language of the powerful, "evacuated language," and "dead language." Orwell called it "anesthetic" language. In *Death Sentences*, Don Watson takes up the fight against it: the pestilence of bullet points, the dearth of verbs, the buzzwords, the weasel words and cant, the Newspeak of a kind Orwell could not have imagined. Published in Australia in November 2003, *Death Sentences* gained a massive following among the legions of bright, sensitive people who Could Not Take It Anymore. More than a year later, it remains a national bestseller.

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Customer Reviews

Nothing should be easier than to agree with than a book that takes exactly the same position on a

subject dear to my heart--writing clearly and succinctly. Yet "Death Sentences," which does a good job of trotting out a shoebox full of mangled bureaucratese, only shows why clear writing is not the same as clear thinking. Australian writer/intellectual Don Watson's work starts sanguinely enough. He lists scores of examples of the deadening incomprehensible corporate-speak, military-speak and advertising-speak. "Employment outcomes," "quality participation opportunities," and "major change drivers," are just some of the oleaginous verbal slop thickly slathered on as mission statements, empowerment manifestos, or the proclamation of multicultural diversity. At the beginning of the book I felt myself nodding in agreement with the many examples of the problem, a problem that not only offends sensibilities (of requiring writing to be understood), but which seems almost designed to conceal meaning. Yet, after 40 pages of examples interspersed with homilies, I began to experience a sense of uneasiness. O.K., professional writing is going down the tubes; now what? By 60 pages I became impatient. Yes, much corporate-speak is abominable; what's next? Why, other than being ugly, is this bad? And is there a cure? Well, there was nothing next--only another 120 pages of more of the same. No indication of the extent of the problem. No explication of any actual harm. And no cure was mooted. The only change of cadence was a lurch into a series of anti-Bush barbs, as if he were the only American politician who ever mangled the English language.

Don Watson, *Death Sentences: How Clichés, Weasel Words, and Management-speak Are Strangling Public Language* (Gotham, 2005) Are you sick of the idiocy that seems to be inherent in mission statements? Have you ever attempted to read a book of laws--the rules by which we are all supposed to live in this country--and given up in utter frustration at your inability to understand any word other than "the"? Do you wonder why no one's said anything original in a TV commercial in decades (assuming you don't simply record everything and fast-forward through the commercials, as I've been doing for years)? In that case, Australian curmudgeon Don Watson's rant on the dumbing down of the English language is right up your alley. I tend to like my grammar books replete with footnotes and diagrams, but Watson is pointing out features of the modern language that don't require them; it's easy to find a plethora of examples of everything he attacks by just looking around us. Open up a company's annual report, or just look at the polished bronze plaque with the company's mission statement on the wall, and you've got examples out the wazoo. And lord help you if you attempt to read some of the crap that gets introduced in Congress. (Given that no one in Congress actually reads the legislation they vote on, which is common knowledge these days, you have to wonder--who's writing the stuff? No, I don't know either.) It all makes Watson (whose government, it seems, is as awful as ours when it comes to this stuff) want to beat his head against

something pointed, and I have to agree with him. Given the book's bestseller status, I'm not the only one by a longshot.

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