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**IEP Meetings: Like a Box of Chocolates**  
"Ya never know what you're gonna get"

Sponsored by INCIIID, Inc.  
Brice Palmer, Speaker

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Introduction

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Click to listen then right-click on the icon to enlarge the screen.

## “I try and I try and I try but. . .”

Finally, when you get a copy Of the IEP, you are worn down by the “SERIAL” IEP meetings.

What can you do about it?

Pay VERY close attention to the words that overshadow just about everything else in Special Education today!

What is robbing educational benefit. . . ?

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“My momma always said, life is like a box of chocolates. You never know what you're gonna get.” Forrest Gump:

Isn't the “You never know what you're gonna get” feeling what you have when you finish the annual review, go through several draft versions, and the district gives you the final IEP—and asks you to approve it?

When you do get a copy of the final IEP you're worn down. In one-way or another the whole meeting routine became less about your child and more about personalities and the school district. An onlooker might describe the serial IEP meetings for the annual review as an old fashioned goat roping contest.

Are the present levels and the annual goals so elastic that explaining them after the fact in ways to explain away how the district implemented them?  
They aren't, you say?

I am shocked.  
What can you do about it?  
Tah-dah . . . .

Pay close attention to the words that overshadow just about everything in special education. Special Education today is a huge industry. It is so big and so complicated that "pieces" and jargon of special education robs the educational benefit from our student's education. In fact it is so huge and so complicated that you say –

***I Can't Get No (Satisfaction)***  
***By The Rolling Stones***

I can't get no satisfaction, I can't get no satisfaction  
'Cause I try and I try and I try and I try  
I can't get no, I can't get no  
When I'm drivin' in my car, and the man come on the radio  
He's tellin' me more and more about some useless information  
Supposed to fire my imagination  
I can't get no, oh, no, no, no, hey, hey, hey  
That's what I say  
I can't get no satisfaction, I can't get no satisfaction  
'Cause I try and I try and I try and I try [1]

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## Educational Jargon or IEP “Baffle-Gab”

IEP meetings are FULL of “squishy” language and buzzword jargon.

Like “Alice in Wonderland” the language  
*“It seems to be very pretty. . . But it’s rather hard to understand.”*

To Communicate: be in touch, be in contact, have dealings with, interact, commune, meet, talk, speak, converse. . . .

Fuzzy and Foggy language creates confusion and fuzzy, foggy IEP’s.

Fuzzy languages creates foggy assumptions that can redirect arguments, create “spin, bias and hide bigotry.

Jargon hides the TRUE meaning!

## Educational Jargon or as I like to call it: IEP BAFFLEGAB

I’ll be blunt: Squishy language and buzzword jargon packed into an IEP is stunning to behold. It’s like Alice in Wonderland. *“It seems very pretty,” she said when she had finished it, “but it’s rather hard to understand!” “Somehow it seems to fill my head with ideas--only I don’t exactly know what they are! . . .”*

You do not have to be perfect. You do not have to be an accomplished writer. You do have to be YOU.

And what about the high word count in special education conversations for the word communicate? Communicate: be in touch, be in contact, have dealings with, interact, commune, meet, liaise; talk, speak, converse. Informal: have a confab, powwow Partridge states, in reference to communicate and communication, that if all you mean by communicate is write or tell, or by communication a note or a letter, then say so. -- Eric Partridge,

Each one of us would be hard-pressed to find an IEP that isn't loaded with jargon filled, squishy language.


Why go to the trouble of avoiding it?

Because fuzzy language can create foggy assumptions; redirect arguments; create spin, half-truths, ill-defined statements, bias, hide bigotry, hide true meanings, puff up self-images, sidestep issues, and more.


Ask yourself, "is this possible," followed by "is this reasonable."

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## Words: The Levers We Use to force Meaning Out of Poorly Written IEP's



Our priority is speaking clearly to support of the needs of children with disabilities.

Reject use of jargon filled language.  
Do not allow jargon to slip a fast-one by you.

One of the more common ways to do it is the speaker utters a reply to a question – then – the speaker sets up (or if you prefer: effectuates) a NASCAR speed shift to a different subject by using jargon or empty transition words. This technique is also known as reframing the conversation.

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Words are the levers we use to pry meaning from a poorly written IEP, evaluation, letter, policy, etc. Our priority is speaking clearly to the needs of disabled children. When we stop adopting or accepting jargon filled language, we will stop coming away from IEP meetings feeling empty.

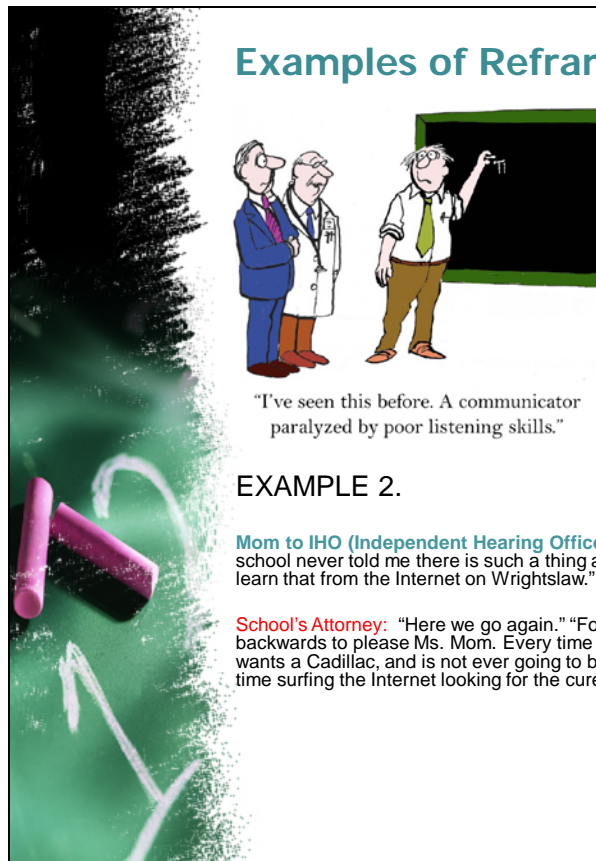
In *“As You Like It,”* Shakespeare wrote, "He can suck melancholy out of a song, as a weasel can suck eggs." To this day, we describe certain words as “weasel words.” And jargon can suck the education right out of an IEP.

Fuzzy language and jargon help the speaker slip a fast one to an unwary listener. Several forms of that maneuver exist. One of the more common ways to do it is the speaker utters a reply to a question – then – the speaker sets up (or if you prefer: effectuates) a



NASCAR speed shift to a different subject by using jargon or empty transition words.  
This technique is also known as reframing the conversation.

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### Examples of Reframing Using Jargon

**EXAMPLE 1.**  
**You:** "Can you please explain to me why the IEP does not say how much time my child will be included in the general curriculum?"  
**Director:** "I am so glad that you asked that because it gives me the opportunity to tell you about our wonderful out-sourced lunch program that we are facilitating by utilizing the student's experiential interfacing resource room environment. This program has been carefully researched, and the research shows that it is in the best educational and social interest of all our students with exceptionalities. You will be delighted to know that this program is being catered, and each luncheon module will be individually served using brown, recycled paper bag modalities."

"I've seen this before. A communicator paralyzed by poor listening skills."

**EXAMPLE 2.**  
**Mom to IHO (Independent Hearing Officer) at Prehearing conference:** "Your Hearingness, the school never told me there is such a thing as parental rights and procedural safeguards. I had to learn that from the Internet on Wrightslaw."  
**School's Attorney:** "Here we go again." "For years, Old Overshoe School District has bent over backwards to please Ms. Mom. Every time we offer one thing, she wants something else. Ms. Mom wants a Cadillac, and is not ever going to be satisfied with a Chevrolet." "Parents spend a lot of time surfing the Internet looking for the cure of the month."



The following are made-up examples: [2]

**You:** "Can you please explain to me why the IEP does not say how much time my child will be included in the general curriculum?"

**Director:** "I am so glad that you asked that because it gives me the opportunity to tell you about our wonderful out-sourced lunch program that we are facilitating by utilizing the student's experiential interfacing resource room environment. This program has

been carefully researched, and the research shows that it is in the best educational and social interest of all our students with exceptionalities. You will be delighted to know that this program is being catered, and each luncheon module will be individually served using brown, recycled paper bag modalities.”

Or,

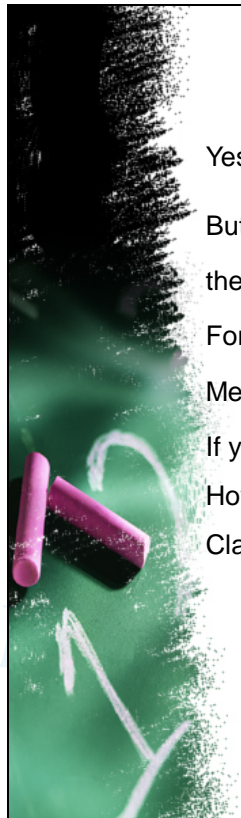
Mom to IHO (Independent Hearing Officer) at Prehearing conference: “Your Hearingness, the school never told me there is such a thing as parental rights and procedural safeguards. I had to learn that from the Internet on Wrightslaw.”

School’s Attorney: “Here we go again.” “For years, Old Overshoe School District has bent over backwards to please Ms. Mom. Every time we offer one thing, she wants something else. Ms. Mom wants a Cadillac, and is not ever going to be satisfied with a Chevrolet.” “Parents spend a lot of time surfing the Internet looking for the cure of the month.”

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## Writing Clearly is Hard Work

Yes, It is Time-Consuming to Write Clearly

But, Jargon can remove equal treatment under the law.

For example – what does the term “typical peers” Mean? Does it mean peers without disabilities? If yes, then who are “not” the peers? How is the speaker using the term “typical”? Wouldn’t the word Classmates or Schoolmates be less “loaded”!

Jargon and made-up words have a DARK APPLICATION



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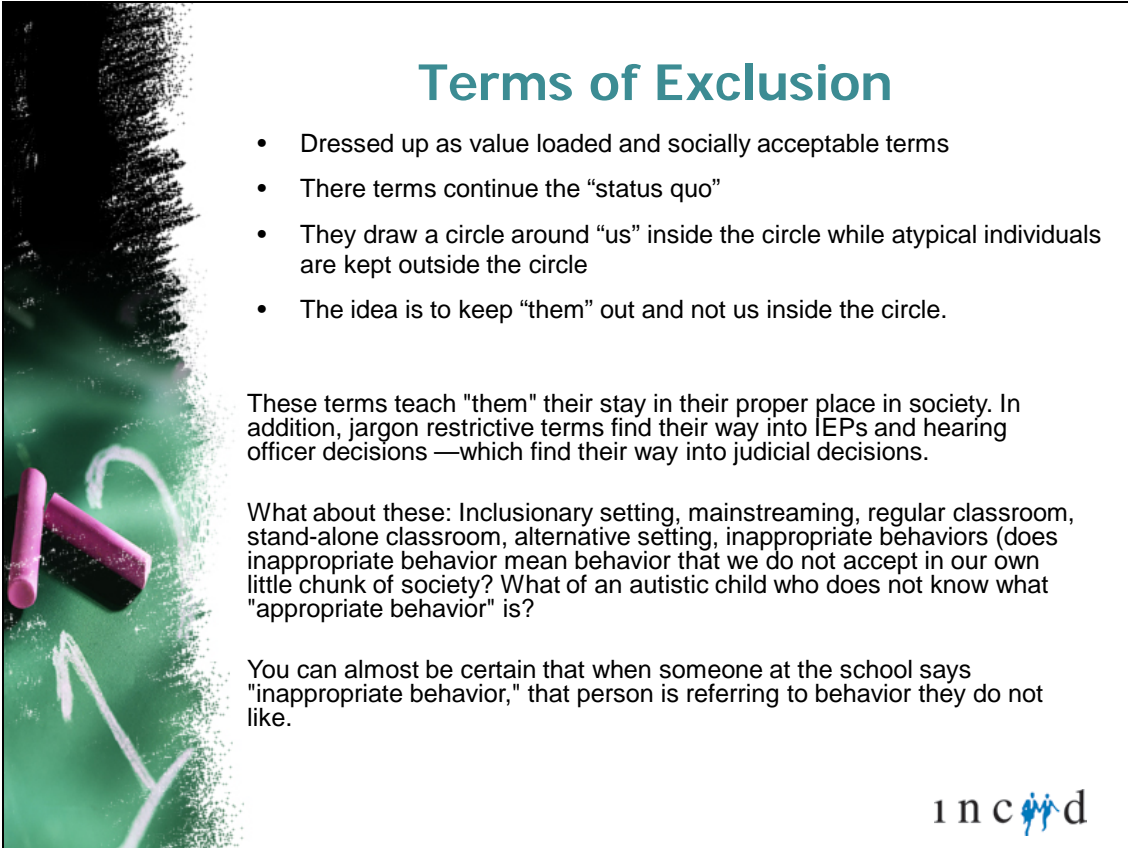
Sure, it takes more time to write a clear statement. On the other hand, consider how much time it will take after the IEP meeting to untangle a dispute over a foggy annual goal.

Jargon can also remove equal treatment under the law. Many “equality” terms we use are in fact terms of exclusion.

What does the term “typical peers” mean? Does it mean students who are not disabled? If it does, then all who are not “typical peers” are atypical (atypical, deviating from what is common or expected, irregular, and so forth). How is a speaker or writer using the

term "typical," and "peer"? Wouldn't the word classmates or schoolmates work better and be less loaded?

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### Terms of Exclusion

- Dressed up as value loaded and socially acceptable terms
- There terms continue the "status quo"
- They draw a circle around "us" inside the circle while atypical individuals are kept outside the circle
- The idea is to keep "them" out and not us inside the circle.

These terms teach "them" their stay in their proper place in society. In addition, jargon restrictive terms find their way into IEPs and hearing officer decisions —which find their way into judicial decisions.

What about these: Inclusionary setting, mainstreaming, regular classroom, stand-alone classroom, alternative setting, inappropriate behaviors (does inappropriate behavior mean behavior that we do not accept in our own little chunk of society? What of an autistic child who does not know what "appropriate behavior" is?

You can almost be certain that when someone at the school says "inappropriate behavior," that person is referring to behavior they do not like.

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Jargon and made-up words have a much more dark application as well; they are terms of exclusion dressed up as value loaded, socially acceptable terms. Those word applications continue the status quo. They draw a distinct circle around "us", who are inside the circle. Atypical individuals are kept outside the line that defines "our" circle. The circle is there to keep "them" out, and not "us" in.


In other words, terms such as these teach "them" their proper place in society. In addition, jargon restrictive terms find their way into IEPs and hearing officer decisions—which find their way into judicial decisions.

What about these: Inclusionary setting, mainstreaming, regular classroom, stand-alone classroom, alternative setting, inappropriate behaviors (does inappropriate behavior mean behavior that we do not accept in our own little chunk of society? What of an autistic child who does not know what "appropriate behavior" is? You can almost be certain that when someone at the school says "inappropriate behavior," that person is referring to behavior they do not like.

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## Why Be Concerned?



Alphie Kohn put it, "Some people undoubtedly find it convenient to have students arrive having already been stamped Prime, Choice, Select, or Standard." A. Kohn, *Punished by Rewards*, p. 202, Boston: Houghton Mifflin (1993).

Using fuzzy language results in:

- Conflict between the school And parents
- An IEP full of Empty Promises

The IDEA calls for collaboration between parents and schools.  
Clear language is important for clear expectations.  
Clear language is important for collaboration.  
Clear language is important for letters and other communication with the schools.

### **The REAL Question: Why should we be concerned?**

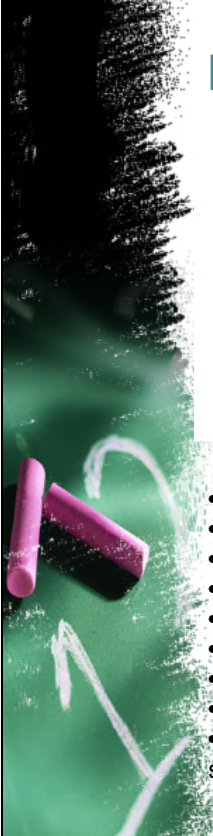
Because, as Alphie Kohn put it, "Some people undoubtedly find it convenient to have students arrive having already been stamped Prime, Choice, Select, or Standard." A. Kohn, *Punished by Rewards*, p. 202, Boston: Houghton Mifflin (1993).

One unfortunate result of jargon language is conflict between parents and school districts. If we replace words that accurately define the Individualized Education Program with jargon and fuzzy language, what remains in the IEP are empty promises of a free appropriate public education (inappropriate?).

The IDEA calls for collaboration between parents and the school district to write an IEP. If clear language is important for understanding and effective collaboration, clear language is just as important for our written correspondence and our conversations with the school district outside Team meetings. If you use even a few of these writing strategies and skills your chances of getting an IEP that does not have the


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## Don't Let the "Box of Chocolates" Philosophy Define the IEP

Forrest Gump



TIPS

- Get rid of special education jargon – use real words and language.
- Get rid of acronyms and abbreviations in letters and emails.
- Get rid of EVERY sentence using passive phrases.
- Use strong active verbs.
- Treat every email just as if writing a formal letter.
- Write drafts then proofread the drafts (including emails).
- Use a type that is easy to read.
- Get a good dictionary and thesaurus.
- Double check written work with spell checkers. Word and other spell checkers often misinterpret words as misspelled or correctly spelled

An Easy Formula for Letters and Emails

- Who are you?
- Why are you writing to me?
- Why are you calling or emailing?
- What do you want? Or

Forrest Gump "You never know what you're gonna get" surprise will improve.

An easy formula for letters and e-mail messages.

The reader wants to know the answer to four questions:

Who are you?

Why are you writing to me? (also, why are you calling or e-mailing)

What do you want? (or, what do you want me to do about it?)

Tips:

Get rid of special education jargon in your spoken and written work.

Get rid of acronyms and abbreviations in your letters and e-mail.

Get rid of every passive sentence and phrase you can.

Use strong active verbs in your sentences

Treat every e-mail you write just as if you were writing an important formal letter.

Write drafts and proofread the drafts of everything you write. That includes e-mail messages, letters, and complaints. If your message is important, it is important to write carefully.

Double check your written work with your word processor's spell check – then, print your work and proofread it the old fashioned way. The reason to proofread from a printed copy is because mistakes show up more clearly on printed work than on a computer screen. Too, word processor spell checkers often misinterpret some words as misspelled or correctly spelled.

[Try using [Grammarly.com](http://www.Grammarly.com) to help get rid of passive sentences.]

Use a type font that is easy to read. A type font that is readable on paper is often difficult to read on a computer screen. For text on paper I recommend 12 point Georgia. For computer screens, I recommend a sans serif font such as 12 point Arial or 12 point Franklin Gothic Book. 12 point Georgia is a good compromise for both text on paper and text on a computer screen. The typeface for this article is 12 point Georgia.

Get yourself a good dictionary and a good thesaurus. No, I'm not talking about the one built into your computer word processor program. I'm talking about real books – those that sit on your desk within reach of your keyboard.

Get yourself a good synonym finder. Recommendations: <http://www.thesaurus.com/> or the free one at <http://www.thesaurus.com/>

Do not write important email messages or letters on your smart phone. Use a desktop, laptop, or a pad device that has a word processing program installed and a keyboard. If you do not have a standard word processing program such as Microsoft Word, then you can get a good one for free. It is called Libre Office Suite. It will do everything Microsoft Word does and more. And, you can save a document written in Libre as a Word compatible format. That means you can write your letter, save it as a Word compatible file if you need to send a copy of your letter to the school or anyone else.



Download it from <http://www.libreoffice.org/download/libreoffice-fresh/>. Be sure to download the one for your computer's operating system:

Linux x64 (rpm)

Linux x86 (deb)

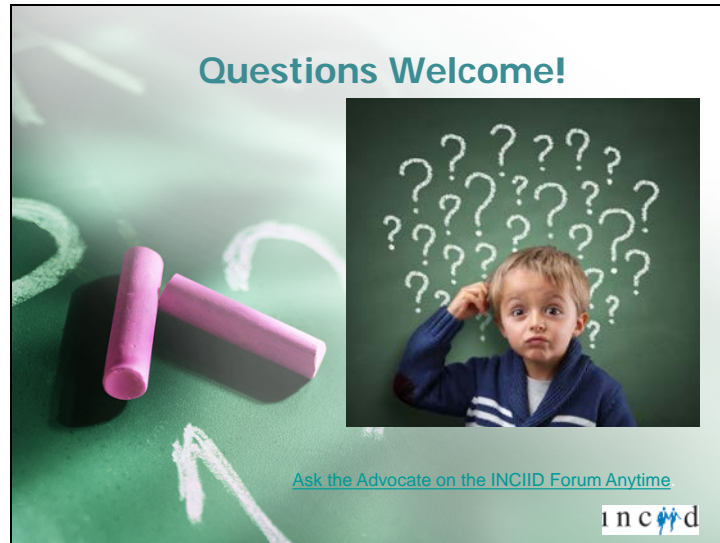
Linux x86 (rpm)

Mac OS X x86\_64 (10.8 or newer required)

Windows

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Resources: <https://www.inciid.org/special-needs>

Ask the Advocate Forum – Brice Palmer answers your personal advocacy questions.  
<http://www.inciid.org/forum/forumdisplay.php?51-Ask-the-Educational-Advocate>

2015 Article Series Link: <http://www.inciid.org/advocacy-article-series-links>

Contact Brice Palmer: Email: [brice@shoreham.net](mailto:brice@shoreham.net)  
 Phone: 802-537-3022

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### Brice Palmer, Speaker

**Brice** is a special education advocate who works with parents across the country. He has practiced, taught and written about special education advocacy since 1995. His articles have appeared in *The Beacon Journal*, published by Harbor House Law Press, *Autism Asperger's Digest*, published by Future Horizons, Inc., *Family Focus*, the quarterly newsletter published by Families for Russian and Ukrainian Adoption (FRUA), and various articles appearing at [www.wrightslaw.com](http://www.wrightslaw.com).

Some of the Wrightslaw articles are: *Do the Documents Speak for Themselves?* *How to Prepare Your Case*, *Learning To Negotiate Is Part of the Advocacy Process*, and *How and Why to Tape Record Meetings*.

- Brice lives out in the woods near Benson, Vermont. You can reach him by phone at: (802) 537-3022. Brice also answers questions on the [Advocacy Forum on INCIID](#) or you can
- [Email him](#).



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### About the author:

Brice is a special education advocate who works with parents across the country. He has practiced, taught and written about special education advocacy since 1995. His articles have appeared in *The Beacon Journal*, published by Harbor House Law Press, *Autism Asperger's Digest*, published by Future Horizons, Inc., *Family Focus*, the quarterly newsletter published by Families for Russian and Ukrainian Adoption (FRUA), and various articles appearing at [www.wrightslaw.com](http://www.wrightslaw.com). Some of the Wrightslaw articles are: *Do the Documents Speak for Themselves?* *How to Prepare Your Case*, *Learning To Negotiate Is Part of the Advocacy Process*, and *How and Why to Tape Record Meetings*.

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[1] <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=h7pbliGcmc4>

[2] Ok. I admit it. These made up examples are recycled from some of my workshop and article stuff.