without bullshit

10 top writing tips and the psychology behind them

🕐 May 4, 2015   📁 Tips   🏷 jargon, passive voice, statistics, weasel words, writing tips, writing without bullshit

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There are plenty of folks happy to tell you how to write better, just as any doctor will tell you to "eat right and exercise." But changing your writing (or eating) habits only happens when you understand *why* you do what you do. I can help you with that.

That proposal or email you wrote must now compete for attention with Facebook and the Huffington Post. Here's how to compete more effectively, and why you're not doing it already. (The wall chart for these is at the bottom of the post.)

1 Write shorter.

Why it matters. Readers are impatient and will give up on your blog post, email, or document before you've made your point. Every extra word makes readers antsy.

Why you write long. It's far easier to type than to edit. So people just keep adding things.

How to fix it. Edit. Delete your "warming up" text and start with the main point. Cull extraneous detail and repetition. Work as if each word you eventually publish or send will cost you $10. I've often had writers who were outraged that I had redlined two-thirds of what they wrote . . . only to read the shortened doc and respond "that's so much more powerful."

2 Shorten your sentences.

Why it matters. Long sentences make readers work too hard to figure out your meaning.

Why your sentences are too long. New ideas keep occurring to you as you write each sentence. And you think long sentences make you sound sophisticated.

How to fix it. Break sentences down into bite-size ideas. Then delete what you don't need. Think

Hemingway, not Dickens.

3 Rewrite passive voice.

Why it matters. Passive voice sentences conceal who is acting and create uneasiness.

Why you write passive. Your writing teachers have trained you to write this way. Also, if you are insecure about what you're saying, you hide it behind passive wording.

How to fix it. Figure out who the actor in the sentence is and make it the subject. For example this Fortune article says that "New ingredients are steadily being added to the job-matching mix." Rewrite as "Startup companies keep adding new job-matching techniques."

4 Eliminate weasel words.

Why it matters. Words like "generally" and "most" make your writing sound weak and equivocal.

Why you use weasel words. You're afraid of making a bold statement; these words give you an out. When you don't say anything, you can't be wrong.

How to fix it. Delete the weasel words, then read the resulting statement. If it's too bold, write the strongest, clearest statement you can to take its place. (If no bold statement applies, you have nothing to say, so delete the sentence.) For example, this Wall Street Journal native ad piece includes the sentence "Most companies with traditional business models probably have a few radical developers on staff." Rewrite as "Every company has a radical developer or two."

5 Replace jargon with clarity.

Why it matters. Jargon makes your reader feel stupid. Unless they're an insider, they can't figure out your meaning.

Why you use jargon. You think jargon makes you sound sophisticated. Or you're hiding the fact that you don't actually understand what you're saying.

How to fix it. Imagine you're talking to your mom (unless your mom is an expert in your subject; if so, imagine you're talking to your high school history teacher). Explain what you mean in plain English. If using a technical term would actually make things clearer or shorter, define it first. For example, this SAP press release includes the sentence "As the digital transformation revolution reaches maturity, companies have the opportunity to shift business models within their industry disruptively to create new sources of defensible competitive advantage." Rewrite as "New technology creates new ways to do business."

6 Cite numbers effectively.

Why it matters. Used properly, statistics can back up your point.

Why you use numbers the wrong way. You think a number — any number — adds credibility. But they're so easy to misuse.

How to fix it. When citing a statistic, include the context (compared to what?). And statistics shorn of sources are meaningless; "It is estimated that" might as well say "I made this number up." Here's a proper way to use a statistic: "Forrester Research estimates that by 2017, 2.4 billion people will own smartphones, or around one third of the world's population."

7 Use "I," "we," and "you."

Why it matters. Taken together, these pronouns create a relationship between the writer ("I"), his organization ("we"), and the reader ("you.")

Why you don't use these pronouns. It's scary to talk directly to reader. It sounds informal.

How to fix it. Imagine the reader. Then rewrite using the word "you." For example, rewrite the Fenway Park rule "No bag or item larger than 16″x16″x8″ will be permitted inside the Park," as "Security staff won't let you in the park if your bag is too big."

8 Move key insights up.

Why it matters. You only have a few sentences to get the reader's attention. If you boldly state your key point at or near the top, they'll stick around to see if you can prove it.

Why your insights are buried. We were all taught to write deductively: first this, then that, then this, therefore conclusion. Also, you're afraid of scaring people away with a bold opening statement.

How to fix it. Force yourself to start with a bold statement. If you just can't get in this habit, write whatever you need to warm up to stating your thesis, then delete the warmup. Once you've finished the piece and realize what you *really* meant to say, rewrite the bold statement. Each time you rewrite, rewrite the opener.

9 Cite examples.

Why it matters. Text without examples is dull and not credible. Text with examples comes alive.

Why you lack examples. Examples come from research, which is *work*. They make you pause and think as you're writing, which slows you down.

How to fix it. For a piece of any length, plan to spend half the writing time doing research first. If you can't get an actual example, use a hypothetical. If possible, cite a person who did something, not just

a company.

10 Give us some signposts.

Why it matters. If you're writing anything longer than a page, people want to know what they're in for.

Why you lack signposts. You're afraid of sounding pedantic. Worse yet, if your writing isn't well-organized, then you can't explain the structure.

How to fix it. After you've stated your main thesis, write this: "Here's how I'll explain this." Then include a few short sentences or a numbered list. It's that easy!

Want more insights like this? Follow me on twitter, read the posts below, or scroll down to sign up for daily writing tips with extra snark. **Or sign up for my webinar on October 22.**

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- How I can help you create powerful messages.

Here's a wall chart for you. Print it out and hang it by the place where you write. And yes, this is the blueprint for the bulk of my next book. Thanks to Jeremiah Owyang for suggesting this post.

Ten writing tips and the psychology behind them

bernoff.com

Tip	Why it matters	Why you fail	How to fix
Write shorter.	Readers are impatient.	You just keep typing; it's easier than editing.	Edit out extraneous text.
Shorten your sentences.	Long sentences puzzle readers.	You tack on ideas as you're writing.	Break into shorter sentences.
Rewrite passive voice.	Passive hides true meaning.	You're insecure about what you're saying.	Make the actor the sentence's subject.
Eliminate weasel words.	Weasel words make statements wimpy.	You're afraid to be bold.	Cut weasel words; if you can't, cut the sentence.
Replace jargon with clarity.	Jargon makes readers feel stupid.	You think jargon sounds sophisticated.	Replace with plain English.
Cite numbers effectively.	Stats back up your point.	You think any number adds credibility.	Include both context and source for stats.
Use "I," "we," and "you."	Pronouns invite the reader to relate.	You're afraid of sounding informal.	Imagine the reader; write directly to her.
Move key insights up.	Bold statements retain attention.	You feel the need to "warm up" first.	Write bold openers; rewrite with each draft.
Cite examples.	Text without examples is boring.	You're too busy to do the research.	Plan to spend half your time on research.
Give us some signposts.	Readers want to know what's coming.	You're afraid of sounding pedantic.	After stating thesis, explain what's coming.

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up. It's worth it, really.*

Email Address

146 thoughts on "10 top writing tips and the psychology behind them"

May 4, 2015 at 11:03 am

This is genius. Thanks for spreading the good word.

Eric Savitz

May 6, 2015 at 5:26 pm

Rewrite as: 'Thanks'.

Druid

Pingback: 10 top writing tips and the psychology behind t...

May 4, 2015 at 1:24 pm

This is great. I'd carve it in stone and place this on the side of Highway 101 if I could carve and could afford a big enough stone. Printing this out and pinning it to my cube wall instead.

Brian
Caulfield

May 13, 2015 at 11:48 pm

This is great, I'm pinning it to my cube wall.

Bruce

June 11, 2015 at 7:47 am

Bruce, in your zeal to teach Brian a lesson, you spliced with a comma.

shonangreg

May 4, 2015 at 2:13 pm

Love this!

John
Starosta

May 4, 2015 at 6:24 pm

Hemingway was the undisputed KING of the run-on sentence. Your example was misplaced. Go read, "The Sun Also Rises" and check back.

Tim

May 4, 2015 at 7:04 pm

Point taken, Tim.

★ Josh
Bernoff

May 4, 2015 at 9:59 pm

I may be biased, but I think Austen. Talk about economy – every word carefully chosen, and put exactly where needed. Although 200 years later, readers see her language as full of the "jargon" of antiquated formality.

Amy

Patterson

May 6, 2015 at 10:42 am

Hemingway was the king of the run-on sentence? You must be referring to some other Hemingway, because it's not Ernest.

Kevin
Stevens

May 4, 2015 at 8:28 pm

Brilliant.

Michelle   The End

May 4, 2015 at 9:46 pm

Great tips to keep in mind when writing!

Sharon

May 5, 2015 at 9:56 am

Excellent. Hemingway is smiling.

Dana

May 5, 2015 at 10:00 am

And to Tim, Hemingway's style is real. Maybe not as pervasive as some think, but real.

Dana

"A doctor came in followed by a nurse. He held something in his two hands that looked like a freshly skinned rabbit and hurried across the corridor with it and in through another door. I went down to the door he had gone into and found them in the room doing things to a new-born child. The doctor held him

up for me to see. He held him by the heels and slapped him."

May 7, 2015 at 6:19 pm

L Ward

And Dickens is laughing :) Great advice for commercial writing, not so much for novels- as the novels of today need more romance and vocabulary. When your piers insist you shouldn't use "big" words because the readership won't understand them, it's time to use many, many more! (I'd give examples, but that would lengthen my response :)

May 7, 2015 at 7:25 pm

★ Josh Bernoff

I don't write advice for fiction writers. Their job is to entertain; my readers' job is to persuade or inform. That said, there are principles that apply across both domains . . .

November 8, 2015 at 10:08 pm

Charlie

These are good tips for all writers. Fiction or not, the best writing is effortless to read.

May 13, 2015 at 6:25 am

Lynn

This is where I think things get lost. I work with a lot of fiction writers these days, and so many of them are trying to "romance" the language, to the point where it's ridiculous.
The point here is valid for fiction and non-fiction alike. If you're writing for entertainment purposes, if you're trying to engage a reader, you have to know your ability and your projected audience. Now, some people are able to write literature that will land itself in collegiate curriculum… But the percentage of authors that are capable of effectively using vocabulary and nuanced language on such a level is rather low, comparatively.

As an editor, I advise my clients, use the language and vocabulary that is natural to you. Don't reach and insist yourself into words and phrasing that

doesn't actually work for you under the guise of trying to be artistic. Your readers are far more likely to connect with simple and beautiful language, than something you pulled out trying to sound impressive.

May 17, 2015 at 12:17 pm

KC

Yes, this comment is spot-on. It's really obvious when a writer uses "big" words for their own sake. No matter what style of writing, you should use the word that best conveys what you're trying to say, and you make that decision based on the rhetorical situation (purpose, audience, genre, etc.)

May 17, 2015 at 12:11 pm

KC

Actually, this is pretty good advice for fiction writers too. Economy of language is very important in fiction. Florid, bloated language does not make for a good reading experience. I have read thousands of story submissions as an editor of literary magazines and contests, most of which I rejected on the grounds that the writer did not get to the point.

Pingback: 10 astuces pour mieux rédiger vos articles — 10 top #writing tips and the psychology behind them | yvan daneault

May 5, 2015 at 11:20 pm

One you forgot — one space between periods and the next sentence, never two.

Dorothy
Pomerantz

May 5, 2015 at 11:29 pm

Great post!

Reuven
Cohen
(Network
World)

May 6, 2015 at 8:41 am

Start a sentence with 'And' to make yourself look really punchy?

Earth Rod

May 6, 2015 at 9:02 am

So far as I'm concerned, that's a legit way to write. Read any business book.

★ Josh
Bernoff

May 13, 2015 at 6:29 am

It's not even specific to business writing. The general consensus in grammar realms these days is that there's nothing essentially wrong with conjunctions as sentence starters.

Lynn

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Pingback: 10 top writing tips and the psychology behind them | Jerz's Literacy Weblog

May 6, 2015 at 11:44 am

Strunk & White would be proud.

Donald
Summers

May 6, 2015 at 12:12 pm

It depends what you're writing. A novel? A poem? A technical manual?
Investigative journalism?

Barbara
Saunders

May 6, 2015 at 3:44 pm

I'm writing about non-fiction that's designed to persuade or inform, not just
entertain. That includes tech manuals and investigative journalism, but not
poems and novels.

★ Josh
Bernoff

May 13, 2015 at 6:31 am

Obviously some of these rules don't apply to fiction and poetry writing.
However, many of them are just as poignant, regardless of the genre.

Lynn

May 13, 2015 at 8:11 am

My advice is intended for non-fiction writers only. Fiction writers are liars by
definition; bullshit does not apply.

★ Josh
Bernoff

May 13, 2015 at 10:06 am

It may be intended only for non-fiction writers, but it doesn't make the
advice completely non-applicable to fiction writers. I'll agree that
fiction is a little more flexible, though. With fiction writing, the question
becomes, is this artistically or stylistically relevant, or is it just shite
writing?

Lynn

My point was mostly to say that, you shouldn't dismiss it at face-value simply because of the intention. Musing on it doesn't hurt.

May 13, 2015 at 10:09 am

Fiction writers are welcome to take any of my advice at their own risk.

★ Josh Bernoff

November 10, 2015 at 7:26 pm

bruce

Fiction writers create worlds that must have internal consistency. If they lie, that fictional world crumbles. If they try to use bullshit, their reader will turn away in disgust – nobody likes a made-up world that doesn't make sense.

On the other hand, if you're writing a "non-fiction" book, you're readers are already predisposed to believe everything you say. Even if it's an outlandish fabrication, just make up some statistics or studies that seems to prove what you're saying, and your readers will eat it up.

In short – truth is important in fiction. Bullshit lives in the world of non-fiction.

May 6, 2015 at 12:55 pm

Great tips. Thanks.

Jennifer

May 6, 2015 at 1:51 pm

nailed it.

Kimberly

May 6, 2015 at 8:01 pm

Pinned! Thanks for this really useful breakdown 🙂

Anemone
Lost

May 6, 2015 at 9:51 pm

The author would have Shakespeare rewrite, "To be, or not to be. That is the question." The "improved" version would make the same query, but thus: "Be?"

Gary

May 6, 2015 at 11:40 pm

I disagree with number 4; absolute statements ALWAYS alienate readers because they can come up with exceptions to your emphatic statements (Do you see what I did there?)

Carlton
Collins

May 19, 2015 at 3:51 pm

That was my reaction too.

Todd
Gillette

Better suggestion for the audience: "Eliminate all weasel words that aren't necessary. Better yet, reword your sentence or paragraph so that you get across the point without needing to use them." Now I need an example, but I'm too lazy 😉

Bold statements are great, but if they don't apply across the board then why proclaim that they do?

May 19, 2015 at 3:52 pm

And I should add, other than that minor point, I agree that this article is excellent. While I've known these tips, the article and chart are great for

Todd
Gillette

reinforcing the practices.

May 7, 2015 at 12:48 am

Josh

When I first entered the business world I wondered why some people on my team routinely got what they wanted from my manager while others didn't. I knew he was a very impartial guy so I really questioned it. I realized quickly that my problem was that my emails were too wordy, my main points were buried, and I used weasely language to ask for what I really wanted because I was afraid of rejection.

This would have saved me a lot of time & effort of figuring all that out on my own! Glad to have it so I can pass it on to others now. Thank you!

May 7, 2015 at 1:32 am

"Write in the passive voice" said no writing teacher, ever. It stumps me why you'd think that for even a second.

americanist

May 7, 2015 at 9:37 am

★ Josh
Bernoff

Writing teachers may not **say** to write in the passive voice, but they and their students do it all the time without thinking.

May 7, 2015 at 9:53 am

Bastion

The disdain of passive voice is puzzling to me. It conflicts with the short-and-sweet mantra; you find writers needlessly transmuting fine statements like "Steve was astounded." to "A wave of astonishment hit Steve, his emotions a tsunami of — " and so on.

That's probably something which falls under the rule of foolish consistency, and I'm invoking hyperbole, but I think the point is clear.

★ Josh
Bernoff

May 7, 2015 at 10:06 am

I have a real and powerful reason to disdain the passive voice: people use it to hide the truth. If you don't know who's acting, you don't know the truth.

"Steve was astounded" is not passive voice, because "astounded" is an adjective. If you said "Steve was fired," that's passive voice, and begs the question of who fired him. "The first sentence hides nothing; the second hides the person who performed the action.

The other challenge with passive voice is it gives the reader and uneasy feeling that stuff is happening without knowing why or how or who. You are left not knowing what to do about what you read. And that's a key marker of failed writing.

Bastion

May 7, 2015 at 3:25 pm

I don't want to seem overly concerned about this, but I just don't buy this as a rule because there will always be times when the object is stressed rathet than the action. "The beverage was chilled before serving." or "My dad was killed in the war." Attempts to fenagle these sentences just leave the text reading like it was edited by Yoda. Stand for it, I won't! 😀

★ Josh
Bernoff

May 7, 2015 at 3:35 pm

There are certainly situations where the passive voice makes sense. Maybe 5% of what people write in passive, should stay passive.

I'm trying to raise awareness. Most passive voice is unconscious, poor communication. If every time a person wrote a passive sentence, they asked themselves "would this be better if I wrote about the actor as the subject?", then the writing would be far better (and they could leave the 5% unchanged).

And frankly, "The waiter chilled the beverage before serving." and "The Nazis killed my father" might be better sentences, depending on the context.

May 18, 2015 at 9:15 pm

TM

I was forbidden by a college English professor from writing in the passive voice for a whole semester. She just wanted me to be conscious of when I used it. I write for nonprofits now, and we fall into weak language and passive voice too often, watering down our message, so I get why this matters.

May 19, 2015 at 6:59 am

Can't help pointing out that the first sentence of your comment is in the passive voice.

★ Josh
Bernoff

May 7, 2015 at 8:50 pm

Evidence for this claim?

Jason

May 8, 2015 at 7:31 am

40 years of writing experience.

★ Josh
Bernoff

Pingback: 10 Top Writing Tips & the Psychology Behind Them | Patricia S. Shepard

May 7, 2015 at 10:45 am

Well done. Thank-you for the handy reminder chart, Kat

Kathryn

May 7, 2015 at 1:29 pm

Love this. I coach doctoral students working on large research papers and dissertations. Your list – and the handy graph – is a Godsend. However, #7 – "use 'I,' 'we,' and 'you'" – is a no-no in my world. Is there a place for #7 in scholarly writing?

Julia Fischer

May 7, 2015 at 1:47 pm

See the comment on this thread from my friend Len Burman, the economist. Things are easing up. For now, though, scholarly writing tends not to use "I" or "you" and as a result, it's stilted. I did a post specifically on academic writing here: http://withoutbullshit.com/blog/can-academia-be-saved-from-bullshit/

★ Josh Bernoff

May 7, 2015 at 2:33 pm

Thanks for you reply, and the link to your other post. Great discussion!

Julia Fischer

May 7, 2015 at 9:00 pm

I'm a college writing instructor; I agree almost entirely with this list. My only quibble is that you might want to consider audience and context. This writing advice is perfect for the business world, and for internet writing.

Jason

Most of your advice is applicable to academic writing, too. However, that audience will demand some exceptions. For example, the trend in academic writing is to embrace "I" — but not in "I think" constructions. And "you" remains universally troublesome among academic audiences.

The unwritten rule beneath all these rules should be "know your audience."
That will tell you when to fight battles like "you/we/I," and when not to.

May 14, 2015 at 3:56 pm

Amie

Excellent point! One of the reasons that the "I think" construction is problematic for academic audiences is that it functions as a "weasel word" to an audience expecting a direct claim, rather than an opinion. Know Thy Audience, should be the golden rule in any writing. Communication, in whatever form, should consider both the communicator and the recipient of the message.

May 14, 2015 at 5:39 pm

There are times to use "I," but "I think" rarely adds much.

★ Josh
Bernoff

November 10, 2015 at 9:50 am

#8, inductive: http://www.livescience.com/21569-deduction-vs-induction.html

Joan S

May 7, 2015 at 2:52 pm

Julian

Drop 'weasel' words and make bold statements? Or are they broad assumptions? How do you know that every company has at least one or two radical developers? Well, as long as you have the facts to back up those bold statements.

Pingback: Write Shorter – Live & Learn

Pingback: Thursday Links because Thursdays Louis CK is on at 10 and that makes Thursday cool right now | This is Happening

May 8, 2015 at 1:38 am

mario

I am a community college writing teacher. Like most of my colleagues, I have never taught students to use passive voice (unless the doer of the action is unimportant: "My house was painted today.") I agree with most of these suggestions except for using "you." It should be reserved for how-to pieces. Thanks for the post-

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May 8, 2015 at 6:05 am

John

Brilliant, thanks.
One suggestion – in 9 Cite Examples, you say:
"How to fix it. For a piece of any length, plan to spend half the writing time doing research first."
I always recommend that students start writing first – you don't really know what to research until you have started writing. The old 'research first/write up later' scheme is a recipe for wasting the first half of the time.
For your purposes I'd just ditch the over-determined direction 'first' and let them decide what's the best time for them to research.

May 8, 2015 at 7:27 am

I see your point. Writing = thinking. But if we do it your way, the writers must be prepared to throw out everything they wrote to warm up.

★ Josh
Bernoff

June 18, 2015 at 1:40 pm

Harry Smith
III

I find it productive to write a short piece (1/2-1 page) to get a grasp on what you already know and what you seek to know. Little of the text will make it to the final draft, but the pre-writing won't waste too much time. It may give the writer a way to clear his head before delving into research.

But if I have more time, I try to do all the research first. Researching, along with casual pondering, can lead to great, surprising ideas. But these ideas are often found at unexpected times (like while showering). If I have a long time to write a piece, I find it more helpful to explore a general topic than to aim towards something specific.

Basically, I write first when I am short on time, but I research first when I have longer.

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May 8, 2015 at 9:36 am

Gene

I agree with #7 but not the example: citing the exact dimensions is helpful because "too large" is vague. The link's rewrite is better but if they say "Security Staff" then only "Security Staff" can reject or remove people; not ushers, section supervisors, or other staff.

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Pingback: Reading challenge | Pearltrees

Pingback: Writing | Pearltrees

Pingback: Writing | Pearltrees

May 10, 2015 at 11:14 am

Yes to all but 2. The Hemingway advice is good, but he wrote sentences averaging 28 words (Francis Christensen did the study back in the 60s). That means for every three-word sentence he wrote, he also wrote a 53-word sentence. It's not how many words the sentence has; it's how they're put together. The only other advice I give is: start your sentences with the subject followed immediately by the main verb, then add your modifying information afterwards. This gives your reader immediate context for all the refining, more specific information. It's called backward modification, and it works.

Kurt Rachwitz

May 10, 2015 at 9:30 pm

I recently visited Seth Godin's blog and his writing style is genius. Brief. Short. To the point. Made me want to read his entire blog in one sitting!

leigh ann dickey

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Pingback: 8 Life Lessons Gleaned From The Internet | Molly Greene: Writer

May 11, 2015 at 5:01 pm

Good stuff. These tips can't be repeated too often.

Tom Kieliszewski

Pingback: Common writing mistakes and why we make them by @jbernoff | Shelf Wisdom

May 12, 2015 at 10:27 am

Point 1 is Funny because when I first started everybody told me I should write longer articles, but you are right readers became more and more impatient so I guess it's good to keep it short. Thanks for sharing !

Timo
Fischer

May 12, 2015 at 12:05 pm

"Forrester Research estimates that by 2017, 2.4 billion people will own smartphones, or around one third of the world's population." This makes it sound as if 2.4 billion people will own one third of the world's population. While most people will infer what you meant anyway, I would prefer that the sentence be constructed properly.

Christopher

May 12, 2015 at 2:26 pm

Fair point.

★ Josh
Bernoff

May 12, 2015 at 11:59 pm

For a struggling writer like me, this article and the discussions about it are so helpful and enlightening. Indeed, non fiction writing should always be clear, concise, convincing, coherent, and complete. Thank you, Josh Bernoff.

Cecile Grace
Matulac

Pingback: 10 Tips On How To Write Better And The Reasons Why They Work | A multi-disciplined Graphic Designer and Art Director based in Bristol with a passion for technology and digital design

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May 13, 2015 at 10:38 am

If you enjoyed this article and want a deeper look on writing well, you can read the book "On Writing Well" by William Zinsser.

Furkan

Pingback: Digital Literacy by @ericschwartzman » Blog Archive What's Next for Former Forrester Analyst Josh Bernoff? » Digital Literacy by @ericschwartzman

May 13, 2015 at 2:00 pm

This advice will depend on what you're writing. I doubt that the author has ever tried conveying philosophical ideas!

Ian Wardell

If you're trying to convey certain ideas, it is not a good idea to make it short. You have to lead them by the hand. Even then they inevitably fail to understand. Of course they might not be reading it because it is too long. But making it shorter will definitely not facilitate understanding.

Short sentences are a good idea. As is avoiding Jargon.

May 13, 2015 at 2:38 pm

Sorry, I still believe shorter is always better.

★ Josh
Bernoff

May 14, 2015 at 7:45 am

That's just silly. No one would ever read any non-fictional books if that were so. Reading the synopsis would do!

Ian Wardell

May 13, 2015 at 4:06 pm

Gabriel Disi

Very insightful rules for budding and established writers. I would like to know how best to go about researching on and for a topic as I sometimes finds phase overwhelming.
Thanks

May 13, 2015 at 6:12 pm

Chris

Josh,

Excellent article. I enjoyed your writing while you were with Forrester. I feel most people enjoy rambling away, in person or on paper, which leads to poor writing. Again, well done!

May 14, 2015 at 7:19 am

Mike

Excellent list, full of great advice.

(although, ironically, #9 "Use examples" is one of the only points where you *don't* then give an example!)

May 15, 2015 at 12:10 am

Atredies83

These are all pretty good, except for 3, 4 and 5.

3 Rewrite passive voice. – Not always. Passive voice has its uses, such as when the person performing the action is unknown, or when softening the impact of your words is actually desirable.
4 Eliminate weasel words. – Reduce perhaps, but don't eliminate. The world is not

a simple place. Going around making unqualified generalisations can make you seem ignorant and over-confident. It will also get people thinking about exceptions to your rule rather than the general rule itself. Intelligent and educated people are naturally wary of anyone making sweeping statements.

5 Replace jargon with clarity. – This depends on your audience of course. If you are writing for a specific field, using universally understood jargon will require far fewer words than explaining everything so you mum can understand it.

May 15, 2015 at 8:33 am

People commit sins in the name of the exceptions you cite. I am trying to save their souls.

★ Josh Bernoff

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June 5, 2015 at 12:08 pm

Got here by way of Jay Bauer. Your advice impinges like one's first puff on a Kool non filter.

Stan Dubin

One comment on the above. You mention:

"Most companies with traditional business models probably have a few radical developers on staff." Rewrite as "Every company has a radical developer or two."

The rewrite seems to go too far.

I understand that "most" is a weasle word, but if the facts only support "most" companies "probably have" a radical developer or two — then it's not "every" company "has" a radical developer or two.

Willing to compromise that "most" is often a weasle word but sometimes just states the case?

June 5, 2015 at 12:17 pm

There's always a way to eliminate the weasel word. If it's not all companies, say something like "At any company that's not completely locked down" or "At every company I've ever encountered." The minute you say "most" the sentence becomes meaningless.

★ Josh
Bernoff

June 5, 2015 at 12:24 pm

Deal.

Stan Dubin

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June 23, 2015 at 12:33 am

Very enlightening facts, yet in writing there are certain things to be considered like avoiding unique uncommon words and use simple plain words instead. Readers don't want to spend their entire time relying on dictionary.

writing tips

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September 1, 2015 at 2:14 pm

Great stuff. My college freshman ask me for my best writing tips. I passed on my best writing advice. But I also sent him a link to this site.

Peter Wise

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October 31, 2015 at 9:18 pm

I agree. Samples do make it more credible. Great post!

Vergiely
Cubol

November 7, 2015 at 9:55 pm

Adele

Not bad, but, "New ingredients are steadily being added to the job-matching mix."
Rewrite as "Startup companies keep adding new job-matching techniques." Both
are gobbled-gook, "Recruiters look for new skills" is simpler and tells the story.
And 5, you wrote, "New technology creates new ways to do business." Really?
'New' twice in the same sentence? Dreadful writing, perhaps try, "Business
innovation thrives with new technology." Still not exciting but better.
I clicked because I was interested in the table, but the content dissuaded me. I
would, however, like to read more, if its clear and less self-important.

November 8, 2015 at 7:46 am

You misspelled "it's"

Josh

November 9, 2015 at 11:12 am

I'm not sure why 2.4 billion people will own either smartphones or a third of the world's population. Is Samsung invading the Confederacy?

James

November 9, 2015 at 8:59 pm

I'm going to my English teacher with this gold. This is brilliant.

Deniell

November 9, 2015 at 10:32 pm

Thanks for the writing tips. They're very useful

Wulan

November 10, 2015 at 2:30 am

So VERY glad you included in your list the need to back up statistics with context and sources. A lot of journalists and other writers are sloppy about that, if not intentionally misleading.

Michele
Engel

November 10, 2015 at 5:53 am

One extra tip: Overuse of the 'I' pronoun can look extremely egotistical and needs to be used sparingly only when it is valid.

Simon
Ellinas

November 10, 2015 at 2:29 pm

These are wonderful tips. I agree that I am committing few of the mistakes.

But I have on query. For SEO we need to write detailed and long article, but for

Mihir Naik

readers we need to make it crisp and shorter.

What shall we do? Shall we create lengthy and detailed articles or write shorter articles for readers?

November 10, 2015 at 3:09 pm

Write shorter. SEO that sucks people into reading something long and boring is not doing you any good.

Josh
Bernoff

Pingback: 10 Tips Plus Psychology | J. Giambrone

Pingback: Ten Writing Tips | Heh. Indeed.

November 10, 2015 at 5:21 pm

Alex H.

I like most of this advice, but I have a huge problem with number 4. The trouble with eliminating what you term "weasel words" is that it's an excellent way to convert a true, or at least defensible, statistical statement into a categorical statement that can be proven false by the identification of a single counterexample. To advocate in favor of the tragic cognitive error of categorical thinking in a probabilistic world is an awfully ironic position to take on a blog with the title "Without Bullshit."

November 10, 2015 at 7:06 pm

I think using "I think" reminds the writer that most of what he or she thinks are facts are actually opinions.

Greg
Carman

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