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14 Pointers For Style (Part 1)

1

Write the way you speak. Within reason, of course. Don't put in the filler phrases, colloquialisms, improper grammar and nonexistent words that we often use in speech. But don't try to write like a 16th Century university professor either. Readers are too busy to read between the lines, so make sure your message sounds like it came from a human being. (This concept is not new. *The Style Book of the Detroit News*, 1918, advised: "Stilted English, pompous and high-sounding, is in just as bad taste as garish clothing or pungent perfume.")

For instance, if I said that my *cranial habiliment came asunder in a squall*, would you know that my hat blew off in a gust of wind? If I told you that I had *ovum for my matutinal refection*, would you know that I had eggs for breakfast? If I asserted that my *horological mechanism failed to be efficacious*, would you know that my clock didn't keep time?

What if I asked you to give me a *quadrilabial osculation*? That's a kiss!



Using words like those can put our readers in the same bind as Mrs. Albert Einstein. She was once asked whether she understood everything her famous husband said. "I understand some of the words," she replied, "but none of the sentences."

Sometimes when people sit down to write a report, create an executive summary, design a proposal, or fill out an application, they don't express their true personalities. They write as if they were ancient creatures with petrified voice boxes and fossilized brains, using stale phrases like *enclosed herewith you will please find, thank you in advance, we beg to advise you, and the aforementioned reference*.

Suppose I came up to you and said, "I am pleased to hand you herewith your check, payable in the amount of two dollars and no cents, open parenthesis, two dollars, closed parenthesis."

You'd say, "Huh? What in the heck are you talking about?" Or maybe, "About what in the heck are you talking?" (Good communication means never having to say "Huh?") But people often write like that. You'll have a better chance of being understood if you keep your language simple and speak to your reader as if you were face to face. Don't use someone else's phraseology simply because it sounds authoritative. If *you* can't understand what you're saying, chances are your readers won't

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either. Write the way you would speak to an educated person in an important situation. Read your document out loud when you're finished—that's one sure way to find out if it sounds natural. If it doesn't, revise it.

Write in a style that is natural to you. If you strain for effect, you are certain to burst a rhetorical blood vessel.

—James McCarthy
Author of *The Newspaper Worker*

2

Keep your message simple. Well-established words, simple sentences, short paragraphs, and straight-shooting text make writing more understandable.

- When you have something to say, be direct—not rude, but direct. Keep in mind E. B. White's advice in *The Elements of Style*: "When you say something, make sure you have said it. The chances of your having said it are only fair."
- Never use a long unfamiliar word when a short familiar word will work just as well (replace *rhombohedral* with *symmetrical* or *balanced*).
- Use single words instead of phrases (replace *reach a decision* with *decide*).
- Avoid phrases with redundant terms (instead of *component parts*, use *components* or *parts*).
- Use measurable words. Abstract words often have vague or "iffy" meanings, but measurable words usually stand for ideas the reader can see, feel, hear, taste or smell. They present clear, sharp images:

<u>Abstract</u>	<u>Concrete</u>
a sizable profit	\$6 million
the majority	53%
the near future		Thursday afternoon
passing grade	B+

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- Don't invent or coin words when there are already known words that say what you mean.
- Cut words, phrases, sentences or whole paragraphs unless they enhance the clarity of your writing and help achieve your objective. Words are like extra pounds—the more you have, the worse the whole package looks. Memorize Kay's Rule of Max (Page 48) and refer to the wordiness charts in Chapter 6.

3 **Present your points in logical order.** Reading a document shouldn't be a chore or a guessing game. C. S. Lewis, author of *Alice in Wonderland*, compared writing to “driving sheep down a road. If there is any gate to the left or right, the readers will most certainly go into it.” To keep readers on your desired path, you have to plan ahead, *think* about what you're saying, and be logical in your path.

Don't assume that readers will “catch on” or follow your train of thought or understand hints. Tell them what your document is about in the first paragraph, and make sure **your thoughts flow logically, one into another, in a sequence that's easy for the reader to absorb. This principle applies to paragraphs, sentences, even phrases.**

How do you achieve such a sequence? By thinking your message out step by step before you write it—or at least before the second draft—to make sure each point is clear and in logical order. An outline can help you know what you want to say, how you want to say it, and what details need to be included.

Begin most documents with your most important idea (often a recommendation, request, conclusion or response) and put your details in the middle.

In long documents, preview key content and end by summarizing major ideas to help readers understand and remember. Previews and summaries are unnecessary in short documents, but are always helpful when your documents exceed two pages.

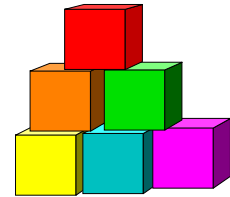
Be consistent in announcing and discussing ideas. When you introduce two or more topics, you create an expectation of order in the reader's mind, so you need to discuss the topics in the same order you introduced them. If you say, *This proposal has four parts: A, B, C and D*, state your points

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in that order. If you write, *I don't like this idea because of X and Y*, then discuss your reasons in the same order: first *X* and then *Y*.

Also beware of gaps and broken links in your chain of reasoning and tie your thoughts together with parallel construction and transitional words and phrases (bridges), such as *however, therefore, thus, on the other hand*, etc. (see Page 90).

Clarity and/or rhythm can often be improved just by adding these transitions or even by reversing the sequence of paragraphs. A paragraph might be made clearer by reversing some of the sentences; a sentence, by changing the order of phrases; a phrase, by varying the order of words. Ideas should fit on top of one another like building blocks, but be sure you get the bottom blocks in first.



In whatever you write, verify the sequence of ideas and take out or transpose everything that interrupts the march of thought and feeling.

—Jacque Barzun
Author of *From Dawn to Decadence*

4

Choose direct or indirect styling.

▲ Direct styling is often called the inverted pyramid style. It means that the beginning, or lead, sentence should be the most important fact of your message—your point—and it's right up front. The foundation of the pyramid (facts, background, subpoints) is secondary. Direct styling is usually best for everyday writing.

▼ Indirect styling is when you begin with your foundation rather than your point. This is often helpful in persuasive writing so you don't give away the punch line too quickly.

Whatever format you choose, keep your openings short. An opening may introduce your topic and set up the major idea, or provide background information, or establish your reason for writing. But when an opening is too long, the document can seem burdensome, and some readers may give up on it.

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5

Use an obvious organization. Research shows that readers understand information better if they read something familiar before something unfamiliar. Choose between:

- Chronological: Past to present or present to past
- Priority: Most to least important, or sometimes vice versa
- Geographical: By region or area
- Problem/Cause/Effect: Problem, what caused it, what effect it's having (can also be problem, effect, cause)
- Questions and Answers: Interview-type format
- Advantages/Disadvantages: Pros and cons
- Bottom Line/Evidence/Tasks: Result (conclusion, problem, action); statistics, facts; tasks to be done

Always go from known information to unknown, simple information to complex, general concepts before specific, and the whole idea before the parts.

6

Enumerate and use headings and subheadings to package information for easy reading and to show shifts in content. Headings allow you to go from one topic to the next without narrative transitions. If listed items are equally important and have no heading indicating number (i.e., *Five Pointers*), don't number or alphabetize the list. Instead, use bullets or dashes to show where each item begins.

- (a) Make headings
- Short
 - Succinct
 - Informative
 - Consistent

- (b) Let headings announce specific content


Vague
Conclusion

Specific
Four Key Conclusions

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(c) Use headings to create interest

<u>Boring</u>	<u>Interesting</u>
Cost Considerations	Innovative Ways to Cut Costs

 **Be positive.** Sentences should be written in a positive tone whenever possible, so avoid no, not and n't, except for strong emphasis or contrast. In general, use not only when you feel like underlining it. (The employee was late vs. The employee was not on time!) Look for sentences from which you can cut the negative, and tell readers what is rather than what is not and what you can do rather than what you can't do.

Negative: *The answer does not lie with carelessness or incompetence.*

Better: *The answer lies in having enough people to do the job.*

Negative: *Because of the difficulty in our inventory department, we will not be able to deliver your new Jaguar this month.*

Better: *We're happy to tell you that your new Jaguar will be delivered on August 1. We apologize for the delay.*

Negative: *We can't incorporate all the specified design features without increasing the unit size.*

Better: *To provide the specified design features, we have increased the unit size.*

Negative: *Absolutely no refunds after 7 days!*

Better: *We will cheerfully refund your full purchase price within 7 days!*