



12 Ways to Improve Your Writing

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The overall classification of this presentation is:

Unclassified

Classified by:

Derived from:

Declassify on:

1) Write lousy first drafts

...then edit them to make them awesome.

Get the important points down on paper or screen, and organize them into a logical order. Then add supporting information. Soon you'll have a first draft.

If you have time, set it aside, come back to it later, and read it with fresh eyes.

Revise the content until it's ready to make it's debut, and ask at least one other person to read it.



This is also a cure for writer's block.

2) Write good leads

Use a strong opening to draw readers into your article or message.

In most cases, it's best to keep the **bottom line up front** (BLUF).

Don't begin with a date unless it's the most important part of the message. (It rarely is.)

If you want someone to **do something** – RSVP, speak at an event, sign an authorization – say so within the first few sentences. Many readers scan the first paragraph and decide whether to continue reading. If your request is not there, they might not see it.

For a news story, use the **inverted pyramid**: the most important info in the first paragraph, the rest in descending order of importance. Then, if an editor chops off the last few paragraphs, you've still made your main point, and the story still makes sense.

Avoid clichéd openings, such as:

- “Webster defines ‘mediocre’ as...”
- “Unless you’ve been living under a rock...”
- “In a perfect world...”



3) Use plain language

Write the way people talk. Avoid “cop speak.”

"Smith related that, upon his return to the aforementioned residence, he made the observation that the forwardmost point of entry was unsecured." – cop speak

"Smith said the door was unlocked when he got home."
– better

The typical newspaper is written at a **6th grade reading level** – not because readers are stupid, but because **that's level at which most people like to process information.**

Make it easier for readers to quickly understand your meaning by using simple language and short sentences.



4) Avoid jargon

Use plain English that most readers can easily understand.

- "We have created a frictionless user onboarding experience." – jargon
- "Signing up is easy." – plain language (better)

If you **must** include a technical term or unfamiliar entity name, insert a brief description or a hyperlink that readers can follow to learn more.

When writing about scientific matters for non-SME's, use examples or analogies, such as "equivalent to 20 tons of TNT" or "the length of a school bus."

If your document contains three or more technical terms and acronyms, add a glossary at the end to define them.



5) Choose active voice over passive

In an active sentence, the subject performs an action. In a passive sentence, the subject receives the action. In most cases, active is better than passive.

Active sentences are stronger, clearer, and more concise. They more closely resemble spoken language.

An easy way to tell the difference: Add “by zombies” at the end of a sentence. If it makes sense, it’s passive. Re-cast it to make it active, if that’s feasible.



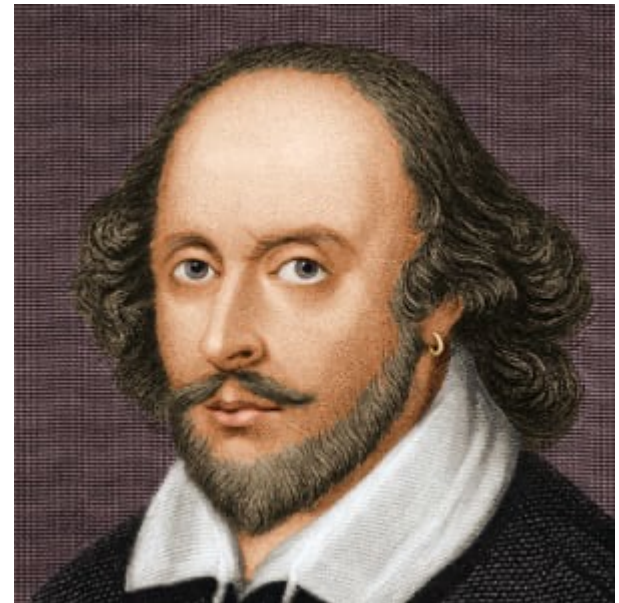
“Over 11 million maps and charts were ordered and printed **by zombies.**”
- passive

“Customers ordered and printed over 11 million maps and charts.” – active (and we know who *really* ordered and printed the and charts)

6) Don't over-explain

Omit things that everyone already knows.

- For example, you can quote, or refer to, Abraham Lincoln or William Shakespeare without explaining who they are.



Don't re-state the obvious.

- “The NGA Museum ~~is a museum that~~ contains historic artifacts and photos.” – redundant
- “The NGA Museum contains historic artifacts and photos.” – better
- “Amy ~~is a person who~~ likes chocolate.” – redundant
- “Amy likes chocolate.” – better

(Both of these edits also change the sentence from passive to active—a bonus!)

7) Choose your words carefully

Concise language is easier – and more interesting – to read than long phrases with bland or unfamiliar words. Use strong words with impact.

- Concrete > vague
- A single word > a phrase
- Familiar > arcane
- Specific > general
- Short > long

“We will **utilize** the new method.” – three syllables (and not technically correct)

“He will **use** the new method.” – shorter, and the meaning is still clear

“This **effort** will increase efficiency.” – vague

“This **plan / measure / initiative** will increase efficiency.” – more specific and concrete

“They are **more than happy** with the results.” – three-word phrase

“They are **delighted** (or thrilled, or elated, or ecstatic) with the results.” – one word

Resuscitate “*smothered verbs*” (weak verbs paired with abstract nouns).

- **can** > have the ability to
- **decided** > made a decision
- **attended** > was in attendance
- **describe** > give a description
- **contributed** > made a contribution
- **need** > am in need of

8) Sometimes, you need to break the rules

You may need to ignore proper usage if it gets in the way of clear, effective writing.

Occasionally, adhering to grammar rules can yield correct-but-awkward text. End sentences with prepositions and use split infinitives, if doing so works better than following the rules.

- “From where did this rule come?” – correct, but awkward
- “Where did this rule come from?” – technically incorrect, but better
- “Where did this rule originate?” – another option



According to legend, Sir Winston Churchill once responded to clumsy editing of his work by writing, “This is the type of arrant pedantry up with which I shall not put!”

9) Apply the KonMari method to your writing

Words don't have to “spark joy,” but they do need to serve a purpose. De-clutter your writing by eliminating unnecessary words and phrases:

“There is...that...” “There are...who...”

“...in the process of...” “...be doing...”

- ~~There were~~ seven people ~~who~~ worked on the project. – cluttered
- Seven people worked on the project. – better
- We are ~~in the process of~~ testing the software. – cluttered
- We are testing the software. – better
- We will ~~be meeting~~ at 9:00. – cluttered / grammatically incorrect
- We will meet at 9:00. – better



Another way to avoid visual clutter:

Use *italics*, **boldface**, (*or both*), **color** or **increased font size** for emphasis, instead of underlining text, which suggests a hyperlink and is less effective.

10) Read every day

Read good, well-written content.

Reading a lot teaches you how good sentences look, feel, and sound.

Knowing this will help you become a better writer.



11) Write every day

Practice makes perfect.

- Keep a journal.
- Write posts for your blog.
- Compose letters.
- Offer to help write your team's quarterly report or an article about a recent success or upcoming event.



In his book *Outliers*, journalist Malcolm Gladwell attributed the phenomenal success of some high achievers – including Bill Gates and The Beatles – to natural talent supplemented by thousand of hours spent honing their tradecraft early in their careers.

This applies to writing as well, and it's never too late to start racking up your hours.

12) Use apps and other tools to make your writing bold and clear

Weekly plain language tips, announcements, *NGA Today* splash page

Writer's Corner Newsletter www.geo.nga.ic.gov/atc/editors/archive.php

Writing Tips and Tricks for NGA Analysts blogs.intelink.ic.gov/blogs/ngaeditors/

Grammar Girl grammar.quickanddirtytips.com/grammar-girl

Comma Queen video.newyorker.com/series/comma-queen

Grammarly www.grammarly.com/blog/category/handbook/

Grammarist grammarist.com/

The Hemingway App HemingwayApp.com

Recommended reference books

The Associated Press Stylebook

The Chicago Manual of Style

Elements of Style, by Strunk and White

On Writing Well, by Zinsser

The Plain English Approach to Business Writing by Edward P. Bailey

100 Ways to Improve Your Writing, by Gary Provost

Garner's Modern English Usage, Fourth Edition

The NGA Analysis Style Manual

Ernest Hemingway on Writing

Stephen King on Writing

