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14 Pointers For Style (Part 2)



Use the active voice. Active voice is when you *do* something, passive voice is when something is done *to* you. As the late Theodore Bernstein said in *The Careful Writer*, “The active voice strikes like a boxer moving forward in attack; the passive voice parries while backpedaling.” For that reason, active voice is almost always preferable to passive. Let your subject do to your object (sentence structure = subject, verb, object), rather than having your object be done to by your subject (sentence structure = object, verb, [by] subject). Active structure always produces a shorter, livelier, more personable sentence.



Use similes, metaphors and personification to spice up your writing. For centuries, effective writers have been recognized for their ability to tell stories and use figures of speech that inspire attitude adjustments and behavior changes in their readers and listeners.

A figure of speech lets the reader relate to an idea as if it were something else. Figures of speech can range from short words or phrases to longer make-believe stories or personal experiences. The most usable in business writing are similes, metaphors and personification, but these do tend to become overused and wind up in the cliché category instead. If you are creative enough to come up with new, interesting figures of speech, use them; if not, stay away!

A simile states a comparison between two unlike items by using words such as *like, as, than, seems and appears*: His muscles were as *hard as icebergs*.

A metaphor is an implied comparison between two unlike items: The girl was a *flower in botanical wallpaper*.

Personification is a metaphor attributing human appearance, emotion or other qualities to nonhuman subjects: The tree began digging into our roof *with its bony fingers*.

You can use figures of speech to add life to dull writing (or to make dull writing duller), as long as you make sure your meaning will be understood, and as long as you don't mix your metaphors by putting two things together that don't belong together:

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The Party is fueling the fires of galloping inflation.

I think we'll be paddling up a stream behind the eight ball.

When the economy dictates belt-tightening, advertising usually feels the ax first.



Avoid clichés, slang, hyperboles, euphemisms and jargon and outdated language. These noncreative devices usually add nothing to the meaning of a sentence and can make your writing weak and boring. Weed these from your writing:

► **Clichés:** Overused, trite phrases:

all that glitters is not gold

as easy as pie

at a loss for words

at the eleventh hour

black as pitch

blew my mind

brown as a berry

bury the hatchet

cool as a cucumber

dead as a doornail

dumb as a cow

fit to be tied

green with envy

hard as a rock

head honcho

in no uncertain terms

in the mainstream

Is that your final answer?

it was no picnic

last but not least

no sooner said than done

off his rocker

pass the buck

piece of cake

right to the bitter end

the bottom line

throw in the towel

tip of the iceberg

to make a long story short

too funny for words

variety is the spice of life

win-win solution

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► **Slang:** Informal or substandard language, usually from a particular group or area:

- *Gonna/gotta*: Haphazard contractions for *going to*. I've just *gotta* get the point across that these words are not a contraction for anything and are never gonna be acceptable in good writing.
- *Irregardless*: Still considered poor English by the experts and most of the world. It negates itself twice—*ir* and *less* are both negative affixes. Use *regardless*.
- *Ain't*: Still considered substandard usage. Use *are not* or *am not*.

Ignorant people think it's the noise which fighting cats make that is so aggravating, but it ain't so; it's the sickening grammar they use.

—Mark Twain (Samuel Clements), 1835-1910
American humorist and writer

► **Hyperboles:** Extravagant exaggerations:

almost died laughing
can't wait to see you
could eat a horse
dying for a burger
green with envy
hard to swallow
it's to die for
literally buried in work



mad as an old wet hen
mean as a snake
scared to death
swims like a rock
worked my fingers to
the bone
would give my soul
for

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► **Euphemisms:** Expressions substituted for ones that might be considered painful or offensive:

- Little blessing (baby, newborn)
- Experienced negative career development (was fired)
- Generate revenue (make money)
- Sanitation engineer (garbage collector)
- Removal vehicle (truck)
- Poorly buffered precipitation (acid rain)
- Nonowner occupied equity recovery (second mortgage)
- Energy documents (power bills)
- Positive mortality experience (lived)
- Synthetic glass (plastic)

Euphemisms are unpleasant truths wearing diplomatic cologne.

—Quentin Crisp, 1908-1999
American author and actor

► **Jargon:** Specific language of a particular group, such as computer programmers, lawyers or teenagers, that is usually unclear to the rest of us. It's best to avoid jargon and foreign expressions unless you're convinced the usage is the best way to say what you mean. According to *Financial Times* a few years ago, Marks and Spencer in England reported that sales of *vichyssoise* in their store doubled when they dropped the French and called it what it is: leek and potato soup. If you even suspect that your reader won't understand the term, explain or change it.

► **Outdated language:** Language rarely used today:

<u>Outdated</u>	<u>Use instead</u>
amid, amidst, amongst	in, among
firstly	first
moreover	and
nevertheless	anyway, but
thusly	so
unto	to
upon	on



Avoid prejudicial language. Although we can't always avoid prejudicial words and phrases, we should at least try to eliminate the ones that obviously discriminate against, or offend, others. Remember, just because you see nothing wrong with a statement doesn't mean there's nothing wrong with it.

Guidelines For Bias-Free Communication

- Be aware of words, images and situations that suggest that all or most members of a particular group are the same (women are poor drivers, men don't eat quiche). Stereotypes may lead to assumptions that are unsupportable and offensive. They cloud the fact that all attributes may be found in all groups and individuals.
- Avoid qualifiers that suggest an exception to the rule: There were a lot of intelligent black students at the orientation program. Under what circumstances would you write There were a lot of intelligent white students at the program?
- Identify by race or ethnic origin only when relevant. Few situations require such identification:

I met a nice Jewish man at the wedding.

That blind lady is really a hard worker.

Would you ever say *nice Baptist man* or *sighted lady*?

- Don't use language that could have questionable connotations. While a word or phrase may not be personally offensive to you, it may be to others. It's time to strip our language of words and expressions that don't express equality.
 - *Culturally deprived* or *culturally disadvantaged* may imply superiority of one culture over another.
 - *Non-White* implies that White is the standard. Similar phrases, such as *non-Black* and *non-Yellow*, don't exist in our language.
 - *Minority* ignores the fact that people of color comprise the majority of the world's population (and may comprise the majority of your immediate locale).
- Be aware of the possible negative implications of symbolic words, such as *black heart*, *yellow peril*, *wild Indians*, *redskins* and *jew them down*, even though you may not intentionally mean anything by it.

- Avoid the generic *he* and *his*. This nongender single form insults half the population. *He/she* is no better. Use *they* and *their* instead:

A manager should know the strengths of *their* employees.

Or use plural subjects:

Managers should know the strengths of their employees.

- Avoid words with gender references unless necessary: lady doctor, lady lawyer, male nurse, male secretary.

12

Be vibrant. Write with verbs and nouns, rather than adjectives and adverbs. Use energetic verbs that show action (*decide*) instead of verbs that suffocate nouns under words like *have* and *make* (*make a decision*).

Avoid needless qualifiers such as *very*, *rather*, *seldom*, *sometimes*, *somewhat*, *partial*, *pretty*, *many*, *fairly*, *virtually*, *moderately*, *actually*, *totally*, *absolutely*, *completely*, *continually*, *constantly*, *continuously*, *literally*, *really*, *unfortunately*, *ironically*, *incredibly*, *hopefully*, *finally*, *certainly*, *hardly*, *scarcely*. These words and others like them promise emphasis, but too often they steal the strength from our sentences instead.

The *ly* adverbs especially tempt us to put them at the beginning of a sentence to introduce a general idea or wishful thinking: ***Hopefully***, *I'll meet the deadline*. Adverbs have to modify a verb or other adverb, and *hopefully* obviously doesn't modify *meet*, so it shouldn't go in the modifier position.

Be cautious of phrases that have two modifiers and a noun (*normally lovely smile*, *ground-breakingly racy sitcom*). Here's a perfect example I heard on television this week: *I anxiously await your answer impatiently*. The modifiers aren't positioned together, but they sure bog down the sentence, don't they?

13

Be rhythmic. Writing, like dancing, needs rhythm to perform at its best. If all your sentences have the same grammatical pattern and the same logic and design, your writing will be dull. Yet, in business and government writing, the average written sentence is 28 words long! (The average spoken sentence is 20 words, and the average sentence of the professional writer is 18!) A string of long sentences, no matter how well written, will put the reader to sleep. A string of short, choppy sentences sounds harsh—even angry. Vary the length and form of your words, sentences and paragraphs for higher impact and interest.

- **Long and dull:** I am presently seven days from marriage, yet I do not rest merry today because Father and the children could not come from Lexington for Christmas, and I miss seeing them. Perhaps they fear being obligated to stay through the nuptials, which

they have already “sadly” declined and therefore will not attend. I feel like a stranger in my own home and tread lightly around my sister and her husband to avoid seeing their drawn faces. I remember Christmases past ringing with laughter and joyousness, but tonight my heart is shredding like bark on a long-dead tree. My only true joy is Elizabeth’s Baby Albert and his youthful innocence, for he has yet to learn that the world can be a confusing, cruel place.

- Short and harsh: Seven days from marriage. I don’t rest merry, however. Father and the children couldn’t come for Christmas. I miss seeing them. Perhaps they fear being obligated to stay through the nuptials. They have already declined. I feel like a stranger in my own home. I tread lightly around others to avoid their faces. I remember Christmases past. There was laughter and joy. But tonight my heart is sad. My only joy is Elizabeth’s Baby Albert. He is still innocent. He has yet to learn that the world can be confusing and cruel.
- Mixed and rhythmic: I’m now seven days from marriage, yet I don’t rest merry. Father and the children can’t come for Christmas, and I already miss seeing them. Perhaps they fear being obligated to stay through the nuptials, which they have already “sadly” declined. I feel like a stranger in my own home, and tread lightly around Elizabeth and John to avoid their drawn faces. I remember Christmases past ringing with laughter and joyousness, but tonight my heart is shredding like bark on a dead tree. My only true joy is Elizabeth’s Baby Albert, for he has yet to learn that the world can be a confusing, cruel place.

14

Be persuasive when necessary.

- Capture their attention by leading with a question, promise or benefit.
- Tell them the good news, or at least what they want to know.
- Remind them of their needs and show them how those needs can be filled.
- Highlight benefits with graphics to make them easily visualized. Point out your key messages with color, handwriting, bullets, brackets, asterisks or other features.
- Tell them the facts. Be honest with your claims. Answer “who says.”
- Use *when* rather than *if* to describe upcoming actions/decisions (**when you do this NOT if you do this**). Use *will* rather than *would* or, better yet, use *do*. Use *can* or *do* rather than *could*.
- Use *if* and *then* together, although *then* is usually unnecessary in the real text: **If you will take this action, [then] you’ll get this reward.**

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- Clarify the reader's options/choices and show all decisions as smart, no-lose choices.
- Be specific and save your readers from having to do complex calculations or think about multiple meanings.
- Use persuasive words: *you, money, save, new, easy, free, guarantee, discovery, results, health, proven.*
- Avoid turn-off words: *absurd, ridicule, allege, contrary, obstacle, wrong, complaint, condemn, hate, encroach, pain, waste.*
- Call for action. Ask for what you want.
- Remember that *u* precedes *i* in the word *persuasion*.

When you're analyzing a writing that didn't come out exactly the way you wanted it to, ask yourself, "What was I trying to accomplish?" Think it over until you can state the purpose in one simple sentence. This guideline will help you strengthen sentences, paragraphs, reports, letters, books—everything.

When you have your intent clearly in mind, ask a few more questions:

- Did I ramble or put in unnecessary facts, words or phrases?
- Did I talk normally and conversationally?
- Did I anticipate the reader's questions and answer them as I wrote?
- Do my sentences strike the eye and ear as complete, logical, rhythmical units?
- Is my style on the correct level for the reader or does it need to be more/less formal?
- Did I state my purpose straightforwardly and directly, or did I beat around the bush?

How Clear Is Your Writing?

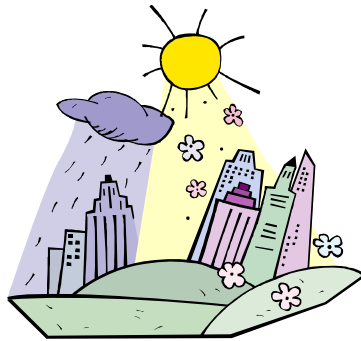
Find a letter, document, report, etc., that you've written and evaluate it based on this readability scale. Use only the first 100 words of your document. First, count the pronouns and circle the appropriate number in Column A.

Next, count the number of words in your sentences and divide by the number of sentences to find the average words per sentence. Circle the appropriate number in Column C.

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Draw a line between the circles. Your clarity level is the one in Column B that the line touches. If you need to move up or down Column B a little to make it work, move down. If your clarity level is below “probable,” you need to work on your writing.

A	B	C
<u>Pronouns per 100 words</u>	<u>Probability of being misunderstood</u>	<u>Average words per sentence</u>
19 or more	Extremely improbable	9 or fewer
9-18	Highly improbable	10-15
5-17	Probable	16-19
3-5	Highly probable	20-26
0-2	Virtually certain	30 or more



**Clear or Foggy
Today?**