

This ain't no English lesson

The fast and dirty writing academy



Some numbers (and what they mean for your words)

The beauty of language is that, with a palette of just 26 letters and some punctuation, we can express virtually any idea we've ever had. But, because of this almost infinite flexibility, it is virtually impossible to produce an 'instruction manual' ensuring that every single writer writes in exactly the same way. And let's face it, our writing would be pretty dull if we did.

There are a lot of words in English. The number in active use stands at a little over 170,000 (with about 40,000 more that have fallen out of favour). Surprisingly then, over 80% of the words most English speakers use come from a list of just 200. In case you're interested, these are:

the of and a to in he have it that for they I with as not on she at by this we
you do but from or which one would all will there say who make when can
more if no man out other so what time up go about than into could state
only new year some take come these know see use get like then first any
work now may such give over think most even find day also after way
many must look before great back through long where much should well
people down own just because good each those feel seem how high too
place little world very still nation hand old life tell write become here show
house both between need mean call develop under last right move thing
general school never same another begin while number part turn real leave
might want point form off child few small since against ask late home
interest large person end open public follow during present without again
hold govern around possible head consider word programme problem
however lead system set order eye plan run keep face fact group play
stand increase early course change help line

So what does this mean for your writing? It means, keep it simple. If you mainly use simple words and string them together into simple sentences and simple paragraphs, you will communicate more effectively. Simple really.

A bit of philosophy

What makes for good writing? It's got to be more than not spelling anything wrong and getting all our commas in the right place. So what is it? Essentially there are three key features good business writing shares:

- 1: *Meaning is not contained in words*
This may sound counterintuitive but it is true. In writing, meaning is not contained in the words we use, rather it is contained in the response those words generate from our readers. Good writing recognises this. It focuses on the reader first and foremost. It knows the response it wants to achieve. And it uses words to get that response.
- 2: *All communication is a conversation*
It's all too easy to think about a piece of text as a one-way communication. Writers write, readers read. However, to think this way is to ignore a fundamental truth: as soon as we start to read, a conversation begins in our heads. We respond to the text. This may be to agree or to argue passionately against the ideas presented. Good writing allows for this, engaging with the reader rather than steamrolling through.

- 3: *We communicate to persuade*
Why do we write? It can't be that our reader is simply somewhere they can't take a phone call or meeting. Nor is it really down to the audience being too numerous to fit into a single room. We write to persuade. This can be in subtle or overt ways but even the most basic informational copy is there for a reason. That's why good writing will always have a purpose, a focus. It will be written with an outcome in mind.

Tips, tricks and techniques

The following represent practical tips to help you write better. There is little science behind them (although some). For the most part, they are what smarter people than I have taught me over the years plus some other stuff I've worked out for myself.

Understand your audience

Who are you talking to? What do they care about? What are their hot buttons and total turn-offs? The more you know about your potential readers, the more you can start engaging them. All writing we produce should be about the reader, their needs and their interests. And having a picture of them clearly in your head gives you somewhere to go back to, a foundation to judge your writing against.

Remember, as mentioned above, meaning is contained in the reaction of your readers to your writing. Get under their skin and you'll be in a much better position to talk with them.

Be relevant

Keep your copy focused and interesting. Talk to your readers about what they are interested in not just what you're into. Ask yourself: what's in it for them? Why will they give up their valuable time and scant attention to read your copy? Don't simply tell them what they already know. If you must repeat their words back to them to show understanding, do it quickly and add your own perspective.

Write plainly and simply

Always ask yourself: is there a simpler word than the one I've chosen? The world of business is littered with words only ever seen in proposals and PowerPoint presentations. A good rule of thumb is if you wouldn't say it out loud, don't say it in your writing.

Be clear and human and you will close the gap between yourself and your reader.

Tell tales

Storytelling is almost as old as the human race. Putting information into the form of a story is one of the fastest, most effective ways to engage your reader. This might take the form of an anecdote, real-world example or hypothetical scenario. The key is to immerse the reader into the action, making it as real as possible for them.

Start by starting (fix it later)

So you've marshalled all the relevant information, done the necessary reading and talked it through with your colleagues, what next? The tyranny of the blank sheet of paper is well known. Of course, today it's more the blank screen and flashing cursor. So where do you start?

There is of course some general preparation you can do. Structuring your content as an outline can be helpful and often points out gaps early in the process. You can try writing a 'logic train' where you lay out the argument in stages and where each new point builds on the previous one.

Of course, with all this preparation, the page can still remain blank. The answer is to start anywhere. Simply start writing. You are going to edit and refine it later anyway. But you can only do this if there is content to edit and refine. So just write.

The rule of three

It is a truism that a lot of writing is about creating lists. This may involve anything from a list of services to a list of ideas. The trick is to write them well. One way is to group them into threes. This has the effect of giving a sense of completeness. It creates a feeling of progression. And it throws emphasis onto the final point.

The dictionary rule

Remember the 200 words. The simple rule is: if you have to look a word up in a dictionary, don't use it. And if your readers are likely to need to look it up, definitely don't use it. Business writing is not about showing how clever you are, it's about communicating effectively with an audience.

The jargon rule

The same goes for jargon. On the upside, jargon has the effect of making everyone who understands it feel part of an exclusive group. The downside is those who don't understand it feel excluded and ignorant. The downside outweighs the upside.

Don't repeat yourself

Beware of overusing individual words. They become monotonous and tend to draw attention away from the point you are making. Ensure you mix it up where you can – so if you used 'business' the first time, use 'company' the next and 'organisation' the time after. Also look for any habitual phrases that crop up too often in your writing and get rid of them (this is sometimes called killing your darlings).

Avoid the passive

In general, avoid using passive sentences. They can drain the life out of your copy. Try to opt for active sentences that give momentum and drive to your writing. So for example, instead of:

The core principles of our proposal will be outlined in the following pages.

Opt for:

We will outline our proposal's core principles in the following pages.

And and but

Contrary to what your school teachers may have told you, it is fine to begin sentences with *and*. And *but* is fine too. There is also a very good reason to do so. Starting with either *and* or *but* places additional emphasis onto that sentence (see 'Rule of three' above). Beyond this, it will help you chop long complex sentences up into shorter, simpler ones.

Edit

If possible, get someone else to edit your writing. However, if you are doing it yourself:

- Take your time. Good editing can take as long as half the time it took to write the original content. Perhaps even longer.
- Edit first for style and tone. Ask these questions: Is it clear? Is it necessary? Is there a shorter way to say it? Can it be simpler?
- Leave checking grammar and spelling until last. For a thorough edit, print the content.

Cut by a third

This is a tough one to do, but infinitely worth it. Get your text to a point where you are really happy with it. Run a word count. Now cut your copy by a third. This will force you to cut out the flab present in almost all writing.

'That' isn't needed

If you go through any text you've written, 90% of the time you can remove the word 'that' and it will improve your sentence.

Exclamation marks are like laughing at your own joke

Don't use them.

Proofread

Sloppy errors will undermine your readers' responses to your writing. So spend time proofreading. It is very difficult to see your own errors so get someone else to proofread your writing too wherever possible.

See the end of this document for some proofreading tips.

Enjoy what you write

Finally, try to enjoy writing. Don't view it as some high-stakes, high-pressure event where the wrong word will result in the fall of civilisation as we know it. This rarely happens. Even with business writing, be playful, try different things out. For the 20% of your writing where you stray outside the core 200, choose interesting words (*interesting*, not complex or impenetrable). And whatever you do, don't be boring.

Good luck.

Jay Ball
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Proofreading top 20

- 1: Always proof from paper, not the screen. Go s l o w l y – there is no time to fix it after it goes to a reader or to print.
- 2: Don't get interrupted or distracted (go somewhere else if you need to).
- 3: Beware – if you wrote it, you will tend to read what you think is there (proof with an obsessively critical eye or get a colleague to help).
- 4: Read **every** word, don't simply scan. When looking at spelling, do not concentrate on meaning (do a separate pass for that).
- 5: Know the mistakes you make most often (mine is you/your) and do a separate check for them.
- 6: Split out different types of checking (go through first for meaning – does it makes sense? – then for spelling, then for punctuation, then for consistency etc).
- 7: Look for misspelled words (kinda obvious) but particularly do the following:
 - Before you print out of Word, make sure you **select all** and then go to **Tools** and then **Language** and select **English (UK)** – then spell check
 - Look for things like you/your/you're, the/they, to/too
- 7: Check the numbering on numbered lists.
- 8: For absolute paranoia, read it backwards one word at a time.
- 9: Look for inconsistencies – particularly hyphenations and on newer words (eg web site, web-site, website) also on capitalisation and full stops on heads/subs.
- 10: Look for partial sentences (where a sentence requires the other sentences around it to make sense).
- 11: Be very careful where you have cut and pasted (this will not only bring other people's errors in but will also – in Word – bring in their language settings).
- 12: There is rarely a comma before 'and' – unless it is part of a list that has other 'ands' in it.
- 13: Exclamation marks are unnecessary 99.9% of the time.
- 14: Never put in spoof web addresses/phone numbers (eg it is far easier for 0800 123456 to make its way into print than 0800 XXXXXXXX).
- 15: Be careful of ALL CAPS WORDS as typos are harder to spot.
- 16: Make sure * marks lead to a) a footnote and b) a footnote referring to the thing being *'d.
- 17: Look out for apostrophes, they're tricky. Make sure you understand when to use them, when not to and the exceptions to the general rule.
- 18: If you have a sentence that starts within brackets, the full stop goes inside the brackets, otherwise it goes outside.
- 19: If it isn't a proper noun, lowercase it.
- 20: Try not to make assumptions, assumption is the mother of all cock ups.

Now, there are three errors on this page, can you find them?