

Business Writing

How to Write Clearly and Concisely



**Nina
Sunday**

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By Nina Sunday

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Chapter 1: Goals - Economy, Clarity, Empathy

Have you ever composed a document only to find the reader misunderstood your intentions or became confused?

Whether you write emails, reports or proposals, you need to write clearly, concisely and quickly.

Writing is using words to express your thoughts and ideas.

Poor writing is like turning up in an ill-fitting suit. It diminishes your credibility.

What's the cost of 10,000 new brochures being pulped because of an unacceptable typo?

Good writing opens doors, creates opportunities, and gets results.

The ability to communicate effectively gives a competitive advantage.

Everyone now must compose at internet speed and most people have questions about style, usage, vocabulary, grammar, punctuation and spelling.

Improving your business communication skyrockets your career.

So what makes for good business writing?

Good business writing is concise—says more with fewer words. It's clear—there's no ambiguity or information gaps. It's writing with the reader in mind.

To achieve these goals we'll discuss:

- Plain English - how to avoid complex language, jargon and clichés
- Readability - how to measure your writing using an easy to calculate Readability Index
- Editing tips to refine your writing style, to makeover your writing sample.

While not essential, it makes sense to read this book with a one-page printout of a sample of your writing; two paper copies, one to work with, the other for your final draft.

Have a pen or pencil handy to make notes on your sample printout as we apply rules of good writing one by one.

We'll show you the 20% of writing tactics that will improve your writing by 80%.

That's the 80 / 20 rule.

Good writing is really rewriting. Even the best writers polish and re-polish their first drafts.

You may want to use the makeover checklist that's included in the appendix again and again as an editing process until the steps become automatic and second nature.

Powerful writing is writing with impact.

The ancient Roman orator and philosopher, Cicero, said, 'The point of writing is not just to be understood, but to make it impossible to be misunderstood.'¹

Chapter 2: Readability Index

How readable is your writing style? Is it crystal clear and easy to read, or is it foggy?

To measure the readability of your writing sample, let's apply the Fog Index developed by Robert Gunning in 1968.¹

Using the Fog Readability Index we can measure your writing style to identify how easy or difficult it is for your reader to understand you.

In a moment I will ask you to count:

- the number of words in your writing sample
- then the number of sentences
- then the number of words with three syllables or more, i.e. long words.

Using an easy mathematical formula - you might need a calculator - we'll come up with a readability score.

Exercise 1 - Fog Index

Step 1. Count the number of **words** (with two or more letters) in your writing sample, to maximum 200 words. Either place a tick at 200 words or note the number of words.

Step 2. Now count the number of **sentences** within that section. (A bullet point is a separate thought, so count that as a sentence.)

Step 3. Divide the number of words by the number of sentences. This gives you the average **sentence length**.

Syllables

A syllable is a unit of sound. The word 'industry' has three syllables: in-dus-try. Tech-nol-o-gy has four syllables. Look for any word with three or more syllables.

Step 4. Count the number of **long words**, that is, words with three or more syllables. (The next paragraph explains what a syllable is.)

A tip. Exclude names of people or places and words that are combinations of two easy words such as understand, oversee, etc.

Step 5. I suggest you use a calculator for this next calculation.

Take the number of multi-syllable words; divide that by the number of words in the passage, then multiply by 100 to get the percentage of multi-syllable words.

Step 6. The Fog Readability Index formula is -

average sentence length plus the percentage of long words multiplied by 0.4, equals your Readability Index.

Debrief

An index of around 10 or 11 is average - clear and understandable.

Anything below that, around 7 or 8, is crystal clear.

Anything above 13 is becoming decidedly 'foggy'. (It's been known to be as high as 40.)

Please be aware this readability formula is only a guide.

Your final judge is your ear and common sense. If when you read it aloud it makes sense, it flows, it's understandable, then your writing is fine.

Keep your writing clear and fight the fog.

Chapter 3: Economy - Sentence Length

There's a saying. How do you eat an elephant? One bite at a time. Tackle a large project one small step at a time. Learn how to improve your business writing one tactic at a time.

When author Ernest Hemingway joined the newspaper, *Toronto Star Weekly*, in 1920, he was given a style sheet by his boss, C. G. Pete Wellington.

Among the list of do's and don'ts were these three rules:

- use short sentences
- use short first paragraphs
- use vigorous English.

Hemingway later praised these three principles as 'the best rules I ever learned for the business of writing'. Hemingway won the Nobel Prize for literature in 1954 for his novel, 'The Old Man and the Sea'. Read this novel to experience an example of crystal clear writing.

Exercise 2 - longest sentence

Are you long-winded? How long are your sentences? Are any sentences more than 22 words?

Please go through your writing sample. Identify the longest sentence (by counting the total number of words).

It's good to vary sentence length with an occasional short sentence.

Exercise 3 - shortest sentence

Here are examples of short sentences with impact.

- That must stop.
- Here's what I suggest.
- I agree.
- This is a major breakthrough.

Please locate your shortest sentence. Does this sentence have impact?

Chapter 4: Eliminate Unnecessary Words, Avoid Qualifiers

Please read the following poem published in the Quarterly Journal of Doublespeak (Doublespeak is the wordy opposite of Plain English.)

‘Scintillate, scintillate
globule vivific
Fain would I fathom
thy nature specific.
Loftily poised in the
ether capacious
Vaguely resembling a
gem carbonaceous.’

Can you guess what simple poem this is a parody?

I’ll give you a clue. Sisters Ann and Jane Taylor published their poem ‘The Star’ in 1806. Read it again.

‘Scintillate, scintillate
Twinkle, twinkle,
globule vivific
little star,
Fain would I fathom
How I wonder
thy nature specific.
what you are!
Loftily poised in the
Up above the
ether capacious
world so high
Vaguely resembling a
Like a gem carbonaceous.
diamond in the sky.’

Are you too wordy? Do you use too many words when you write?

George Orwell, author of novels, ‘Animal Farm’ and ‘1984’, whose books have sold forty million copies in 60 languages, advocated a simple, plain style.

His rules for clear writing include:

- never use a long word where a short one will do
- never use the passive where you can use the active (more about passive and active voice later)
- if it is possible to cut a word out, always cut it out. Omit needless words

Orwell's 'Animal Farm' sheep might chant, 'Brevity is good. Wordiness is baad.' [sic]

Omit needless words

Our first brevity tactic is to eliminate unnecessary words.

We compete for our reader's attention. The shorter the sentence the quicker it delivers the message. The shorter your piece, the more likely it will be read.

Exercise 4 - Omit needless words

Please refer to the sample of your writing to find opportunities to delete non-essential words. For example, instead of *in order* to write *to*, instead of *in the event that* write *if*, replace *for the purpose of* with *to*.

'A total of 14 trucks'	Should be...	'14 trucks'
'Due to the fact that'		'because'
'In the event that'		'if'
'At this point in time'		'now'
'End Result'		'result'

Avoid Qualifiers

Qualifiers are words such as *very, quite, rather, some, almost, extremely, nearly, a little, a bit, kind of, sort of*.

You might be surprised to discover that qualifiers weaken your statement rather than emphasise it.

Compare: *The service was very poor and I was quite disappointed.*

With: *The service was poor and I was disappointed.*

Perhaps read each sentence aloud. Which statement is more definite, more confident?

Whenever you are tempted to use a qualifier, pick a better adjective instead.

Instead of: *The service was extremely good and I was very pleased.*

Write instead: *The service was outstanding and I was impressed.*

Another option - you can replace it with a better word:

- *very tall* might become *towering*
- *very small* might become *petite*.

Avoid using qualifiers.

Exercise 5 - avoid qualifiers

How many qualifiers have you used in your writing sample?

Scan your document for qualifiers.

Circle, underline or highlight each one as you locate it.

Then read again any sentence with the qualifier removed and notice the difference. If it reads better without the qualifier, remove it.

How many qualifiers can you eliminate?

Debrief

How many qualifiers did you remove and still have emphasis? Most of them?

And does your writing now sound more confident?

Qualifiers have been described as leeches infesting the pond of prose, sucking the blood of words.²

Avoid unnecessary qualifiers.

Exercise 5 - I think

Similarly, phrases such as *in my opinion, I believe, think* are unnecessary and weaken your argument.

Look through your piece now and simply cross out any you find.

That

Let's now turn our attention to a common connecting word, *that*.

The house that Jack built can easily be written as *The house Jack built*.

That was, which are, and who is are common phrases you can often cut out and still make sense.

A phrase such as *that consists of* can be rewritten as *consisting of*.

Sometimes *that* or *which* is important to avoid ambiguity, but if it's possible to cut out *that* or *which*, cut it out.

Exercise 6 - that

Locate any sentence containing *that*.

Reread the sentence with *that* removed. If it still makes sense, notice whether removing it also adds a sense of flow.

Does your writing sound better with unnecessary *thats* removed.

The

Now look for every time you've used the article, *the*.

Instead of *a member of the Advisor Services* you could drop *the* and write, *A member of Advisor Services*.

Exercise 7 - the

Look for every *the* and decide which can go.

One proviso: never sacrifice clarity for the sake of brevity.

There is a story about Hollywood movie star, Cary Grant.

Cary Grant was discreet about his age. A journalist telegraphed Grant's agent with an abbreviated message, 'How old Cary Grant?'

Grant saw this telegram and instructed his agent to reply, 'Old Cary Grant just fine. How are you?'

It is important to eliminate unnecessary words, however not so many the message becomes ambiguous.

Chapter 5: Economy - Avoid Repetition

From what classic novel are these opening lines?

It was the best of times,
It was the worst of times,
It was the age of wisdom,
It was the age of foolishness.

These are the opening lines of *Tale of Two Cities* by Charles Dickens.

That's an example of deliberate parallel repetition that works.

In business correspondence though, repetition is a nuisance and slows the reader down.

Exercise 8 - repetition

In your writing sample have you repeated words or phrases?

Scan your document now for the same word written repeatedly. Circle, underline or highlight each one as you locate it.

I don't mean connecting words such as *and* or *you* but notable words such as *industry* or *technology*.

You might be surprised how many jump out when you ask your brain to search and locate identical words.

Debrief

Were you surprised by how many you found?

It's common to have a blind spot to repetition.

Once you identify words repeated, you have a few options. You can either:

- delete the word or phrase - (does it still make sense?)
- use a synonym, a word with the same meaning
- use a Thesaurus or synonym dictionary
- rewrite the sentence.

Thesaurus

In 1852, retired English doctor, Peter Roget, published his now world-famous Thesaurus of English Words and Phrases.²

During his lifetime there were 28 editions and Roget's Thesaurus is still printed today. Web-based versions are on the net or you'll find it in the Tools menu in your word processing software.

A Thesaurus is a useful tool but it can be over-used, so be careful. Don't let synonyms take over and make your piece sound contrived.

Don't scramble to use every possible synonym. If it feels normal and natural to re-use your first-choice word, then do so.

Too many synonyms become obvious.

Author George Orwell said:

Good prose is like a window pane. Good writing does not draw attention to itself.

Exercise 8 - repetition - part 2

Please look over your writing sample and decide how you will handle the repetition you've identified.

Will you delete words, use a synonym (another word with the same meaning), or rewrite the sentence to add variation?

Our lesson today is, don't repeat yourself, and avoid being repetitive! [sic]³

Now look at the **first word of each paragraph**.

Do you use the same word to start each sentence, or is there variation?

If you notice a pattern, you might like to change the word order.

To create more interesting expression, one writing tactic is to reposition the end of a sentence at the start, (as in this sentence).

Exercise 8 - repetition - part 3

In your writing sample double-check the first word of your paragraphs.

If you notice repetition, rewrite.

Chapter 6: Economy - Avoid Redundancy

What are the fewest words you can use and still get a message across?

The two shortest telegrams ever sent were between French author, Victor Hugo, and his publisher.

Hugo was wondering how sales were going on his novel, 'Les Miserables', and telegraphed a simple question mark.

His publisher's reply was equally short, an exclamation mark!

Vigorous writing is concise.

Consider this phrase: 'His neighbor who lived next door...'

Don't neighbors usually live next door? 'who lived next door' is redundant and unnecessary.

The reason *because...* is redundant.

The reason *is...* is correct.

Redundancy

Avoid redundancy, that is, a word repeating the meaning of another word in the same phrase.

For example:

'Let me repeat again' should be 'let me repeat'...

Exercise 9 - redundancy

Please look over your writing sample to locate any redundant phrase, i.e. multiple words conveying the same thought.

In the same way as before, check your piece makes better sense with redundant words removed.

A Cornell university English professor, William Strunk Jr., who wrote the now classic, *Elements of Style*, had a favourite maxim: omit needless words.

I say to you too:

Omit needless words. Make every word count.

Chapter 7: Economy - Active Voice

I am loved by him.

I am not loved by him.

I am loved by him.

Saying it this way is using passive voice.

How much more direct and concise it sounds when I say:

He loves me.

He loves me not.

He loves me.

This is using active voice.

Consider this sentence:

The chair was broken by Jim.—Passive.

Jim broke the chair.—Active.

In active voice, Jim performs the action.

In passive voice, the chair is being acted upon.

The letter was written by him.—Passive.

He wrote the letter.—Active.

Active sentences are direct, personal and more interesting.

Passive sentences use more words, are longwinded and impersonal.

Passive voice is used for scientific writing, but for business documents, active voice:

- uses fewer words
- is to the point
- is more direct
- sounds better
- and reads better.

Let's spot the passive in your writing.

Remember, a verb is a *doing, being* or *having* word and describes an action or state of being.

To locate passive voice, look for compound verbs consisting of two or three parts

For example,

The house was built by...

The room is cleaned by...

Harry got promoted by...

These sentences use part of the verb *to be* or *to get*.

Often the word *by* follows the verb:

- was built by
- is cleaned by

One way to put writing into active voice is to ask yourself, *who is doing this?*

Exercise 10 - active voice

Active voice brings the action to life. The subject acts, rather than is acted upon.

Rewrite this sentence in active voice:

The shops were closed by all the dealers. (8 words)

Ask yourself, who is doing the closing? The dealers are closing, so our sentence, rewritten in active voice, becomes:

All the dealers closed the shops. (6 words)

Observe the number of words saved. The passive sentence used eight words; active voice reduced the word count to six. That's 25% fewer words.

Let's try one more.

Consider this sentence:

The contract was signed by the chairperson. (7 words)

Who is doing the signing? The chairperson is signing, so the sentence becomes:

The chairperson signed the contract. (5 words)

The passive sentence used 7 words; the active used 5 words, saving 28% of total words.

Exercise 11 - active voice - part 2

Refer now to your writing sample to locate passive voice sentences.

Use clues such as compound verbs, especially including the word *by*.

For example:

- was signed by...
- were ordered by...

And when you find a passive sentence, rewrite it in active voice.

Do this one by one as you encounter the passive throughout your piece.

In summary, active voice reduces the number of words overall while injecting vigour into your writing.

You can end up with what Nobel prize-winning author, Ernest Hemingway, called a crisp, clear sentence.

Chapter 8: Clarity - Write the Way You Speak

If you read your writing aloud does it sound natural? Do you write the way you speak?

Use simple words rather than complex ones. Use short, familiar words.

Which is easier to read?

utilise - or *use*?

endeavor - or *try*?

sufficient - or *enough*?

Large words sound impersonal and make the writer appear stuffy.

Many authors have difficulty keeping their message simple and clear. Instead of using everyday words they use complex or unfamiliar words.

Simple, everyday words help get your message across.

Technical writers often use words such as *initiate* and *proliferate* instead of the simpler *start* and *spread*.

Exercise 12 - read it aloud

Read aloud your writing sample, to listen how it sounds. Be aware of how your reader might respond as they read.

Does it sound natural?

Identify any words that sound awkward or that you would not use at all in spoken English. If you would not say it in conversation or on the telephone, don't write it.

Read your piece aloud; mark off any unwieldy phrases that sound too formal.

Let your ear be the judge.

Debrief

Did you come across any wordy phrases you would never use in spoken English? Here are some examples:

- in the interim
- I acknowledge receipt of
- enclosed please find

Remember to write the way you speak.

Since the 1980s, the drive for plain language is an international trend. The American, Canadian, British and Australian governments have plain language policies. The European Union launched a *Fight the Fog* campaign.¹

Private and public organisations realise the importance of clear and easy-to-understand communications.

You must understand the words you write.

If in doubt about the meaning of a word, don't use it.

Your reading audience is likely to be fuzzy on the meaning of such a word as well.

You must understand the words you write.

Avoid words that sound 'official'. You are writing to express, not impress.

Using words that are harder to understand are an unnecessary overload and create a communication barrier.

Avoid using an uncommon word if exactly the same thing can be said with a familiar one.

Register

Register refers to the style of language we use in a particular situation, whether formal, standard or informal.

At a public or religious ceremony we might use formal register, whereas having coffee with a friend our register might be more informal.

Plain English roughly equates to standard register which is a neutral style, neither formal nor casual.

In formal register the writer might use words such as *amendment* and *legislation*. Plain English - standard register - uses *changes* and *laws* instead.

Use simple words instead of complex vocabulary. Think Plain English.

Chapter 9: Clarity - Be Positive

If I say, don't think of a blue hippopotamus, what's the first thing that pops into your mind?

Whatever follows the words *do not* or *don't* becomes the dominant thought.

What do you think of when I say, 'Please do not mess up your room'? Do you imagine a scene of a messed up room?

Listen to the following instruction:

Do not turn off your computer without saving your work.

If we consider the logical order of events and then state it in the positive, this instruction becomes:

Save your work, then turn off your computer.

Here's an instruction on a sign in a warehouse, 'Do not double-stack thin-grade cardboard boxes or they'll collapse.'

Hmm...I now have this image in my mind of boxes falling around everywhere. *Double-stacking* and *collapse* are the dominant thoughts.

If double-stacking is what you *don't* want them to do, what *do* you want them to do? To double-stack only thick-grade boxes—or—to single-stack thin-grade boxes?

The instruction should be, '*Please single-stack all thin-grade cardboard boxes*'.

Perhaps add a reason, 'To avoid boxes collapsing, please single-stack all thin-grade cardboard boxes.'

Don't write don't

Don't is an abstract device of language, which means it's invisible.

And what the brain remembers are the words immediately following the word *don't*.

Why do people say 'don't forget' when they actually mean 'please remember'?

Consider this letter ending:

Please do not hesitate to contact us if you have any questions.

Promise me you'll never use that clichéd letter ending again.

If *don't* is invisible, are you actually suggesting, please *hesitate* to contact us?

Why not write: *Feel free to contact us if you have any questions, or, if you have any questions, please just ask.*

Exercise 13 - state in the positive

Now it's your turn. Have you stated information in the negative or the positive?

Clues to look for: The words *not*, *do not* or *don't*.

Especially foggy are double negatives - *It's not unlikely* or *it's not uncommon*.

Locate any negative expressions in your writing sample. Restate them in the positive.

Author George Orwell protested against the double negative and suggested it's possible to cure oneself of them by memorising this sentence:

A not un-black dog was chasing a not un-small rabbit across a not un-green field.

And next time someone thanks you for your assistance, instead of saying 'not a problem', say instead, 'it's a pleasure'.

Describe what you want your reader to do, not what you want them to avoid.

And don't say don't! [sic]

Chapter 10: Avoid Nominalisation

Avoid changing verbs into nouns.

Use the verb, it's more dynamic.

They conducted an investigation... doesn't have as much impact as . . . *They investigated it.*

The process of changing a verb into a noun is called nominalisation.

Too much nominalisation in a document makes it abstract and difficult to read.

Instead of, *we made a decision*, write, *we decided*.

That's vigorous English.

Instead of...*we reached an agreement...**we agreed*

Instead of...*the introduction of...* use...*by introducing*

submit an application becomes...*apply for*

conduct an assessment... why not simply use *assess*?

Exercise 14 - nominalisation

Clues to look for? Look for words ending in 'ion', 'tion', or 'ment'.

In summary, a simple step for clearer writing is to use verbs, rather than nouns.

Maintain a high verb to noun ratio.

Chapter 11: Clarity - Bullets

Did you know *bullet*, the word for the simple round dot point we use to emphasise items in a list, comes from the French word, *boules*, meaning ball?

It's common for executives and decision-makers to just scan documents rather than read them in detail.

Bullets make documents more readable.

They capture the reader and are a quick way to summarise conclusions or key concepts.

They aid information flow and help readers absorb information.

Bullets:

- focus attention
- improve comprehension
- aid memory
- emphasise
- organise
- summarise.

From a design and layout point of view, they signal to the eye, here are the essentials.

To replace sentences with keywords or phrases is a brevity tactic.

Next step in the makeover of your writing sample is to identify any part of the text that lends itself to becoming dot points.

Exercise 15 - bullet opportunities

Scan your document for items that can be listed, i.e. items that could easily form a list.

Some clues to look for . . .

- a sentence containing phrases such as: *The main phases of the project are...or...The 4 major steps are...*
- a series of words or phrases separated by commas or semi-colons.

How to create bullets

Use the *bullets and numbering* function found in the *Format* menu of your word processing program.

Here are some guidelines around creating bullet points:

Never use a bullet and a number together. Save numbers for when you need to show priority or date order.

Use a simple dot or square rather than a flowery icon or shape.

No need to add a comma at the end of each dot point unless it's a complete sentence, then add a full stop or period. There is a trend towards less punctuation.

You may wish to add a full stop or period at the end of the final last point to show the list is complete.

Make sure there's consistency and parallel construction.

Parallel construction means the lead-in statement begins a sentence, then each bulleted item must continue with the same grammatical structure as if it is completing that sentence.

Consistency also means if the initial letter after the dot is lower case, do the same with all items in the same list and all lists in the same document.

To capitalise or not to capitalise? The answer's simple. If each dot point is a full sentence, start with a capital letter.

If each entry is a phrase or sentence fragment, then no initial capital need be used.

Create only one bulleted list per page. Too many bullets reduce their effectiveness. And include only six or fewer entries per set of bullets.

Do not justify the text. It can skew or stretch the letters. A ragged right margin is fine.

Refer to a style guide for more rules about dot points.

Chapter 12: Empathy - Tone - I vs. You, First, Second, Third Person

In business, what is our purpose when writing?

To give information? To ask for information? To request action? To persuade, recommend or suggest?

There's another underlying purpose to business communication - to create relationships and build goodwill.

Goodwill is a business asset with a dollar value. Do you write with a human voice? Does your language sound natural? Do you write the way you speak?

Research shows executives make decisions based on facts and objective valuation, not through persuasive superlatives such as 'amazing', 'revolutionary', 'ground-breaking'.

People are becoming more savvy and immune to hype. They want authenticity and substance.

Companies using language of the sales pitch sound superficial and false.

Tone is expressed with your choice of words.

One way to put a reader-focus in your documents is to use 'You' more often than 'I'.

'I' is what's called first person.

'You' is second person.

'He' / 'she' / 'they' is third person.

Using 'you' and 'we' engages the reader, and generally speaking, is more often better than using 'I'.

Compare: *We can send you a report*

With: *You can request a report.*

Emphasise what your client wants - not what you want for your client. It's a subtle distinction, and powerful.

Exercise 16 - I vs. you

Scan your document for the word 'I'.

For each one you locate, consider, can you rewrite the sentence from the reader's point of view?

Consider whether it's better to rewrite the sentence using 'you' instead.

Debrief

How many did you find? Does your piece sound better written with the reader in mind?

Put a reader-focus in your choice of words; meet the reader's needs. Maintain a high 'you' to 'I' ratio.

Chapter 13: Empathy - Courtesy

Like adding salt or pepper to a meal, *please* and *thank you* are word condiments that add a courtesy flavor to your emails, letters, memos and documents.

Whenever you request something—action or information—add a *please* and a *thank you*.

Thanking you in anticipation is old-fashioned ‘office-speak’ and sounds false.

Exercise 17 - courtesy

In your document, locate any requests for your reader to do something.

Have you included please or thank you? If not, remember to add these. (Avoid writing *please* more than once in any sentence.)

Chapter 14: Punctuation - Commas

Just as musical notation directs a musician how to play, so punctuation directs you how to read.

Punctuation marks are the traffic signals of language.

Someone from a couple of hundred years ago might ask, where did all the commas go? While the trend today is towards less punctuation, even experts don't agree where to put a comma. So there's room for judgment and personal preference.

Use commas:

- in a list
- before dialogue
- to separate information so it makes sense.

Short introductory phrases do not require a comma, unless it is likely to be misread.

A comma is a pause, indicating where you would take a breath if reading aloud.

Listen to this sentence from Gore Vidal's novel, *Burr*.¹

Some weeks before, Adams had appointed Secretary of State, John Marshall, Chief Justice of the United States.

I wrote this sentence with a comma after the phrase, 'Some weeks before'.

Consider how it would read if the comma were missing...

Some weeks before Adams had appointed Secretary of State, John Marshall, Chief Justice of the United States...

and now we've reached a dead end.

The comma after the introductory phrase *Some weeks before* is an essential signal to meaning.

So if you're not sure whether a comma might be required, read it aloud. It becomes obvious.

Pause where it makes sense to pause, and add a comma there.

Run-on sentences

I love chocolate ice cream she likes vanilla.

We are going out to dinner I booked a babysitter.

These sentences are examples of run-on sentences—a common error. They are actually two sentences in one.

Adding a comma after *ice cream*, or *dinner* does not fix the problem.

Comma Splice

In fact, we then have another common error - a *comma-splice*. A comma alone cannot join two complete sentences.

There are three ways to fix this.

1. Replace the comma with a semi-colon.

I love chocolate ice cream; she likes vanilla.

We are going out to dinner; I booked a babysitter.

2. Replace the comma with a full stop or period and make two sentences.

I love chocolate ice cream. She likes vanilla.

We are going out to dinner. I booked a babysitter.

However, too many short sentences can make your writing choppy.

3. Keep the comma and add a connecting word.

FANBOYS

'And' and 'but' are the most common of the seven joiner words. FANBOYS is a handy mnemonic device (memory aid) to help you remember the seven connecting words:

F - for

A - and

N - nor

B - but

O - or

Y - yet

S - so

Watch for complete sentences within sentences, then add a comma and a FANBOYS joiner word to connect them.

Comma before 'and'

What about lists? Is there a comma before the word 'and' at the end of a list?

We sell nuts, bolts, and gaskets.

The comma before 'and' is called the Oxford comma, from the house style at Oxford University Press. It is also called the Harvard comma, or the serial comma, from the house style of Harvard University Press.

Experts disagree about whether to use the serial comma and many people were brought up not to use a comma before 'and'.

Bottom-line - both are correct, it's an optional comma. Our goal is clarity, for example:

If the items in the list are not single items, adding a comma before 'and' aids clarity.

'The frames are available in red and yellow, blue and green, and brown and purple.'

In the next chapter we'll answer the question, when is a comma not a comma?

Chapter 15: Apostrophes

When is a comma not a comma? When it is an apostrophe!

Let's understand two simple rules for apostrophes.

Apostrophe rule # 1

A contraction is the contracted form of two words, using an apostrophe to indicate the missing letter.

The word *it's* is a contraction of the two words *it is* or *it has*.

Use the read aloud rule to help you identify whether *it's* means *it is*.

Thank God it's Friday means the same as *Thank God it is Friday* so it is spelled, *it's*.

Contractions make your writing sound informal. They are common in marketing copy.

Use them whenever you wish to express an informal tone.

An absence of contractions may make your writing sound too formal, so find a happy medium.

Common mix-ups:

- their - they're
- your - you're
- whose - who's

If you can replace *they're* with *they are*, then use the version with the apostrophe.

If you can replace *you're* with *you are*, then use the version with the apostrophe.

If you can replace *who's* with *who is*, then use the version with the apostrophe.

I could've danced all night includes a contraction for *could have*, not the two words *could of*.

Could of does not make sense.

Avoid this common pitfall and you will appear credible and professional.

Apostrophe rule # 2

To indicate possession, we add apostrophe 's'.

- Jack's coat
- Jill's briefcase.

You might like to brush up on all the other rules around using the apostrophe to indicate possession with singular and plural nouns.

Redundant apostrophe

When not to use an apostrophe?

Before the 's' of a plural word:

- apples
- oranges
- videos
- books
- 1980s
- DVDs
- CDs

Avoid this common blooper which is often seen in sign writing.

Chapter 16: Content - Getting Started

How long does it take to sharpen 20 pencils?

To sharpen his mind and collect his thoughts prior to writing, author Ernest Hemingway sharpened 20 pencils. How long does it take for you to get started to write?

Please think of a document or report you need to write. Perhaps it's one you've been procrastinating. Here are a couple of useful methods for planning a document so that writing it becomes a natural flow.

Memory map

One way to plan a document is to construct a memory map.

Memory mapping is a diagramming technique using branches and keywords.

Start with a blank sheet of paper, draw a line in the centre, (almost to the edge but not quite), and on that line write the subject or topic.

Please now draw six lines radiating from that centre line. This is the skeleton of your memory map.

Author Rudyard Kipling wrote this poem:

‘I keep six honest serving-men
They taught me all I knew.
Their names are *what* and *where*
and *when* and *how* and *why* and *who*.’

These six questions are sometimes called the Journalist's Credo; journalists rely on them.

There are five Ws and one H.

Please add each of these as a heading on each branch of your memory map.

These six questions act as a trigger to ensure you include enough information to avoid blind spots or idea gaps.

Communication is not just what we write; it's the response we get. The feedback is the message.¹

We shouldn't blame our reader if they fail to understand our message or follow our instructions.

Exercise 18 - memory map

I'll give you a few moments right now to add branches and keywords to your memory map.

Work your way around the centre line.

With memory mapping you can take yourself away from your desk and perhaps over a cup of tea or coffee, with pen and paper, plan a document in five minutes.

Alternatively, there is a range of mapping software available to purchase for constructing memory maps on your computer.

Free writing

Another method to overcome writer's block is free writing, where you write as fast as you can for a specific amount of time on your chosen topic.

Have a time limit. Your pen never leaves the paper or your fingers never leave the keyboard. Do not stop writing; just keep writing.

The idea is to put anything on paper; the point is to keep going. Even if you write your thoughts in between the flow, such as, *I can't think of anything to write*, or *I can hear a plane flying overhead* or whatever. Just keep writing until a new thought pops into your head, and away you go again.

Writing breakthroughs have occurred using the free writing method.

Call a friend

Finally, another method, one of my favorites, is to call a friend. Have a conversation. Bounce around a few ideas. And make notes of what you say.

Don't be a perfectionist

All writing involves rewriting. Suspend judgment when composing a first draft. Just keep going.

Don't stop to correct and refine during the first draft—it is too soon! Get in the flow and get a complete first draft done in one go. Then go back and proof read edits.

Chapter 17: Email

Our world is now *email-centric*.

Assume that any email message you send is competing with 20 to 100 or more other emails for attention.

Here are tips for better writing of emails to guarantee your recipient reads and replies to your message.

Entice the reader to open your message by including a meaningful subject header.

How do you feel when an email arrives with an old subject-header of a topic long finished with?

Consider the subject header as a keyword memory jogger.

When the topic changes, update the subject header.

First impressions count. Invest a moment to invent a subject-header that arouses a 'read me' response.

A meaningful subject-header helps to categorise a message; the recipient can file or prioritise based on the importance and urgency.

Many viruses contain non-specific subject headers, so your recipient might decide to delete a message, to be safe.

Avoid all caps or all capitals, unless it's for one or two words for emphasis.

Writing in all uppercase is called shouting.

Your reader might feel yelled at. Besides, all uppercase takes longer to read.

Avoid underlining. Your recipient might mistake it for a hyperlink and try unsuccessfully to click through to a web page.

Keep it short. It takes longer to read words on-screen than on paper, so please keep it brief.

Consider sending separate emails for separate topics, to encourage short, sharp, to the point communications.

Aim to complete each email within 2 minutes, called the 2-minute rule. This is excellent Time Management and keeps the message concise.

Alternatively, cultivate the ability to keep the message to five short sentences, much like writing a haiku poem. This takes discipline.

And when you get good at keeping to five sentences, aim to do it in three!

Chapter 18: Style Guides

Who makes the rules?

The French have the French Academy who monitors English words that creep into everyday French. They banned 'le software' and 'le weekend' from official publications.

In English, the rules are decided by a consensus of writers, publishers and English and Linguistics academics.

When an expression has become sufficiently current it is labeled as acceptable usage.

In the US, the Chicago Manual of Style¹ is a common reference text. The UK uses the Oxford,² Australia uses the Style Manual for authors, editors and printers.

The European Commission's Translation Service has initiated the fight the fog campaign to encourage clear writing. (It's hard to translate foggy writing into other languages.)

Where to from here? Read about Style. Continue to learn the art of good writing.

Invest in a style guide, such as *The Elements of Style* by Strunk and White.

Your style guide, thesaurus and dictionary are your friends.

They contain all the guidelines you need for writing and editing.

Chapter 19: Revise After Time

Here's a recipe for making bread:

Mix the ingredients together.

Knead the dough.

Let it rise.

Shape the bread in the pan.

Let it rise again.

And bake it.

Always allow time for your writing piece to incubate.

Reread your first draft after time has elapsed, even 10 minutes is worthwhile.

See it with fresh eyes. Try to picture how the reader will see it. Then revise and edit.

Apply the makeover rules we discuss in this book, one by one, until your piece is shaped, refined, baked.

Even the best writers perform major surgery on their first draft.

With every piece you write and refine, your work improves.

Eventually the makeover rules become second nature.

As well, use the computer grammar and spell check.

Refer to a style guide; continually improve how you use language and compose text.

Continue to learn the art of good writing.

Chapter 20: Review

Let's review what we covered in this book.

- use short sentences
- use short first paragraphs
- use vigorous English.

Never use a long word where a short one will do.

Never use the passive where you can use the active.

Active voice:

- uses fewer words
- is to the point
- is more direct
- sounds better
- and reads better.

If it is possible to cut a word out, always cut it out. Eliminate unnecessary words; omit needless words.

That, which and *the* are often unnecessary.

Avoid qualifiers - they weaken your point, rather than emphasise it.

Avoid repetition - of individual words and the first word of paragraphs.

Avoid redundancy - a word repeating the meaning of another word in the same phrase.

Inject vigor into your writing with crisp, clear sentences. Be concise. Be succinct.

Write the way you speak. Write with a human voice. Make it sound natural.

Goodwill is a business asset with a dollar value. You are cultivating relationships when you write.

Avoid formal and informal register in business writing. Use standard register. Plain English equates to standard register.

Use simple words instead of complex vocabulary. Think simplicity.

Use verbs, rather than nouns. Maintain a high verb-to-noun ratio.

Not *We reached an agreement* where the verb is *to reach*, but *we agreed* where the verb is *to agree*.

Be concrete rather than abstract.

Bullets make documents more readable by aiding information flow and memory.

Scan your document for any items that can be listed, but no more than one list per page.

Use 'you' rather than 'I'. Write from your reader's point of view.

Sprinkle your text with *please* and *thank you*. Business flourishes where there are courtesy and good manners.

Use commas:

- in a list
- before dialogue
- to separate information so it makes sense.

The purpose of a comma is to avoid ambiguity. Read your piece aloud to locate where to add commas.

Apostrophes indicate missing letters in contractions and possession.

It's a boy is i-t-apostrophe-s because it makes sense if you say *It is a boy*.

Getting started - construct a memory map to plan a document.

Remember the Journalist's Credo - who, what, where when, why, how.

Then there's free writing or call a friend.

In email, take advantage of the subject header as a keyword memory jogger.

When the topic changes; update the subject header.

Email 'netiquette' suggests writing in upper case is shouting and rude.

Email might be fast, but remember to make time to be courteous.

Separate emails for separate topics.

Avoid underlining (your reader might try to click on it thinking it's a hyperlink!)

Keep it short. Remember the 2-minute rule and aim to complete each email within this amount of time.

Your style guide, thesaurus and dictionary are your friends.

Read about style. Continue to learn the art of good writing.

Always allow time for your writing piece to incubate. There's no such thing as good writing, just good rewriting. Even the best writers edit and refine their first draft.

Good business writing shows you care about your reader. You do a little extra so they have a concise easy-to-read document to deal with.

This book outlines the 20% of writing tactics that yield an 80% improvement in the words. That's the 80 / 20 rule.

Enhance your career by avoiding costly mistakes. Gain better outcomes. Achieve your goals.

Happy writing.

References

The quotes, anecdotes and ideas described in this book were accumulated from a variety of sources over a number of years.

About the author



Nina Sunday (BA, Dip Ed, Certified Speaking Professional, Certified Virtual Presenter) is an Australian speaker on workplace culture, communication and influence.

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After working in education, sales and television, Nina Sunday founded Australian training company, Brainpower Training, delivering productivity and people skills training to government and private sectors and leads a network of facilitators Australia-wide.

Nina's 2018 book, *'Workplace Wisdom for 9 to thrive; proven tactics and hacks to get ahead in today's workplace'*, is available on Amazon, and is a selection of the US-based, C-Suite Book Club's list of leading business books.

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Other Works by Nina Sunday

Brainpower Smart Study:
How to Study Effectively Using
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