CHAPTER 4

Guidelines for Good Writing

For years, writing coaches have worked to distill a set of qualities in writing that will catch and hold readers. Many people, such as Roy Peter Clark at the Poynter Institute in St. Petersburg, Florida, have spent a great deal of their professional careers analyzing the qualities of good writing. Authors such as William Zinsser, best known for his book *On Writing Well*, offer advice on how to strengthen and improve prose. Even communication researchers, charged with finding out what makes publications sell, have considered which qualities are valued in messages. The research shows the most effective writing is simple and forceful; that is, it says it straight without flourishes and pomp.

In this chapter, you will learn

- four essential qualities in writing: accuracy, clarity, completeness, and fairness,
- five broad rules for writing that will appeal to audiences, and
- specific tips to improve writing.

Watchwords of Writing

No message will succeed if it does not have four essential qualities: accuracy, clarity, completeness, and fairness. We know from the discussion in Chapter 1 that audiences can be fickle; once lost, they might not return. Writing that is accurate, clear, complete, and fair has a better chance of holding audiences, particularly those who might be clicking through websites or leafing through magazines.

Accuracy ensures the credibility of all writing. When an audience catches a misspelled name or an erroneous date, that audience doubts the accuracy of the information that follows. An audience will abandon a communicator or a source it cannot trust.

Clarity means the writer uses language an audience understands. Simple language is preferred over complicated words. Jargon and technical language are avoided. The message comes through.

Completeness anticipates and answers an audience's questions. A complete message satisfies the audience and does so quickly.

Fairness occurs when the writer uses a variety of sources to keep an article balanced, excises any editorial opinion, and strives to be as objective as possible.

Let's look at each element more closely.

Accuracy

Good communication of any kind always contains accurate information. Accuracy is comforting to audiences, who depend on information. Errors can occur at any stage in writing: while gathering information through research and interviewing, transcribing notes, calculating figures, or creating the copy (when typos can occur). To ensure accuracy, writers must use good information-gathering techniques. They must obtain information only from reliable sources, then check and recheck it against other sources. If they find a discrepancy or an error but don't have time to check it, they should follow the adage, "When in doubt, leave it out."

We all are prone to commit errors on occasion. Just because a well-known person recites a fact or the fact is found in a well-known source, such as Wikipedia, doesn't mean it is correct. People might add to a database erroneous information that is not verified, and experts may inadvertently misquote results. Name spellings, middle initials, street numbers, birth dates—seemingly trivial details—become monumentally important once they become part of a message. Such details might be accurate in notes but then could be transcribed erroneously into copy.

Today's information environment constantly tests accuracy. Deadlines, competition, and 24/7 news cycles push reporters and editors to publish, post, or air the news quickly—sometimes too quickly. In their hurry to produce copy, writers run a greater risk of getting information wrong.

Errors have always been a danger to a communicator's credibility, but new technologies have made publishing even more treacherous for writers who don't take the time to get it right. Once incorrect information is online, it is available for others to pick up and repurpose. This incorrect information can then be found and sent forward by other writers who might also fail to double-check for accuracy.

Publishing information online has made it easier to spread inaccurate information, and it has also increased accountability for professional communicators. Some bloggers closely monitor professional news sites, standing ready to criticize inaccuracies. Two of the most prominent sites dedicated to correcting inaccurate information are Snopes.com, a semiprofessional site run by a California couple, and Factcheck.org, funded by the Annenberg Public Policy Center of the University of Pennsylvania.

If messages are wrong, people are misled. Writers and audiences rarely forget the mishap when a name is misspelled or an address is wrong. Inaccuracies in messages lead to distrust among audiences and can lead to libel suits. Once audience members are misled by a source, they have difficulty trusting it again. Even the venerable *New York Times* has struggled with lost credibility because of inaccuracies.

Clarity

A message will have impact if it is clear and straightforward and everyone in its audience can understand it. "Send a check for $75 by February 1 if you want to ski with the Seniors Club in February" makes the requirement clear. The writing is direct and uses simple, to-the-point language.

A message needs to be so clear that no misunderstanding or confusion can possibly result. People rely on media for information on where to vote, get flu shots, take vacations, enroll their children in school, and find cheap gasoline. If the directions to a polling site are unclear, such as "the church on Capitol Square," people will be unhappy when they arrive and discover a church on each corner of Capitol Square.

Style overlaid on a message can also get in the way of comprehension. The length limits of microblogging have created a new shorthand that might not be universally understood. One newcomer to texting thought "LOL" meant "lots of love" instead of "laugh out loud."

Completeness

Useful messages also are complete, giving sufficient information for rea understanding and guidance. A news story that omits an important fact can be misleading and even harmful.

When an important highway intersection outside Washington, D.C. was under construction, traffic was rerouted for a 12-hour period. News reports warned drivers about the detour, but some neglected to mention the additional 45 minutes of drive time required to navigate the detour. This problem with completeness caused headaches for the many travelers who missed important appointments.

Again, length constraints of microblogs and texts can interfere with providing enough information. Writers using those platforms often solve the issue by creating tiny URLs that can send followers to a full story.

Fairness

Messages will be more believable if audiences sense that stories are fair Readers or viewers will turn away from reports they feel are skewed o

one-sided unless they are following a blog or writer they know has a specific agenda.

For a story to be fair or balanced, it must have a variety of sources. That doesn't mean that every story must present each side of an issue in the same detail and the same number of words. Such balance is not possible in most writing. A reporter might not be able to get in touch with sources on one side of an issue, but a simple statement that "the opposition party president could not be reached for comment" would let readers know that he or she tried.

Writers must be careful about the language they use so audiences don't ascribe any specific leaning or viewpoint to the story. Language should be neutral. Quotes can be inflammatory or weighty—but such language should be limited to quotes that are attributed to specific sources, rather than ascribed to the writer.

Keys to Good Writing

Researchers, language professionals, and experienced writers agree on five basic tenets of good writing: (1) use short sentences, (2) use short words, (3) eliminate wordiness, (4) avoid jargon, and (5) come to the point quickly. Anyone can apply the rules while writing and editing. These rules have become more important as messages shrink because of digital delivery.

Good Writing Uses Short Sentences

Most readability experts argue that regardless of age, education, or economic status, people prefer and understand writing that uses short sentences. People have little patience with long, complicated sentences that tax brain power. Of course, not all sentences should be short; sentence length should vary. A short sentence can have impact. A long, complex sentence can set up an idea for the audience or create a mood, and a short sentence can follow immediately—almost as a punch line. Get the point?

A study at the American Press Institute showed that reader understanding drops off dramatically if sentences exceed 20 words, and comprehension continues to drop as sentences grow longer. Only about one of 20 people studied could clearly comprehend 50-word sentences, a common length in newspapers and in academic writing.

Short sentences are critical in broadcast writing or links on websites. Tweets are limited to 140 characters and, therefore, demand short sentences as in this Twitter example from Mariah Carey on June 1, 2012: "Today we celebrate the life of the beloved iconic legend Marilyn Monroe who continues to inspire generation after generation." Often tweets are not complete sentences, however, and use abbreviated language.

Professor Fred Fedler of the University of Central Florida said that simplicity makes stories more interesting and forceful. He cites as an example a prize-winning story by World War II journalist Ernie Pyle in which the average sentence length was 10.6 words.

Good Writing Uses Short Words

Perhaps your high school English teacher praised you for using "penurious" rather than "stingy" or "inebriated" rather than "drunk." Then you were expanding your vocabulary, but now your audience will thank you for choosing the simpler word.

Just as with long sentences, readers and listeners become tired and discouraged when faced with too many complex words—usually those exceeding three syllables. To be sure, you can use commonly known, longer words, such as "responsibility," "establishment," "participate," and "governmental." Be sure, however, that the longer words are a better choice than a shorter version, such as "duty," "founding," "join," or "federal" or "state." Mariah Carey's tweet shows a good mix of words that everyone can understand: "celebrate," "beloved," "iconic," "legend," "inspiration," and "generation."

When writing, select the simplest word possible to convey the meaning. For example, in a police story, a writer said, "The contents of the suspicious package were innocuous." Some readers might wonder if the contents were dangerous or not. Use "fight" instead of altercation. Replace "finalize" with a word such as "conclude" or "finish." Rather than "exasperate," use "annoy" or "bother." Instead of "terminating" this paragraph, we will "end" it.

Good Writing Eliminates Wordiness

"You can almost detect a wordy sentence by looking at it—at least if you can recognize weak verbs, ponderous nouns, and strings of prepositional phrases," Claire Kehrwald Cook writes in her book, *Line by Line: How to Improve Your Own Writing*. Her advice gives writers clues about where to find wordiness and where to improve sentence structure.

Author William Zinsser notes that the secret to good writing is to strip every sentence to its basic components. Writers must detach themselves from the information and chisel it to the bare essentials. Writers must throw out extra words and phrases—even extra sentences and paragraphs. Remember this adage: "Two words are never as good as one." Consider the simple word "new." When used in the following sentence, it is unnecessary: "Crews expect the new building to be completed within two months." All buildings under construction are new. Leave the word out.

Audiences can find the facts only when excess is trimmed. Sparse writing is more professional, more informative, more objective, and more likely to be read. In Saltzman's *If You Can Talk, You Can Write*, writer Stanley Elkin describes the process of eliminating excess in writing: "[It's] a kind of whittling, a honing to the bone, until you finally get whatever the hell you're looking for. It's an exercise in sculpture, chipping away at the rock until you find the nose."

Wordy writing is likely to be redundant. No writer needs to say that a fire "completely destroyed" a downtown block; if it was destroyed, the destruction was complete. This classic often appears: "Jones is currently the manager of

consumer services." "Is" means "now," and "now" means "currently." Kill the word "currently." Think about other phrases such as "past history," "acres of land," "4 p.m. in the afternoon," "at 12 midnight," "dead body," and "totally incomprehensible."

In seeking wordiness, look specifically for unnecessary adjectives and qualifiers. For example, a project cannot be the "most" unique. "Unique" means one of a kind. Qualifiers such as "very," "truly," and "really" can generally be cut without damage to copy.

Sometimes a statement or entire paragraph that repeats a speaker's direct quotes can be deleted:

> Jones said he was delighted the school would receive $40,000 to use for purchasing audiovisual equipment materials for the library.
>
> "I am just delighted that we will have the $40,000 to buy audiovisual equipment for the library," Jones said.

Delete the first paragraph. It does more than serve as a transition to the direct quote—it steals it.

As in art, too much embellishment in writing only detracts and distracts. Consider the effectiveness of the following message before and after its extra words are deleted:

> More than 100 years ago, the Tung Wah Dispensary attempted to cure the ailments and afflictions of the San Francisco Chinatown community from its humble outpost at 828 Sacramento Street. When the institution realized that its cramped quarters were counterproductive to the logistics of health care, it expanded its services and relocated to 845 Jackson Street, eventually being renamed the Chinese Hospital.

Simplified, the history looks like this:

> A century ago, the Tung Wah Dispensary treated sickness in San Francisco's Chinatown from its humble outpost at 828 Sacramento Street. Cramped quarters and expanded services led to a new location at 845 Jackson Street, the building that eventually was named the Chinese Hospital.

Without its embellishments—"ailments and afflictions," "institution," and "counterproductive"—this message is much more readable and just as informative.

Good Writing Avoids Jargon or Technical Language

In our high-tech society, so much jargon exists that it is difficult to tell what is jargon and what is plain English. Few people recall that "input" and "output" originated in computer jargon. The same is true of the terms "bottom line,"

"24/7," and "in the red." The Internet has given us "Google" and "blog" as part of common language.

Jargon abounds in everyday life. For example, in listing its objectives for the year, an annual report from an elementary school stated:

> Objective Three: The mean score for the kindergarten program will increase from 5.1 to 5.4 as measured by the FPG Assessment Report. The lead teacher for developmentally appropriate practice coordinated the efforts of our kindergarten teachers to enable our program to meet this objective.

For parents, what does this say? Not much. What is a mean score? What is the FPG Assessment Report? What is developmentally appropriate practice? When people see or hear such words, they stop. Confusion sets in. Parents just want to know how their children are doing in school.

Why Is Jargon Such a No-No? Jargon should be avoided for several reasons. First, it makes too many assumptions about audiences. Technical language serves insiders: those who are familiar with the lingo. "Outsiders" who could benefit from the information might be put off. For example, an art exhibit notice that contains artistic jargon might scare away potential visitors to the gallery. Technical terms might create a feeling that the gallery is reserved for an elite group. As a result, town residents might feel excluded or perceive the message as exclusive. For the same reason, it is also wise to avoid foreign words and phrases in published writing—unless those words are commonly used, such as *voilà*!

Second, jargon has precise meaning only to the insiders who use it. Once again, consider the word "input," which may be anything from telephone conversations to cash contributions. A more specific term is better.

Third, jargon usually is ambiguous. The "bottom line" mentioned in a school newsletter could mean many things: expenditures, income, or both; parent satisfaction; student learning outcomes—or almost anything. Skilled writers avoid vagueness by avoiding jargon.

Whether writers use jargon or technical language depends on their audience. If they are writing for a medical publication whose audience is nurses and doctors, the language can be more specific to that profession.

Too often, though, messages for general audiences or laypeople are filled with educational, legal, economic, or medical jargon. Some technical language has become more understood by the general public, such as "SAT" scores for "Scholastic Assessment Tests" and "AIDS" for "acquired immune deficiency syndrome." But such language too often goes unexplained.

Institutional Language. Another problem related to jargon is the use of institutional language: abstract terms and phrases that might communicate well in a specific workplace or institution but that lose meaning for a general audience. For example, medical professionals use the term "treatment

modalities." That terminology is nonspecific and lacks meaning and interest, even to a well-educated general audience. Treatment modalities should be named in terms an audience can understand: a series of shots, an antibiotic for 10 days, physical therapy for several months, and so on. It is easy to find words to substitute for institutional terms, and the simpler words are always more specific.

A professor wrote, "Shrinking and unstable sources of funding lead to short-term dislocations." What he meant was that a lack of funding interrupts research. Some terms cannot be avoided such as the nation's "gross domestic product (GDP)." Writers must explain such words adequately when they use them. As *The Associated Press Stylebook* explains GDP, "The sum of all the goods and services produced within a nation's borders. In the U.S., it is calculated quarterly by the Commerce Department."

Although institutional language might be the conversational standard at work, it rarely works in writing. When you are talking, you can be sure how much your audience knows about your topic. You can supplement messages with hand gestures, facial expressions, and other visual aids. You can clarify or define confusing terms if your audience looks puzzled or asks questions.

When you are writing, your text stands alone and must be absolutely clear. Your goal as a writer is to eliminate misunderstanding; omitting jargon and technical language is a giant step toward that goal.

Good Writing Comes to the Point Quickly

Chapter 5 will focus on the need for writers to come to the point quickly, perhaps the most problematic of writing challenges. A writer might not want to come to the point because the point is unpleasant: A company has lost money or laid off employees, or a popular program has been discontinued. But audiences see through attempts to delay bad news and interpret them as sneaky ways to hide information. However unwelcome the message, direct communication conveys a feeling of openness and honesty.

Some writers fail to come to the point because they are in "writer's mode," self-indulgently crafting a long introduction to the main points rather than getting to those points. Readers of media writing want information rather than art, and they consider the most direct messages to be the greatest masterpieces.

Still other writers have trouble coming to the point because they do not know what the point is. Critical thinking—deciding on the main goal in communicating—precedes every writing task. To come to the point, writers must know their audiences and analyze information carefully enough to know the point audiences will want to know.

The late writer and filmmaker Nora Ephron told a story about her high school journalism teacher. In one lesson, he taught his class to recognize main points by telling them their faculty members would be attending a major conference the next day. He asked them to write a news story about it.

In the students' articles, the introductory paragraphs summarized the facts: All teachers would travel to a nearby city and hear famous speakers. After collecting the papers, the teacher threw them away and told the students, "The point is that there will be no school tomorrow." Ephron said she never forgot the point of that exercise:

> *It was an electrifying moment. So that's it, I realized. It's about the point. The classic newspaper lead of who-what-when-where-how and why is utterly meaningless if you haven't figured out the significance of the facts. What is the point? What does it mean? He planted those questions in my head. And for the first year he taught me journalism, every day was like the first; every set of facts had a point buried in it if we looked hard enough. He turned the class into a gorgeous intellectual exercise, and he gave me enthusiasm for the profession I never lost. Also, of course, he taught me something that works just as well in life as it does in journalism.*

Words

Three of the five keys to good writing just given—using short words, avoiding wordiness, and eliminating jargon—focus on words, the basic unit of any oral or written message. A good writer also needs knowledge of language, a good vocabulary, and the sense to know when a word is inappropriate or unnecessary.

The Power of Little Words

Most of the little words in our language come from the original language spoken in England before Roman and French invaders added their vocabulary to the mix. The English common folk retained their own words for everyday things, and they borrowed from Latin and French only when they had to.

As a result, the things nearest and dearest to us still are called by their original English names—home, fire, food, and mother, for example. And it is these words to which English-speaking people still respond emotionally. The word "home" has much stronger emotional appeal than the cooler, more technical word "domicile," which is borrowed from Latin. Likewise, "food" sounds good; "nutrients," a Latin-based word, is another matter.

How Little Words Are Successful

Professor and writing coach Carl Sessions Stepp says people respond to small words because they usually are "first-degree" words, or words that are immediately understood. Everyone has a single, readily available mental picture of "home," along with a host of meanings and feelings associated with that mental picture. But few people can respond so completely to "domicile."

Using "home" instead taps the audience's rich reserves of emotion and information.

Stepp points out that larger, multisyllabic words, many of which have origins in other languages, are "second-degree" words. Such words are abstract rather than concrete. They produce no immediate images in the minds of readers or listeners and are often ambiguous when other information is given. Take, for example, the word "nutrition." Does it mean food substances or measures of vitamins and minerals? It is a second-degree word because the audience needs more information for full understanding.

Consider other second-degree words, such as "facility" and "output." Compare them with these first-degree words: "school" and "grades."

Stepp argues that writers are more likely to appeal to audiences if they choose first-degree words and avoid second-degree words. In writing, we deal with many second-degree words that are part of science, technology, education, and almost every other field. Writers need to remember to define such words in first-degree terms whenever possible, as in this sentence:

> Nutrition—the kinds of foods patients eat every day—is the topic of a workshop for nurses at Sibley Hospital on Saturday.

Little words are more heart-warming and more easily understood. They also save space, time, and the reader's energy. They are more readable. In a story from the *Gillette* (Wyo.) *News-Record*, the language could not be much simpler in describing one man's journey and his goal to help others on their own paths (see Box 4.1). Most fifth graders could read the story with very little trouble.

BOX 4.1 A Gillette Teacher Finds His American Dream

BY NATHAN PAYNE
City/Living Editor

Bertine Bahige leaned back against the wall outside his classroom and looked at the ceiling as he tried to regain his composure.

It was his second class of the day and he already had been in a conversation with a student, trying to keep her in school long enough to graduate in a few weeks.

"I try to give them hope," he said, looking upward.

He wouldn't turn to face his class until he could regain his normal smiling demeanor.

Only minutes before, the 32-year-old math teacher had been greeting each of his students, as he does before every class. He asked them about their most recent performances in track or soccer or sometimes he ribs them about not keeping their grades up in English class.

"I don't understand that because I thought you all spoke English," said the teacher, whose native language is French.

Then came along the one he'd been looking for, the one whose future could hinge on his effort.

He knows she's looking ahead at life hoping to survive, not considering the idea of thriving. It's a fate he once faced himself, a fate he wants to help her overcome.

The countdown

Bahige caught her as she approached his classroom a few minutes before the bell rang.

Like an elementary school pupil might, the high school senior scuffed her feet a little on the polished terrazzo floors as she stepped to within a couple of feet of her teacher. The girl, a precalculus student, looked down and kicked at a line with the toe of her retro sneakers while the last few of her classmates walked past and took their seats.

They both knew what was coming. She is a good student, but she had missed several classes.

"Where have you been?" Bahige asked with concern in his voice.

She looked up with the forced smile of someone who has given up, the kind of smile that is betrayed by the pain in her eyes.

"My dad has been in jail, Mr. B," she said. "We're about to lose our house. I have to work."

She quietly told Bahige that her mother wasn't around, her uncle was moving across the state and she had nowhere to live. She had been working as many hours as possible to simply feed herself, and told him that by the end of the week, she could be sleeping in her car.

"I think I'm going to have to drop," she said, shaking her head.

"It's only 15 days," he pleaded with the senior, hoping she wouldn't lose the past 13 years of hard work, hoping she would see the value in a high school diploma.

She explained that administrators told her that they had limited options for a student like her who has missed so many days of school. How could she worry about coming to the last weeks of school, taking her last exams and wearing a cap and gown if she were homeless?

"I'll talk to some people," he said. "We will figure something out. Just come back to class Wednesday."

She uttered a less-than-reassuring "I'll try," and took her seat between a pair of classmates.

Bahige gazed at the ceiling as though he might find answers there.

He had only a few moments to compose himself before going into his classroom to try to make vectors, parametric equations and matrices relevant to his students' lives.

"I would let her stay in the spare bedroom in my house if it was appropriate," he said, trying to suppress his frustration with the system in which he works.

As he walked through the doorway, he smiled, said "good morning" and pointed to the chalkboard on the west side of his classroom.

On it was a calendar with a white "X" through each of the days past—a countdown to graduation.

(*Continued*)

(*Continued*)

"You only have 30 days left until graduation, that's only 15 days in each class," he said. "Make sure you get your work done. You're almost there."

As Bahige began to diagram a math equation for his students, he was as far from his past as he could be.

.....

All it takes is hope

Two days after pleading with his student to stay in school, Bahige got what he had hoped for. When class began that Wednesday in April, she was there, in her chair, waiting to learn math.

Each day as Bahige crossed off another box on his countdown to graduation, she was there.

In a week when she and a few hundred of her classmates walk across the graduation stage, it doesn't matter that no one else in the Wyoming Center knows the significance of her accomplishment. Bahige will clap a little louder. She will smile a little wider.

They both know what it took to get there.

Hope.

COMPLETE STORY IN APPENDIX C.

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The Right Word

Wordsmiths such as the late Theodore Bernstein and the late John Bremner long ago decried the lack of precision in language. Bremner lamented what he called "the surge of literary barbarism" in English usage. Both stressed the importance of knowing language and definitions. To language lovers like Bremner, writing is a love affair with language. In his book, *Words on Words*, Bremner wrote,

> *To love words, you must first know what they are. Yes, words are symbols of ideas. But many words have lives of their own. They have their own historical and etymological associations, their own romantic and environmental dalliances, their own sonic and visual delights.*

A careless writer describes a basketball player as "an intricate part of the team." Perhaps his footwork is intricate, but what the writer really meant to say was "an integral part of the team."

A morning news anchor said people were "respective" of the First Lady when she appeared at the fundraiser. She meant to say "respectful."

A letter from a university provost to a newspaper columnist thanked her for "the prospective" she gave to a local issue. The provost meant "perspective."

In a news story, a student quoted a speaker as saying the decision "reaped haddock" on the school's admissions procedures—a fishy use of "wreaked

havoc." Language needs to be specific and correct. When writers misuse or misspell words, such as "brew ha-ha" for "brouhaha," we laugh. As writers, we do not want our audiences laughing at us—unless we mean for them to chuckle with us. The pleas of Bremner and other wordsmiths retain their significance for writers today.

Similar Words

Words that sound alike are troublesome for writers. Among the most common homonyms are "principal" and "principle," "affect" and "effect," and "its" and "it's." Such words are particularly troublesome today when writers depend heavily on computer spell-checkers. Few programs will know the difference between "naval" and "navel" or "stationary" and "stationery," as we discussed in Chapters 2 and 3. The resulting confusion can be misleading and embarrassing. Writers must be comfortable going to dictionary.com or another handy reference book to check correct spelling and usage. Other references, such as those listed at the end of this chapter, are valuable for writers. Refer to Chapter 2 for spelling tips.

Writers should pay careful attention to synonyms. Many writers haul out the thesaurus when they are weary of using a word too often. But a synonym might not be specific. One editing teacher advises against using a thesaurus and prefers a dictionary. Remember that repetition of a word or words throughout a message is acceptable. Repetition can unify a message. For instance, the word "site" might be used throughout a story about the launch of a nonprofit organization's website. It unifies the story and is more specific than other references to online presence.

Word Choice

While taking care with word usage, writers should strive to choose words that are universally accepted and understood. When writers are unsure about a word or its use, they should reach for a stylebook or a dictionary. *The Associated Press Stylebook*, for example, adds cautionary notes about how specific words should be used. The note might warn that the word is offensive or should be used sparingly. Dictionaries will include in the definition whether the word is below the normal standard for literate writing. Dictionaries also will indicate spellings of words and examples of correct usage, as in the case of homonyms. For example, "principal" would be used for the top administrator of a school, not "principle," which is a rule or belief that someone follows.

If a dictionary or a stylebook warns against usage of a word, writers should use it only if they have a compelling reason. They might also have to explain in a note at the beginning of the article or the broadcast that the message contains offensive language. Using profanities and vulgarities is discussed more fully in Chapter 10 on quotes and attribution.

Sentences

Sentences should be complete. Each must have a subject and a verb and must state one complete idea, thought, or meaning. Granted, some writers use short but incomplete sentences for emphasis, such as "The day he left was cold and in the dead of winter. January 22, to be exact." Sentence fragments or stray phrases generally have little place in most media writing, and beginning writers should avoid using them. Such writing does appear in microblogging, however.

This is a fragment: "January 22, to be exact."
This is a sentence: "The day he left was cold and in the dead of winter."
This is a sentence: "That day was January 22, to be exact."

Sentence Types

Grammarians define different types of sentences on the basis of structure.

- A simple sentence is one independent or main clause. It can have more than one subject and verb, object, and modifying phrase.

  The tanker ran aground, spilling 11 million gallons of crude oil into the bay.

  Six seniors and two juniors are on the university's debate team.

- A compound sentence has two or more simple sentences that may be joined by a conjunction such as "and" or "but" or by punctuation such as a semicolon.

  Homer used his share of the settlement to buy a fishing boat, but within two years his business was bankrupt.

  Many people have changed their diets to cut out high-fat foods; others have ignored warnings that a high-fat diet might cause heart disease.

- A complex sentence has at least one independent or main clause and other clauses dependent on the main clause.

  Postings on a social networking site might open your private information to third parties, despite your belief that those details are locked away from everyone but family and friends.

- A compound-complex sentence is a compound sentence with at least two independent clauses and one or more dependent clauses.

  When the stock sale occurred in May, investors expected it to do well; but it lost value immediately, crushing all their hopes.

Vary Sentence Types

Good writers use a variety of sentence types, but they prefer the simple sentence. A good guideline is to use many simple sentences and to use compound sentences formed from short simple sentences.

Writers use complex sentences because of the need for attribution, elaboration, and identification. But they work hard to avoid compound-complex sentences, saving them to express ideas difficult to state any other way.

Studies show that people of all ages and levels of education prefer simple sentences, in which subjects come before verbs and verbs before the remainder of the sentence. A series of simple sentences relaxes readers or listeners and prepares them to encounter something more complex in your text.

Look at the sentence variety in Box 4.2 in Tim Sullivan's story on Tibetan monks learning science. He begins with a mix of complex sentences and simple sentences in the first paragraph.

BOX 4.2 Tibetan Monks Tackle Science in the Indian Hills

BY TIM SULLIVAN
The Associated Press

SARAH, India — The shouts of more than a dozen Tibetan monks echo through the small classroom. Fingers are pointed. Voices collide. When an important point is made, the men smack their hands together and stomp the floor, their robes billowing around them.

It's the way Tibetan Buddhist scholars have traded ideas for centuries. Among them, the debate-as-shouting match is a discipline and a joy.

But this is something different.

Evolutionary theory is mentioned—loudly. One monk invokes Heisenberg's Uncertainty Principle. Another shouts about the subatomic nature of neutrinos.

In an educational complex perched on the edge of a small river valley, in a place where the Himalayan foothills descend into the Indian plains, a group of about 65 Tibetan monks and nuns are working with American scientists to tie their ancient culture to the modern world.

"I'd like to go back to my monastery . . . to pass on my knowledge to other monks so that they might bring the (scientific) process to others," said Tenzin Choegyal, a 29-year-old monk born in exile in India.

If that seems a modest goal, it reflects an immense change in Tibetan culture, where change has traditionally come at a glacial pace.

(*Continued*)

(*Continued*)

Isolated for centuries atop the high Himalayan plateau, and refusing entry to nearly all outsiders, Tibet long saw little of value in modernity.

Education was almost completely limited to monastic schools. Magic and mysticism were—and are—important parts of life to many people. New technologies were something to be feared: Eyeglasses were largely forbidden until well into the 20th century.

No longer. Pushed by the Dalai Lama, a fierce proponent of modern schooling, a series of programs were created in exile to teach scientific education to monks, the traditional core of Tibetan culture.

At the forefront is an intensive summer program, stretched over five years, that brings professors from Emory University in Atlanta. For six days a week, six hours a day, the professors teach everything from basic math to advanced neuroscience.

"The Buddhist religion has a deep concept of the mind that goes back thousands of years," said Larry Young, an Emory psychiatry professor and prominent neuroscientist. "Now they're learning something different about the mind: the mind-body interface, how the brain controls the body."

...The monks and nuns in the Emory program are...brought to the Sarah complex "the best and the brightest," Worthman said, brought to the Sarah complex from monasteries and convents across India and Nepal. While most are in their 20s or 30s, some are far older and long ago earned high-level degrees in Buddhist philosophy.

Still, few learned anything but basic math before the Emory program. Because of the way they study—focusing on debates and the memorization of long written passages, but doing comparatively little writing—few are able to take notes during classroom lectures. Many were raised to see magic as an integral part of the world around them.

To watch them in class, though, is astonishing.

No one yawns. No one dozes. Since almost no one takes notes, it's easy to think they're not paying attention.

But then a monk or a nun in a red robe calls out a question about brain chemistry—or cell biology, or logic—that can leave their teachers stunned.

"They really understand how neurocircuits work at a level that's comparable to what we see at a senior (undergraduate) neuroscience classroom in the United States," said Young.

Common Sentence Errors

In constructing sentences, some writers forget the rule of parallel structure, noted as a grammar problem in Chapter 2. In writing, all parts of any list or series must be parallel—that is, if the first element in the list starts with a noun, all others must be nouns as well. For example, the structure of this sentence is not parallel:

> Plaintiffs reacted to the court's decision with sorrow, rage, surprise, and vowing to appeal the ruling.

Nouns in the list, "sorrow, "rage" and "surprise," are not parallel with the verb form "vowing." The sentence should be rewritten to read:

> Plaintiffs reacted to the court's decision with sorrow, rage, surprise, and vows to appeal the ruling.

When writers start with a specific verb form, such as an infinitive with "to," they must keep the same format. The structure of the following sentence is not parallel:

> In the new budget, the county will have funds to expand social services, to hire five police officers, and for adding bike lanes to Main Street.

It should be rewritten to read:

> In the new budget, the county will have funds to expand social services, to hire five police officers, and to add bike lanes to Main Street.

Another common sentence error is the incorrect placement of modifying phrases or clauses. Such misplaced elements can lead to humorous and misleading sentences, such as the following:

> After wheeling me into the operating room, a mask was placed over my face.

> The bank makes low-interest loans to individuals of any size.

> Mrs. Rogers was arrested shortly after 3 p.m. at the home where the couple lived without incident.

Once spotted, modifier problems are easy to repair. Good writers train themselves to check modifier placement: Did the mask really wheel me into the operating room? Does the bank make loans based on height and weight? Did the couple really live in the house without incident? The questions can be cleared up by quick rewriting:

> After I was wheeled into the operating room, a mask was placed over my face.

> The bank makes low-interest loans of any size to individuals.

> Mrs. Rogers was arrested without incident shortly after 3 p.m. at the home where the couple lived.

A good sentence can never be interpreted to mean more than one thing. Linguists say it has a "single reading"—meaning the reader never needs to go back and read it again to understand it. If the reader goes back, it should be to savor the quality of the writing. Good writing aims for a single reading, so readers move unobstructed through messages to meaning. Once they understand the message, then readers can act or react—and communication is complete.

Paragraphs—Short Paragraphs

Words become sentences, and sentences become paragraphs. English composition books devote entire chapters to the topic of writing good paragraphs. When writers are concerned with transmitting information quickly, their ideas about paragraphing change. A paragraph is a whole presentation or argument on a topic for an English composition or literature class, whereas in mass communication, a paragraph is a single fact, thought, or "sound byte." That single thought or idea might take several sentences to explain. In newswriting, paragraphs often are kept short to break up blocks of gray copy. Journalists talk about "graphs," a shortened version of "paragraphs." One thought or idea is in a graph, and graphs are one sentence on occasion.

Effective use of four graphs of varying lengths is shown in the opening of this story written by *St. Pete Times* reporter Michael Kruse to describe damage from Hurricane Katrina:

> WAVELAND, Miss.—City Hall is gone.
>
> The post office is gone.
>
> The restaurants, the condos, the houses. Gone, gone, gone.
>
> In this coastal town of about 7,000 people, on a wide swath of land that stretches about a mile up from the Gulf of Mexico, almost everything south of the railroad tracks is gone.

Newspaper and magazine writers start a new graph to signal a new fact or a change of speaker—and sometimes just to give the reader a break. Readers appreciate white space in a publication, and frequent paragraph breaks give visual relief by making space—literal and figurative—between ideas.

New Speaker Equals New Paragraph

One of the most useful functions of a frequent paragraph break is that it effectively signals a change, particularly in the case of a direct quote or a change of speakers when several people are quoted. In Nathan Payne's story referenced earlier in this chapter, he uses new paragraphs to separate quotes from actions. Consider this excerpt found in the full story in Appendix C as he describes Bertine Bahige's escape from the rebels:

> With silent steps, he crept away, tiptoeing through the jungle. The snap of a twig or the rustling of leaves could have meant the end of his life.
>
> "I knew I didn't have a choice for failure," he said. "Death was not an issue. There was no prison. You have to overcome fear."

Or the change in speakers in this section of Payne's story:

> "I think I'm going to have to drop," she said, shaking her head.
>
> "It's only 15 days," he pleaded with the senior, hoping she wouldn't lose the past 13 years of hard work, hoping she would see the value in a high school diploma.

With quotes, the short graph adds a conversational tone to newswriting and holds the audience's attention. "New speaker, new graph" is a writer's rule that can add clarity to all writing.

Most writing can benefit from shorter paragraphs. Bite-sized paragraphs may not be appropriate in all settings, but leaner paragraphs tend to streamline messages of all kinds, saving time and space—the most precious resources in any medium.

The Way to Clearer Writing

Writing often moves from the general to the specific, and this chapter is following such a path. At the outset of the chapter, we discussed broad principles of accuracy, clarity, completeness, and fairness. We then looked at the basic tenets of good writing and the components of any piece of writing—words, sentences, and paragraphs—as summarized in Box 4.3. When listed, the rules seem more manageable.

BOX 4.3 Good Writing Rules

1. Good writing uses short sentences.
2. Good writing uses short words.
3. Good writing eliminates wordiness.
4. Good writing clears away redundancy, jargon, and institutional language.
5. Good writing comes to the point quickly.
6. Good writing has a mix of sentence types.
7. Good writing has short paragraphs.

Write the First Draft as You Would Say It

Writing coach Robert Gunning said writers should write the way they talk. He argued that all writing would improve if people simply talked and wrote down what they said. Gunning was onto a great idea: First drafts are most effective when a writer puts down on paper what he or she would tell someone about a topic. Most people talk in subject–verb–object order that is easy to understand. The result is text that is conversational, uses simple language, and is easy to revise into a well-organized written message.

Colorful Description

Author Tom Wolfe made his mark among fiction writers by writing the way he talks—frankly, and with rich description. In his bestseller, *The Bonfire of the Vanities*, Wolfe describes Maria, the girlfriend of his antihero, Sherman McCoy:

> *Now Maria pushed the door all the way open, but instead of ushering him inside, she leaned up against the doorjamb and crossed her legs and folded her arms underneath her breasts and kept staring at him and chuckling. She was wearing high-heeled pumps with a black-and-white checkerboard pattern worked into the leather. Sherman knew little about shoe designs, but it registered on him that this one was of the moment. She wore a tailored white gabardine skirt, very short, a good four inches above the knees, revealing her legs, which to Sherman's eyes were like a dancer's, and emphasizing her tiny waist. She wore a white silk blouse, open down to the top of her breasts. The light in the tiny entryway was such that it threw her entire ensemble into high relief: her dark hair, those cheekbones, the fine features of her face, the swollen curve of her lips, her creamy blouse, those creamy flan breasts, her shimmering shanks, so insouciantly crossed.*

In this passage, all parts of speech become part of the description. The verbs are active: pushed, leaned, folded, worked, and threw. The nouns—doorjamb, pumps, flan, shanks—are concrete and tangible, and the adjectives appeal to the senses: high-heeled, black-and-white, checkerboard, tailored, fine, swollen, creamy, and shimmering. All writers can learn from Wolfe's gift for conversational, dense description that leaves readers with strong sensory images.

Description can be less literary and still paint a picture, as in this excerpt describing a lighthouse that is being restored into a bed and breakfast:

> Rust is what visitors first see when they enter the 140-foot-high Frying Pan Tower. Plus corrosion. Peeling paint. Missing ceiling tiles. The tower has been deteriorating in the wind-and-wave-swept environment since Coast Guard crews left 33 years ago.
>
> The living quarters can best be described as utilitarian. Peeling beige paint hangs from the walls of the rec room. Chairs, table, faded dartboard and pool table are legacies of Coast Guarders. Their cats, Bacon and Eggs, once played here.
>
> Kitchen appliances work when the generator fires up. An elderly refrigerator huffs air that's more cool than cold.

Don't Begin at the Beginning

After seeing a four-car collision, the typical observer arrives home and blurts out: "I saw an incredible wreck on Highway 501. Four cars collided; all the drivers were injured, and one car burned." Only then will the observer back up and give background: "I was in the left lane, coming home from the mall," and so on.

Like urgent conversation, writing needs to jump straight to the point, then fill the reader in—just as we will discuss in Chapter 5 on writing leads. This technique gives writing a conversational tone and at the same time gets to the ever-so-important point of the message.

Starting with salient facts is a natural way to tell about important information. Unfortunately, it is a form that most people forget after years of reading stories and writing essays, both of which usually start with formal introductions. Your goal is to get to your main point as soon as possible in your message. Suspenseful beginnings work best in drama.

Writing and Editing: Two Compatible Tasks

When you spill out your conversational first draft, write it without stopping to edit. Mixing writing and editing wastes time and effort. If you edit as you go (and most amateurs do), you might fuss over a sentence you eventually cut. At the very least, you will interrupt your own thought processes and conversational flow. So write first. If you pause to ponder sentence structure or information, that's okay. But do not wander or stray from writing.

Some beginning writers lack the confidence to sit down and write. But author Joel Saltzman points out that we all are more competent wordsmiths than we think:

> *When you're talking, odds are that 98 percent of the time you don't even think about grammar. You're doing fine and it's just not an issue.... I am suggesting that you don't worry about it right now; because the more you worry about grammar, the less you're going to write.*

Stick with Subject–Verb Order

Most human languages prefer to place subjects before verbs, and English is no exception. Curious people want to know who did something, then what they

did (and to whom or what). Keep these audience interests and preferences in mind when you write. Subject–verb–object order generally gives the sentence action.

> Soldiers cleared rocks the size of houses from blocked roads.

> A massive earthquake registering 8.2 on the Richter scale rocked Japan early Friday.

Readers get confused if subjects and verbs are scrambled, regardless of how artistic the result may be:

> Came he swiftly to her bower?

Not in the information age.

Choose Active Verbs

Verbs are action words, but not all verbs are active. Some show no action at all, such as the verb "to be" in all its forms (is, am, are, was, were, be, being). Such verbs are less interesting and harder to picture than active verbs.

Writers prefer active verbs because they contain more information and sensory detail. "He was president" is vague compared with "He dominated the country as president." "Lightner whacked the ball with such force that it sailed over the right outfield wall" simulates the sound of the bat striking the ball. Good writing is filled with active verbs that evoke images in the mind of the reader or listener. In the following lead, the writer uses active verbs in a weather story:

> MOSCOW, Ind. (AP)—Tornadoes ripped through this central Indiana community and skipped over National Guard barracks full of sleeping soldiers as thunderstorms battered the Ohio Valley, authorities said Wednesday.

Choose the Active Voice

When writers use active verbs, they write in active voice.

"Lightner whacked the ball." The subject, Lightner, performs the action. The object, the ball, receives action. This sentence format is called *active voice*, and it is the natural order of English. "A man wearing a stocking mask robbed the university dining hall" carries more action than "the university dining hall was robbed by a man."

Every now and then, a sentence has no obvious subject and must be written in another format, called the *passive voice*. Take, for example, this sentence: "The law was changed several years ago." It is in passive voice. The recipient of the action, the law, has been moved into the subject position—probably because a long legislative process kept the writer from isolating a single person or session responsible for changing the law.

Research shows that people prefer active sentences over passive ones. The sentence "Congress passed the bill" is easier to read and comprehend than its passive equivalent, "The bill was passed by Congress." Skilled writers prefer the active voice and use passive sentences only when necessary. In our example about Lightner, a passive structure would hardly have the same effect: "The ball was whacked by Lightner."

Sometimes writers use passive sentences for emphasis: "The anticrime bill that will give police departments more powers was passed by Congress." Here the writer wants to focus on the provisions of the bill rather than on congressional action and writes the lead accordingly.

Generally Put Time Elements after the Verb

Because verbs are stimulating to readers, they should come before less interesting elements. Audiences need to know when something happened, but they can wait to find out. The time element, a necessary but often dull part of a message, can be relegated to a place after the verb. Some writers prefer to put it immediately after the verb. Here are a few examples:

> The second annual Wiener Festival, featuring dachshunds of all sizes and breeds, will be held Saturday in Laurel.

> Grant applications requesting up to $100,000 for research on learning disabilities may be submitted through June 15 to the National Institutes of Health.

Sometimes, however, the time element carries importance and needs to go elsewhere—even first in the sentence:

> On Wednesday, a 14-year-old youth collected $125,000 he found in a paper bag a year ago. No one claimed the money.

In the above example, the beginning and end of the sentence set up the time span: On Wednesday, the youth cashed in after waiting a year.

> Beginning July 1, North Carolina residents will need to show their Social Security cards or verify their numbers when getting new or replacement driver's licenses.

Right away, people know the laws will change.

Be Specific

Always give the most specific information you can. Significant details enlighten and delight readers and pack information into a few words. Instead of saying actress Mischa Barton went shopping, tell what she bought: toys for her dog.

What kind? Inquiring minds want to know! Instead of saying a reporter had a messy desk, try this:

> On his desk, Howard had a can of unsharpened pencils and two potted ferns, both of them dead.

Watch out for words that have almost a generic quality, such as "facility." Be specific: bank, gymnasium, recreation center, high school. Use the specific noun.

Author Tom Wolfe has a marvelous talent for combining simple words into colorful, entertaining description. In *The Bonfire of the Vanities* excerpt we discussed earlier in the chapter, Wolfe creates pictures with his prose. Like other excellent writers, he uses language to appeal to the senses. Wolfe gives specific details, such as the skirt riding "a good four inches above the knees" and the "checkerboard pattern worked into the leather." His technique is one that all good writers use, regardless of the medium.

Appeal to the Senses

Whether reading or listening, audience members still can use the full range of senses as they absorb information. That means writers must pay attention to their senses when gathering information. Writers can report the facts or describe the scene without being subjective—a fear that keeps many beginning writers from using descriptive writing.

Consider this description of a rower as she launches her boat for a post-dawn row:

> A slight fog clouded the surface of the water, creating an eerie stage to the backdrop of oranges, yellows, browns, and greens of the trees' fall foliage on the far shore. As she carried the scull to the dock, she caught the familiar odor of rotting wood and scum that accumulated along the lake's edge. She eased the boat into the water, and the bow made a gentle plop as it cut the surface and sent a ripple outward. She loved this time of the morning, the lake silent except for nature's noises.

Writing that creates mental pictures, aromas, and sensations is more memorable and more appealing because it transports the audience to the scene of the message. Once captured, the audience is likely to remain in the writer's world long enough to get the message.

You don't need to be a feature writer to use sensory appeal. It works well in everyday forms of communication, such as directions to the company picnic. Instead of "turn right two blocks after the fork in the road and proceed to 1511," how about:

> Look for a grove of tall pines two blocks after the fork in the road; turn right and go to the red mailbox marked 1511. You'll smell pungent smoke from Marvin's famous barbecued ribs.

With such sensory appeal, it is doubtful anyone will get lost.

Use Statistics Sparingly and Powerfully

We live in an era where numbers make powerful messages: A basketball arena will cost $221 million. A pharmaceutical company will lay off 1,600 workers.

Audiences become desensitized if bombarded by alarming numbers, regardless of how striking those numbers may be. Statistics of any kind should be delivered one at a time. Never let two numbers touch in written copy; avoid putting numbers close to one another except in direct comparisons:

> The report assumes oil prices ranging from a low of $113 a barrel to as high as $186 a barrel by 2030; a barrel was trading above $133 on Wednesday.

Another rule of thumb is to limit yourself to no more than three numbers in any paragraph to avoid overwhelming your reader or listener. In a business story, for example, numbers can be confusing, so spread them out and keep them simple. Consider improving the following lead packed with numbers:

> Dr. Marcy LePique, a Flagstaff obstetrician and gynecologist since 2003, has delivered more than 10,000 babies and about 20 litters of puppies in her 25-year career as a physician and 30-year career as a breeder of golden retrievers.

Professor Emeritus Philip Meyer, a former consultant at *USA Today*, suggests that in any statistical report one or two numbers stand out as crucial. The important numbers should appear early in your message, and others may be summarized in lists or tables outside the written text.

Translate Statistics into Everyday, Tangible Terms

People have little intuitive understanding of large numbers. The citizen who learns that a sports arena will cost $221 million is left with many questions: Is that a good price for an arena? How many new schools would that buy? How much will my county taxes increase?

Good writers provide an understanding of big numbers in several ways. One way is to compare one number with another:

> The $221 million price tag compares with the $58.2 million cost of an arena built in 1989 in Springfield.

Another way to present numbers is to give them in terms the average person deals with each day. Few of us can visualize $221 million, but many people can understand a 3.5 percent tax increase to fund the stadium.

The clearest way to present costs is to use an individual citizen as an example:

> A person owning a home with a tax value of $254,000 will pay about $320 more each year in taxes to finance the arena.

Such writing allows the audience to understand personal gains or losses that may be obscured in reports of large numbers.

Double-Check Your Math

Many writers jokingly say they went into communications because they could not do math. But any writer needs to use numbers and must be sure they are correct. Errors can be embarrassing.

In a news story about salary increases at city hall, a reporter looked at the current year's salary for the city attorney: $130,000. The proposed salary for the next fiscal year was $138,000. The city attorney would get a 5 percent pay increase, she wrote. The actual increase was 6 percent. The reporter erroneously divided the difference of $8,000 by the new salary rather than the current salary. Other city employees were upset that the city attorney was getting 5 percent compared with their 2 percent. When the real difference eventually was published, the unhappiness grew. (And the city attorney expressed his anger that the figures were published at all, forgetting that the salaries of public officials are public record.)

When in Doubt, Leave It Out

Unless you check the accuracy of a number, spelling, or surprising fact, leave it out or hold publication until you can verify it. Accuracy is linked, in the minds of audience members, with quality—with media quality and writer quality. Your reputation is riding on what you write.

Some errors are painful to people in the community. A university magazine noted offhandedly that a famous scientist had discovered a new kind of plant. His research assistant, who in fact had made the discovery and received credit for it in scientific journals, called the reporter to correct the error. Few people will ever see a small correction notice, but people such as the offended research assistant will remember the slight for years.

Mistakes, no matter where they appear, also may lead to legal problems. Chapter 12 discusses libel.

Rewrite Long Introductory Phrases

Audiences are eager to get to the point, and long introductory phrases slow them down. Long phrases also interrupt the subject–verb–object pattern that readers and listeners prefer.

Avoid:

Because the Cardinals had been waiting all season for a victory and had received what they considered to be negative media attention, several players refused to be interviewed.

Prefer:

Several Cardinals players refused to be interviewed after a winless season amid negative media coverage.

Eliminate Long Strings of Prepositional Phrases

Any group of two or more prepositional phrases makes a sentence meander rather than flow. Too many prepositional phrases strung together within a sentence are undesirable but easy to fix. Prepositional phrases are among the movable parts of any sentence; they also can be placed in new (short) sentences.

Avoid:

The school's marching band will appear in a series of performances on three consecutive Tuesday afternoons on the athletic field near the gymnasium on the school campus beginning this Tuesday.

Prefer:

The school's marching band will present a series of Tuesday afternoon performances beginning this week. The band will play on the athletic field near the gymnasium.

Look for unnecessary prepositional phrases everywhere in writing. Take

Marilyn Jacobs, one of the writers of the letter, said the group wants action immediately.

and edit it to read

Marilyn Jacobs, who helped write the letter, said the group wants action immediately.

Avoid Making Everything Look IMPORTANT

Some writers like to add emphasis by underlining text or using capital letters, exclamation marks, bold type, and even quotation marks. Frequent use of such elements detracts from professional polish. Once in a while, everyone needs to add emphasis. Save it for when it really counts. In some messages, such emphasis can be interpreted as anger, exasperation, and even sarcasm.

Avoid a message that looks like this sentence:

If you don't get your information sheet in today, you WON'T be in the new directory AT ALL.

Try:

> If you don't get your information sheet in today, you won't be in the new directory.

Clear Out Euphemisms

Most of us were taught to use euphemisms in polite conversation—to say "expecting" rather than "pregnant," "plump" rather than "fat," and "passed away" rather than "died." Most euphemisms are designed to be imprecise—to mislead or give false comfort. In fact, we like euphemisms because they are handy substitutes for embarrassing words. In media writing, straight talk is preferred.

Avoid:

> The guard said two residents of the correctional facility had gone to "their just reward."

Prefer:

> The guard said that two prisoners had died.

Using the straightforward "prisoners" and "died" instead of the longer euphemisms keeps the sentence short and the reading easy. Once euphemisms are removed, the meaning is clear and timeless.

Watch Out for Language Trends

Writers should avoid popular trends in writing that substitute a myriad of words and phrases for ones that had been part of common language. In many cases, the new language is wordy and less precise.

The use of such "pop" language excludes segments of the audience that might not be cued to the lingo. Certainly language evolves. Each time a new edition of *Webster's Dictionary* comes out, new words are included. Many of us can remember when "ain't" was not in the dictionary. Dictionaries list and define words common in the English language, but a dictionary is just one of many sources writers use.

One trend that has pained language experts is the conversion of nouns to verbs. Host has become "to host," and conference has become "to conference." An advertising director notified clients: "We will deadline ad copy for Friday's paper on Wednesday." An anchor said the state was considering "tolling roads," or charging tolls to pay for construction. Many computer terms already are accepted usage, but some writers still cringe when they hear nouns used in verb forms such as "texting," friending," or "googling."

Another trend that offends many writers is the addition of "-ize" to create new words: "prioritize," "finalize," "maximize," "accessorize." Again, although the words have found their way into everyday usage, language professionals try to find better and more accurate verbs.

Keep Writing Readable

Readability is defined most simply as the level of difficulty of a given message. Readable, or high-readability, writing is easy to understand. Several ways to measure readability have been found, most of which are based on (1) sentence length and (2) concentration or number of multisyllable words.

One common readability measure is the Fog Index, developed in the 1940s by Robert Gunning for United Press International wire service. Despite its age, the Fog Index is still used as a measure of readability. To compute a Fog Index, (1) calculate the average number of words per sentence in a given message and (2) count the number of difficult words, or those with three syllables or more, in a 100-word sample from the message. Add these two figures together and multiply by 0.4.

The resulting number—the Fog Index—corresponds to the number of years of education a reader would need to read and understand the copy. For example, a publication with an average of 22 words per sentence and 15 difficult words in the 100-word sample would have a Fog Index of 14.8. That means its readers would require some college education to read the piece comfortably.

Most readability experts agree that clear writing should be at or below the 11th- and 12th-grade levels. Even people with a great deal more education seem most comfortable reading at this level. Many grammar-check software packages have readability measures that automatically tell writers the readability of any piece. The *Wall Street Journal's* Fog Index routinely falls into the 11th- to 12th-grade range, despite the complicated nature of financial reporting. A clever marketing strategy is operating here: Dow Jones knows that to make business reports palatable, they must be readable.

Enough Guidelines!

So many guidelines and rules may seem overwhelming. Fortunately, writers should write without thinking about all these maxims at one time.

Guidelines explained throughout this chapter can help with direct writing. Keep the guidelines in mind as you write, but do not be so tied to them that you stop after every sentence to analyze whether it meets the standards of good writing. Go ahead and write and then go back and apply the guidelines.

Exercises

1. Edit the following sentences to make them shorter and to the point:
   - In order to expedite the delivery, the company will add a third delivery truck for its routes on Monday.
   - We will have pizza for dinner whether or not you choose to come.
   - She is presently employed as the assistant to the president, but she expects to make a decision whether or not to change jobs by the end of the year.
   - If they are willing to pay the difference between the economy pack and the family pack, customers will learn that the family pack will save them more money in the long run.
   - Students voted Thursday to conduct a poll to determine the status of living conditions in dormitories.
   - Clarendon Park residents will march Saturday to protest the city council's decision to annex the neighborhood over residents' objections.
   - If the school maintains lines of communication and makes the alumni feel as if they are still a part of the school even though they have already graduated, the school should have no problem reaching its fund-raising goal.
   - The residents of the neighborhood said they would petition the city council to reconsider again the decision to allow beer sales before 11 a.m. on Sunday morning, which would be against the wishes of many church-going citizens.
   - Fifteen scholarship winners, who were chosen because of their high academic achievement, will be given $15,000 in scholarship money to use at the college of their choice after they graduate from high school.

2. Edit the following to eliminate redundancy:
   - Susan is currently director of marketing sales.
   - He served as past president of the Rotary club.
   - The elementary school will need twenty-five acres of land for a multipurpose building, playground, and ball fields.
   - Fire completely destroyed the town hall in the month of June.
   - The future outlook for the economy indicates interest rates may rise slightly.
   - The circus will be at 3 p.m. Sunday afternoon and 7 p.m. Sunday night.
   - Due to the fact that more than two-thirds of the people did not respond, the picnic will be canceled.
   - She climbed up the tree in order to get a better look at the defendant.
   - John went on to say that any student's effort should be recognized.
   - The Broadway show will close down six months after it first began.

3. Look through newspapers, magazines, and websites and select an article or blog that shows five or more of the characteristics of good writing mentioned in this chapter. Clip or print the piece you selected and write a short paper, listing the guidelines for good writing that are followed. For each guideline you mention, quote a passage or paragraph that shows how the writer used the good writing rules or techniques.

4. Calculate the Fog index for (a) a newspaper article, (b) a celebrity tweet, (c) a story on EPSN.com, and (d) the opening paragraph in one of your textbooks. How does readability compare across these publications? What conclusions can you draw from this comparison?

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