

# BETTER WRITING

Paul Hiebert, TEDS

You are a student, not a writer. So why worry about writing? You write for the same reason you talk: to get your point across. Writing is one of the tools you use to pass on your ideas. Writing is one way to communicate. A person who cannot talk is seriously handicapped.

So is the person who cannot write clearly. In a clear sense, he or she is dumb. You want your readers to understand exactly what you are saying. If they ask, "What does this mean?" you have not done the job. If a professor misunderstands what you have written on an exam, he or she may mark your answer wrong. If the readers do not understand your dissertation, it will gather dust on the shelf.

Writing clearly reduces misunderstandings and helps avoid errors. You have developed strong writing habits already. You may need to dig out the bad ones and unlearn them. Unlearning is more painful than learning, but it can be done. You will also need to learn new habits that can strengthen your writing.

As your readers pick up what you write, they ask themselves, "What's this all about? What's in it for us? What am I asked to do?" Your message must answer these questions clearly and completely. The important thing in writing is the end, not the means; the point you make, not the fancy phrases you choose. The goals of writing are to:

- to be read: a confusing message is too much trouble to read.
- to be understood: if your reader misunderstand completely, you would have done better not to write.
- to convince: is your writing direct, conversational--as you would say it face to face?
- to cause some sort of action: direct, precise, active writing moves the reader to act.

To achieve these goals, adopt one basic measuring stick for your writings: Is it clear? How hard or easy a piece of writing is to read depends on two things: 1) how tough the subject matter is; and 2) how complex the language is. A complex subject does not demand complex language. In fact, for the careful writer, here is a good guide: the harder and more involved the subject, the greater the need for simple writing. This is particularly true in academic writing. Academic jargon is not a sign of being learned or of knowing the subject.

## IS YOUR WRITING CLEAR?

There are some simple rules that can make your writing clear.

1. Use Short Words and Short Sentences. Long words and long sentences make writing unnecessarily hard to read. The key word here is "unnecessarily." A long word is sometimes the right, the precise word; but writing larded with big words is tough reading. Also long sentences are often effective and they do add variety. However, long sentences in quantity burden the reader. How to keep your sentences short:

- do not use words that say nothing.
- do not use words that say something you have already said.
- do not use three or four words when one will do.
- use periods.

Here is an illustration:

"Notwithstanding the fact that he believed that the company, as a whole, was not operating well, he expressed doubt with reference to an eventual sales slump that one ever happen, but he advised the heads of the departments that they should consolidate together as one unit." If we throw out words that do not say anything and those that are redundant, if we substitute one word for three or four, and if we add one period, we come up with the following: "Although he believed the company was not operating well, he doubted a sales slump would occur. However, he advised the department heads to consolidate."

2. Avoid Excess Words. If there is a Golden Rule for clear writing, it is this: **avoid excess words.** Researchers estimate that the average piece of writing can be cut from 20% to 40% and be improved by the operation.

Using too many words is a common fault, and forgivable. However, there is no excuse for padding sentences deliberately. Nonprofessionals often pad their writing: to achieve what they mistakenly believe is style; to make small ideas sound important; to cover up fuzzy thinking; or to soften direct statements. However, these are rather poor reasons. To give you some idea of how wordy we have become, here is a short list of common phrases. Each of them is weak, and can be replaced by one strong word:

- |                            |                                     |                      |
|----------------------------|-------------------------------------|----------------------|
| - in the amount of         | - on the order or magnitude of      |                      |
| - for the purpose of       | - which is of a confidential nature |                      |
| - in the nature of         | - along the lines of                | - prior to           |
| - subsequent to            | - on the basis of                   | - with reference to  |
| - with regard to           | - in connection with                | - in accordance with |
| - on the occasion of       | - in the event that                 | - in the case of     |
| - in view of the fact that | - for the reason that               | - with a view to     |
| - despite the fact that    | - give consideration to             | - have need for      |
| - give instructions to     | - is of the opinion                 | - in large measure   |
| - make an adjustment       | - the improvement of                | - the purpose of     |

With a little effort, you can double or triple this list.

3. Use Simple Words. Write to be understood (better yet, write so you cannot be misunderstood) and not to impress the reader. So pick the simplest word that says clearly what you mean. Simple words are not always short words, nor are they always common words. Sometimes the simplest word you can find is a long hard word.

In successful writing, from the Bible to Ernest Hemingway, you will find the same wise use of plain language. The point is this: there is no end to ways you can express ideas without resorting to fancy words.

4. Use Short Words. Because a word is short, it may seem insignificant. Many writers hurl them into the trash and rely instead on long important-sounding words. When they do so, they are tossing away the hardest working part of our language. Short words more often than not are the clearest possible way to express an involved concept. What are little words?

- they are vigorous
- they are flexible
- they are clear
- they are easy to use and to understand
- in short, little words are effective.

5. Say it Once. A common type of excess word is redundancy--needless repetition. These are redundancies:

- "Consolidate them together as one unit ..."
- "The rules and regulations say ..."
- "We needed a settlement that is fair and equitable ... "

How do you get rid of unnecessary repetition? The same way you get rid of other extra wordage: by reading and re-reading what you have written, and asking, "Does it really have to be said here?" If it doesn't, don't.

6. Use Strong Verbs. Strong verbs make writing strong. Lack of them makes writing feeble. A verb describes action or a state of being. For direct, clear, forceful writing, you cannot beat the active verb. It shows direction by the subject. Active verbs move. They convince. They crackle with vitality. They describe action the way that you perform action. You act directly; active verbs describe directly.

Other types of verbs and verb substitutes exist. These include:

- **verbs of being** (forms of the verb "to be"). They are weak substitutes for action verbs. Instead of "it is the finding of the court..." or "We are in agreement. .." try "This court finds..." or "We agree ..."
- **passive verbs** (expressing action done to the subject). Passive verbs, when over-used, result in wordy writing. They may indicate indecision. They create vagueness. Yet, much academic writing avoids strong verbs and relies instead on these weak substitutes.
- **smothering verbs** (action turned into a thing or quality). "When you take **err** (a verb) and turn it into **error** (a thing), or change it to **erroneous** (a quality) you smother it and rob it of its action. The electricity vanishes. The force dissipates. Watch out for words ending in **-ion, -tion, -ing, -ent, -ant, -eney, -aney**. Verbs of being often accompany smothering verbs.

7. Write, rewrite and rewrite again. Allan Tippet noted, "There is no good writing. There is only good rewriting." Do not be content with writing down your ideas. Look at your writing from the perspective of the reader. Would you enjoy reading it? Would you read it if you didn't have to?

### IS YOUR WRITING LOGICAL?

Good writing depends much more on careful thought than it does on a detailed knowledge of the language. Writing without thought is like shooting without aim. Writing things down, on the other hand, helps us clarify our thinking by forcing us to state our ideas. When you write ask:

- Am I saying all that must be said?
- Am I saying it right?
- Is it clear, or could it be clearer?
- Am I adding anything that does not have to be said?

Messages suffer from being over-stuffed--not only with extra words, but also with pointless information. Your reader wants to know the point of what you have written, enough background to understand it--and not much more.

When you write like a writer, try to think like a reader. Your writing will be shorter, more to the point, more effective. Sure it take effort. As one writer put it: "**Easy writing's vile hard reading.**" Most people, when they write, say much more than they need. What you must say depends on several points:

- What action are you taking? "Open the window."
- How much background information does the reader need to understand clearly? "It's too hot in here. Open the window."
- How much courtesy or tact does he/she deserve? "It's too hot in here. Please open the window."

#### COMMON ERRORS TO AVOID

- do not begin a sentence with "And," "But," or "Or."
- avoid colloquialisms such as, "a lot," "huge,"
- use superlatives sparingly, e.g. "very," "great," "tremendous,"
- avoid using "would," "could" or "might" except for future possibilities. Because the dissertation is about the present facts, these should be left to the final chapter.
- use "some" and "many," "one," sparingly. Remember, you are presenting facts and these words are very imprecise and general. Be more specific in reporting quantities.
- don't "preach" in the main body of the dissertation. Avoid personal asides--comments of your own showing personal judgments and impressions. In the body of the dissertation be sure to maintain as objective a point of view as possible and report the facts and let them speak.
- check that the antecedent to a pronoun is clear and that the pronoun and antecedent match in number. The antecedent should be earlier in the same paragraph. An antecedent cannot be in the title of the section. Treat headings as if they don't exist for the sake of the written text.
- check the TIU Guide/Turabian to see when to use written numbers and when to use numeral numbers.
- avoid folk idioms such as: "a lot of," "all sorts of," "huge," "really ...," and "girls" (when referring to women).
- don't use contractions such as "can't," "wouldn't," and "isn't." Spell out the words.
- don't use "etc." in the text except where it is in a quotation.
- avoid excessive emphasis with such words as "just," "great," and "very." Do not use italics or underlining to emphasize a point. It is better to understate than overstate a point. Let it speak for itself.
- use last names, not codes, when referring to people in the text. Use codes only in citations to show sources of the data.
- make sure the headings are at the proper level, and that they are formatted according to the TIU Guide/Turabian.
- single space and indent all quotations three or more lines in length. Do not run them into the
- text (see the TIU Guide/Turabian).
- use italics or underlining for book and magazine titles.
- use italics for foreign terms, but then do not start with a capital letter, except at the beginning of a sentence. If you use capital letters at the beginning of the key words, the material becomes a title, and these are italicized only if they refer to book or magazine titles, not to titles of agencies, schools and the like.

- check the citation format for your program (see TIU Guide/Turabian).
- don't put two or more levels of headings together without an introductory paragraph before the sub-heading.
- in the text, do not refer to the heading or include it as part of the narrative. Remember headings show the logical progression of the argument, but they are not part of the narrative text.
- use the past tense for past events. Use the present tense for all other matters. Avoid the future tense except where demanded by the context, and in the final chapter where you can “preach.”

IN ALL MATTERS OF DOUBT, CHECK THE *TIU STYLE AND FORMAT GUIDE* AND TURABIAN FOR YOUR PARTICULAR PROGRAM!