Policy Language Usage Tips

Experience has shown that the following are some of the more common causes of ambiguity and misunderstanding in policies.

**“Affect”** and **“effect” –** These wordshave nothing in common. When used as a verb, **“affect”** means “to influence” (as in: *how smoking will affect health)* and **“effect”** means “to bring about” or “to cause” (as in: *budget measures designed to effect savings).* As a noun, **“affect”** refers to feelings or emotion and **“effect”** is the result of some cause (*the effect of too much exposure to the sun may be skin cancer).*

**“Assure/ensure/insure”** – These all mean “to make secure or certain,” but **“assure”** is used only in the sense of “to set the mind at rest,” as in: *I assured the boss of my loyalty.* Although **“ensure”** and **“insure”** are generally interchangeable, **“insure”** is the only correct choice when speaking of guaranteeing something financially against risk: *I want to insure my home against flood damage.* **“Ensure”** is the term used most commonly in policies, as in: *Use the read-back process to ensure that you heard the physician correctly.*

**“Can”** – This is not synonymous with **“may”** although it is often misused as though it were. **“Can”** indicates physical or mental ability rather than permission. For example: *You can lift heavy objects by bending at the waist and using the back muscles.* While this statement is true, it would not be permitted in a well-written policy because it might be construed as giving permission to lift in this unsafe manner.

**“E.g.”** and **“i.e.”** – These are often confused. **“E.g.”** means *for example.* **“I.e.”**means *that is.*

**“Guideline” –** Ambiguity abounds when this word is used in a policy. Does it set forth an absolute requirement or merely a suggestion? If the former, make it clear that compliance is mandatory.

**“It’s”** and **“its”** – The former means “it is.” The latter is possessive.

**“May”** – Used to indicate something allowed or permitted but not required. For example:

*Department heads may permit exceptions to the dress code on a case-by-case basis if necessary for work-related reasons.* **“May”** must never be used in policies unless permission is meant.

**“Might” –** This indicates the possibility of a future action or occurrence. *Hurricanes might cause power outages or other service interruptions.* Do not use **“might”** unless that is the intention.

**“Must”** and **“shall” –** These are used to indicate explicit obligations. *Team members must [or shall] comply with all legal standards applicable to their jobs.* Note: Adding “not” creates a negative obligation: *Team members (may)(must)(shall) not reveal confidential patient information to persons who do not have a legitimate need to know.*

**“Should” –** Like “guideline,” *should*is ambiguous because it can be interpreted as either obligatory or advisory, depending on the context. Consider: *You should call and apologize.* When spoken by a parent to a child, this is likely to be considered as a command. When spoken by one friend to another, it is more likely to be taken as advice that one can follow or not as s/he wishes. **“Should”** must never be used in policies unless its meaning is well defined.

**“That”** – Used to introduce a defining clause: a clause that serves to identify the thing being talked about. *The house that Jack built was torn down.* “That Jack built” tells which house was torn down. “Which”, on the other hand, is used to introduce a non-defining clause; a clause that gives additional―but nonessential―information about something that has already been identified. In this sentence, *the house on Falcon Street, which Jack built, was torn down*, the clause “which Jack built” does not further identify the house but provides some gratuitous information.

**“Will”** –Used to describe a future event or customary action: *The accounts payable clerk will process check requests and forward them to the director of accounts payable for signature.* To avoid ambiguity, **“will”** must not be used to indicate a requirement or command. (See “must” and “shall,” above.) Normally **“will”** is used only in the procedure section of a policy.

*Source*: J. Stuart Showalter, JD, MFS, contributing editor for HFMA.