



Even in today's world of faxes, conference calls, e-mails, Web-mail, voice-mail and video conferencing, people in business still need to know how to communicate a written message. They need to know how to do it effectively, clearly, correctly — and quickly, because readers have less time and less patience than ever.

To help achieve that goal, here are some simple principles that can help anyone turn weak, ineffective writing into strong, effective writing. Most of these principles apply to all categories of written work. Others apply more selectively.

Catch the reader's attention

Begin with a short sentence that captures the reader's attention. Make the reader want to read what you're writing.

- ▶ *Identify the bigger picture.* Explain why your topic matters, and how it fits into the bigger picture of the reader's world.
- ▶ *Show why the reader should pay attention.* Readers care about themselves and their own lives. Tie your opening to your readers and their lives, or to the larger business context. After reading your first few paragraphs, a reader should know why they want or need to read whatever you're writing.

- ▶ *Stay flexible about starting.* Don't feel you have to start work at the beginning. You can start in the middle. Then figure out the beginning later. This can help prevent writer's block.
- ▶ *Know your audience.* Think about what you want to tell them and why, before you write your first word. Context dictates everything else. What does your audience already know? What do they want or need to read about?

Strong verbs strengthen your writing

Verbs mean action. When people do things, readers pay attention. When people sit around and have things done to them or when you talk about abstract or inanimate things, readers drift off. Keep your readers awake.

- ▶ *Seek active verbs.* Don't use lame, static, sitting-around verbs such as "to have," "to be" or their variants. Instead of saying "there are available a significant range of meaningful options" (the reader envisions someone sitting and sleeping, and quickly falls asleep), say a specific person can choose from four options (the reader envisions someone doing something and stays awake).
- ▶ *Look for real events, real people.* Describe even the most abstract concepts in terms of real events happening to real people.

- *Don't turn verbs into nouns.* Say "she achieved" rather than "her achievements included." Don't add "ing" to the end of a verb to turn it into a semi-noun. A discussion of growing work-force turnover (a thing) doesn't catch the reader's attention with the same force as a statement that turnover has exploded or that more employees than ever leave the company every year (actions). Rather than talk about "responses that some companies have experienced to be effective," discuss how "companies have responded." Someone is doing something. You're not just talking about static things and concepts.
- *Beware of technical terms.* Technical terms that mean something to you might not communicate as well to your audience. Many readers get snagged by words like "assignor" and "assignee," which they must translate in their minds to "bank" or "borrower," often incorrectly. Even though your reader should be able to understand words like these, in the real world they're an extra step. Make your reader's job as easy as you can.



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Keep it simple

Keep most of your sentences short. Break long sentences into shorter ones when you can. If you want to make two related points, write two sentences. Don't string them together into one sentence with the word "and."

- *Construct simple sentences.* Most sentences should contain no more than one idea. If you want to modify, clarify or qualify what you're saying, resist the temptation to do so in the middle of the discussion. It breaks the flow. Save it for somewhere else.
- *Avoid parentheses.* Anything you want to put in parentheses will create a legalistic complication and detour. If it's short, maybe use commas. If it's long, say it somewhere else.
- *Strive for short paragraphs.* They help readers digest ideas in bite-sized units.
- *Make a direct path.* Get to the point quickly and directly. Don't interrupt your logical flow while you discuss something else. Your readers don't want to hold their breath mentally. Rearrange your sentences as necessary. For example, if you are describing an

overall concept that has some exceptions and variations, explain the general concept first, then discuss the exceptions and variations. Don't strew the exceptions and variations throughout your discussion.

- *Conserve reader brainpower.* Don't make your reader spend too much brainpower deciphering your message. Readers need their brainpower to absorb your message once they have figured out what it is. Reading is hard work.
- *Be willing to start over.* If what you are saying gets too complicated, tear it up and start over again.
- *Provide graphic illustrations.* If you can use bullets, charts and headings, do it.

Establish a sound structure

To build a house, you would dig the basement first, then pour the foundation, then frame the structure, install the systems to make it livable and, finally, apply your finishing touches. Build most written work the same way.

- *Identify the overall purpose.* Start with a structure, an overall purpose. Make it clear in your first couple of paragraphs.
- *Remember your goal.* Don't lose sight of what you're trying to achieve, why and for whom.
- *Watch the details.* Unnecessary extras can confuse more than clarify. Properly used, though, details can help you turn abstractions into concrete examples, helping you communicate better.
- *Provide a logical approach.* If you write about something complicated, introduce it in a logical order — usually the order in which your readers would encounter it in the real world. Start with what they know. Then take them to the next concept. And then the concept after that. Do it in a logical order, the way a normal person would think through and assimilate a series of new ideas.
- *Use an orderly scheme.* Use a logical and consistent system of headings and subheadings to impose order and help your readers understand that order.
- *Seek consistency and coordination.* Present similar ideas in a similar way. If five conditions need to be satisfied before a proposal will work, collect those five conditions in a single list. Don't sprinkle them randomly throughout your work like lost pieces of a jigsaw puzzle.
- *Say it once.* After the structure you have chosen identifies the points you wish to make, discuss each point once, all in one place. Don't force the reader to puzzle through and fit together several relevant provisions to understand what you are saying.

Use powerful words in a powerful way

Clear, straightforward words convey ideas more powerfully than stuffy, complicated phrases. See **Table 1** on page 102 for some examples.

<i>Complicated</i>	<i>Powerful</i>
Provide the requisite information	Tell
Suffer a numeric reduction in	Drop
Experience work force turnover	Lose people
Take the steps necessary to retain	Keep
Remain; continue in the status quo	Stay
Not found frequently to occur	Rare
Provide with	Give
Undesirable	Bad
With respect to; in connection with; applicable to	For

► *Accentuate the positive.* Write in the positive, not the negative. A “negative” means not only the word “not” and its variations, but also negative words like “prohibit,” “harm,” “disapprove” and “undo.” Any negative word will complicate your sentence and make your reader process one more concept, i.e., the fact that you mean to refer to the opposite of whatever you are actually discussing. This makes your reader work harder. Positive words are easier to understand. For an extreme example of how negative words don’t work, see **Table 2**.

<i>Too Many Negatives</i>	<i>Simpler Version</i>
Unless the obstacles to this plan are eliminated or mitigated, no one will avoid the risk of not being able to maximize profits.	If we can make this plan work, it may help us maximize profits.

► *Use active words.* Dramatic, active words grab the reader’s attention. See **Table 3** for some examples.

<i>Boring and Sleepy</i>	<i>Dramatic and Active</i>
What can be done <i>in light of</i> some problem or <i>with reference</i> to the problem	How a specific person <i>has cut costs this quarter to save the company from the losses it suffered last quarter</i> because of some problem
Someone is <i>able to implement a program to mitigate the adverse impacts of</i> something	Someone can <i>solve the problem</i> by making specific changes and adopting a specific solution
Someone is <i>experiencing an adverse situation</i>	A specific business is <i>watching its profits evaporate</i> from some problem

► *Avoid word piles.* Don’t build word piles, long strings of words piled together to express one concept. For example, instead of referring to alternative real estate business-based strategies, describe how the company manages its real estate.

Don’t Take Yourself Too Seriously

Write the way you speak. Use simple language. Have a little fun, but not too much.

► *Avoid pomp.* Don’t think your writing has to sound pompous, high-flown or archaic if you want to communicate important ideas effectively. Often, it’s just the opposite.

► *Strive for normal language.* If appropriate, use the same informal phrases that your readers would use. This way, your readers won’t need to translate your language into theirs.

► *Have a bit of fun.* Let your words sing a little sometimes. Play with alliteration, repetition, rhythm. Two examples: the last two sentences. Another example: The big companies not only pay more, they hire more.

Kill unnecessary words

Less is more. The fewer words you use, the more effectively you can communicate, if you choose the right words.

You are probably clouding the picture when you use these types of words:

► *Glue.* Delete “glue” words such as “in sum,” “clearly,” “in order to,” “however” and so on.

► *Intensifiers.* Avoid intensifiers such as “very,” “really,” “much” or the use of italics or boldface type to emphasize your point. They make you sound uncertain.

Use the rhythm of the sentence to accent what’s important. The power positions in a sentence are at the beginning and end.

► *Throat clearing.* Watch out for “throat-clearing” phrases at the beginning of your work — extra phrases that add nothing but words. Although they can sometimes help you get started, they’re easy to delete in your first round of editing.

► *Adjectives.* Adjectives weaken your words. Use them sparingly. Adverbs weaken them even more. Compare two sentences, one with, the other without, an adverb. The one without the intensifier is more intense.

► *Consultant-speak.* Don’t use mushy words such as “significant,” “ongoing,” “current,” “arisen,” “trend,” “key.”

“actualization,” “parameter,” “activate,” “situation,” “in order to,” “access” and similar consultant-speak.

- *Numbers.* To best communicate numbers 10 or higher, express them as numerals, not words.

Keep your readers involved

Readers love war stories, real-life examples and practical tips based on the experiences of specific people, including you.

- *Provide specific examples.* Give your readers ideas, suggestions and points to “take away” and use. Don’t write in generalities relating to the world as a whole. Write in specifics that apply directly to your readers’ own experiences.
- *Paint word pictures.* Use metaphors. They encourage your readers to paint pictures in their heads and see connections and similarities.
- *Use effective quotations.* If you quote words spoken by a real person, your readers will appreciate it. But don’t make your quotations too long.
- *Observe the “rule of three.”* In any list of suggestions, examples, guidelines or points to remember, your readers want to see at least three items.

Tips for the writing process

First let your ideas flow freely onto paper, without being self-conscious about “writing well.” Then edit and revise. That second process — making your writing simple and direct — is hard work, but you have the comfort of knowing that the raw material is there.

- *Find solid blocks of time.* For a substantial piece of work, try to prevent disruptions and reserve a solid block of time. If you can get away with it, close the door, hold your calls and reread the whole piece top to bottom (or bottom to top) one last time.
- *Listen to the sound of words.* As you read your words, how do they sound in your head? Make them sound better. Even if you accurately express your message, if your reader can’t easily understand it or stumbles because your words don’t sound right, then you’ve done only part of your job, because you distract your reader from your message. The sound gets in the way.
- *Weigh brevity vs. clarity.* Brevity is good. Clarity is better.
- *Let it sit.* After you’ve written your first draft, put it aside for a while. Look at it again as if you’ve never seen it before. Read it quickly for an overview, as a



casual reader might. Does it work? Does it hang together? Does it flow? Then read it slowly, line-by-line and word-by-word. Have you made each point as effectively as you can? Did you leave out anything important? Do your words fit together?

- *View your work as a reader would.* When you read through your work again, ask yourself whether you can easily grasp it. But don’t assume you will. Assume the opposite. Look for opportunities to get confused, overwhelmed and lost. Fix them. Make your work clearer than it needs to be.
- *Cut, cut, cut.* Don’t fall in love with a sentence, a paragraph, an idea. Do you need it? If not, dump it. Edit and edit again.
- *Bend the rules.* Ignore any of the suggestions in this article when it makes sense to do so. Every principle has its exceptions.

Your conclusion

You don’t have to end with a grand conclusion and a bow. If you can gracefully circle back to the point you made at the beginning, you’ll give your readers a sense of closure.

- *Summarize.* Summarize your message briefly but without restating too much of what you’ve already said.
- *Avoid formulas.* Avoid trite or formulaic endings.
- *Stop.* Finish your job. Don’t leave your reader hanging.

P.S. Everyone reads postscripts. Use them accordingly. ▲

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