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## How To Make Sure You Say What You Really Mean

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*by Julie Gallagher*

We've all heard the old saying, "Sticks and stones can break my bones, but words can never hurt me." Don't you believe it. Words are powerful, and they *can* hurt – a lot. In fact, if you're not careful, you can even hurt yourself, by using the wrong word in your writing.

Recently a friend sent me a copy of an e-mail she received from the customer service department of her credit card company, after she contacted them with a question about her account. She was thrilled with their positive response. But as I read the e-mail, one line jumped out at me: "In lieu of good customer service..." the sentence began.

Did they really mean they were offering her a few extra reward points *instead of* good customer service? I doubt it. More likely, what the customer service department meant to say was, "Because good customer service is important to us..." followed by the details of what they were doing to make sure she remained a happy customer.

So why didn't the writer say that? I can only guess that perhaps the writer liked the phrase "in lieu of", thought it sounded fancier than saying "because", and so used it – without bothering to confirm the true meaning.

Have you ever done that? Tried to impress others with a big word, only to find out you'd used the word incorrectly? Counterproductive, isn't it? You may impress people all right, but it's not the impression you were going for.

How bad can it be, you ask?

Bad enough. When you use the wrong word:

- you deliver the wrong message. In some cases, you might be saying the opposite of what you intended.
- you damage trust. If you make careless errors in your writing, your client can't help but wonder how many mistakes you're making when you perform your service or create your product.
- you make yourself look unprofessional. Some mistakes can brand you – undeservedly – as an amateur. It makes sense to ensure that everything the public sees from your company adheres to the highest professional standards of quality and accuracy.

So, how do you avoid mistakes like this?

1. Proofread everything. If at all possible, have at least one other person look over your work, as well. Even the best writer can miss something.
2. If you're not sure, look it up. The spell-check on your computer can only tell you if a word is spelled correctly, not if it's the right word for the context. Keep an old-fashioned dictionary handy.

When you write, remember to choose your words carefully. People may still disagree with what you say, but they won't be able to dismiss you because you made careless mistakes in how you said it.

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