

20 Secrets of Good Writing

Among the compendia of good writing principles one of the best and most useful is this list compiled by Ken Roman and Joel Raphaelson of the advertising agency Ogilvy & Mather Worldwide. "20 Secrets of Good Writing" sets forth sound, easy-to-follow suggestions for improving one's writing.

When you are speaking for Ogilvy & Mather, your writing must meet our standards. These allow ample room for individuality and freshness of expression. But "personal style" is not an excuse for sloppy, unprofessional writing.

Here are some suggestions on how to improve your writing—20 principles that all good writers follow.

1. Keep in mind that the reader doesn't have much time.

What you write must be clear on first reading. If you want your paper to be read by senior people, remember that they have punishing schedules, evening engagements, and bulging briefcases.

The shorter your paper, the better the chance it will be read at high levels. During World War II, no documents of more than one page was allowed to reach Churchill's desk.

2. Know where you are going—and tell the reader. Start with an *outline* to organize your argument. *Begin important paragraphs with topic sentences that tell what follows. Conclude with a summary paragraph.*

An outline not only helps the reader; it keeps you from getting lost enroute. Compile a list of all your points before you start.

3. Make what you write easy to read. For extra emphasis, underline entire sentences. Number your points, as we do in this section.

Put main points into indented paragraphs like this.

4. Short sentences and short paragraphs are easier to read than long ones. Send telegrams, not essays.

5. Make your writing vigorous and direct. Wherever possible use active verbs, and avoid the passive voice.

<u>Passive</u>	<u>Active</u>
We are concerned that if this recommendation is turned down, the brand's market share may be negatively affected.	We believe you must act on this recommendation to hold the brand's share.

6. Avoid clichés. Find your own words.

<u>Cliché</u>	<u>Direct</u>
Turn over every rock for a solution	Try hard
Put it to the acid test	Test thoroughly
Few and far between	Few
Last but not least	Last
Iron out	Remove

7. Avoid vague modifiers such as "very" and "slightly." Search for the word or phrase that *precisely* states your meaning.

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Vague

Very overspent
Slightly behind schedule

Precise

Overspent by \$1,000
One day late

8. Use specific concrete language.

Avoid technical jargon, what E. B. White calls "the language of mutilation."

There is always a simple, down-to-earth word that says the same thing as the show-off fad word or the abstraction.

Jargon

Parameters
Implement
Viable
Interface
Optimum
Meaningful
To impact
Resultful
Finalize
Judgmentally
Input
Output

Plain English

Limits, boundaries
Carry out
Practical, workable
To talk with
Best
Real, actual
To affect
Effective, to have results
Complete
I think
Facts, information
Results

It is believed that with the parameters that have been imposed by your management, a viable solution may be hard to find. If we are to impact the consumer to the optimum, further interface with your management may be the most meaningful step to take.

We believe that the limits your management gave us may rule out a practical solution. If we want our consumer program to succeed, maybe we ought to talk with your management again.

9. Find the right word. Know its precise meaning.

Use your dictionary, and your thesaurus.
Don't confuse words like these:

To "affect" something is to have an influence on it. (The new campaign affects few attitudes.)

"Effect" can mean to bring about (verb) or a result (noun). (It effected no change in attitudes, and had no effect.)

"It's" is the contraction of "it is." (It's the advertising of P&G.)

"Its" is the possessive form of "it" and does *not* take an apostrophe. (Check P&G and its advertising.)

"Principal" is the first in rank or performance. (The principal competition is P&G.)

"Principle" is a fundamental truth or rule. (The principle of competing with P&G is to have a good product.)

"Imply" means to suggest indirectly. (The writer implies it won't work.)

"Infer" means to draw meaning out of something. (The reader infers it won't work.)

"i.e." means "that is."

"e.g." means "for example."

When you confuse words like these, your reader is justified in concluding that you don't know better. Illiteracy does not breed respect.

10. Don't make spelling mistakes.

When in doubt, check the dictionary. If you are congenitally a bad speller, make sure your final draft gets checked by someone who isn't thus crippled.

If your writing is careless, the reader may reasonably doubt the thoroughness of your thinking.

11. Don't overwrite or overstate.

No more words than necessary. Take the time to boil down your points. *Remember the story of the man who apologized for writing such a long letter, explaining that he just didn't have the time to write a short one.*

The Gettysburg Address used only 266 words.

12. Come to the point.

Churchill could have said, "The position in regard to France is very serious." What he did say was, "The news from France is bad."

Don't beat around the bush. Say what you think—in simple, declarative sentences. Write confidently.

13. State things as simply as you can.

Use familiar words and uncomplicated sentences.

14. Handle numbers consistently.

Newspapers generally spell out numbers for ten and under, use numerals for 11 and up.

Don't write M when you mean a thousand, or MM when you mean a million. The reader may not know this code. Write \$5,000—not \$5M. Write \$7,000,000 (or \$7 million)—not \$7MM.

15. Avoid needless words.

The songwriter wrote, "Softly as in a morning sunrise"—and Ring Lardner explained that this was as opposed to a late afternoon or evening sunrise. Poetic license may be granted for a song, but not for phrases like these:

<u>Don't write</u>	<u>Write</u>
Advance plan	Plan
Take action	Act
Have a discussion	Discuss
Hold a meeting	Meet
Study in depth	Study
New innovations	Innovations
Consensus of opinion	Consensus
At the present time	Now
Until such time as	Until
In the majority of instances	Most
On a local basis	Locally
Basically unaware of	Did not know
In the area of	Approximately
At management level	By management
With regard to	About, concerning
In connection with	Of, in, on
In view of	Because
In the event of	If
For the purpose of	For
On the basis of	By, from
Despite the fact that	Although
In the majority of instances	Usually

Always go through your first draft once with the sole purpose of deleting all unnecessary words, phrases, and sentences. David Ogilvy has improved many pieces of writing by deleting entire paragraphs, and sometimes even whole pages.

16. Be concise, but readable.

Terseness is a virtue, if not carried to extremes. Don't leave out words. Write full sentences, and make them count.

17. Be brief, simple and natural.

Don't write, "The reasons are fourfold." Write, "There are four reasons."

Don't start sentences with "importantly." Write, "The important point is . . ."

Don't write "hopefully" when you mean "I hope that." "Hopefully" means "in a hopeful manner." Its common misuse annoys a great many literate people.

Never use the word "basically." It can always be deleted. It is a basically useless word.

Avoid the hostile term "against," as in "This campaign goes against teenagers." You are not *against* teenagers. On the contrary, you want them to buy your product. Write, "This campaign addresses teenagers," or "This campaign is aimed at teenagers."

18. Don't write like a lawyer or a bureaucrat.

"Re" is legalese meaning "in the matter of," and is never necessary.

The slash—as in and/or—is bureaucratese. Don't write, "We'll hold the meeting on Monday and/or Tuesday." Write, "We'll hold the meeting on Monday or Tuesday—or both days, if necessary.

19. Never be content with your first draft.

Rewrite, with an eye toward simplifying and clarifying. Rearrange. Revise. Above all, cut.

Mark Twain said that writers should strike out every third word on principle. "You have no idea what vigor it adds to your style."

For every major document, let time elapse between your first and second drafts—at least overnight. Then come at it with a questioning eye and a ruthless attitude.

The five examples that follow were taken from a single presentation. They show how editing shortened, sharpened, and clarified what the writer was trying to say.

First Draft

Consumer perception of the brand changed very positively.

Generate promotion interest through high levels of advertising spending.

Move from product advertising to an educational campaign, one that would instruct viewers on such things as . . .

Using the resources of Ogilvy & Mather in Europe, in addition to our Chicago office, we have been able to provide the company with media alternatives they had previously been unaware of.

Second Draft

Consumer perception of the brand improved.

Use heavy advertising to stimulate interest in promotions.

Move from product advertising to an educational campaign on such subjects as . . .

Ogilvy & Mather offices in Europe and Chicago showed the company media alternatives that it hadn't known about.

Based on their small budget, we have developed a media plan which is based on efficiency in reaching the target audience.

We developed a media plan that increases the efficiency of the small budget by focusing on prospects.

20. Have somebody else look over your draft. All O&M advertising copy is reviewed many times, even though it is written by professional writers.

Before David Ogilvy makes a speech, he submits a draft to his partners for editing and comment.

What you write represents the agency as much as an advertisement by a creative director or a speech by a chairman. They solicit advice. Why not you?