WIN 5.2 - Developing an Inclusive Writing Style

Lesson 3 - Humour, Acronyms, Jargon and Obscurity

Humour can be a really important part of communication, but one of the challenges when communicating with people whose first language might not be English or who may come from another culture - humour can be very challenging in those situations because jokes might be found offensive, or simply the cultural references might be different and therefore the - someone might not get the joke.

With acronyms, this is something - I find that our culture is becoming very acronym-heavy. And I've been in my current role for a year, and I've been at the same institution for 15 years, and even just the other day a colleague sent me an email that had a bunch of acronyms in it that I did not understand. So when you use acronyms without clearly spelling them out you have to realize that people might be unfamiliar with what you're referring to. And again they might not feel comfortable enough to ask for clarification and therefore they might not understand what you're talking about.

With jargon - jargon is often used to signify membership in a particular group, but what I find interesting about jargon is that, whether intentionally or unintentionally, what it really does is signal that you're excluded from a particular group. So if you write something that's filled with jargon, only a few, select individuals are going to understand it. So when you use jargon you have to be very careful too about who your audience is and whether they're going to understand. And I think that it's important always to try to be clear and try to avoid language that might not be understood by the people that you're writing for.

It's interesting that obscurity in writing was first - first came about with the ancient Greeks, with the philosophers. And the purpose of it was to try to get their writing past the censors, because the idea was that the censors wouldn't understand what they were saying, and therefore they were able to pass off their writing and only the people that followed them, and only the other philosophers would understand. So I find that fascinating because jargon and obscure writing really, you know, does exclude people, does prevent understanding, so I really think it should be avoided in all professional writing.