

20 tips for writing well

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Most people write badly because they can't think clearly. It follows that if you can think clearly, you have a chance of writing well. These tips will help you put on paper exactly what you have in mind.

1. Keep in mind that the reader doesn't have much time. What you write must be clear on first reading. The shorter your paper, the better the chance it will be read.

2. Know where you are going - and tell the reader. Start with an outline to organise your argument.

Begin important paragraphs with topic sentences that tell what follows. Conclude with a summary paragraph.

An outline not only helps the reader; it keeps you from getting lost en route. Compile a list of all your points before you start.

3. Make what you write easy to read. For extra emphasis, underline entire sentences and number your points.

Put main points into indented paragraphs like this.

4. Short sentences and short paragraphs - are easier to read than long ones. Send telegrams, not essays.

5. Make your writing vigorous and direct. Wherever possible use active verbs, and avoid the passive voice.

Passive

We are concerned that if this recommendation is turned down the brand's market share may be negatively affected.

Active

We believe you must act on this recommendation to hold the brand's share.

6. Avoid clichés. Find your own words.

Cliché

Turn over every rock for a solution

Put it to the acid test

Few and far between

Last but not least
Iron out

Direct

Try hard
Test thoroughly
Few
Last
Remove

7. Avoid vague modifiers - such as 'very' and 'slightly.' Search for the word or phrase that precisely states your meaning.

Vague

Very overspent
Slightly behind schedule

Precise

Overspent by R100,000
One day late

8. Use specific, concrete language. Avoid technical jargon. There's always a simple, down-to-earth word, which says the same thing as the show-off word.

Jargon

Parameters
Implement
Viable
Interface
Optimum
Meaningful
Judgmentally
Input
Output

Plain English

Limits, boundaries
Carry out
Practical, workable
To talk with
Best
Real, actual
I think
Facts, information
Results

9. Find the right word. Know its precise meaning. Use your online dictionary and thesaurus. Don't confuse words like these:

It's is the contraction of it is. (It's the advertising of Standard Bank.)

Its is the possessive form of it and doesn't take an apostrophe. (Standard Bank and its advertising are remarkable.)

i.e. means that is.

e.g. means for example.

When you confuse words like these, your reader is justified in concluding that you don't know any better.

10. Don't make spelling mistakes. When in doubt, check your online dictionary. Your Spellchecker should also be running continuously. Just make sure it's set to English, and not American English. There's a big difference. *[Editor: Don't be totally reliant on the Spellchecker, however. Check, for instance, that "shipping can expect rough seas" is not rendered as "shipping can expect rough sees".]*

If your writing is careless, the reader may reasonably doubt the thoroughness of your thinking.

11. Don't overwrite or over-state. No more words than necessary. Take the time to boil down your points.

12. Get to the point. Don't beat around the bush. Say what you think - in simple, clear sentences. Write confidently.

13. State things as simply as you can. Use familiar words and uncomplicated sentences.

14. Handle numbers consistently. Newspapers generally spell out numbers for ten and under, use numerals for 11 and up.

Don't write K when you mean thousand, or M when you mean a million. The reader may not know this code. Write R5,000 - not R5K. Write R7,000,000 (or R7 million) - not R7M.

15. Strike out needless words. Always go through your first draft once with the sole purpose of deleting all unnecessary words, phrases, and sentences.

Many pieces of writing can be improved by deleting entire paragraphs, and sometimes even whole pages.

16. Be concise, but readable. Terseness is a virtue, if not carried to extremes. Don't leave out words. Write full sentences, and make them count.

17. Be brief, simple and natural. Don't write, 'The reasons are fourfold.' Write, 'There are four reasons.'

Don't start sentences with 'importantly.' Write, 'The important point is...'

Don't write 'hopefully' when you mean 'I hope that.' 'Hopefully' means 'in a hopeful manner.' Its common misuse annoys a great many literate people.

18. Don't write like a lawyer or a bureaucrat. 'Re' is legalese meaning 'in the matter of' and is never necessary.

The slash-as in and/or is bureaucratese. Don't write, 'We'll hold the meetings on Monday and/or Tuesday.' Write, 'We'll hold the meeting on Monday or Tuesday - or both days, if necessary.'

19. Never be content with your first draft. Rewrite, with an eye toward simplifying and clarifying. Rearrange. Revise. Above all, cut.

For every major document, let time elapse between your first and second drafts - at least overnight. Then come at it with a questioning eye and a ruthless attitude.

20. Have somebody else look over your draft. When writing an important document or speech submit a draft to

colleagues for editing and comment.

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