

Tighter, Brighter Writing

How to clear the clutter from your sentences and write compelling copy

by Neil Everton, Podium Media & Communications Coaching

Our words say a lot about us. But do they always speak well on our behalf? Let's examine a message from the manager of a hotel to all guests.

“We have scheduled training modules to improve our Associates ability to heighten our overall Guest experience and mechanisms to solicit Guest feedback on ways in which we can meaningfully improve.”

The message he wants to send is simple: the comfort and happiness of guests matters to us. But something goes badly wrong between the clear thought and the clunky expression of that thought. We're left with puffed-up phrases, jargon - and no connection to his target audience. (Not to mention random capitalization and shaky punctuation... where's the possessive apostrophe in Associates).

The message misses its mark. In fact, because of the language, the message may be counter-productive.

We brand the author as stuffy and self-important. Probably not a man we'd want to spend too much time with at the hotel's next meet-and-greet. Maybe we'll find a friendlier, more sincere hotel next time.

Let's look at another message. This is from the web site of Nova Scotia-based business coach [Debi Hartlen MacDonald](#):

“Working with me is not for the faint of heart. My no-nonsense approach of Think It - Plan It - Do It, with a little hand-holding along the way, is for those business owners that want to see results. That can't happen unless you're prepared to roll up your sleeves and work with me to develop a customized plan for you and your business that you actually plan to implement.”

The opening sentence tells you a lot about Debi. You know where you stand. The writing tells you she's a forceful personality who doesn't have much time for shirkers. But if you're prepared to work hard, she'll take care of you.

She knows her target audience – and her message hits the bulls-eye.

Clear writing is not easy. But sometimes we make it much harder than it needs to be - like our stuffy hotel manager. Sometimes we dress plain thoughts in fancy costume. And that's like dressing a dog in a tartan vest and bootees - incomprehensible and embarrassing to all parties.

This White Paper is about saying what we want to say, as simply as possible.

It's about being authentic. It's about capturing your natural voice and delivering it as powerfully as possible. I offer no gimmicks to help build authenticity into your writing. But I do offer tips and tools to make sure nothing gets in the way of your authentic voice.

Clear the Clutter

Whatever the season, it's always a good time to do some spring cleaning in your sentences. Let's clear the clutter. Too much writing today is drowning in unnecessary words, meaningless jargon, pompous frills, and passive constructions intended to confuse rather than clarify.

"I try to leave out all the parts that people skip."

Elmore Leonard



I call it message inflation. The more important the message, the less we trust our instincts. We turn away from the conversational us - the person who charms friends with warm conversation and outrageous gossip. We feel our natural, conversational vocabulary is inadequate. So we send for reinforcements. With a blare of trumpets, a squadron of extra syllables marches over the hill. Suddenly, from the mouths of perfectly nice people, we hear:

"High-quality learning environments are a necessary precondition for facilitation and enhancement of the ongoing learning process."

(Thanks to the [Plain English Campaign](#) for finding that gem.)

Here's our first tool. Two little words:

'Hi Mom'

'Hi Mom' keeps you conversational and authentic. Just add those two little words on the front of any sentence you are writing - then read it aloud. Try it with the sentence we just looked at:

"Hi Mom - High-quality learning environments are a necessary precondition for facilitation and enhancement of the ongoing learning process."

You just don't talk like that to anyone you care about. The 'Hi Mom' test tells you something has to be changed. How about:

“Hi Mom - Children need good schools if they are to learn properly.”

'Hi Mom' keeps you from straying into the land of bafflegab. And it immediately makes your sentences more muscular. And a lot slimmer. Ten words, compared to 17.

Don't be a victim of message inflation. The more important the message – the greater the need for clarity and simplicity.

Winston Churchill knew this. The stakes were high for him in 1941, as he tried to persuade the United States to enter World War II:

“We shall not fail or falter. We shall not weaken or tire. Give us the tools and we will finish the job.”

Churchill was a champion of plain language. He used to say “Broadly speaking, small words are best and old words best of all”.

Let's apply the 'Hi Mom' test to the message from the hotel manager:

“Hi Mom, We have scheduled training modules to improve our Associates ability to heighten our overall Guest experience and mechanisms to solicit Guest feedback on ways in which we can meaningfully improve.”

And Mom runs screaming from the room. Can we coax her back? Just change the language:

“Hi Mom, We're doing everything we can to make your stay as comfortable as possible. Tell us if you need anything.”

Wage war on jargon. The hotel manager is the keeper of the jargon: training modules, overall guest experience, mechanisms to solicit. Jargon is code. It has its place - if everyone else knows the code. But if

the phrase looks and sounds unfamiliar to a reader or listener, it derails their enjoyment and understanding of the words. Your words have a simple task - and it's not trying to impress readers with their size and complexity.

I love a phrase I read from a writing coach: "Language should not be a secret society handshake." It's not a code to decipher.

We need to strip every sentence down to its barest bones. Every word that's not working hard for you is getting in the way.

So here's another tip.

Imagine you had to pay \$1 for every word you write. Pretty quickly you'd start to pinch pennies. In my workshops I challenge writers to go through their scripts and scratch out every word that's not earning its keep. They're surprised at how many words are not worth a dollar. And they're delighted at how much stronger the writing is when the worthless words are excised.

Here's what I mean. This is a sentence I took from a radio news report. Eighteen words.

"He said that the cut backs in the health care field had placed hospitals in a crisis situation."

Let's trim it, using the dollar-a-word test. At this stage we're not changing the sentence - just removing the flab:

"He said ~~that the~~ cut backs in ~~the~~ health care ~~field had~~ placed hospitals in a crisis situation."

We could even change 'cut backs' to 'cuts'. That allows us to claim another dollar. Our trimmed sentence reads:

"He said cuts in health care placed hospitals in crisis."

Ten words instead of 18 – an \$8 saving. You might not be able to excise 40% of all your words. But you will be surprised and delighted by how many can be dispatched without affecting meaning.

Sometimes you just need to stop and think - ‘what am I trying to say?’

My thanks again to the [Plain English Campaign](#) for this before-and-after example:

“If there are any points on which you require explanation or further particulars we shall be glad to furnish such additional details as may be required by telephone.”

Which in plain English is:

“If you have any questions, please phone.”

The best tool for a writer is the delete key. Cut, cut and cut again. Don’t settle for 18 words when you can say the same thing better in ten. We all overwrite. That’s what first drafts are for. The problems start when we accept a first draft as the finished product. The minute we fall in love with our words and sentences, we are in trouble.

If you are struggling to find a word to cut, look for ‘that’. You can almost always save a dollar at the expense of ‘that’, without hurting the sentence.

“Substitute ‘damn’ every time you're inclined to write ‘very’; your editor will delete it and the writing will be just as it should be.”

Mark Twain



The next few tips all continue the theme of strip out clutter.

Don’t send a bunch of words to do the work of one.

CBC radio reported:

“Felipe Gonzalez went down to defeat today in Spain’s general election.”

‘Went down to defeat’... what’s wrong with saying ‘lost’?

Why write ‘they had a meeting’ when you could simply say ‘they met’?

Watch out for parasite words.

These are words that creep out when you’re not looking, and attach themselves to other words:

Personal friend	We’re in trouble if we have impersonal friends...
Considered opinion	What other opinion would be worth sharing?
Face up	Adding ‘up’ to verbs like face, or meet, is unnecessary.

Replace big words with small words.

Implement	->	Do
Sufficient	->	Enough
Numerous	->	Many
Referred to as	->	Called
Assistance	->	Help

Why? Why is it so important to trim out words, and reduce the length of words? Because your readers are bombarded with offers and invitations and requests. (They’re just like you: think of the messages you’ve been subjected to already today... radio, newspapers, billboards, television, posters, web sites, email, flyers).

At one time you could assume your reader had an attention span of 30 seconds. That’s about 90 words.

Now it’s closer to 5 seconds, or 15 words. We decide very quickly whether we will watch a show, or listen to a song – or read your lovingly-crafted piece of writing. You want your readers to look at your message and go ‘wow’. Your message needs to hit home fast. You can’t afford to have any clutter.

Here’s another reason why you need to communicate simply and quickly. Thirty eight per cent of Nova Scotians, and more than 40 per cent of all Canadians, have prose literacy below level 3. In other words they are comfortable dealing only with simple, clear material involving uncomplicated instructions and tasks.

Most of what you write will have one objective - to make people think or act differently. They’re more likely to do that if the message is simple and clear.

“A writer, if he has something to say, usually finds that the simplest way of saying it is the best. It is the strongest and the most effective.”

Rudolf Flesch and AH Lass, [The Classic Guide to Better Writing](#)



Simplicity is central to any effective communication. Actor Christopher Plummer spoke to the Globe and Mail newspaper, about an extended run as Prospero in *The Tempest*. He was asked if he changed his performance over the course of several months. No, he replied, the performance didn’t change. But the delivery did: “You find yourself eliminating certain kinds of busy mannerisms that you might have had – and you get simpler and simpler and simpler in whatever you do.”

Simpler and simpler and simpler is a great ambition for any writer.

But we've been so busy spring cleaning, we're getting ahead of ourselves. Before we even get to stripping out the clutter, we have some serious planning to do.

Planning Tools

Figure out who you are, who you're talking to, what you want to say. What is the appropriate style for your writing? Formal or informal. scientific, or academic, or general.

How do you want to be perceived? How do you talk to clients? Try to capture that voice in your writing.

Generally, formal writing is considered old-fashioned, even in business. But some people don't like informal prose. They react better to a different style. Use language that's appropriate to the audience. Know your audience.

What does the audience want from you, or expect from you? Imagine YOU are the customer. What do you need before you decide to buy, or invest, or sign-up? How do you convince the skeptics your message is believable?

“Our friendly customer service staff are here to help.”

It's a message – but it needs help if it's to be convincing. What makes your customer service different? What makes it better?

Why are you writing? Figure out your purpose. Write it down in a short sentence:

“I'm writing this because I want to...”

Identifying your central purpose helps in the next stage, which is about focusing your ideas.

Focus

You need a sniper's rifle, not a shotgun.

Your writing needs to be aimed directly at its target. Blasting away in the hope of hitting the side of the barn isn't going to work. Focus your thoughts. You are allowed one big thought in any piece of writing.

Resist the temptation to say too much. The more you give, the less people get. Bill Clinton's election campaign in 1992 had a couple of obstacles to overcome. There were the rumours of extramarital affairs. And there was the fact that Clinton loved to talk about every issue under the sun.

In their book [Made to Stick](#), brothers Chip and Dan Heath look at how James Carville and other advisors got Clinton to focus on one key message – 'It's the economy, stupid.' The book recalls how the advisors convinced Clinton: "If you say three things, you don't say anything."

Whatever your topic – you know a lot. You know all the subtleties, the different perspectives. But when you come to write, you must prioritize.

We'll call it your focus – but we could borrow a label from movies and call it the controlling idea.

Get comfortable expressing your focus in a single, short sentence. Incorporate in that sentence a reply to the question 'so what?' Your audience is looking at your web page, or brochure, or newsletter and wondering 'what's in this for me?' Your focused thought must answer that question. Once again, we are putting ourselves in the shoes of the audience – the writing is mostly about them, not about you.

Think of your focused message as the string of a necklace. The gems strung on the necklace are beautiful – but without that simple thread that gives them shape, they're just beads rolling around the floor.

Structure

Your very expensive necklace depends on a thread worth a few cents. Without the structure provided by the thread, you have nothing.

It's the same with writing. The words may dance and sparkle. But without structure they ramble into incoherence.

At its simplest (and safest), structure can be chronological. You follow the time-line.

Or you might be writing about something held together not by time, but by concepts. In this case you might create a series of chapters, or building blocks. You could put each section on an index card or Post-It note, and move them around until you're happy with the order.

Generally, any piece of writing (any piece of communication) breaks down into four sections:

1. Hook
2. Context
3. Development
4. Conclusion

In our media-saturated, short attention-span world, we have to grab our audience. We have to hook 'em. A headline, an image, compelling words, a story – it doesn't matter what you use. But don't go fishing without bait on the hook.

Pretty soon the audience will want to know why this matters to them. You need to provide a little context - but not a whole history lesson.

The development is where you'll start to reel-in your catch. You'll provide convincing arguments to support your case or your claim: maybe testimonials, perhaps price comparisons.

The conclusion will include a compelling call to action.

Here's another way of thinking about structure. In the world of copywriters, a device called the Motivating Sequence was popularized by Robert Bly. His system has five elements:

1. Get attention
2. Identify problem/need
3. Offer solution/answer
4. Prove your solution/answer is best
5. Invite action

Working out focus and structure takes time. But it's an investment. It gives you a way of getting to grips with a daunting task. One of my favourite books on writing is [Bird by Bird: Some Instructions on Writing and Life](#). The author, Anne Lamott, explains the title:

“Thirty years ago my older brother, who was ten years old at the time, was trying to get a report on birds written that he'd had three months to write. (It) was due the next day. He was at the kitchen table close to tears, surrounded by binder paper and pencils and unopened books on birds, immobilized by the hugeness of the task ahead. Then my father sat down beside him, put his arm around my brother's shoulder, and said 'Bird by bird, buddy. Just take it bird by bird'.”



So you've figured out the focus. You've thought about a structure. Now it's time to get writing.

Tools to Add Impact to Any Writing

Don't bury the lead

For 25 years I worked in newsrooms. I worked in a tiny office where cigarette smoke condensed on the ceiling and dripped brown blotches onto our copy paper. And I worked in the smoke-free open-plan splendour of the BBC's international newsgathering operation. In every newsroom there's one simple rule: don't bury the lead.

In other words, don't be slow getting to the big news. Sometimes we called it 'backing in' to the story. Just recently I heard a writing coach bemoaning the fact that her students were 'shy about getting to the point'. She called it writing through the back door.

Your message must make a grand entrance through the front door. You don't have time to wander round to the back.

Get to the point.

Tell stories

Stories are how we make sense of the world. We use stories to learn useful stuff - like how to live and how to relate to others.

Yet sometimes we dismiss stories as 'kids' stuff', not worthy of being dispatched to carry home our important messages.

If we think like this, we miss a great opportunity. Any writing is made more memorable by the use of appropriate stories. In marketing copy, stories help by putting the customer in a 'that could be me' frame of mind.

A lot of what we read overflows with facts, figures and information. We're bombarded with data.

But before your audience can believe in your facts, they need to believe in you. Telling stories is a good way of helping your audience get to know you – the first step towards believing you. Stories don't have to be long. Just make sure the anecdote or story is simple, clear and relevant. (And won't alienate any group within your audience).

- Story is a good way of engaging the audience;
- Story is a good way of letting the audience know you can be trusted;
- Story gives structure to information and makes data memorable;
- Story is a good way of keeping the audience engaged;
- Story is a wonderful teaching tool;
- Story touches us in a way facts don't.

Parkinson's Disease is a fact. Actor Michael J. Fox's struggle with Parkinson's Disease is a story that drives medical research, agitates for political change, and has people reaching into wallets and purses to finance the search for a cure.

Anyone who achieves a personal or professional goal, but has to overcome difficulties to do it, has a story. Because at the heart of story is a character confronting difficulties to achieve something worthwhile.

Put a human face on your data. Convert your facts and figures into a story people will remember.

Facts tell - but stories sell.

Words need a work-out

Send your words to the gym. Make sure they're fit for the mission you are sending them on. You're looking for muscular words in strong sentences.

Let's start with the verbs. Hire the active ones. Fire most of the passive ones.

'Joe saw Jill' is active.

'Jill was seen by Joe' is passive.

Any time you see a verb construction using 'was' you need to consider a re-write. For example:

***I was held tight by him when we danced,
And I was accompanied by him to my home
And there was a great brightness from the stars
And then I was kissed by him***

would never get into Rolling Stone Magazine's 500 Greatest Songs of All Time. But The Crystals' version from 1963 did:

***When he danced he held me tight
And when he walked me home that night
All the stars were shining bright
And then he kissed me.***

Good popular music is a great place to refine your writing skills. Good songs convey the maximum meaning with the minimum words. Verbs are strong and there's no room for clutter. So if books on grammar don't turn your crank, put on some music or listen to poetry. And when you hear a neat phrase, steal it. How do you think those great song-writers and poets got to be so good?

Verbs are your writing muscle. Strong active verbs push the writing along. Weak passive constructions slow you down like a tired five year-old in a supermarket.

Don't settle for the first verb that pops into your mind. Take a few minutes to find the verb that energizes your writing.

“The difference between the right word and the almost right word is the difference between lightning and a lightning bug.”

Mark Twain



‘Joe walked in’ is active - but can we raise the stakes a little? How did Joe walk in? Did he:

- March
- Dart
- Dash
- Storm
- Sway
- Stagger
- Swagger
- Sashay
- Creep
- Crawl
- Careen
- Limp
- Lumber

Beefing up a verb can be much more effective than reaching for an adverb. Speaking of which,

Murder your adverbs and adjectives

Adverbs are expensive – and rarely worth the money.

- He smiled happily
- The radio blared loudly
- She clenched her teeth tightly
- Fire destroyed the house completely
- I was totally flabbergasted

If we find the right verb, we don’t need to dress it up. In each of these five sentences, the verb says it all. Anything else is redundant. A dollar wasted.

Adjectives have to go, too. They are unreliable. I could tell you ‘I’m a huge fan of music’ but it doesn’t tell you very much.

I would tell you more about my enthusiasm for music if I said ‘I have more than 9000 songs on my iPod. The big three artists are Bob Dylan, Elvis Costello and Van Morrison’.

Think about stories you see on television news. Just about every report of an earthquake presses into service the adjective ‘massive’. But we have no way of measuring massive – we just have a vague feeling it’s bigger than big but maybe not as big as enormous.

How do we give a sense of scale if we dump the adjective? Easy – we get specific. Instead of writing ‘There was a massive earthquake’, let’s use facts:

‘The earthquake killed 5000 people.’

Adjectives and adverbs huff and puff, but they don’t blow the house down.

“I believe the road to hell is paved with adverbs, and I will shout it from the rooftops. To put it another way, they’re like dandelions. If you have one on your lawn, it looks pretty and unique. If you fail to root it out, however, you find five the next day... fifty the day after that... and then, my brothers and sisters, your lawn is totally, completely, and profligately covered with dandelions. By then you see them for the weeds they really are. but by then it’s – GASP! – too late.”

Stephen King, [On Writing: A Memoir of the Craft](#)



For our next writing tip, we need to meet an eccentric American lawyer. Gerry Spence has a mane of white hair, and a wardrobe full of cowboy hats and buckskin jackets.

In his blog he claims he didn’t lose a criminal case in 55 years. His most famous legal battle was on behalf of the family of Karen Silkwood. Silkwood was the whistle-blower from an American plutonium plant

who died in a mysterious car crash in 1974. Spence won a \$10.5 million verdict for Silkwood’s family.

Spence drew on his winning ways in court to write a book, [How to Argue and Win Every Time](#).

He’s a champion of storytelling. He’s a champion of careful planning. And anyone who aspires to be a good writer can learn from another of Spence’s winning ways:

“When people explain things in the abstract, I grow weary. I say ‘give me an example. Show me how you do it. Show me a time-line of the events. Show me a picture of the broken leg. Tell me what it felt like. Make me see it. Make me feel it. Make me care’. If I can’t care, I can’t make anyone else care. Here’s the rule: stick with the action. Avoid the abstraction.”



So action beats abstraction. And specifics beat generalities.

Points about punctuation

Fall in love with the full stop. The more full stops you have, the greater the chance your writing will be energetic and clear.

Most writers don’t reach the period soon enough, according to writer, editor and teacher William Zinsser.

Get to the period quicker and your sentences will get stronger. Resist the temptation to bolt two thoughts together with a conjunction. One thought per sentence is plenty. When you feel tempted by a comma, hit the period key instead.

Scrutinize your longer sentences. Every time you see a comma or a colon, every time you see an ‘and’ or a ‘but’ or some other joining word holding two thoughts together – stop and think. Separate those

two or three or five thoughts into separate thoughts in separate sentences.

The payoff is more muscular sentences, easier to read and easier to comprehend.

Try to keep sentences to 20 words or less. Your readers will thank you.

“There is no minimum length for a sentence that’s acceptable in the eyes of God. Among good writers it is the short sentence that predominates, and don’t tell me about Normal Mailer - he’s a genius. If you want to write long sentences, be a genius. Or at least make sure that the sentence is under control from beginning to end, in syntax and punctuation, so that the reader knows where he is at every step of the winding trail.”



William Zinsser, [On Writing Well](#)

Keep paragraphs short, too. Writing is visual. It catches the eye before it catches the brain. White space is good. It’s inviting and appetizing.

Be strategic in the use of headlines, sub-heads, bold and underlined text, pictures and graphics.

Before we leave the topic of punctuation, a plea. Dump the exclamation point. Let your words do the work. The exclamation mark is like hitting your reader with a two by four... ‘didyageddit!’

Build in signposts to help the reader

Short sentences are great. They can sound choppy. Smooth the edges with transitions.

Er, let’s try that again:

Short sentences are great. But they can sound choppy. So it’s a good idea to smooth the edges with transitions.

When you are comfortable writing short sentences, make sure they flow comfortably. Use transitional words and phrases to help the reader navigate from thought to thought.

In a face to face conversation, a lot of additional meaning comes through body language. But in writing there is no body language. So it's vital to convey connections and changes of mood or sense with transitional words and phrases.

Your aim at all times must be to make life easy for readers. They're giving you their time to read your political argument or sales pitch. They deserve a helping hand through the tricky bits.

So signpost changes. A curve in the road should be signposted. So should a curve in your thoughts. There are lots of transitional words to help:

But, yet, still, however, now, today, later...

And, yes, it is OK to start a sentence with But.

Contractions help, too. This White Paper is littered with contractions. I did it deliberately, to enhance the informal style. But I reviewed each contraction to make sure the meaning was clear. If there was a risk of ambiguity, the phrase was written out in full.

Don't worry too much about the grammar police. Worry about getting your message out clearly more than about splitting an infinitive. Just make sure you don't risk your credibility by breaking any of the big rules.

A Few Big Rules

Editing and proofing

Remember, there's no such thing as good writing - only good rewriting (Louis D Brandeis). Others have expressed the same sentiment:

James Michener: "I have never thought of myself as a good writer. But I'm one of the world's best rewriters."

Roald Dahl: "Good writing is essentially rewriting."

Leo Tolstoy: "I can't understand how anyone can write without re-writing everything over and over again."

When it comes to reviewing and rewriting, once is never enough. Brevity and clarity are hard-won prizes. So when you have finished your writing, take the words for a spin. See how they feel and sound together.

Challenge every word. Is it working hard for you – or just coasting?

Check everything. Even the small print at the bottom of the pages – especially the small print.

Here's our best tip when it comes to proofing: print it out. Don't try to proof on a computer screen.

Print and proof. You have a much better chance of spotting errors on paper than you do on the screen.

Before you sign off on a piece of work, read it from the perspective of your target audience. Do you answer the question 'What's in it for me?' Do you write more about benefits than about features? Do you identify problems and offer convincing solutions?

Now revisit your original purpose for writing. Do you achieve what you intended?

Finally, check the call to action. Did you include it? (You'd be surprised how many people forget). Did you make it clear people need to act on your message – and act now?

Tips on Specific Writing Projects

Email

Hook the reader. In an email the hook is the subject line. So if you're one of the many people who send emails with empty subject lines - stop it. People who get hundreds of emails daily aren't going to invest time trying to help you. Your message needs to be clear in the subject line and the first line of text.

Get to the point. This is an extension of the previous point. Use short, uncluttered sentences to deliver relevant information quickly. Use paragraph breaks to force in white space and make it more readable. And keep the whole message short.

Use a salutation. Emails are informal, but courtesy requires a salutation. And check the spelling of the addressee's name. Is he a Philip or Phillip? A Steven or a Stephen? Is she a Jean or a Jeanne? Don't assume and don't guess.

Watch your language and tone. The tone of emails is often misunderstood. Without the body language or tone of voice to indicate the right interpretation, emails can be unintentionally hurtful. Language can be informal and conversation - but it should always be considered and appropriate to its purpose.

Don't embarrass people in group mailings. Don't boost your ego by spotting a mistake, correcting it and hitting 'reply all'. If it needs correcting, take it back to the perpetrator. Point it out in the way you would have wished to have it explained to you if the shoe was on the other foot.

Check your copy. Print and proof before hitting send. A chunk of our business community received an e-blast about a new advertising promotion.



It came from the advertising executives of a big agency - but they managed to misspell both advertising and executives in their graphics-rich e-blast.

Include a call to action. Before signing off, indicate clearly what you expect of the recipient. If you need a response, say so. Set a time frame.

Marketing Copy

Have a strong headline that talks about a benefit. Remember, your message needs to march in through the front door. You might consider a second headline that reinforces the first.

Establish the problem your service or product will fix. Identify the pain, including the cost associated with the problem.

Offer a solution, and show how your solution will help the client. Answer the ‘so what?’ question.

Provide proof of your claims. Other successes, testimonials, awards – this is no time to be shy.

Create a compelling call to action. Before you started writing, you should have figured out what action you wanted from your potential client. Ask them - clearly and confidently - to take that action.

Make the document attractive to the eye. If it's a brochure, use call out boxes, pictures, headlines and sub-heads to give the reader a rich experience. A lot of us scan now, rather than reading a mass of text. So make it easy for scanners to gather all the information they need.

News Releases

Journalists are suspicious of anything that looks like a bid for free advertising. So avoid hype and marketing slogans.

Write in a newsy style. Don't bury the lead. Get to the point in the first sentence. Establish what's new.

Write a compelling headline. Try to make it resonate with as large an audience as possible.

Write about people. Tell stories. Journalists thrive on the human angle, so help them see it in your story.

Talk boldly about obstacles overcome, pressures resisted, battles fought and won. Journalism revolves around conflict - beating bureaucracy, battling illness, beating the odds, winning a race, fighting injustice.

Offer strong quotes. Demonstrate you would be a good interviewee.

Don't forget the contact details – names, telephone numbers, alternate numbers, and after-hours numbers.

Proposals

Identify needs: what is the problem that needs to be overcome?

Offer solutions: without false modesty (and without hype) set out how you will fix the problems. Only promise what you can deliver.

Establish credibility: awards, testimonials from other customers, third-party endorsements - these might give you the competitive edge.

Present samples: show what you can do. Pictures of other projects. Evidence you can deliver on time.

Use appropriate language: bright and breezy probably won't fly with the IT department. A long recitation of dry facts may not work with advertising executives.

Quick Reminder of the Best Writing Tools

Have a **clear objective** in mind. Why are you writing?

What do you want to say? **Focus your ideas** into one big thought, and express it in one short sentence.

Hook your reader. It could be a dynamite headline, a strong first sentence, a tease, or an offer the reader can't resist. It's the subject line in your email. Don't bury the lead. Get to the point.

Identify the pain. Summarize the problem.

Present your solution, answer the 'so what?' question, and support your solution with quotes and testimonials.

Write as you speak. Use 'Hi Mom' to make sure no jargon or bafflegab is sneaking into your sentences. Keep it simple.

Keep it short. Short words. Short sentences. One thought per sentence.

Strip out clutter. Would you pay \$1 for every word? Eliminate every word that's not working hard for you.

Avoid adverbs and adjectives. Put your trust in muscular verbs.

Keep the sentences active. Make sure someone is doing something. Passive constructions sap the energy from your writing.

Tell stories. Stories make information memorable.

Specifics beat generalities; action beats abstraction.

Provide signposts to help the reader navigate around changes in thought or mood.

Make sure your ideas flow logically from one idea to the next. Plot the structure using Hook, Context, Development and Conclusion or Get Attention, Identify Problem, Offer Solution, Provide Proof, Invite Action.

Read everything over once, twice, three times. Print before proofing.

ABOUT NEIL EVERTON

[Neil Everton](#) has been writing professionally since a Saturday morning in the late 60s when he signed as a trainee reporter on a weekly newspaper in a coal mining town in England. He wrote the lead story in his first week. “The writing was clunky. But I got a big by-line, and I was hooked.” Since then he’s written for newspapers, radio, television and documentaries. He’s written four books. [Read Neil’s bio.](#)

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