

Bring Clarity to Writing

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Have you ever read an email from someone that was too wordy, lacked focus, and left you confused? How can we learn from reading such emails to improve our own communication? How do we compose emails and writings that others will actually want to read?

The ability to write clearly is crucial to getting your message across no matter what you're writing, whether it's an email, a blog post, a magazine article, or a letter to a friend. Clear and concise writing is vital to having your words read and understood.

The whole purpose of most writing is to inform readers of something or to persuade people to do something. The more clear and concise your language, the easier your message will be understood, and the more likely your readers will respond to that message.

Before you can write clearly, you have to be able to think clearly. A big reason many writers don't see desired success in conveying their message is that they were not focused on a clear message. Good writing usually stems directly from clear thinking.

In this post, we'll first look at some common obstacles to clear thinking and writing, then offer some suggestions to develop the mental state for clear writing, and finally give some specific writing tips that, if implemented, will immediately add that magic touch of clarity to your writing.

Three Obstacles to Clear and Concise Writing

Obstacle 1: False ideas about what good writing is.

Many writers try to write more intelligently and attractively than they need to. Their writing can come across as trying too hard and that isn't intelligent or attractive. There's no cosmic law dictating that as soon as you start putting words on paper, you have to jazz it up and make it sound more intelligent than it really is.

Even writers with more knowledge and experience make this mistake. They want to impress readers with their grandiose grasp of the language, tossing about little-known, large words and trying to write in a clever way that ends up diminishing the clarity of their message. They've forgotten the most important piece of good writing: your first priority is to inform your readers, not to impress them.

If you seek first to impress, you probably won't; nor will you often truly inform, as your message gets lost in the jungle of your arcane vocabulary. Seek first to inform, as clearly as you can. If you do that, you stand a better chance of also impressing your readers because you expressed your points clearly.

Obstacle 2: Not being clear about one's message.

Many writers have a general idea of what they want to say, but they don't crystallize it in one short, snappy sentence. Thus, they start out writing, touching on their topic from different angles, and including every bit of information they think is relevant.

The writing may end up readable and professional sounding, but the readers will come away thinking that, while they understood the gist of the author's intent, they can't precisely say what the take-home point was. This is usually because the writer never really knew what it was either.

Obstacle 3: Distractions. Y

our mind has to be clear for your writing to be precise. If you've got the TV on in the background, if other people are coming in and out of your writing space, if you've got Twitter updates and email updates continually popping up on your screen, etc. – your focus will be eradicated.

How to Develop the Clear Mental State for Writing

Read, Read, Read

Reading broadly can accomplish two things: one, broaden your vocabulary so you more naturally use the right words instead of searching about for intelligent-sounding words which might not be a good fit; and two, you can get a much better, natural feel for what makes up good, clear, and fluid writing.

Additionally, you expose yourself to more ideas and perspectives, forcing yourself to think more critically in general, which will enable you to think more critically about the subjects on which you're writing.

Respected magazines and newspapers which regularly include in-depth articles and essays have been extremely helpful to me in demonstrating how to write clear, engaging, intelligent prose which convey both a clear message and a colorful style. Two of my favorites are GQ Magazine and the Wall Street Journal newspaper.

Read Books and Blogs on Writing

The following are resources that have most directly and immediately benefited my writing mechanics.

- Book: The Elements of Style by William Strunk, Jr., and E.B. White.
- Essay: Politics And The English Language by George Orwell.
- Book: Style: Lessons in Clarity and Grace by Joseph M. Williams.
- Blog: Copyblogger by Brian Clark.

Clear Your Writing Space

When it's time to write, clear everything off your writing table except for what's absolutely necessary to write the piece. There might be all kinds of unrelated notes, books, magazines, loose change, several pens, notepads, etc. Simply take a minute to rid the table of all the excess. Only keep resources directly related to the current project and set everything else aside. For example, a pen or notes might be good resources to keep close. Clarity and simplicity in your workspace lends itself to clarity and simplicity in your thinking, and so on down to your writing. 4. Block-Off Time

Determine how much time you realistically think you'll need to write the piece and schedule that time period for writing only. Say it'll take you maybe three hours. Block off that time and do nothing but work on the project for the full three hours, taking a five-minute break at the end of each hour to walk around and stretch. 5. Eliminate Distractions

Turn off the television, turn off your cell phone, turn off instant messaging, turn off Twitter and email updates, and anything else that's likely to interrupt you, thus diminishing your focus. You might also consider turning off your Internet connection so you don't surf the web.

All of that distracting infotainment will still be there in droves once you finish your project. Then info-binge all you want. But, for the time being, do nothing but write. Simple. Clear. Focused.

8 Keys to Clarity When Writing

1. Visualize Road Signs

Think about the street and highway signs you see around your city. People who write road signs have very little space within which to get their message across. In that very limited space, the fewer and larger the words, the more likely drivers are to see the words and process the conveyed message.

Examples:

- Do Not Enter
- Speed Limit 50: Next 400 Miles.
- Stop

Notice the concise prose. The message is very clear. Do the same in your own writing. Choose the right words, the most descriptive words, and keep your words to a minimum. Say exactly what you have to say and be done with it. Don't muddy up your meaning by writing more than is necessary to make your point.

2. Write a One-Liner Summary

You may remember writing a thesis statement in high school or college. Similar to a thesis statement, consider

putting together a one sentence summary text describing the main purpose prior to writing.

Whenever you have something to write, take a few minutes to think your subject through, and then write out, in one or two short sentences, the main idea you're trying to get across. Think about your purpose with this piece of writing and your expected outcome.

Do this for yourself, as a guiding structure for your writing, and refer back to it regularly to stay on track toward your primary argument.

A purposeful summary or thesis statement is like a company's mission statement; it sets out our clear mission in whatever we're writing.

3. Do Your Headline First

A headline is a one-sentence encapsulation of your subject and will act as a guiding force for your entire piece. While the thesis statement is a promise you make to yourself, your writing will reflect the thesis statement – a headline "is a promise to prospective readers. Its job is to clearly communicate the benefit that you will deliver to the reader in exchange for their valuable time," says Brian Clark.

Figure out what you really want your piece to say, and after putting together a good thesis statement, write up a good, snappy, eye-catching, bold, informative, and short headline.

Once you have a good title, it functions as a reference point for your piece. As you're writing, imagine yourself in the place of your readers; continually ask yourself if the arguments you're making, the prose you're writing, truly fulfills the promise made to your readers. Combining a good thesis statement with a good headline before you begin writing can have a powerful, laser-like effect on your focus, enabling you to write with more clarity and purpose.

4. Write Like You Talk

Instead of reaching about for soaring words and phrases, simply write like normal people speak. Of course, you'll have to adjust for legitimate differences between spoken and written words, but you should use the language your readers will clearly understand and relate to. Don't confuse your prose's clarity by using jargon or stilted, "intelligent" words.

An example of what you shouldn't write:

"I do believe that the most important action that could be taken to improve customer satisfaction is to truly engage customers by establishing a significant relationship with them through extended attention to what motivates them to take a particular stance in correlation to the company."

Most normal people don't speak like that. Change it to:

"Let's really pay attention to what our customers say they want from us."

Remember, simple, short, and clear.

Another benefit to writing like you speak is that you retain your own voice and can express yourself authentically. You don't need to search for unfamiliar language to sound more professional. Simply be yourself and write the way you speak. Your prose will become clearer and your own voice will shine through.

5. Use Simple Words to Evoke Vivid Images

Often the simple short word will do much better than any large word, to convey your idea, and be more clearly understood. Try to create concrete images in your writing by using real, earthy words; words that describe actual things. Here are some related quotes from respected authors:

- "Never use a long word where a short one will do." -George Orwell.
- "Always prefer the clean direct word to the long, vague one. Don't implement promises, but keep them." -C.S. Lewis.
- "Poor Faulkner. Does he really think big emotions come from big words? He thinks I don't know the ten-dollar words. I know them all right. But there are older and simpler and better words, and those are the ones I use." -Ernest Hemingway.

6. Eliminate Redundant Words and Phrases

Some redundancy is necessary to stress your main points, but too much indicates that you don't really have much to say or know how to say it well. An easy way of reducing redundancy is to not use two or more words which mean the same thing.

Examples,

- Past history – if something is history, it clearly happened in the past;
- Armed gunman – if someone has a gun, they're clearly armed;
- Foreign imports – if something is imported, it's clearly foreign;
- Screaming loudly – if someone is screaming, they're clearly being loud.

Only use the words you need to use and eliminate excess. After writing, go back to each paragraph and sentence with a fine toothed comb and see how you can rephrase the same meaning using fewer words. Do this several times. Don't be afraid to cut text out, if it means a more effective piece of writing.

7. Minimize Clichés.

A cliché is a phrase, expression, or idea that has been overused to the point of losing its intended force or novelty, especially when at some time it was considered distinctively forceful or novel. Dulling your writing or speaking with clichés is lazy thinking. It shows you don't value your subject enough to invest the energy and time to really describe it in more colorful, unique, and accurate language.

George Orwell called clichés dying metaphors and ready-made phrases that do your thinking for you. Instead of using clichés to fill in space, aim to think critically about meaning and choose words that accurately and freshly conjure the image and meaning you are trying to convey.

Examples of long-standing clichés:

- Light at the end of the tunnel
- Keeping up with the Joneses
- Put it on the back burner

Examples of popular clichés today:

- Size does matter
- Perfect storm
- Watergate, Spygate, Nipplegate, Ashleygate. (anything that's a scandal)-gate

Orwell offers this advice for using more colorful language without resorting to clichés:

"A scrupulous writer, in every sentence that he writes, will ask himself at least four questions, thus: What am I trying to say? What words will express it? What image or idiom will make it clearer? Is this image fresh enough to have an effect? And he will probably ask himself two more: Could I put it more shortly? Have I said anything that is avoidably ugly?"

But you are not obliged to go to all this trouble. You can shirk it by simply throwing your mind open and letting the ready-made phrases come crowding in. They will construct your sentences for you – even think your thoughts for you, to a certain extent – and at need they will perform the important service of partially concealing your meaning even from yourself."

8. Cut Out Most Metadiscourse.

Metadiscourse is simply writing about writing. It occurs when a writer comments on what he is saying. Examples are: I believe, I think, In my opinion. These are unnecessary because it is clear that you are the one expressing your opinion, and excessive usage can make your writing sound extra verbose.

An example of especially verbose metadiscourse:

"I would like to take this opportunity to offer a hearty congratulations to you."

No need to say you would like to take this opportunity; just take it. Don't tell him that you would like to, or are

about to, offer congratulations – just congratulate him.

Here's an alternative version projecting the same meaning:

"Congratulations!"

There are times when metadiscourse is helpful. Particularly, when the topic is controversial, it is wise to be clear that a statement is our opinion.

The point here is to become aware of when we add extra words to justify ourselves. Constantly adding metadiscourse adds unnecessary words and buries the main point.

(Adapted from <http://thinksimplenow.com/clarity/pen-zen-bring-clarity-to-writing/>)