

Fat and Skinny Words: Levels of Abstraction by Patricia Fripp, CSP, CPAE

Nothing can turn your audience or prospect off faster than using fat words when they're hungry for skinny ones. Or vice versa. I learned this exciting concept from Dr. David Palmer, a Silicon Valley negotiations expert. In his talks on negotiations, he describes "levels of abstraction." Unless you can match your message to the expectations of your audience, or talk at the same level at which they are listening, you won't connect as well as you would like to. This is true whether your audience is one person or one thousand.

Suppose you write the word "automobile" on a pad. A simple concept. Going up to the next level of abstraction, you could write above it that the car is a "wheeled passenger vehicle," then "surface transportation," then "major force in the world's economy." This is making the word "automobile" fatter and fatter, larger and larger. These big ideas and abstractions are "fat words." They are great for conveying the big picture, inspiring ideas, motivating.

Now, let's make the word skinnier. Underneath, you might write "sedan," "Ford sedan," "red four-door Ford sedan." Eventually, you would be talking about a specific car. Those are "skinny" words. They are essential for conveying instructions and solving technical problems. No one holding a screwdriver, camera, or with a blank screen on their computer wants "fat" words. You'll just frustrate them, maybe make them furious. They want to know minute details and specific who, what, when, how.

Many of my clients hire me to coach their sales teams. After giving them the automobile illustration, they learn to be more effective by evaluating each other by saying, "your words are too fat" or "those words aren't skinny enough." "When you are presenting a sales overview to an executive or senior management," I ask, "Should your words get fatter or skinnier?"

Upper management needs fat words. After a successful initial interview with an executive, you will be invited to present your offerings to a middle management team. For this group, your ideas need to be brought down the level of abstraction by using "skinner words and phrases."

Let's assume you were very effective and persuasive. You made the sale. Now you are dealing with the individuals that make the technology work. That is when the words and phrases need to get "skinny." The who, what, how, where do I turn it on?

At what level should you present your information so that you get your message across? It all depends on the audience.

As a professional speaker and trainer I ask my clients, "What do you want the theme of my remarks to be? What is the purpose of the meeting?" For years I have been hearing, "Get them to sell more," or "Motivate them." My reply would be, "How much are they selling now? How much more?" or "Motivate them to do what?"

Can you see the challenge? Their words are too fat for me to get a clear picture of how to meet and exceed their expectations. With my questioning I need to drive their comments and expectations down the level of abstraction by saying things like, "Can you help me understand specifically what you mean by that?"