

# How to write things people will read



*Ever tried to read the guarantee for your washing machine?*

**“ANYTHING** that’s grammatically correct, and correctly spelt is good written communication.” . . . Right?

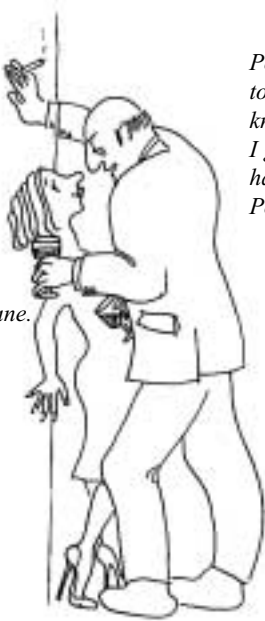
**Wrong.** Ever tried to read government memos, or the guarantee for your washing machine? The grammar and spelling are OK, but the communication is lousy.

Why? What’s missing? Or – better yet – what’s in bad writing that shouldn’t be there? What gets in the way of good, clear communication? Or in technical terms, what puts a noise in the signal?

Professional writers use a number of tricks to get rid of the noise. For some reason, these “tricks” aren’t taught in school. (Even less at the universities.) So we’re going to list six of these tricks. And here’s why: we want to show you why it’s a waste of money to go ahead with your expensive brochure, intricate instruction manual, sales letter or book, unless it’s worded well.

*Permit me  
to make myself  
known to you.  
I go under the  
handle of James  
Percival Courtenay.*

*Hello,  
I'm Jane.*



## Have you cut out the deadwood?

Look at these examples: “The deluxe table is red in colour.” “Our batteries last for a duration of 25 hours.” “To start the generator, turn the handle in a clockwise direction.” See the deadwood?

The same sentences come to life when you chop it out: “The deluxe table is red.” “Our batteries last 25 hours.” “To start the generator, turn the handle clockwise.”

Too much deadwood and you numb your reader’s brain. If he *has* to read what you write (a manual, say), he’ll find it hard to concentrate. And hard to remember what you’ve said.

## Are your words and sentences too long?

Why do you get a headache when you read your insurance policy? Because the policy says “implement” when it could have said “do”. Or it says “terminate” when it could have said “end”. And the sentences run for miles. Who can wade through it?

If you overdo the long words and sentences, you might as well write in Greek. Your readers won’t understand a thing. And you don’t even impress them — most people have a quiet contempt for stuffy writing.

Short words are usually clearer and have more effect. Ditto for short sentences.



*Sorry, but we’ll have to operate!  
You’ve got too many big words in there.*

## Are your verbs working?

Make your verbs work as hard as possible. They drive the writing along.

WRITE: “This report explains our policy.”

NOT: “This report is an explanation of our policy.”

WRITE: “Our company designed and developed the new console.”

NOT: “Our company has done the design and development of the new console.”

WRITE: “The costs exceed what we expected.”

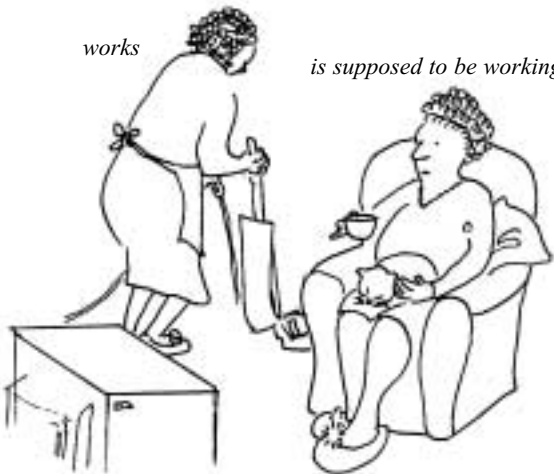
NOT: “The costs are in excess of what we expected.”

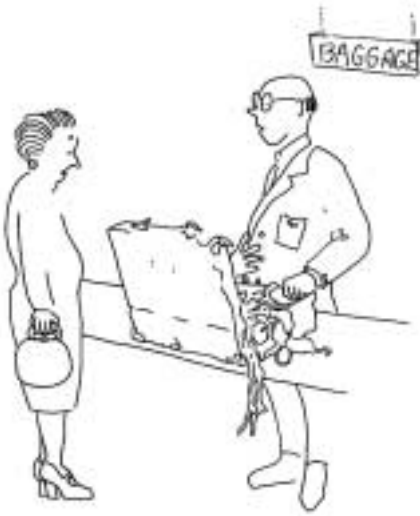
Both versions say the same thing. Yet one has force and the other lacks it.

Then there’s the deadly “passive voice”. The direct way to write a sentence is like this: “The cow jumped over the moon.” In the passive voice it comes out: “The moon was jumped over by the cow.” Weak. With a roundabout feeling. Puts people to sleep.

*works*

*is supposed to be working*





*It is regretted that your suitcase has been subject to damaging circumstances.*

And the passive voice is often vague: “It is required for the meter to be calibrated.” Who by? Who’s requiring it? To be clear, you need to say something like: “The manufacturer requires that the commissioning engineer calibrates the meter” or “You need to calibrate the meter before you use it.” The passive voice version might mean anything.

Look through your brochures and letters. Are they full of the passive voice? Your writing could be more forceful. Clearer. (And only one in a thousand will know your “secret”).

## **Is your conversational level about right?**

We’re writing this in a very conversational way. Almost like a letter to a friend. Notice how often we’ve been using the word “you”? It’s one of the marks of a conversational style. Even computer manuals are written this way. (The ones you can read.)

If you never use words like “you”, “we”, “your”, and “our”, then your publications could suffer. People relate to personal words. And these words help a lot when you’re giving instructions. (“When you get off the train, watch the step” *not* “It is advised to observe the step when alighting from the train.”)

In very conversational writing, the word “I” has a natural place.

Even scientists are now told: “Forget the superstition that scientific objectivity demands impersonal writing.” (Clear Technical Writing, by J. A. Brogan, 1983.)

We’re making the case for more personal writing because most business writing shelters behind an impersonal style. It feels safer. And in some cases, it *is* appropriate. But not always.

You don’t have to be as informal as we’re being now. You can write in a personal style and still be as dignified as you like. It can pay.



*Let me show you how our product works.*

## **Will everyone get the same message?**

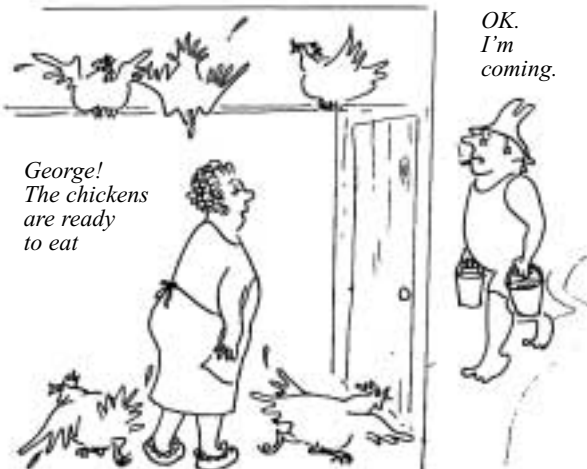
Most people find it easy to write something they can understand *themselves*. But someone else might read it in a completely different way.

Here’s a typical scene: “That’s not what I wrote!” says the writer, getting mad, explaining it in new words. The reader stares at the page again, and sure enough — there it is: the meaning he hadn’t seen. Yet both meanings were there in black and white . . . Ambiguous writing.

Sound familiar? It’s why professional writers tell you to put your writing away when you’re finished. Then look at it later, with a cold eye. Or let someone else criticise it.

Ever strain yourself trying to follow instruction leaflets? (Like how to program some brands of air conditioners.) And this is *technical writing*. (So called.)

You should write so that everyone will interpret it the same way. This takes extra work. But it means that your words have predictable effects.



## What about the big picture?

Do you start with the main point? Or do you lead your reader up to it slowly?

For a hundred years, newspapers and magazines have put the main point first. (The “inverted pyramid” style.) Readers now expect it. If you don’t do the same thing, your readers may never *get* to your main point. And they may feel tricked.

Imagine you get a long letter that starts off by thanking you for your support for your bowling club. The letter goes on and on, saying how well the club is doing, telling about the events coming up, the new members, then — bang! — after four pages you find out what they’re after: a \$200 special contribution from every member! Feel burned?

Another example. Scientists used to put their conclusions at the end of their reports. (After they’d softened up their readers with arguments and evidence.) But readers automatically skipped to the end, to find the meat. So scientific reports now have the summary right at the front.

Look at your newspaper. The headline sums up the whole story. The first paragraph sums it up again, with a little more detail. And so on, until the end — where you’ll find the least important details.

Do the same thing. It’s easy. And it helps your reader.



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## Why pass the tests?

*You’ll get your message across.* People will read it and understand it. This makes it more likely they’ll act on it.

*Your readers will feel comfortable with the writing style.* A lot of people find it hard to adjust their writing to their audience. They write the same way, whether it’s going to a law firm or a cricket team. Result: letters and publications get junked. This won’t happen if you write in a conversational style, at the right level.

*You’ll cut down on ambiguity.* If you mean “car” but write “vehicle”, the reader gets a fuzzy picture: you might mean anything from a fork lift truck to a Honda Civic. This happens when you use a more abstract word than you need to. Each time you do it, possibilities multiply. The fog spreads. Our rule about short words is a help: you only use the long words when you need them. Long words are usually the more abstract ones.

Your publications represent you. Make them good.

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