

Low-fat Writing

It wasn't very long ago we thought we needed lots of fat to make something taste good. We've learned, however, that low-fat food can be just as tasty as it is healthy. Writing has undergone the same change. Today's busy readers want low-fat writing, too. They want messages to be communicated without them having to wade through a lot of unnecessary material. Here are some ways to make your writing easier for your readers.

- ▶ Follow the example set by the most-read newspapers, provide readers with a summary paragraph and easy-to-read heading.
- ▶ Cut down on articles, prepositions and conjunctions. According to Dr. Rudolph Flesch, a renowned author and scholar on clear writing, such words as the, and, a, too, I, in, was, that, it, he, you, for, had, is, with, she, has, on, at, have, but, not, me and my account for one-third of all English writing. The word "the," alone, accounts for five percent.
- ▶ Keep it simple by using simple words. Today's audiences are too busy to spend time reading words more than once. The easier your words are to understand, the easier they are to remember.
- ▶ Take a fresh look at what you've written, and polish it. How many extraneous words can you eliminate?
- ▶ Before you begin to write, know the "screaming message" you want your audience to receive. Be able to reduce it to a simple sentence and lead with it. Don't force your readers to dig to find what you are trying to tell them.
- ▶ Read the paragraph you've just written and decide which sentence you absolutely cannot throw out. That is your main point and should probably be the first sentence of your paragraph.
- ▶ Use the active tense. It saves words, and it's more reader-friendly. Writers often use passive language to avoid meeting a controversial or complex topic head-on or because they haven't taken the time to rearrange the words in the active tense.
 - ◆ "I am sending you a report" is better than "There is a report being sent to you."
 - ◆ Your audience will catch the meaning of "Please volunteer" faster than "Your services as a volunteer are requested."
- ▶ Pretend you are talking to the reader.

(Over)

- ▶▶▶▶ Think of yourself as a distiller of information. It is not necessary to provide information that does not serve your purpose. You do know your purpose, don't you?
- ▶▶▶▶ Cover each point thoroughly, but consider covering fewer points in a single article or message.
- ▶▶▶▶ Use a pronoun instead of repeating the noun.
- ▶▶▶▶ Learn to "factor" expressions. Factoring in mathematics, means writing $a(b+c)$, instead of $ab + ac$. Use the same principle in writing. Instead of writing "curriculum development and curriculum implementation," write "curriculum development and implementation."
- ▶▶▶▶ Use contractions. English permits you to contract "do not" to "don't" and make one word out of two. Why not do it in writing?
- ▶▶▶▶ Be concise. Here are some ways to begin:

Instead of

Afford an opportunity

Are of the opinion that

Despite the fact that

Due in large measure to

During the time or during which time

For the reason that or In view of the fact that

Fully cognizant of

In addition to the above

In the event that

Inasmuch as

It is in recognition of this fact that

Not in a position to

On the basis of

This will acknowledge receipt of

Will you be kind enough

Try

Allow, enable

Believe, think

Though

Because, since

While

Because

Aware

Also

If

Since

Therefore

Cannot or unable

By, from

Thank you for sending

Please

- ▶▶▶▶ Watch out for words that add nothing to the meaning of the sentence. Some examples: In terms of, In essence, You know.
- ▶▶▶▶ Avoid the use of qualifiers such as rather, very, little and pretty. In "The Elements of Style," Strunk and White's classic guidebook for clear writing, the authors refer to these words as "leeches that infest the pond of prose, sucking the blood of words."
- ▶▶▶▶ Keep your sentences short. How short is a matter of clarity. If you can understand its meaning on the first reading, it is probably short enough. In any case, keep it under 40-50 words.