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Writer's Edge

By Ingrid Sapona

Welcome to Writer's Edge — a column by Ingrid Sapona, owner of Good with Words. In her column, Ingrid will write about ways of improving your communication skills. Many of you already know Ingrid — she's been working with the CICBV and CBVs for more than 10 years and is the creator and presenter of the popular seminar: Valuation Reports and Opinions: Your Stock In Trade — Are they as clear as can be?

Ingrid welcomes your feedback, questions, and suggestions for topics you'd be interested in reading about. Drop Ingrid a line at: ingrid@goodwithwords.com, or at 416-259-3399.

Are you a Slasher?

Slash marks [/] are not a formal punctuation mark. They're simply a graphic symbol many people, including many business valuers, use. Though some see slashes as convenient shorthand, I'm not a fan of them because they can create confusion and ambiguity.

Common Meanings and Uses

Here are just some examples of the different meanings ascribed to the slash, according to Merriam-Webster.com, the Chicago Manual of Style, and the Canadian Press Stylebook:

- Slashes are used instead of writing "or" [he/she; pass/fail], "per" [kms/hour; \$150/hour], or "divided by" [5/8; (a + b)/(c-d)].
- Slashes are also used in certain contexts for "and" [she was an MD/PhD candidate].
- Slashes are used in dates [2010/11; 30/6/2010].
- Slashes are used to show breaks in lines of poetry when poetry is included in prose. [I don't use a lot of poetry in my writing so this was news to me until recently.]

And/Or

The Chicago Style Manual (the bible for authors, editors, copywriters, and publishers) says "a slash most commonly signifies alternatives". In other words, it's used to show that either of two alternatives is possible. (For example, in: "the child's mother/father must attend," the slash indicates the alternative of the child's mother or the child's father.) The slash in "and/or" is meant to indicate alternatives, but this can be problematic because in most instances "and" and "or" are mutually exclusive.

The only way "and/or" makes sense is when you wish to show three distinct possibilities: A, or B, or A and B. Unless all three alternatives are possible, the writer should use either "and" or "or",

whichever is appropriate. For example, if a company has a rule that all cheques are to be signed by two people (say the treasurer and a director), then it would be incorrect to write: cheques are signed by the treasurer and/or a director.

Difficulties for Readers

Slashes slow readers down because before readers can grasp the underlying meaning of the sentence, they must stop to figure out how the writer is using the slash. Here's an example of and/or in a valuation:

When the earnings or cash flow values of a business exceed the value of its tangible asset backing, value is ascribed to goodwill and/or other intangible assets.

Though, strictly speaking, in the sentence above "and/or" is correct because all three alternatives are possible, using "and/or" forces readers to pause as they dissect the alternatives. The writer could have made it effortless for the reader by writing:

When a business' earnings or its cash flow values exceed the value of its tangible asset backing, the value can be ascribed to goodwill, to other tangible assets, or to both.

Slashes may seem handy, but given the divergent uses and meanings readers might infer, I recommend you use them sparingly, if at all. Using words to say what you mean instead of slash marks will make it easier for the reader and reduce the chances of creating confusion and ambiguity.
