

The Power of Monosyllables

Although the general tendency of authors and lecturers is to try to impress the listener with long polysyllabic words, sometimes the most effective words are short, monosyllabic interjections with power to completely alter the course of a conversation. From childhood, English-speaking individuals learn that the pug-nacious use of the word "so?" properly intoned, carries all the derision and disdain possible within two letters. Coupled with another monosyllable to become "so what?" the pair question any credibility that might have been theretofore established.

I have observed that the word "oh?" uttered with fixed gaze and uplifted eyelids quietly and unmistakably implies total disbelief of whatever preceded that terse response. No disparaging remarks, no direct accusation; merely the briefest of messages, coupled with body language, conveys paragraphs of doubt. Similarly, the simple word "what" uttered with tones slightly higher than the normal speaking range, a slightly increased volume, and coupled with a grimace, can shatter any hope of compatibility of concept and implies that the one to whom the comment was directed must have diminished mental capacity.

Even the novice journalist understands that the basis for accurate reporting is the establishment and re-counting of who, what, where, and when. These are the simple, direct, single-syllable guidelines for factual reporting.

These simple words challenge the Mary Poppins' wisdom of slipping such a word as supercalafragilisticexpialidocious into a conversation to give the illusion of erudition. No, as impressive to their user as polysyllables might be, true scholastic expression is conveyed through much briefer words. In fact, the acquisition of knowledge often begins with that simple yet profound word "why." This one word has probably done more to advance science and initiate active investigation than any other single word.

If one were to truly use the power of this simple word, it would be seen that it can shatter the calm course of daily life. I challenge the reader, for just one day, to question every action—from the moment the mind is first engaged in the morning, throughout the entire waking period. It will quickly be apparent that most of us stumble into a routine of rote repetition, dictated more by habit than by rational behavior. "Why" has the power to restore some more logical course to our daily regimen as it exposes our unwitting lapse into repetitive living. It opens the door to change by exposing the absence of logic.

"Why" is the fuel that powers the scientific engine,

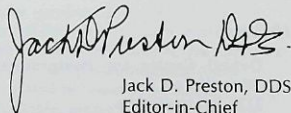
challenges the greatest of minds, and stirs productive cerebration in the observing user. Since man has walked the earth, the falling of objects was noticed, but it took the question of "why" to explore the force of gravity and its influence on the universe. "Why" challenges irrational authority and enables social change. "Why" is the simple basis for much of the progress civilization has made, and it is through the need to answer the questions raised by that one word that another monosyllable has evolved—"how."

The need to resolve the question "why" and evoke action moves us from the realm of the philosophical "why" to the productive activity of creation. "How?" stirs the creative juices of the inventor, the complex formulations of the mathematician, and the intricate manipulations of the craftsman.

"How" causes the mind to pursue tortuous maneuvers seeking to resolve the questions raised by the answers to "why." In fact, this is really how progress has been made in the exponential fashion we have witnessed. As one question is answered, others are raised and greater ignorance is exposed through increasing wisdom. The constant need to question and to resolve those questions is the generator of progress. Man's need to question even that which appears to be obvious and then to determine how the desired result might be accomplished is the basis for achievement and advancement.

Of course, the rate of progress is often mediated by the third part of this triad, "when." The need for expeditious accomplishment hastens fruition from what might have remained merely a cerebral exercise. "When" is often the motivation for the economic implementation of creative thought. It adds priority to action and filters out extraneous deviations. The harmonious sequential functioning of these three words is simplistically beautiful. From initiation to fulfillment, why, how, and when symbolize progress and epitomize accomplishment.

As new polysyllabic terms are derived from our ultratechnical progress, every investigator and every reader might do well to recognize the need to revert to the beautiful simplicity of why, how, and when. Truly, these three monosyllables are the demonstration that sometimes, less is more.



Jack D. Preston, DDS
Editor-in-Chief

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