



This writing tip is from Luis M. Luque, a writer-editor in DCSS. Luis has been working at CDC since 2012. Before that he served on active duty as a journalist/mass communication specialist for 20 years in the United States Navy.

Excuse me, I have an important topic to address. Or, rather, it's a word I'd like to address. That word is "address." If there's ever been a weaker, more mealy-mouthed way to say you're going to "do something," I'm not sure I've heard it.

For example, if I write that "I'm going to address world hunger in the weeks ahead," do you have any idea what I plan to do? I certainly haven't expressed a plan. Am I going to talk about world hunger? Am I going to do something about it? Politicians probably love the word "address" because it makes them sound concerned, busy, oriented toward action. "We'll address all your concerns soon," or "during our next meeting," or "when the board convenes next month"—or never.

Let's face it—I can address, say, world hunger during a speech at a joint session of Congress, before the United Nations, or in a press conference. Sounds important, right? But I can also address it over tea and cookies with my Aunt Tillie. Yet none of that addressing will place so much as one crumb in anyone else's mouth.

The main problem with "address" is that the word is too elastic. It means whatever I want it to mean. By addressing world hunger, I don't actually have to do anything! I could open 10,000 food pantries in developing countries around the world. Or I could just discuss it with you. Either way, I'm addressing the issue. Speech writers love to address all our problems. Addressing sounds grand, like the State of the Union Address and the Gettysburg Address. It sounds like actions and solutions even when it merely means discussion, delay, and avoidance:

Reporter: Let me ask you specifically about your plans to address climate change.

Politician: I've addressed that at length in my policy proposals and with my constituents.

Reporter: Does that mean you plan to support or oppose the president's plan?

Politician: As I've indicated, I've already addressed that topic at length. Please refer to my website. Next question.

Here's an idea: save your addresses for envelopes, emails, and your GPS map program. Rather than addressing your problems, why not do something about them? Solve them, resolve them, tackle them, manage them, coordinate them, handle them, take them up, deal with them, or come to grips with them. DO something about them. You can even delegate them. But, please, whatever else you might do, stop "addressing" everything!

What other words do you think are too imprecise to have much substance?