

Why Every Professional Needs to Know How to Write

By Curt Smothers

IN THE PACK MEDIOCRITY

- Cluttered
- Confusing
- Disorganized
- Easily Ignored

OPPORTUNITIES PASS THEM BY

THE WRITER'S EDGE

Clear Thinking. Clear Writing. Career Advantage.
Good writing gets you noticed. Great writing gets you ahead.

GET NOTICED
Your ideas stand out.

INFLUENCE DECISION MAKERS

ADVANCE YOUR CAREER

BUILD TRUST AND CREDIBILITY

DRIVE RESULTS

AT THE TOP EXCELLENCE

- ✓ Clear
- ✓ Organized
- ✓ Persuasive
- ✓ Gets Results

BAD WRITING REVEALS

- ✗ Confused thinking
- ✗ Poor grasp of subject
- ✗ Lack of enthusiasm
- ✗ Wastes the reader's time

TOO COMPLEX?
"Integration of aural and visual stimuli produces a more intensified effect in the brain than those resulting from either modality's acting as a single class or type of stimulus."

ENGLISH, PLEASE!
"People learn better by hearing and seeing the ideas than by either one alone."

OVERLY COMPLEX WRITES TO IMPRESS. POOR WRITING ALIENATES READERS.

GOOD WRITER = ASSET
CLARITY • COGENCY • ORGANIZATION
READER APPEAL

WRITE FOR YOUR AUDIENCE

- ✓ Boss
- ✓ Team
- ✓ Customers
- ✓ General Public
- ✓ Specific Purpose

WRITE WITH PURPOSE. READERS MATTER.

WORDS WITHOUT DIRECTION GET YOU NOWHERE.

HOW TO BECOME "GOOD"

- 1 Prefer clear and familiar words. (inasmuch as = because)
- 2 Keep sentences short and simple. Vary your sentence lengths.
- 3 Use active voice. (We fixed it, not "It was fixed.")
- 4 Write in a conversational style. Tight, not stiff.
- 5 Revise, revise, revise. Start early. Let it simmer. First draft is usually crap. — Ernest Hemingway
- 6 Read it aloud. If it sounds bad, it probably is.

REMEMBER THE READER!
"What's in it for me?"

THE BOTTOM LINE

- We write to think, to explain, to persuade, to create impact.
- Great writing is both a craft and an art.
- Write clearly. Write for your audience. Make it easy to understand.
- The writer's edge is the career advantage.
- Clarity today. Opportunity tomorrow. Excellence always.

The writer's edge

A professional who can write well has a distinct career advantage. That advantage translates into an edge that distinguishes mediocrity from excellence — being noticed from being passed over. The ability to present your ideas on paper can mean the difference between “being in the pack” or getting the attention of the people at the top, who mainly read and make decisions for a living.

Writing is a universal medium, and its skillful employment is likewise universally important, irrespective of the subject matter. Professional writing is, in its final form, expository; that is, it informs, explains, states recommendations, etc. It is intended to enlighten, elucidate and convince. Mastery of expository writing, then, is a tool for professional advancement.

You can't escape writing chores

Every professional person sooner or later has to come to grips with the writing chores that come with the job. The memorandum report to the manager, a quarterly budget summary, a recommendation for better use of scarce resources, a marketing strategy outlook — all must be written in a clear and understandable way that will not only be “for the record,” but also meet the standards of the organization as well as reflect the clarity of thought process of the writer.

What cluttered, disorganized or bad writing reveals

How we write reveals much about the way we think: whether we are circumspect or straightforward, the depth or shallowness of our grasp of the subject matter, and how enthusiastic (or unenthusiastic) we are with the task at hand. Even if the writing is anonymous, good writing enhances quality. A good writer will make the most mundane project seem worth the time it takes to read.

Writing for the audience

Good professional writing, then, is a blending of solid expertise with due regard for the target audience. Is the purpose of the writing to tell the boss something? Perhaps the writing is intended for people at a lower level. Maybe it is a safety procedure that needs to be followed. That blending of expertise with a due regard for the reader is what distinguishes the mediocre writer from the good communicator.

The craft and art of writing

A good writer is an asset to any organization. Most people can learn to write adequately, following organizational standards and general rules of grammar and composition. The really good writers, though, have something more going for them. Typically, their writing has a cogency, organization, and reader appeal that is both a craft and an art. The craft has to do with how the writer

uses the language in ways that promote clarity. The art is what makes the writing readable and interesting. The artful writer, then, is the first resource managers rely on for the tough writing assignments.

What exactly is “good” writing?

Of course the notion of what is a “good” writer is highly subjective. Scientists, legal scholars, and educators might consider themselves good writers. They write and publish dense, highly technical and intellectually layered pieces that end up in professional journals and are read by only a few of their peers (or force-fed to unfortunate students). In the “publish-or-perish” environment of their world, such work no doubt contributes either original or generic ideas for their closed community and to their résumé (Curriculum Vitae).

But what about the rest of us? Consider the following example from a doctoral dissertation:

“Integration of aural and visual stimuli produces a more intensified effect in the brain than those resulting from either modality’s acting as a single class or type of stimulus.”

What does that mean? Why must the average reader (or poor student) have to read and mentally peel it like an onion to understand what it really means is this: “People learn better by hearing and seeing the ideas than by either one alone.”

Many writers write to impress rather than to communicate

The foregoing example illustrates a problem that really good writers encounter daily in their profession. The problem is that many writers write to impress, rather than to inform, and they actually think they are good writers. It is as if the reader is only incidental, rather than totally necessary to what writing is all about. When confronted with the necessity to write like that, the good writer must, of course, surrender to the process and conform. However, a good

writer can flourish in the cold mausoleum of academic writing simply by being imaginative and interesting.

How to become “good”

So there is far less good writing everywhere because there are not enough good writers. What can the average writer do to become “good”? For a start, each of us can learn to write clearly, quickly, and persuasively by keeping in mind the following common principles advocated by Albert Joseph in his great book *“Put It in Writing!”*:

1. Prefer clear and familiar words (inasmuch as = because; considerable = much, etc.)
2. Keep most sentences short and simple. Lay off the tendency to “embed” ideas within ideas. Go for a variety of sentence lengths. It makes for better readability.
3. Lay off the passive verbs. This is a tough one to do in most bureaucratic organizations that tend to shy away from direct statements, as in “Mistakes were made” instead of “We messed up.”
4. Use conversational style as a guide to your writing. Of course, the style must be somewhat tighter than informal conversation. We need to punctuate properly and use good grammar, but we do not need to write as if we are preparing a presidential proclamation.
5. Revise, revise, revise. That means starting early and giving yourself plenty of time to allow your writing to “simmer.” Remember that the world’s worst proofreader and least critical reviewer of any piece of writing is the one who wrote it. Also, remember what Ernest Hemingway said about his own writing: “The first draft is usually crap.”

And here’s one of my own:

6. Read what you wrote aloud. If your copy doesn't pass the voice test, you'll know it, because it will sound bad.

Finally, and probably the most important thing that many writers forget: Remember the poor reader, who may know little or nothing about what you are writing. Writing with the reader in mind is nothing less than knowing your target audience and anticipating their motive for reading what you wrote. The motive is frequently, "What is in this for me?"

Let's recap:

Writing well offers professionals a competitive advantage. It distinguishes mediocrity from excellence. A good writer has a fast track to career growth by capturing the attention of decision-makers.

Poor writing, on the other hand, reflects disorganized thinking, whereas clear, engaging writing reveals competence and fosters trust. Professional writers combine expertise with audience awareness. They tailor the message to the reader's needs. This distinction marks the difference between merely adequate and exceptional communication.

Great writing is both a craft and an art. The craft involves clarity and adherence to rules. The art captivates and sustains interest. Sadly, many write to impress rather than inform, creating convoluted content that alienates readers.

So, becoming a better writer involves mastering clarity, brevity, active voice, conversational tone, and a willingness to revise, revise, and revise. Writers must also empathize with readers, prioritizing accessibility and relevance.

Last but nowhere near least: Remember the reader!