CREATE THE FIRST DRAFT

The discipline of writing something down is the first step toward making it happen.

—Lee Iacocca, automobile industry leader

The first three chapters focused on how to determine the content of messages and documents. Now let’s turn to delivering the message well: expressing what you want to communicate in the simplest, clearest language possible.

As you’ll see in many of the examples, there is not necessarily one “right” way to do this. Good writing is not accomplished with formulas. It’s achieved through good thinking, according to each need. But you need not do all the thinking at once. That’s the beauty of the three-step planning, drafting, editing process. First you brainstorm for the big picture: define what you want to accomplish, consider your audience, determine content. Then you create a first draft, as spontaneously and carelessly as you wish. And finally, you edit: review, correct, sharpen.

With a little practice, the three stages blend together. You refine your thinking as you write and, at the same time, automatically apply editing techniques to improve how you express yourself. But for now let’s focus on creating the first draft. First come the words.

CHOOSE THE FAMILIAR WORDS OF CONVERSATION

In business writing, unlike parts of the academic world, you don’t get rewarded for using long, “sophisticated” words. Instead, you lose readers. It seems obvious that using words that more people will understand, and whose meaning they agree on, is best. But too much business writing ignores this basic concept.

Today we’re all speed readers. So even when your audience is highly educated, build your writing on the short words we use in everyday speech. How short? Generally, one and two syllables. This doesn’t imply that you should never use longer words. It means to use short words as your basic building blocks and longer words where they are helpful for accuracy, impact or variety. Or when there’s no available short word or you consciously want to spark things up or evoke an emotional reaction.

LEARN HOW TO...

- Choose natural conversational words
- Build active verb-based sentences
- Assemble short, logical paragraphs
- Use good transitions
- Achieve a fluid cadence
Does this sound like you need to simplify your thoughts? Absolutely not. It means that while you have a wealth of choices with which to express your precise meaning, you must work to be as clear as possible through words that really communicate this meaning to other people.

*I love words but I don’t like strange ones. You don’t understand them and they don’t understand you. Old words is like old friends, you know ‘em the minute you see ‘em.*

—Will Rogers, performer and humorist

The English language evolved from short practical words (see the sidebar “Why English Has So Many Words and How That Affects Your Writing”), and to this day, we seem to trust those words most and find the “fancy” words suspicious.

**WHY ENGLISH HAS SO MANY WORDS AND HOW THAT AFFECTS YOUR WRITING**

The English vocabulary is rich, and there are often abundant word choices for expressing the same or similar thought. The alternatives for the most part reflect English history.

The short words mostly come from the language’s Anglo-Saxon legacy, its original base. These include words like *mother, man, bad, good, work, dog, big, eat, love, in, out.* Some Scandinavian additions arrived with the Viking invasions (*leg, crawl, trust, take*).

But many of the language’s longer words derive from Latin, or French, via the Roman and Norman invasions. Both occupied England as ruling aristocrats and introduced words relating to government, the military, the arts, sophisticated living, philosophy and more. Many of these words represent abstractions—*justice, independence, materialism, intelligence, idealism*—and emotional states—*curiosity, excitement, annoyance.*

It’s estimated that while Anglo-Saxon words compose only 1% of today’s English, they remain the fundamental words, and half of what we typically write consists of those words. As Bill Bryson says in his interesting book *The Mother Tongue: English and How It Got That Way,* “To this day we have an almost instinctive preference for the older Anglo-Saxon phrases.”

A big side benefit of using short words is that many of them are concrete. They represent tangible things we can see or touch or hear or feel and are automatically more persuasive. They keep us grounded in reality and help us write in ways that reach people more directly. Writing built on abstractions gives readers less to hold onto, and it also leads to needlessly complicated grammatical structures. This forces people to slow down and unravel your meaning. When you write for academic purposes, slowing readers down may help them absorb new ideas. But it’s always a negative in business writing. Whether you’re writing an e-mail or report or blog, you want to be understood immediately and unambiguously. You want to draw readers along smoothly and transparently so they absorb the content, rather than noticing (or battling with) the language.

Beyond this commonsense rationale for writing simply, clearly and concisely, today there’s a physical reason. More and more reading is done on a smartphone or other mini-screen, so cutting to the core and tossing the extra words is imperative.
Here’s a first-draft sentence I wrote for this book.

*The amount of interaction in contemporary office contexts is continually diminishing because of technology. Therefore writing is today’s preeminent skill.*

Note all the long non-concrete words; the numerous prepositions (*in, of, to*), which instill clumsiness; and the structure of both sentences—they depend on the passive verb *is*. The result: a stilted rhythm and boring read that doesn’t connect with readers.

When I put on my editor’s hat, I came to my senses and rewrote this way:

*Thanks to technology, today we talk less and write more. So writing is a more important skill than ever.*

Does the rewrite have a somewhat different meaning than the original? Yes, but that’s OK. Finding the best way to deliver a clear message helps you drill down to your core meaning and communicate it much better. Your first draft of any message, long or short, is unlikely to accomplish this. It may take several bouts of editing to find what you want to communicate.

Moving from version 1 to version 2 in my example took several sets of changes.

However, the more you absorb the ideas that underpin good writing, the more you can build them into the first-draft stage. Editing becomes easier, and you can invest in strengthening the message rather than dithering about what it is. Relying on short, concrete words is a good principle to hold onto because, as you’ll see in Chapter 5, checking word length and substituting short for long ones is often a good starting point toward clarity, readability and impact.

**Help Yourself Use Better Words**

Build your awareness of long words that have shorter alternatives. Here are some examples.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Instead of . . .</th>
<th>Try . . .</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Approximately</td>
<td>About</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Demonstrate</td>
<td>Show</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Utilize</td>
<td>Use</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Subsequently</td>
<td>Next</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Construct</td>
<td>Build</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assistance</td>
<td>Help</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Competencies</td>
<td>Skills</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Initiate</td>
<td>Begin</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In some context, the words in the first column might be more accurate or effective. But usually they’re not. See the activity at the end of this chapter for more ten-dollar words to watch for. Jumpstart your writing skill by developing a personal repertoire of short words that can replace some of the long ones you often use. For example, *hard*
generally works better than difficult. It’s better to fix or correct a problem than remEDIATE it. Instead of investigate, you may want to say study or track or look into or follow up. Scan examples of your existing writing to see what complicated words you tend to use, and start a list of alternatives.

Notice, too, that if you’re like most people, your writing is full of phrases that can be reduced to a single word: With reference to is better expressed as about. Why say in the event that when you can say if? Here are some more examples to set you thinking. Scan your own writing for stock phrases that are wordier than they need to be, and pare them down.

We came to the conclusion
We concluded

At the present time
Now

We’re in a position to
We can

The question as to whether
Whether

We wish to bring to your attention
Please note

Owing to the fact that
Because

For the purpose of
To

As a matter of fact
In fact

And to find better words as you write, use a thesaurus—nothing could be easier to do online. Choose a thesaurus you like or just search for the word plus “syn” (for example, “effectuate syn”) and a choice of free resources pops up with surprising possibilities. Look up the verb implement, for example, and you’ll find apply, execute, carry out, put into action, enact, perform and more. Observe that sometimes a set of short simple words may work better than a single long one—for example, carry out rather than implement, in the end rather than ultimately.

The thesaurus can also help you avoid using the same word over and over again, which dulls a reader’s senses. Look up a frequently needed word like develop, for example, and you find a variety of one-, two- and three-syllable words: grow, expand, spread, broaden, build, supplement, reinforce, begin, emerge and much more.

The most valuable of all talents is that of never using two words when one will do.

—Thomas Jefferson

Do you still believe that sticking to simple words for your everyday messaging will make your writing vague and boring, or lead people to think you’re simple-minded? It won’t, but don’t take my word for it. Take a close look at writing you like to read. I bet it’s
clear and easy to understand, no matter how complex the subject. And research has been
done to assess how people react to both spoken and written language. Contrary to what
you may expect, people who communicate in clear, simple language are perceived to be
smarter and more educated than those who speak and write in a “sophisticated” way. It’s
true that some media, like marketing materials and scripts, achieve impact with colorful,
graphic words. But most often this is accomplished by using simple words well, as covered
in Chapter 6.

BUILD CLEAR, CONCISE SENTENCES

If a sentence, no matter how excellent, does not illuminate your subject in some new
and useful way, scratch it out.

—Kurt Vonnegut, novelist

Now that you know that most of the words to write with are already in your head, what
to do with them? Create sentences, of course. Good writing consists of good sentences.
Improve your sentences and you improve your writing. Integrate them well and you’re en
route to becoming a powerful, flexible writer.

This book is about practical techniques for understanding good writing and how to accom-
plish it rather than principles of grammar. This doesn’t imply a disrespect for grammar; the
destination—clear and basically correct writing—is the same, but the route is different.
If learning rules and a more formal foundation works for you, check out the resources
listed at the end of Chapter 5. And when you identify specific shortcomings in your own
writing that involve a grammatical point—like using apostrophes—it’s a good idea to
supplement this book’s strategies with one of these resources and master the problem once
and for all.

Let’s look first at your choices for how to build a sentence.

In the beginning, there is the simple declarative sentence: Someone is doing something,
or something is happening. Here are examples:

* Jim wrote a proposal for a new client project.
* He submitted it to his supervisor.
* She read the proposal.
* She didn’t notice that Jim’s calculations were wrong.
* The client noticed the mistake.
* Ellen blamed Jim.
* Jim apologized.
* The pitch failed.
Then there are sentences with more than one phrase, or clause (which is a phrase that includes a verb), often separated by commas, or words like and or but. Here are some two-part sentences:

*Jack wrote a proposal to pitch a new client project and submitted it to his supervisor.*

*She reviewed the proposal carefully but didn't notice that Jim had made a mistake in his calculations.*

More complex sentence can have three or more parts or sections:

*The client, however, took the trouble to check the numbers and discovered that they were incorrect.*

*The supervisor blamed Jim, and although he apologized to everyone for the error, the bid for new business failed.*

Which sentences are correct? All, of course. It depends on the information you’re delivering, the tone of what you’re writing and so on. But note that the longer sentences enable the writer to make connections between events more clearly without repeating words and ideas. And if you read the sentences aloud, their rhythms are quite different.

When simple declarative sentences dominate your writing, it sounds choppy and childish—much like a first-grade reader or some fourth-grade social studies textbooks. On the other hand, when writing consists entirely of long, complicated sentences, it becomes hard to follow and, pretty soon, boring. It picks up a cadence that, well, puts the reader to sleep.

For example:

*Wanting to express subtle thoughts and ideas, Alice often used lengthy, complicated sentences in her business correspondence. Told that this was a problem, she explained that she wanted to express subtle ideas and not insult her*
readers’ intelligence. But her messages confused people. Often they didn’t read them to the end. Facing these facts, Alice consulted some writing resources and decided to vary the length of her sentences. She finds this technique much more successful.

Do you agree that the second version is more engaging? The reason is simple but important: Version 1 repeats the same multiclause sentence structure, sentence after sentence—each is perfectly correct, but together they give the reader a tiresome experience. Version 2 breaks the pattern by combining sentences with different structures. Not incidentally, crafting the sentences one by one and dovetailing them neatly creates a shorter and more fluid paragraph.

You don’t need to think specifically about structure. Just think about beginning each sentence differently. In the second version, for example, simple sentences like the first one for the most part alternate with more complicated ones that require commas.

Absorb this rhythm idea, and your writing may improve dramatically. It’s easier to keep your reader’s attention and sound interesting just by alternating the length and structure of your sentences. It pulls people along. **We live in an age of speed readers and scanners. The more naturally a piece of writing moves, the more people will stick with it. This elevates your success ratio.**

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**SUCCESS TIP**

**Listen to Your Writing!**

Train your ear to help you review and edit your writing—this method will never fail you. **Simply read your draft aloud.** Notice rhythms: when they work and when they don’t. Listen for the oral stumbling blocks that tell you that words and structures can and should be better. Another way to go about this is to use Google Translate (https://translate.google.com) or a similar app. Paste your copy into the box and click on the microphone or other icon for sound, and a fairly natural computer voice will read your copy to you. This can help you listen more objectively. Wherever you hear a sing-songy up-and-down inflection, see it as a clue to complicated sentences and lengthy words that need attention. We’ll delve further into how to use this technique in Chapter 5.

Notice that “natural”-sounding writing doesn’t really mean “conversational.” You are unlikely to speak to someone about Alice’s writing the way the written message does. You’d probably say something more like this:

*Everything Alice wrote used to be really boring—a whole bunch of sentences, one after another after another. It just put you to sleep. Then she figured out that she could just alternate long and short ones, and it’s amazing. The same stuff sounds so much more interesting.*
How Long Should Sentences Be?

There is actually a semi-scientific answer to this question. It comes from readability research on what makes writing most understandable to the most people. As the sidebar feature “The Shrinking English Sentence” shows, the average number of words per sentence in written materials has radically fallen over the centuries. Today there is more or less agreement that sentences should average between 14 and 18 words to be most comprehensible.

And speech? Linguists have determined that the spoken sentence typically consists of 7 to 10 words.

How about online material? Somewhere between what works for print documents and what’s typical for speech.

**THE SHRINKING ENGLISH SENTENCE**

People began studying readability and its relation to sentence length in the late 19th century. An English literature professor named Lucius Adelno Sherman analyzed sentence length historically and found (in his 1893 book Analytics of Literature) the following averages:

- Pre-Elizabethan times: 50 words per sentence
- Elizabethan times: 45 words per sentence
- Victorian times: 29 words per sentence
- Late 19th century: 23 words per sentence

Sherman observed that, over time, sentences had become simpler and more concrete as well as shorter. He noted that this was because spoken language was affecting written language—as it should: “The oral sentence is clearest because it is the product of millions of daily efforts to be clear and strong. It represents the work of the race for thousands of years in perfecting an effective instrument of communication.”

Today, journalism experts believe sentences should be as short as 15 words on average for maximum readability. But not all written documents need to be understood by everyone.

Since the research agrees that sentence length is one of the two key ingredients of readability (word length is the other), it’s important to consider these guidelines seriously.

Here are a few takeaways for the business writer:

1. Academia remains partly immersed in pre-21st-century writing, especially for English majors. So the writing style encouraged by some professors reflects an earlier time and may be at odds with this book’s guidelines, which focus on writing for today’s high-speed business world.

2. The “rule” doesn’t mean that every sentence should be at least 14 words and no more than 18 words long. It means the average length should fall within those limits. For example, the last few paragraphs here—from the “How Long Should Sentences Be?” head through the end of this sentence—average 17.9 words per sentence. But one sentence is 41 words long and some have fewer than 10 words. Using average length in this way promotes the alternating rhythm recommended earlier.
3. It’s fine to vary the general rule according to the medium, your own writing style and the nature of your audience. Obviously, highly educated readers will understand difficult material more easily than less educated ones. If you’re writing to an audience that ranges, say, from factory workers to managers, or you’d define the readers as average, keep in mind that the average American is estimated to read at a seventh-grade level. And just because people with a lot of education can understand something difficult doesn’t mean they want to read it—or will stick with it. After all, we’re not talking about writing required textbooks. Virtually nothing you’ll write is mandated reading. There are no captive audiences in the business world: You have to earn your audience with just about every single document you create by writing it well.

4. To check how you’re doing, you need not count the words of every sentence. Your Microsoft Word program, and others, gives you a marvelous tool that does this for you. It’s the Readability Statistics Index, and you can ask your computer to bring it up every time you use spell check. The box materializes immediately after the spelling and grammar check and tells you the average sentence length of the document or highlighted piece, word length and more. We’ll practice using this in Chapter 5, but it’s a good tool to employ as you write as well as when you edit.

**BUILD WITH ACTION VERBS**

After improving what you write with shorter words and simpler but varying sentences, look to your verbs. Choosing action verbs is a transformative tool. You probably recall one of the main rules of most writing advice: Avoid the passive voice. This is totally relevant to good business writing. The passive is expressed by a form of *to be*—*were, was*—plus another verb, often ending in *–ed*: “The reason for the failure was identified.” The problem with passive is that it doesn’t say who did the deed. So beyond producing an awkward, dull sentence, people use it as an avoidance tactic, as in “A mistake was made.”

The good news is that you need not understand the complexities of this rule. Just notice as you write: Does my verb suggest a feeling of action—something happening—or is it just a bland place holder? A “flabby” verb that just holds the sentences together and creates a need for wordiness? Look for these weak verbs in many situations other than the classically defined passive. Constructions with an *–ing* verb are often to blame. Here are a few examples:

*Three writing tests are being administered by the ABC company.*

Better:

*The ABC company administers three writing tests.*

*He was seeing stars.*

Better:

*He saw stars.*
As often as possible, center on the action and use the simplest form of a verb—the present tense or simple past tense. Then it’s easy to cut unnecessary wordiness and build a forward-moving cadence that keeps readers with you. Notice how much more direct and compact the second sentence is in each case.

*We were taking forward leaps.*

*versus*

*We leaped forward.*

*Many people are resistant to reading on screen.*

*versus*

*Many people resist on-screen reading.*

*To be your own editor is a skill we all need.*

*versus*

*We all need to edit our own work.*

When you take a moment, more graphic verbs come to mind that don’t need modifiers to make the idea clear:

*The company’s sales figures usually rise substantially in the first quarter.*

*versus*

*Company sales usually zoom in the first quarter.*

Here’s a more complicated example that typifies a lot of business writing:

*This mistake has put us in the position of having to explain why business in the last quarter went down radically.*

Notice the clues that tell you this sentence needs help. Read aloud, it dictates the sing-song cadence of poor writing. When you review it visually, you see that it contains four prepositions—*in, of, to, in*—and depends on words like *has* and *having*.

Spend a few seconds thinking about what the sentence means and you’ll see other alternatives, such as this:

*This mistake forces us to explain why business plummeted in the last quarter.*
Simply substituting these stronger verbs for the roundabout versions cuts the word count from 21 to 13, produces a fast read with a natural cadence and gets the idea across more vividly.

Notice that many sentences with weak verbs and unnecessary wordiness can be fixed by using the present tense. Resist works better than are resistant to; forces us to explain is much better than has put us in the position of having to explain. Look at how these sentence pairs differ:

This rule can be applied to the problem we are confronting.

versus

This rules applies to the problem we face.

or

Apply this rule to the problem we face.

A subject line should really be focused on letting people know what the message is about.

versus

Focus subject lines on what the message is about.

To write a better e-mail, it's helpful to plan your message first.

versus

To write a better e-mail, plan your message first.

The reason you hate me is because I don't laugh at your jokes.

versus

You hate me because I don't laugh at your jokes.

The lesson here: Watch for the word is. You can't always eliminate it, of course, and certainly there are sentences that need it. But when you hunt for a substitute, you often find a much stronger statement lurking.

We also dilute meaning by using hedgy, lazy verbs like make, can and get. All are perfectly good words, but overusing them weakens your writing. A few examples:

He made a decision to leave the job.

versus

He decided to quit.
We can make this change in how we file expense accounts happen soon.

versus

Let’s change how we file expense accounts soon.

You can get a start on the progress report tomorrow.

versus

Start working on the progress report tomorrow.

To make copy more colorful, use some long words.

versus

Use some long words to invigorate copy.

Words like can and should may also undermine impact. They feel evasive:

You can handle the challenge this way.

versus

Handle the challenge this way.

We should review this idea again next week.

versus

Let’s review this idea again next week.

Notice how much more positive a sentence’s tone feels when you use simple present, past or future tense. It’s also good to resist temptations to use the passive to evade responsibility. This approach is sometimes called “the divine passive.” A fact or event is presented as if it were an act of God. It doesn’t work in the business world, no matter how often it’s done. For example:

The wrong decision was made and an unproductive path was chosen.

Who made the decision? Beyond creating an impersonal tone, this evasion undermines credibility and does the cause no good. Here’s an irritating quote reported by the Wall Street Journal, said by a News Corp. executive when his editor was convicted of hacking voice messages:

“We said long ago, and repeat today, that wrongdoing occurred and we apologized for it.”
WORK WITH SHORT PARAGRAPHS

Simplicity is the ultimate sophistication.
—Leonardo da Vinci

Now that you know how to build effective sentences, it’s time to move on to the larger unit.

You may remember being told in school to develop a thesis for an essay and a thesis or topic sentence for each paragraph. The paragraph should cover a single idea based on the topic and end with a conclusion. If that approach helps, use it. I found it paralyzing. Alternatively, start with the readability premise. Research tells us that for practical writing, the best length for a paragraph is three to five sentences. In many cases, even fewer sentences work best—for example, the lead of an article, online copy like websites and blogs, and promotional copy for marketing purposes.

Luckily, when you keep your paragraphs short, it’s easier to stay on track and recognize when you stray off your intended path. It’s also easier to know when to break your paragraphs, or “grafs.” Basically, start a new graf when it feels logical to do so. Typically, this is when you’re beginning a new thought or subthought, starting an item in a list or moving to a detail or clarification.

If you’re the kind of writer who tends to spill it all out in a few long, breathless gasps, here’s a solution: Consistently review your draft with an eye toward the white space. Have you produced a dense document with long paragraphs that break only a few times per page? Then splinter the material into shorter paragraphs of three to five sentences. Try scattering a few single-sentence paragraphs around as well, if they make a point worth emphasizing or act as a transition. Next, look at each paragraph to see if it makes sense or needs to be clarified.

Every document gains from short paragraphs in a number of ways:

- They more readily engage the eye and therefore readers’ interest. A packed message skimpy on white space looks formidable and may even prevent people from reading the message at all.
- They increase the likelihood of keeping your reader with you, because the message seems to move so much faster.
- They produce a “spacey” document that is far easier to grasp than an unbroken dense one and is therefore more likely to succeed, whatever the goal.

In addition to checking that each graf works, check whether each leads logically to the next one and all relate neatly. Short paragraphs are easy to move around, so you can experiment with making your message flow more logically. You often find that the last sentence of one paragraph works better when you move it to begin the paragraph that follows.
And there’s a magic tool for melding all those paragraphs into a fluent, convincing, logical message that makes what you write seem persuasive and even inevitable: the transition.

**USE GOOD TRANSITIONS: WORDS, PHRASES AND DEVICES**

Transitions play an important role in connecting your ideas, examples and overall argument. Take care with them, because successful writing requires that all connections are clear to your audience. You never want your readers to wonder, “Why is she telling me that?” or substituting their own reasoning for yours, even unconsciously. Ambiguous connections create misunderstanding or indifference.

Good transitions, on the other hand, instantly improve all your writing because they smooth it out and eliminate the choppy, disconnected effect that signals poor writing (and thinking). Think of transitions as the stitching that holds a patchwork quilt together.

Transitions are critical at the sentence, paragraph and full-document levels. For example, you could write:

*John doesn’t like sharing his reports. His supervisor wants him to do it.*

The two thoughts don’t connect. Instead they could read:

*John doesn’t like sharing his reports. However, his supervisor requires it.*

On the sentence level, we typically use transition words instinctively. Simple words like *and, but, or and because* are handy—and may be used to begin sentences in all but the most formal documents. But connecting paragraphs well can take more deliberate thought.

It may be appropriate to end a paragraph with a transition, as an introduction to what comes next. Note the transitions between sentences as well as at the end of the paragraph:

*The White Contract is scheduled for signing on the 30th. However, some problems have come up that we should discuss at Friday’s meeting. In the meantime we can prepare for that conversation with the following procedure.*

In many cases, transitions should be used to begin a paragraph so it links to what preceded it. Here are some of the useful words and phrases to draw on for both opening and closing a graf:

To sum up . . . in review . . . finally . . . in general . . . in other words . . . equally important

To the contrary . . . on the other hand . . . conversely . . . nevertheless . . . in spite of . . . otherwise . . . unfortunately . . . regretably
Also . . . additionally . . . further . . . specifically . . . for example . . . accordingly . . . moreover . . . besides

Later . . . the next step is . . . recently . . . in the future . . . afterward . . . at that point . . . so far

To illustrate . . . for example . . . similarly . . . conversely . . . accordingly . . . in conclusion . . . finally

Some transitional words and phrases carry connotations that can help convey the tone you want:

Best of all . . . in fact . . . truthfully . . . of course . . . naturally . . . chiefly . . . inevitably . . . and yet . . . happily . . . it goes without saying . . . surprisingly . . . fortunately

In any message that matters (and as you know, I think they all do), check how each paragraph connects to the one that precedes and the one that follows. If you can’t make these relationships clear, you may need to rethink your content and your own understanding of the subject.

In long documents like reports and proposals, use transitions to ensure that the sections connect logically. Go out of your way to clarify the links with phrases that act as transitional devices:

Here’s why . . . The result . . . Our conclusions . . . There’s more . . . What did we learn? . . . How will this help you? . . . The solution we came up with . . .

You can also use whole sentences to introduce a section and tie it into the document’s logical pattern. Apply some creativity to these transitions, and they’ll really support your cause:

We base our conclusions on the following trials.

We focused on similar projects for five years and learned a number of lessons.

The sales projections are especially interesting.

Here are the questions most frequently asked—and the answers.

A brief review of the problem’s background.

It sounds great. But . . .

That’s what we used to think, too.

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Setting up a sequence via a numbered list is another good tool for promoting clarity and holding a document, or section, together:

Four factors weigh most heavily in making the decision.

The process can be completed in seven stages.

Here’s the plan for the next eight months.

One more great benefit to transitions: Consciously used to better communicate a message, they help you organize your material more easily. And for your reader, a message that feels clear, logical and cohesive is much more convincing than one that holds together less tightly.

**SIDESTEP TONE TRAPS**

The tone of any piece of writing rises, sometimes mysteriously, from the integration of words and sentence structure, what’s included, what’s left out. Tone must suit the subject matter and your relationship to your reader. Control tone if you want your messages to succeed. Here are some pitfalls to avoid.

**The Meant-to-Be-Funny**

Humor is a tremendous asset for a speech, a presentation or a conversation. Unfortunately, unless you’re a talented and confident humor writer, it’s risky to depend on it in writing.

A piece of writing lacks the advantages of personal interaction. There is no facial expression to underscore or counter the words; no subtle body language to suggest your true meaning; and, above all, no tone of voice to communicate the real message. What would be funny in person can easily come across as insulting or cruel. Especially because e-mail (like social media) is infinitely forwardable and accessible, a moment’s entertainment can have unwelcome consequences.

This is a particular drawback with using irony and sarcasm. One solution is to use emojis to suggest that you’re “just joking” and soften a message. But they may be misinterpreted, especially by people unfamiliar with them. And they are still seen as inappropriate in many business environments.

So here is the rule: In business writing, avoid the temptation to make fun of someone or something others might care about. Don’t joke at someone else’s expense. Be wary of injecting any humor that might be misunderstood.

**Prejudicial Wording**

Don’t undercut your message by building in a negative slant, consciously or not. Suppose, for example, you receive an e-mail that begins with one of these phrases:

As I already told you . . .

This is to reinforce our conversation . . .

You did not provide . . .
You are apparently unaware that . . .

I am at a loss to understand . . .

Don’t fail to let me know . . .

As you should have foreseen . . .

I thought you realized the importance of . . .

Obviously, you’re on full defensive even before reading the rest of the message. The takeaway: Avoid this tone and wording. It’s not a productive way to address people, no matter what their relationship to you or how you feel they failed you. Amazingly, however, companies will often write to customers in a similar off-putting manner:

This is to inform you that we are unable to ship your product at this time . . .

Our policy clearly states that purchases are only refundable if . . .

For your information, we no longer provide support services for . . .

Please understand that we cannot make exceptions . . .

SUCCESS TIP

Keep a Lid on Your Emotions

In business, the line between expressing passion and emotion can be a fine one. Your colleagues, superiors and subordinates certainly want to feel your conviction, enthusiasm and confidence. But these qualities must appear to be based on an objective reality—not inappropriate personal investment in a subject or unchecked feelings.

Obviously, it’s bad to lose your temper at a meeting, act defensively, sulk or cast blame. In the business world, like the political, such behavior marks you as the loser. Results can be even worse if you send a hostile message. It may circulate or rankle forever. Therefore:

- Never let what you write show anger.
- Never criticize anyone in writing (unless it’s part of a structured evaluation process).
- Work hard to maintain a balanced, reasonable tone.
- Avoid words that can be negatively interpreted. Don’t sound judgmental.
- Monitor your messages so they don’t betray any attitude, emotion or feeling that will undermine you.
- Always pause before sending a harsh message and ask if it might damage a relationship.

However: It can be very helpful to write a message that tells someone how you feel; just don’t send it. Compose and polish a complete e-mail, letter or post and then burn it; that is, file or discard it. Mentally processing an emotional situation this way enables you to put it in perspective and move on more easily. It’s a good idea not to address it, to prevent a Freudian click.
The substance of a message may in fact be negative, as in the customer service examples. When this is the case, take special care to present the information in as positive a way as possible. The first statement, for example, might be put this way:

_We’re delighted that you’ve ordered our Product #65 but sorry that because it’s proved so popular, we are unable to fill orders as quickly as we’d like. Each #65 is individually crafted._

Here’s how one smart retailer responded, in part, to a return:

_We’d love another opportunity to please you. Please accept this offer of free shipping on your next purchase in our catalog or online at._

Note that when a company produces a flow of impersonal these-are-the-rules-and-we-don’t-care-if-you-like-them-or-not messages to customers, its policies merit review. The marketplace is too competitive to treat customers this way. Writing well can only go so far to cover up bad thinking.

**The Pompous and Pretentious**

*If you can’t explain something simply, you don’t understand it well enough.*

—Albert Einstein

We often see overblown, pretentious language that combines long words with awkward construction. These messages fail to communicate when used in place of real substance. Here’s an empty sentence built on abstractions and adjectives:

_The nostrum of “regulation” drags with it a raft of unexamined impediments concerning the nature of markets and governmentality, and a muddle over intentionality, voluntarism and spontaneity that promulgates the neoliberal creed at the subconscious level._

Spot a sentence like this and rewrite if you can. When writing is so bad that it communicates no meaning at all, it’s impossible to fix it.

**The Cold and Impersonal**

People today value messages that feel authentic and personal. Whether you’re writing a memo explaining a company benefit, a promotional piece selling a product or a letter responding to a complaint, make it personal. Often this means taking the “you” viewpoint:

For example, rather than

_The new policy on filing for overtime claims is._

try
To file an overtime claim, you need to know... 

For pitching a product, rather than

*The newly designed Inca 247 offers a number of features to help the graphic designer.*

try

*Inca 247 saves you 20% of your graphic design project time and...*

This tactic ties right in with your need to instantly engage readers and pull them through your document. Remember, when people decide whether a message is worth reading, self-interest rules. Figure out how to phrase the sentence, and the whole message, building on the word you.

**PRACTICE OPPORTUNITIES**

**I. Practice Sentence Rhythm**

**A. Correct Choppy Cadence**

Rewrite this paragraph. First read it aloud to identify the problems. When you’ve written a new version, read that aloud as well and see if you’re satisfied.

Carol is working on an MBA. She finds the pressures very demanding. She has almost no time to spend with friends. She doesn’t even have time for phone calls. She doesn’t have much time for e-mail or keeping up with Facebook either. The only time she sees other people is in class or team projects or study groups. She recently decided to change this pattern. She’ll begin by brainstorming ideas for how to set aside some personal time each week. She also needs to think about whom she can spend that time with. Everyone she knows is constantly working.

**B. Fix Monotonous Cadence**

Rewrite this letter asking for a recommendation. Again, read the before and after versions aloud.

Dear X,

Not only are you an exceptional business adviser whose unique vision adds significant value to the company, but your constructive management style helps the entire team to develop new skills each day. Because you are a leader in your field, I was wondering if you’d write a letter of recommendation supporting my application to the Green University International MBA program.
While this job affords me constant learning and I continue to enjoy my experience here, I hope that gaining an MBA will enhance my management skills at the international level. It should also prepare me for a future in management, since I hope to become a great manager, like you, one day.

I realize that my acceptance would mean my departure from the firm, but there should be ample time to train a replacement. If permitted, I would love to help secure a replacement and provide thorough training as well as feedback to ensure that the new role maximizes efficiencies and focuses on future growth. And after I’ve completed my schooling, I hope I have the opportunity to work with you in the future.

If you do decide to grant me this request, I have prepared a folder that includes a letter outlining specifics and a prepaid envelope for mailing. If for any reason you don’t feel comfortable writing a letter on my behalf, I completely understand.

II. Review and Rewrite a Recent Message
Identify an e-mail, letter, networking message, report, online post or other piece of your own recent writing. Carefully review:

- Word choice
- Sentence length and structure
- Paragraph length
- Unnecessary wordiness
- Use of transitions
- Cadence when read aloud

In what ways do you find your writing at odds with the principles presented in this chapter? How would you write the message or material differently now? Try a rewrite, thinking within a business context.

III. Translate Your Academic Writing for a Practical Real-World Purpose
For this activity, choose a recent paper you wrote, on any subject, for an academic class. Now invent a business-like reason for the message the paper contains. For example, if you analyzed a piece of literature, review it as if you’d been asked whether to recommend it as required reading for your coworkers; if it’s a research paper, think of an appropriate person to whom you might need to report your findings, such as the chief of IT, HR director, or head of accounting. Rewrite the gist of the paper as a recommendation in simple, concise, active language in line with this chapter’s guidelines. Draw also on the concepts of goal and audience covered in the previous chapters to produce your best message.
IV. Review Your Verbs

Assemble five pieces of your own writing in any media. Go through each methodically, and bold or color the verbs. Then create a document listing all the verbs. Scan the list: Do many reflect a passive voice or feeling? Are they dull placeholder verbs? How many can you replace with more active, interesting verbs? Where can you substitute the simple present tense?

Choose one of the documents and change the weak verbs to strong ones. Notice the changes that the new verbs suggest. Does the message become shorter? Less wordy? More effective? Do you like it better?

V. Write Notes to Yourself

Create pages, real or virtual, with these headings:

- Word Choice
- Verbs
- Sentence Structure
- Paragraphs
- Transitions
- Cadence

On each page, note the changes you'd like to effect in your writing based on the ideas in this chapter. Take account of the analysis you did in the preceding exercises, and review more of your writing against the guidelines.

Print these pages out and keep them as reference. You now have a checklist that will help you improve your writing immediately and a strong start on creating your personal writing improvement plan!

VI. Build a List of Short-Word Substitutes

Think of short-word alternatives for the following list of words. Expand the list with additional frequently used long words you find in your own writing and your everyday reading.

- Substantial
- Subsequent
- Indication
- Aggregate
- Culmination
- Disseminate
Eliminate
Construct
Convoluted
Imminently
Prevalent
Verbose
Fundamental
Additionally
Fraudulent
Initiate
Optimum
Curriculum
Assistance
Substantiate
Component

VII. Group Activity: Assemble a Master List of Shorter Words

In small groups, share and discuss your substitute word lists and brainstorm for more. Each group then contributes its full list to a central committee or individual (perhaps accorded extra credit) who integrates the lists to produce a helpful handout for everyone.