

Writing

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Why Not Write?

“Because I can’t write!”

Is that what you’re thinking? Do you assume you cannot learn how to write well?

If so, then you are simply wrong. You *can* learn to write well. There are rules, and it takes practice, but if you *want* to learn, you will be surprised at how quickly you can write clearly and convincingly.

Why Write?

One reason we write is to convince someone of something. We also write to entertain, or to tell a story, or keep a diary. But almost all the rules for writing in a convincing manner apply to these other forms as well. So consider what happens in us when we want to write convincingly.

We may aim to convince others about our point of view. (“I expect that candidates who lie about having affairs will lie about having mob connections.”) Or we may aim simply to convince others that a certain question is quite important. (“The question is not who we should blame for the recession but why we have recessions at all.”)

Be Engaging

Plant Questions

To be convincing, it is essential to engage your reader. And the key to engagement is to *plant questions*. Consider these examples of ways to start an essay:

“What is it that we expected from our witch doctors, a thousand years ago, that we still require from our religious leaders today?”

“Could it be that our iPod-toting, text-messaging, pink-haired teenagers are actually on to something?”

Here, the question is right in your face. You *expect* the writer to give some answers. Still, you can *plant* questions without actually *asking* questions. For example:



"Over the last 20 years, the portion of Americans who saved at least 10 percent of their income fell from 38 to 2 percent."

"As a firefighter, I find myself fighting people as often as fighting fires."

You can see how bald statements like these raise questions: We want to know why savings have dropped so dramatically. We want the whole story of why this firefighter fights people.

Sometimes in an introduction it helps to *list* the topics you will cover in the paper. But summaries alone don't grab readers. Consider this opening sentence of Mary Smith's essay:

Social networking sites are becoming more popular every day. In this essay, I will first discuss the technology of Facebook, then look at how popular it is, and finally present conclusions.

"Oh dear," I say to myself, "this is going to be boring. I'm really not interested in the technology. And I have no idea what Mary means by *discuss* and by *look at* and *present*."

Now compare that with Bill Jones' introduction:

Facebook is taking over the way we communicate. True, it's easy to use, but many people seem addicted to it. True, it makes it easy for us to express ourselves, but many self-descriptions are so wonderful that the "face" is really a mask. Below, I'll describe a simple test for users to tell if they're addicted. Then I'll offer a psychological explanation of why users tend to be more dishonest in Facebook than they would be face-to-face.

As you can see, Bill tries to light a fire. He hopes that you wonder about that test and about why Facebook promotes pretending that you're someone you're not.

Evoke questions for Understanding

You will recall the difference between memorizing and understanding. Memorizing enables you to *cite* names, dates, places, times, and the labels by which we categorize people and events. You share these with brief words. Understanding enables you to *explain* what people actually meant by their words; the purposes people have for saying what they say and doing what they do; why certain things happened; and how things function. You share these with several sentences, even paragraphs.

Sometimes, it's important to introduce your readers to the definitions of terms. These you hope they will remember. But memorizing that does not stir questions for understanding is practically futile. Your readers may appreciate gaining clarity about terms, but they will benefit far more by

reaching some understanding of about real-life issues. In short, when you plant questions, move in the direction questions that seek understanding—questions whose answers enable your readers to explain things about your topic more clearly and effectively than ever before.

So when you write, keep in mind what you expect your writing will evoke in your readers. Ask yourself, "Do my words just present important concepts and terms to memorize? Or does it evoke understanding of an issue that enables the reader to explain what ideas or words mean, what purposes people had, how things work, or why certain events occurred? Will he/she be enabled to explain the issue to someone else?"

Balance the General and the Specific

Writing involves both general statements and specific examples. The general statements are important for drawing lessons. Suppose you read an essay that begins, "Raising a deaf child makes unexpected demands on parents." The lesson is that *any* parents of a deaf child should not assume they know what lies ahead. At the same time, you want an example because, otherwise, the general statement—important and true though it be—does not stick in your mind. The *image*, say, of 4-year-old Tonya suffering a brain concussion after being knocked to the curb by a Ford pickup she never heard coming clings to the mind far more tenaciously than an *idea* about deaf children: "Deaf children can be hurt by cars they don't hear."

While sometimes it is good to begin with a general statement and then follow up with examples, other times you can start with examples and conclude with a general statement. For example, an essay that begins with a few stories about faculty members who argue with each other might end like this: "It may well be that our faculty members are afraid of being friends with each other."

So let me wind this up with my general statement: Because the mind works by organizing experience, it is important to balance general, organizing statements with specific examples from experience. When the general statement and the specific example work together, the result is quite convincing.

Point to Action

It is one thing to agree with people's ideas but quite another to agree with what they want to do. Here is the real test of how convincing you are.

Some authors give very concrete proposals and "next steps." Others point *toward* action by proposing *policies*. For example: "Employees may not wear shorts" and "Instructors should have master's degrees." In any

case, even if you expect some of your readers to disagree with what you propose, go ahead and propose it anyway. At least most of them will think seriously about the actual implications of your views.

Avoid Disengaging

The fastest way to *disengage* your readers is to distract them. We don't do this intentionally, of course, but there are many ways we do this unintentionally. One thing most distractions have in common is *unclear language*. Clear language brings the subject right to the front of readers' minds. They are so taken with the subject that they barely notice the language. The words are clear glass.

Also, effective language keeps readers moving forward. They expect an example, a further idea, a conclusion. But ineffective language usually makes the reader back up and re-read the unclear parts.

So a good rule is "Never make your reader back up." Below, I've listed some rules for helping your readers move steadily to the end.

1. Fix all spelling, punctuation, and grammar errors.

"For example, the missuse of commas. Its one of those problems that have a long, and painful, history."

Did you feel a hunch that this writing needs fixing? You're correct. But your hunch about the writing is a distraction from the issue being written about. The reason teachers make such a fuss about spelling, punctuation, and grammar is not that you write correctly. It's that you convey what's on your mind effectively.

2. Keep sentences short.

A sentence should normally express just one thought. If your sentence looks too long, check whether it contains two thoughts that could be expressed in two sentences.

3. Avoid unnecessary words.

Every word should count. Fluff words dull the point you're making. Slash words mercilessly. Instead of saying, "The committee reached a decision to hold meetings together every Wednesday," say, "The committee decided to meet every Wednesday."

4. Prefer the simple to the complex.

If the right word is a big word, go ahead and use it. But, if a shorter word does the job, use it. For example: write *change* instead of *modify*; write *use* instead of *utilize*.

5. Prefer the familiar word.

Choose the word that will be clear to most people. Say *paycheck* rather than *wage*, *speed* rather than *velocity*, *unavoidable* rather than *ineluctable*.

6. Prefer the verbs that show vivid action.

Vivid action verbs stick to the mind like glue, while abstract, general verbs easily slide away. For example, compare these sentences: "He had to *chop* his essay in half" and "He had to *reduce* his essay by 50 percent." Or: "She *collapsed* on the marble floor" and "She *fell* in the hall." Or "His computer *froze up*" and "His computer *stopped* working."

7. Prefer the active voice to the passive.

When active verbs are used the noun is doing the acting. Passive verbs have the noun acted upon. For example: "The engineer fixed the valve" (Active). "The valve was fixed by the engineer" (Passive). Active verbs are usually more effective because they give readers an image of a person acting. Passive verbs leave them with an image of a thing doing nothing.

8. Write as if your reader is hearing you talk.

Your grammar should be correct, but the reader should be following your thoughts as easily as hearing you talk. Read a draft of your writing out loud to make sure that it *sounds like talking*.

9. Mix it up.

Variety keeps your reader moving along. Change the length of your sentences. Use different introductory phrases. Occasionally rely on questions, parentheses, and dashes—things that give visual variety.

10. Write to express, not to impress.

Avoid show-off words. Instead of, "The team collapsed in a frenzied brouhaha," say "The team ended up just arguing."

11. Separate the details.

No one likes to read huge reports. Detail may be necessary, but not for everyone. With some forms of writing, it helps to tell the main story in as few sentences as possible and then add the details later or in appendices.

12. Cling to the thing.

If you're having problems with how to express your thought in words, focus on the thing you're talking about rather than on the right words. On scrap paper, write, "All I'm trying to say is ..." and finish this sentence as quickly as you can. You will be surprised at how often this gives you the right words. In the words of Cato the Elder (d. 149 BC), "Cling to the thing; the words will emerge."

13. Study Good Writers

You can learn good writing by learning what good writers do. When an article keeps you moving forward, go back and find out how. Ask yourself, "How did the author keep my interest alive?"

14. Edit with the "Reader over your shoulder."

We write from what we *understand*—the words we use, how we conceive complex issues, and all sorts of assumptions about life and how to act. But to be *understood*, it's important to consider our writing from the viewpoint of our readers. Once you finish a first draft, go back and imagine what a reader over your shoulder would say. Watch for times when you hear, "What does *that* mean?" Or, "I'm getting lost here." Or, "Oh, stop showing off!"

Support your Views

To be convincing, it is also important to support your views. There are five main types of support: experts, logic, creative envisioning, personal experience, and data.

Experts

In essays, one of the main ways of convincing people is to mention the opinions of respected experts. This is why we use quotations. But avoid just sprinkling your essays with quotations because you think teachers expect it. Do not aim to prove you did your homework; instead, aim to convince your teacher of something. Also, the first expression of your idea/view/opinion should be in your own words. It reminds readers that this is *you* trying to influence them. Then add an expert's quote to support your idea, making it clear why the quote is there.

Logic

The main reason we use logic is to remove inconsistencies. For example: "It doesn't seem logical to support capital punishment but oppose abortion." And, "It stands to reason that anyone who believes in world peace should work hard at family peace."

Notice that logic is mainly about spotting errors. We use logic to identify problems and to make our thinking more orderly.

Creative Envisioning

But logic is not the only way we think. We also creatively envision possibilities. None of the great advancements in science, scholarship, and religion came as a logical deduction from what we already know. They came rather from creative insights into how things actually work and into how things could be arranged to work in better ways.

The normal way to support a creative idea is to describe outcomes: "If we opened all online courses to all students in *audit* status, they'd get a better idea of which courses to take."

Personal Experience

Your personal experience can be quite compelling. A mother can write about childbearing that her male teacher is bound to respect. However, her experience is one thing and understanding her experience is quite another. A mother can say with certainty *that* she gave birth, but this experience is not very engaging. What interests people more is how she *understands* the experience: "In my experience as a mother, I have come to understand my main job is to provide health and safety; it is up to them to find happiness."

Data

A drawback of appealing to personal experience is that you are only one person. Your support is anecdotal; others can bring up contrary examples. To draw on a large set of experiences, you need to appeal to statistical data. For example, "One study (page 18 of our textbook) found

that 65 percent of mothers thought their main role was to make their children happy.”

So What?

Decide right now to write convincingly. That decision alone will improve your writing far more than any rule about grammar or punctuation. Be aware that even the best writers edit, edit, edit. But you can make steps forward every day just by following the tips I’ve given above.

Think of it this way:

Writing is easy; rewriting is hard.

Why?

Because making no difference is easy; making a difference is hard.