



COLLEGE OF MEDIA AND PUBLISHING

COURSES IN PROOFREADING, JOURNALISM, WRITING AND MARKETING

Ten simple steps to improve your writing



An ebook from the College of Media and Publishing

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Introduction

A question for you

How often do you read something and then reread it because it didn't make sense? Every day, probably. Think how much time that wastes.

Most people spend at least 20 minutes a day rereading badly-written material. Most documents are three times longer than they need to be. Letters and emails lack clarity and focus. And, memos fail to get to the point.

Why? Because most people haven't had any writing training since they left school. That's weird, as writing is a vital skill that they use every day.

This ebook will show you how to write efficiently, and effectively.

Try this

[Instructions on how to write in the answer boxes in Adobe Reader](#) (this will take you to the end of this ebook).

Read the copy on a webpage, and ask yourself:

1. What tone was used: Friendly? Formal? Overfamiliar? Pushy?

Write your answer here

2. Was it easy to read? Were you able to skim the copy comfortably? Or, did you have to go back and reread parts of it?

Write your answer here

3. How did it make you feel? Interested? Bored? Excited? Or, nothing at all?

Write your answer here

4. Did you want to read on? If so, why? If not, why not?

Write your answer here

Now, do the same with something that you wrote recently. Anything will do – a letter, or an email. Be honest. Which areas could have been better?

Before you start

Some people say that effective writing means “dumbing down”. We prefer to call it “writing appropriately”.

For instance, say you have a friend who has PhDs in classics and English literature. If you email her, that doesn't mean you need to use perfect prose.

Even though she has a great grasp of classical, old-school English, she doesn't need to use it all the time. She's busy and prefers emails to be simple, clear and concise.

Or, imagine a professor of physics is ordering a Chinese takeaway. He will say: “I'll have sweet and sour chicken, egg fried rice and some prawn crackers.”

A car mechanic or road sweeper would use exactly the same language.

There is a place for “old-school” writing, but it isn't appropriate to use it on every occasion.

[Listen to this podcast: Writing in the Queen's English](#)

Let's look at the 10 steps that will improve your writing.



Step 1: plan before you write

Do you plan your writing? If not, it's like visiting a new city without first looking at the guidebook. You end up wandering around.

Most people's writing wanders around. So, before you write, ask yourself:

1. Why am I writing this?
2. Who am I writing for?
3. What do I want to say?
4. What one thing do I want them to remember?
5. What do I want them to do?

Base the content around the answers, and leave out everything else. Then your writing will be focused.



Step 2: focus on the famous five

Everything you write should be:

1. **Short.** No longer than necessary. A 70-word email is too long if it could have been written in 40 words. And a 500-word report is too short if it missed out key facts.
2. **Simple.** A 10-year-old should be able to understand it.
3. **Interesting.** People won't read your message if you bore them.
4. **Relevant.** Focus on one key point. If necessary, introduce other points lower down.
5. **Accurate.** Check times, dates, the spelling of names, URLs and phone numbers.



Step 3: keep the reader in mind

There is no point in writing something if the reader can't understand it. And, it's your job to make sure they do. Otherwise, you'll waste their time, and your own – and get frustrated when they ask you what you meant.

Imagine a doctor going into an infant school to talk about his job. He stands at the front and says:

After taking the Hippocratic oath, I decided to become a registrar at the local infirmary and then, after three years, joined a local NHS Trust as a locum.

None of the children would have a clue what he was talking about.

He should have said:

My job is to make people better when they are sick. I used to work in a hospital, like the one in the town. But, now I work in a doctor's surgery, like the one mummy takes you to when you are poorly. I help when other doctors are away.

Most of the children would understand this, because he adapted his language for his audience.

Tip

Write a pen picture of your target reader and ask yourself who it is:

- A colleague.
- A friend.
- A close family member.

Or, who is it? Picture them, and write accordingly.

Try it yourself

Write 100 words on each of the following topics, using the right language for the right person:

- Explain your favourite TV programme to an 80-year-old aunt.
- Describe your last holiday to your bank manager.
- Describe your hobby to a sassy 16-year-old girl.

Each piece of writing should be different, because you were writing for different readers.



Step 4: write fluently

How do you write fluently? Simple: write as you speak.

Read this:

If you are a householder or maybe you are a business and you are thinking of fitting a burglar alarm system on your premises, then here is an opportunity for you - you are invited to consult a leading Crime Reduction Expert for advice on how to make a cost-effective investment.

You probably got lost halfway through and had to reread it to understand it.

Now read this version:

An expert is offering advice on burglar alarms to help you choose the right equipment without paying too much.

See the difference? The second version is closer to the way you would say it.

Most people speak in fairly clear, fluent English. But, when they start writing, they get complicated.

For instance, you might tell your friend:

I'm just popping out to the café for a cuppa and a cake.

But, if you write it down, you might say:

I am proposing to sojourn to the restaurant and partake of a beverage and an item of confectionery.

When you write something, imagine you are sitting talking to a friend, and use the same language.

And, if you are struggling to write something fluently, say it out loud, record it, play it back and write what you said.

Step 5: keep everything short

Most people are in a hurry and do not have the time to read long words, sentences and paragraphs.

So, it's your job to help them to read quickly.

Make sure that about 60% of the words you write contain six letters or fewer. And, never go below 50%, unless you are writing something for academics.

Sentences should be fewer than 25 words each. And, paragraphs should be two sentences, maximum.

They should also be easy to understand.

Read this sentence:

This vehicle, which is the top of the range both in America and in Europe, comes complete with 20 new features fitted as standard.

The phrase "which is the top of the range both in America and in Europe" slows the reader down, because it's placed in the middle of the main sentence.

It would be better to say:

This vehicle comes complete with 20 new features fitted as standard. It is top of the range both in America and in Europe.

Step 6: get rid of jargon

Our language is littered with jargon and clichés that are a waste of space and time.

Look at these examples:

| | |
|---------------------------|------------------------------------|
| A large number of | Why not say many ? |
| All of a sudden | Why not say suddenly ? |
| At this moment in time | Why not say now ? |
| During the course of | Why not say while ? |
| Give consideration to | Why not say consider ? |
| In spite of the fact that | Why not say despite ? |
| The majority of | Why not say most ? |
| Units of housing | Why not say homes ? |
| Secure the funding | Why not say get the money ? |
| Owing to the fact that | Why not say because ? |
| Was a witness to | Why not say saw ? |
| Behind schedule | Why not say late ? |
| In short supply | Why not say scarce ? |

A good writer should change cumbersome phrases and jargon. Visit these “anti-jargon” websites for some inspiration:

<http://www.plainenglish.co.uk/>

<http://www.plainenglish.co.uk/drivel-defence-text.html>

You can see how clear your writing is by taking the SMOG test. This stands for Simplified Measure of Gobbledygook.

You can test your writing for readability using this online [SMOG calculator](#)

Aim for a score of 12 or less.

Test yourself

[Instructions on how to write in the answer boxes in Adobe Reader](#) (this will take you to the end of this ebook).

Examine the following words and phrases and write shorter jargon-free alternatives next to them:

At an early date:

At the present time:

Commence:

Worst ever:

Face up to:

In addition to:

Behind schedule:

Ahead of schedule:

Seating accommodation:

Lacerations and contusions:

He sustained injuries:

In the event of:

**Come and
join us!**



Step 7: remove obstacles

People easily lose concentration when they read. Small things distract them.

So:

1. Keep capital letters to a minimum. Don't write:

Uptown District Council Cabinet Member for Arts and Recreation.

Instead, write:

Uptown district council cabinet member for arts and recreation.

2. Avoid unnecessary punctuation. Just use full stops, apostrophes, question marks, exclamation marks and speech marks.
3. Keep commas to a minimum by using simple sentence structures. Divide sentences with commas into two.



Step 8: work out how people read

People read in different ways, depending on what they're reading. They might:

Scan. This involves flicking through, searching for something they want, and ignoring everything else, for example, scanning a dictionary.

Read carefully. This involves absorbing, considering and digesting the content, for example, reading a legal document.

Read lightly. This is reading for pleasure, but not with a great deal of concentration, for example, reading a newspaper.

Skim. This means glancing through to get a general idea of the content, and maybe pausing to study some parts more thoroughly, for example, reading a sales letter.

Test yourself

[Instructions on how to write in the answer boxes in Adobe Reader \(this will take you to the end of this ebook\)](#)

Which of the four reading methods above would you use for:

- Reading a company's health and safety policy?

Write your answer here

- Reading a newspaper during your coffee break?

Write your answer here

- Looking up a number in a phone book?

Write your answer here

- Reading the instructions for a microwave?

Write your answer here

Step 9: get to the point

Read this copy which is the first line of a letter selling car insurance:

As a car driver, you know how running costs are climbing every day ...

Yawn. This sentence says nothing important. The writer should have got to the point straight away:

We can cut your car insurance quote by 15%. Guaranteed.

The second version makes you take notice.

So, make your key point immediately. If you don't know what it is, then find out! Go back to the questions we asked in Step 1.

Ask yourself: if you had five seconds to get a message across, what would you say? The answer should give you your start.



Step 10: write clearly

Most of us waste time asking for information we should have been given in the first place.

Try an experiment: record how many times a day you email or message someone asking them to clarify something they told you. The results might surprise you.

Read these messages and note the important details that have been left out:

- I'll meet you at 9.

When exactly: 9am, or 9pm?

- I'll let you know.

How? By phone, text, or what?

- I'll tell the rest of the staff.

Everyone in the company? Just your team? Or who?

- We need to involve the boss.

Which boss? Who are "We"? You and the reader? Or, other people too?

- Can you bring that report?

Which report? Bring it where?

- I'll get in touch when I get back - we're away for a few days.

Which days? When? How will you get in touch?

Make sure you give precise and complete information, so people don't have to ask you to provide missing details or guess what you meant.

Good luck!

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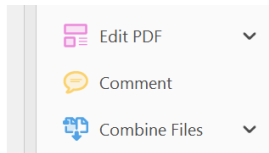
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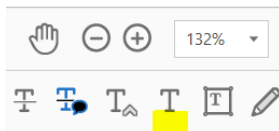
Answer box instructions

Instructions on how to to write in the answer boxes in Adobe Reader

1. Click on Comment (in the right hand pane):



2. Then click on the **T** symbol at the top:



3. And then click in the box and start writing:

Reading a company's health and safety policy:

Write your answer here

[Back to questions on page 1](#)

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