

01 / NOTICE THE INTERPRETIVE QUESTION

Before the Text Travels

Five questions to bring to a sensitive communication

For professionals who draft, review or approve workplace and institutional texts. An invitation to notice where interpretation deserves closer attention.

“The review confirmed that the concerns were addressed.”

A sentence can read smoothly and still leave consequential questions open. What review? Whose concerns? What counts as “addressed”: acknowledged, investigated or resolved?

One reader might take this as a statement that the matter is closed. Another might understand only that someone responded. The surrounding document and its situation may settle the question. This sentence alone does not.

The useful pause

Before a text becomes an email, report, policy or public statement, ask what a reader is being invited to understand - and what supports that understanding. The purpose is to formulate a better question for review.

What this resource offers

Five prompts, one worked example and a short brief you can take into a professional conversation. It provides no risk score or clearance to publish. Discourse analysis requires training, contextual evidence and reasoned interpretation.

Where might readings diverge?

Use a text you know well. Mark the exact words that prompted your question, and keep the surrounding passage. An unanswered question is a starting point for inquiry, not a finding.

1. Who is acting – and who is speaking?

Can you distinguish the person who acted, the person reporting it and the person evaluating it? In “It was determined that...”, look for who made the determination and on what basis. That information may appear elsewhere.

2. How much certainty does the wording convey?

Notice the difference between “may suggest”, “supports” and “confirms”. What evidence accompanies the wording? Greater certainty is not automatically wrong; its justification is the question.

3. What is the reader asked to take for granted?

In “The employee stopped withholding information”, earlier withholding is presented as a starting point. Is that characterization established, attributed to someone or still disputed?

4. What does the wording leave open?

Words such as “addressed”, “appropriate” or “timely” may allow different readings. Does the document explain what they mean here? Which distinction would matter to the intended reader?

5. What changes when the audience or setting changes?

Imagine the passage forwarded without its original email, read by the person it describes or quoted in a later report. Which contextual information would be missing? Would that affect a consequential interpretation?

These prompts are selective. They do not establish intent, credibility, discrimination or legal effect, and they do not replace analysis of the complete discourse and its context.

Keep the words. Bring the context.

Return to the opening example

Exact wording: "The review confirmed that the concerns were addressed."

Question: Does "addressed" mean a response was given or the underlying issue was resolved?

Why it matters: A reader deciding whether further action is needed may distinguish those outcomes.

Context to seek: The review findings, the concerns in question, any definition of "addressed" and the purpose of the communication.

Changing the sentence before establishing those facts could introduce a claim the evidence does not support. A useful next step is to identify what can accurately be said and what remains unresolved.

A brief for your own text

Record these five things before seeking a closer review:

The passage: exact words, document version and location.

The situation: purpose, intended readers and relevant background.

The question: two plausible readings, or one assumption to examine.

The consequence: the decision or understanding that could be affected.

The missing context: what would help assess those readings.

When to bring in a discourse analyst

Consider a professional review when competing readings could affect an important decision, when responsibility or certainty is disputed, or when the interpretation depends on a wider exchange or body of documents. The brief above gives that conversation a concrete starting point.

Explore StoneWord

For more on language, interpretation and StoneWord's work, visit stoneword.ca. Bring the interpretive question first; you can agree on the appropriate scope of review from there.

All examples are fictional. This introductory resource is a starting point for the proposed StoneWord Language Risk Toolkit.