

The guiding principle for the practical writer should be that common words should always be used unless more exact words are needed for definition. The reason for this is so plain that it is all but invisible. It is that if you use words that everybody knows, everybody can understand what you want to say.

A common touch with language has always distinguished great leaders. Winston Churchill comes immediately to mind; he "mobilized the English language and sent it into battle," as John F. Kennedy said. Churchill mobilized the language in more ways than in his inspiring speeches. As Prime Minister of Great Britain, he was that nation's chief administrator at a time when governmental efficiency was a matter of life and death for the democratic world. In August 1940, while the Battle of Britain was at its peak, Churchill took the time to write a memo about excess verbiage in interdepartmental correspondence. It read:

Let us have an end to such phrases as these: 'It is also of importance to bear in mind the following considerations...' or 'Consideration should be given to carrying into effect....' Most of these woolly phrases are mere padding, which can be left out altogether or replaced by a single word. Let us not shrink from the short expressive word even if it is conversational.

Churchill's own wartime letters and memos, reproduced in his memoirs, are models of effective English. It is interesting to speculate on how much his clarity of expression, and his insistence upon it in others, helped to win the war. He was, of course, a professional writer who had earned a living from his pen since he was in his early twenties. He was something of a literary genius. In the light of this, it may seem ridiculous to exhort modern white-collar workers to write like Winston Churchill. Nevertheless, the principles of writing which Churchill followed are not at all hard to grasp.

Churchill was an admirer of H. W. Fowler's *A Dictionary of English Usage*, to which he would direct his generals when he caught them mangling the language. Fowler set five criteria for good writing—that it be *direct, simple, brief, vigorous, and lucid*. Any writer who tries to live up to these is on the right track.

By keeping in mind two basic techniques you can go some way toward meeting Fowler's requirements:

**Prefer the active voice to the passive.** It will make your writing more direct and vigorous. It's a matter of putting the verb in your sentence up front so that it pulls along the rest of the words. In the active voice you would say, "The carpenter built the house;" in the passive, "The house was built by the carpenter." Though it is not always possible to do so in the context of a sentence, use the active whenever you can.

**Prefer the concrete to the abstract.** A concrete word stands for something tangible or particular; an abstract word is "separated from matter, practice, or particular example." Churchill used concrete terms: "We have not journeyed all this way, across the centuries, across the oceans, across the mountains, across the prairies, because we are made of sugar candy." If he had couched that in the abstract, he might have said, "We have not proved ourselves capable of traversing time spans and geographical phenomena due to a deficiency in fortitude." Again, there are times when abstractions are called for by the context because there are no better concrete words, but try not to use them unless you must.

Sticking to the concrete will tend to keep you clear of one of the great pitfalls of modern practical writing, the use of "buzz words." These are words and expressions that come into currency not because they mean anything in particular, but merely because they sound impressive. It is difficult to give examples of them because they have such short lives; the "buzz words" of today are the laughing stock of tomorrow. They are mostly abstract terms (ending, in English, in *-ion, -ance, -osity, -ive, -ize, -al, and -ate*) but they sometimes take the form of concrete words that have been sapped of their original meaning. The reason for giving them a wide berth is that their meaning is seldom clear.

Jargon presents a similar pitfall. It has its place as the in-house language of occupational groups, and that is where it should be kept. It, too, consists mostly of abstract words, and by keeping to the concrete you can shut out much of it. But jargon is contagious, so it should be consciously avoided. Never use a word of it unless you are certain that it means the same to your reader as it does to you.

The combination of the active and the concrete will help make your prose direct, simple, vigorous, and lucid. There is no special technique for making it brief; that is up to you.

The first step to conciseness is to scorn the notion that length is a measure of thoroughness. It isn't. Emulate Blaise Pascal, who wrote to a friend: "I have made this letter a little longer than usual because I lack the time to make it shorter."

Use your pen or pencil as a cutting tool. No piece of writing, no matter what its purpose or length, should leave your desk until you have examined it intensely with a view to taking the fat out of it. Strike out anything that does not add directly to your reader's understanding of the subject. While doing this, try to put yourself in his or her shoes.

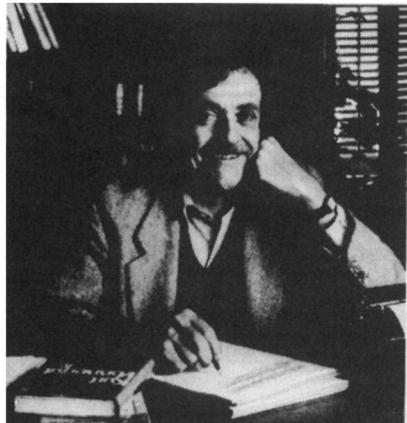
Be hard on yourself; writing is not called a discipline for nothing. It is tough, wearing, brain-racking work. But when you finally get it right, you have done a service to others. And, like Shakespeare's cook, you can lick your metaphorical fingers and feel that it was all worthwhile.

## Power of the Printed Word

*Abstract—Three advertisements from the International Paper Co. series "The Power of the Printed Word" are reproduced: Kurt Vonnegut on "How to Write with Style"; Edward Thompson on "How to Write Clearly"; and Malcolm Forbes on "How to Write a Business Letter." Guidelines and how-to advice are presented succinctly. Ed.*

# How to write with style

By Kurt Vonnegut



International Paper asked Kurt Vonnegut, author of such novels as "Slaughterhouse-Five," "Jailbird" and "Cat's Cradle," to tell you how to put your style and personality into everything you write.

Newspaper reporters and technical writers are trained to reveal almost nothing about themselves in their writings. This makes them freaks in the world of writers, since almost all of the other ink-stained wretches in that world reveal a lot about themselves to readers. We call these revelations, accidental and intentional, elements of style.

These revelations tell us as readers what sort of person it is with whom we are spending time. Does the writer sound ignorant or informed, stupid or bright, crooked or honest, humorless or playful — ? And on and on.

Why should you examine your writing style with the idea of improving it? Do so as a mark of respect for your readers, whatever you're writing. If you scribble your thoughts any which way, your readers will surely feel that you care nothing about them. They will mark you down as an egomaniac or a chowderhead — or, worse, they will stop reading you.

The most damning revelation you can make about yourself is that you do not know what is interesting and what is not. Don't you yourself like or dislike writers

mainly for what they choose to show you or make you think about? Did you ever admire an empty-headed writer for his or her mastery of the language? No.

So your own winning style must begin with ideas in your head.

## 1. Find a subject you care about

Find a subject you care about and which you in your heart feel others should care about. It is this genuine caring, and not your games with language, which will be the most compelling and seductive element in your style.

I am not urging you to write a novel, by the way — although I would not be sorry if you wrote one, provided you genuinely cared about something. A petition to the mayor about a pothole in front of your house or a love letter to the girl next door will do.

## 2. Do not ramble, though

I won't ramble on about that.

## 3. Keep it simple

As for your use of language: Remember that two great masters of language, William Shakespeare and James Joyce, wrote sentences which were almost childlike when their subjects were most profound. "To be or not to be?" asks Shakespeare's Hamlet.

The longest word is three letters long. Joyce, when he was frisky, could put together a sentence as intricate and as glittering as a necklace for Cleopatra, but my favorite sentence in his short story "Eveline" is this one: "She was tired." At that point in the story, no other words could break the heart of a reader as those three words do.

Simplicity of language is not only reputable, but perhaps even sacred. The *Bible* opens with a sentence well within the writing skills of a lively fourteen-year-old: "In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth."

## 4. Have the guts to cut

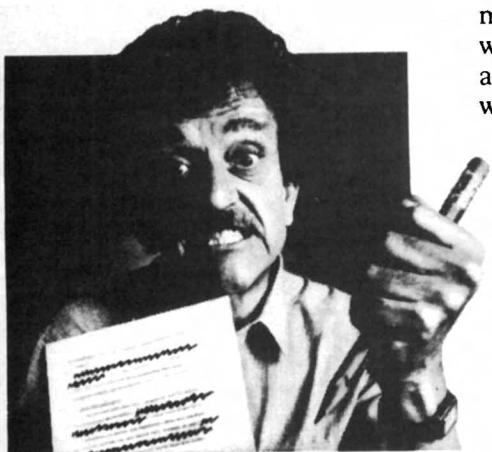
It may be that you, too, are capable of making necklaces for Cleopatra, so to speak. But your eloquence should be the servant of the ideas in your head. Your rule might be this: If a sentence, no matter how excellent, does not illuminate your subject in some new and useful way, scratch it out.

## 5. Sound like yourself

The writing style which is most natural for you is bound to echo the speech you heard when a child. English was the novelist Joseph Conrad's third language, and much that seems piquant in his use of English was no doubt colored by his first language, which was Polish. And lucky indeed is the writer who has grown up in Ireland, for the English spoken there is so amusing and musical. I myself grew up in Indianapolis, where common speech sounds like a band saw cutting galvanized tin,



"Keep it simple. Shakespeare did, with Hamlet's famous soliloquy."



"Be merciless on yourself. If a sentence does not illuminate your subject in some new and useful way, scratch it out."

and employs a vocabulary as unornamental as a monkey wrench.

In some of the more remote hollows of Appalachia, children still grow up hearing songs and locutions of Elizabethan times. Yes, and many Americans grow up hearing a language other than English, or an English dialect a majority of Americans cannot understand.

All these varieties of speech are beautiful, just as the varieties of butterflies are beautiful. No matter what your first language, you should treasure it all your life. If it happens not to be standard English, and if it shows itself when you write standard English, the result is usually delightful, like a very pretty girl with one eye that is green and one that is blue.

I myself find that I trust my own writing most, and others seem to trust it most, too, when I sound most like a person from Indianapolis, which is what I am. What alternatives do I have? The one most vehemently recommended by teachers has no doubt been pressed on you, as well: to write like cultivated Englishmen of a century or more ago.

#### 6. Say what you mean to say

I used to be exasperated by such teachers, but am no more. I understand now that all those antique essays and stories with which I was to compare my own work were not magnificent for their datedness or foreignness, but for saying precisely what their authors

meant them to say. My teachers wished me to write accurately, always selecting the most effective words, and relating the words to one another unambiguously, rigidly, like parts of a machine. The teachers did not want to turn me into an Englishman after all. They hoped that I would become understandable – and therefore understood. And there went my dream of doing with words what Pablo Picasso did with paint or what any number of jazz idols did with music. If I broke all the rules of punctuation, had words mean whatever I wanted them to mean, and strung them together higgledy-piggledy, I would simply not be understood. So you, too, had better avoid Picasso-style or jazz-style writing, if you have something worth saying and wish to be understood.

Readers want our pages to look very much like pages they have seen before. Why? This is because they themselves have a tough job to do, and they need all the help they can get from us.

#### 7. Pity the readers

They have to identify thousands of little marks on paper, and make sense of them immediately. They have to *read*, an art so difficult that most people don't really master it even after having studied it all through grade school and high school – twelve long years.



"Pick a subject you care so deeply about that you'd speak on a soapbox about it."

So this discussion must finally acknowledge that our stylistic options as writers are neither numerous nor glamorous, since our readers are bound to be such imperfect artists. Our audience requires us to be sympathetic and patient teachers, ever willing to simplify and clarify – whereas we would rather soar high above the crowd, singing like nightingales.

That is the bad news. The good news is that we Americans are governed under a unique Constitution, which allows us to write whatever we please without fear of punishment. So the most meaningful aspect of our styles, which is what we choose to write about, is utterly unlimited.

#### 8. For really detailed advice

For a discussion of literary style in a narrower sense, in a more technical sense, I commend to your attention *The Elements of Style*, by William Strunk, Jr., and E.B. White (Macmillan, 1979).

E.B. White is, of course, one of the most admirable literary stylists this country has so far produced.

You should realize, too, that no one would care how well or badly Mr. White expressed himself, if he did not have perfectly enchanting things to say.

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# How to write clearly

**By Edward T. Thompson**

Editor-in-Chief, Reader's Digest



International Paper asked Edward T. Thompson to share some of what he has learned in nineteen years with Reader's Digest, a magazine famous for making complicated subjects understandable to millions of readers.

If you are afraid to write, don't be.

If you think you've got to string together big fancy words and high-flying phrases, forget it.

To write well, unless you aspire to be a professional poet or novelist, you only need to get your ideas across simply and clearly.

It's not easy. But it is easier than you might imagine.

There are only three basic requirements:

First, you must want to write clearly. And I believe you really do, if you've stayed this far with me.

Second, you must be willing to work hard. Thinking means work—and that's what it takes to do anything well.

Third, you must know and follow some basic guidelines.

If, while you're writing for clarity, some lovely, dramatic or inspired phrases or sentences come to you, fine. Put them in.

But then with cold, objective eyes and mind ask yourself: "Do they detract from clarity?" If they do, grit your teeth and cut the frills.

## Follow some basic guidelines

I can't give you a complete list of

"dos and don'ts" for every writing problem you'll ever face.

But I can give you some fundamental guidelines that cover the most common problems.

### 1. Outline what you want to say.

I know that sounds grade-schoolish. But you can't write clearly until, before you start, you know where you will stop.

Ironically, that's even a problem in writing an outline (i.e., knowing the ending before you begin).

So try this method:

- On 3"x5" cards, write—one point to a card—all the points you need to make.
- Divide the cards into piles—one pile for each group of points closely related to each other. (If you were describing an automobile, you'd put all the points about mileage in one pile, all the points about safety in another, and so on.)
- Arrange your piles of points in a sequence. Which are most important and should be given first or saved for last? Which must you present before others in order to make the others understandable?
- Now, within each pile, do the same thing—arrange the points in logical, understandable order.

There you have your outline, needing only an introduction and conclusion.

This is a practical way to outline. It's also flexible. You can add, delete or change the location of points easily.

### 2. Start where your readers are.

How much do they know about the subject? Don't write to a level higher than your readers' knowledge of it.

CAUTION: Forget that old—and wrong—advice about writing to a 12-year-old mentality. That's insulting. But do

remember that your prime purpose is to explain something, not prove that you're smarter than your readers.

### 3. Avoid jargon.

Don't use words, expressions, phrases known only to people with specific knowledge or interests.

Example: A scientist, using scientific jargon, wrote, "The biota exhibited a one hundred percent mortality response." He could have written: "All the fish died."

### 4. Use familiar combinations of words.

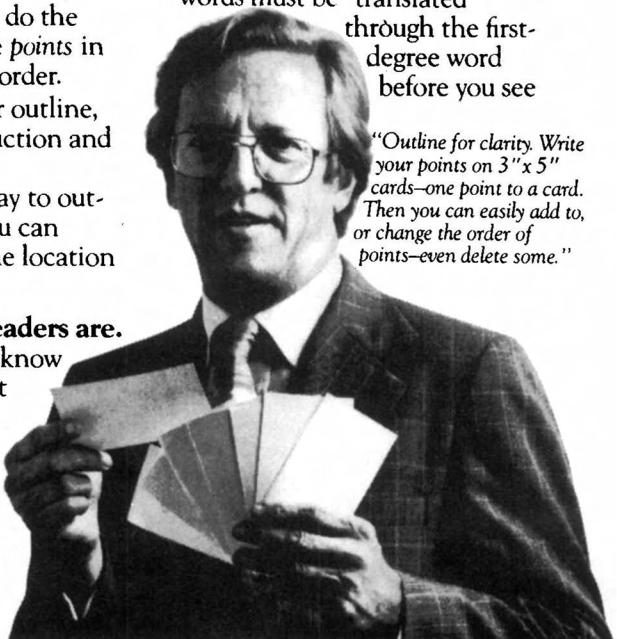
A speech writer for President Franklin D. Roosevelt wrote, "We are endeavoring to construct a more inclusive society." F.D.R. changed it to, "We're going to make a country in which no one is left out."

CAUTION: By familiar combinations of words, I do not mean incorrect grammar. That can be unclear. Example: John's father says he can't go out Friday. (Who can't go out? John or his father?)

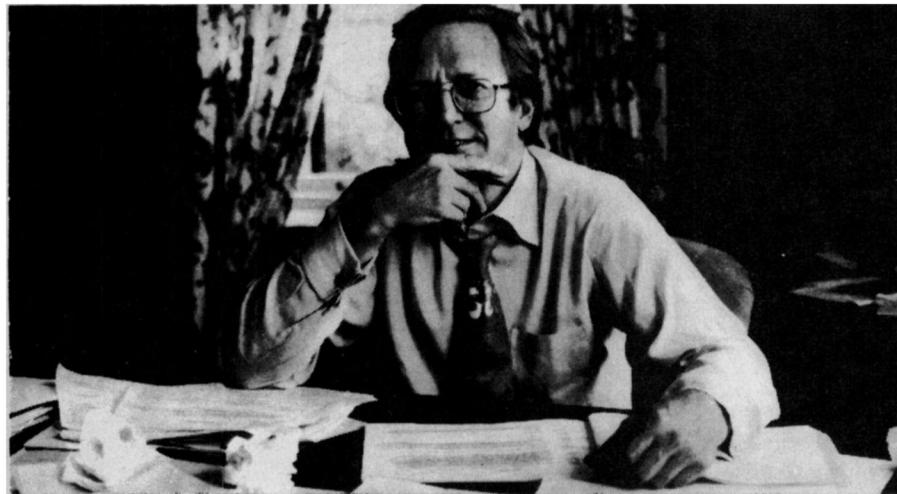
### 5. Use "first-degree" words.

These words immediately bring an image to your mind. Other words must be "translated"

through the first-degree word before you see



"Outline for clarity. Write your points on 3"x5" cards—one point to a card. Then you can easily add to, or change the order of points—even delete some."



"Grit your teeth and cut the frills. That's one of the suggestions I offer here to help you write clearly. They cover the most common problems. And they're all easy to follow."

the image. Those are second/third-degree words.

First-degree words	Second/third-degree words
face	visage, countenance
stay	abide, remain, reside
book	volume, tome, publication

First-degree words are usually the most precise words, too.

## 6. Stick to the point.

Your outline—which was more work in the beginning—now saves you work. Because now you can ask about any sentence you write: "Does it relate to a point in the outline? If it doesn't, should I add it to the outline? If not, I'm getting off the track." Then, full steam ahead—on the main line.

## 7. Be as brief as possible.

Whatever you write, shortening—condensing—almost always makes it tighter, straighter, easier to read and understand.

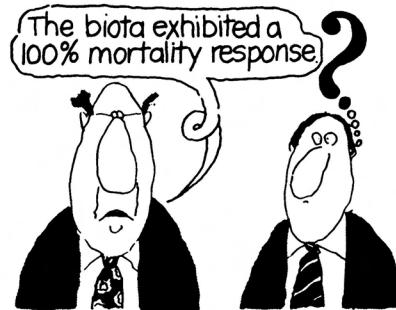
Condensing, as Reader's Digest does it, is in large part artistry. But it involves techniques that anyone can learn and use.

- *Present your points in logical ABC order:* Here again, your outline should save you work because, if you did it right, your points already stand in logical ABC order—A makes B understandable, B makes C understandable and so on. To write in a straight line is to say something clearly in the fewest possible words.

- *Don't waste words telling people what they already know:* Notice how we edited this: "Have you ever

wondered how banks rate you as a credit risk? You know, of course, that it's some combination of facts about your income, your job, and so on. But actually, many banks have a scoring system...."

- *Cut out excess evidence and unnecessary anecdotes:* Usually, one fact or example (at most, two) will support a point. More just belabor it. And while writing about some-



Writing clearly means avoiding jargon. Why didn't he just say: "All the fish died!"

thing may remind you of a good story, ask yourself: "Does it really help to tell the story, or does it slow me down?"

(Many people think Reader's Digest articles are filled with anecdotes. Actually, we use them sparingly and usually for one of two reasons: either the subject is so dry it needs some "humanity" to give it life; or the subject is so hard to grasp, it needs anecdotes to help readers understand. If the subject is both lively and easy to grasp, we move right along.)

- Look for the most common word wasters: windy phrases.

Windy phrases	Cut to...
at the present time	now
in the event of	if
in the majority of instances	usually

- Look for passive verbs you can make active: Invariably, this produces a shorter sentence. "The cherry tree was chopped down by George Washington." (Passive verb and nine words.) "George Washington chopped down the cherry tree." (Active verb and seven words.)

- Look for positive/negative sections from which you can cut the negative: See how we did it here: "The answer does not rest with carelessness or incompetence. It lies largely in having enough people to do the job."

- Finally, to write more clearly by saying it in fewer words: when you've finished, stop.

*Edward T. Thompson*

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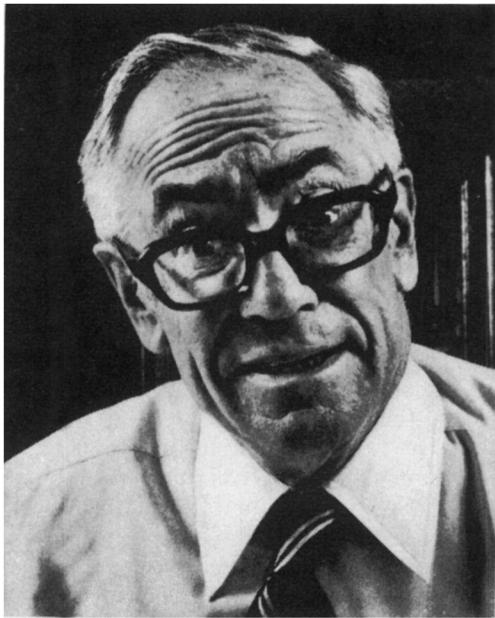
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# How to write a business letter

## Some thoughts from Malcolm Forbes

President and Editor-in-Chief of *Forbes Magazine*



*International Paper asked Malcolm Forbes to share some things he's learned about writing a good business letter. One rule, "Be crystal clear."*

A good business letter can get you a job interview.

Get you off the hook.

Or get you money.

It's totally asinine to blow your chances of getting whatever you want—with a business letter that turns people off instead of turning them on.

The best place to learn to write is in school. If you're still there, pick your teachers' brains.

If not, big deal. I learned to ride a motorcycle at 50 and fly balloons at 52. It's never too late to learn.

Over 10,000 business letters come across my desk every year. They seem to fall into three categories: stultifying if not stupid, mundane (most of them), and first rate (rare). Here's the approach

I've found that separates the winners from the losers (most of it's just good common sense)—it starts before you write your letter:

### Know what you want

If you don't, write it down—in one sentence. "I want to get an interview within the next two weeks." That simple. List the major points you want to get across—it'll keep you on course.

If you're answering a letter, check the points that need answering and keep the letter in front of you while you write. This way you won't forget anything—that would cause another round of letters.

And for goodness' sake, answer promptly if you're going to answer at all. Don't sit on a letter—that invites the person on the other end to sit on whatever you want from him.

### Plunge right in

Call him by name—not "Dear Sir, Madam, or Ms." "Dear Mr. Chrisanthopoulos"—and be sure to spell it right. That'll get him (thus, you) off to a good start.

(Usually, you can get his name just by phoning his company—or from a business directory in your nearest library.)

Tell what your letter is about in the first paragraph. One or two sentences. Don't keep your reader guessing or he might file your letter away—even before he finishes it.

In the round file.

If you're answering a letter, refer to the date

it was written. So the reader won't waste time hunting for it.

People who read business letters are as human as thee and me. Reading a letter shouldn't be a chore—reward the reader for the time he gives you.

### Write so he'll enjoy it

Write the entire letter from his point of view—what's in it for him? Beat him to the draw—surprise him by answering the questions and objections he might have.

Be positive—he'll be more receptive to what you have to say.

Be nice. Contrary to the cliché, genuinely nice guys most often finish first or very near it. I admit it's not easy when you've got a gripe. To be agreeable while disagreeing—that's an art.

Be natural—write the way you talk. Imagine him sitting in front of you—what would you say to him?

Business jargon too often is cold, stiff, unnatural.

Suppose I came up to you and said, "I acknowledge receipt of your letter and I beg to thank you." You'd think, "Huh? You're putting me on."

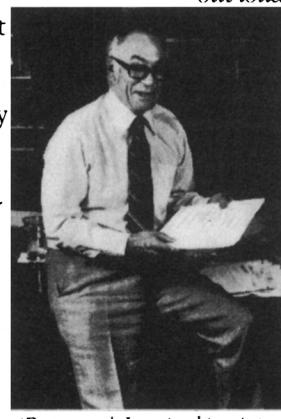
The acid test—read your letter out loud when you're done. You

might get a shock—but you'll know for sure if it sounds natural.

Don't be cute or flippant. The reader won't take you seriously. This doesn't mean you've got to be dull. You prefer your letter to knock 'em dead rather than bore 'em to death.

Three points to remember:

Have a sense of humor. That's refreshing anywhere—a nice surprise



"Be natural. Imagine him sitting in front of you—what would you say to him?"

in a business letter.

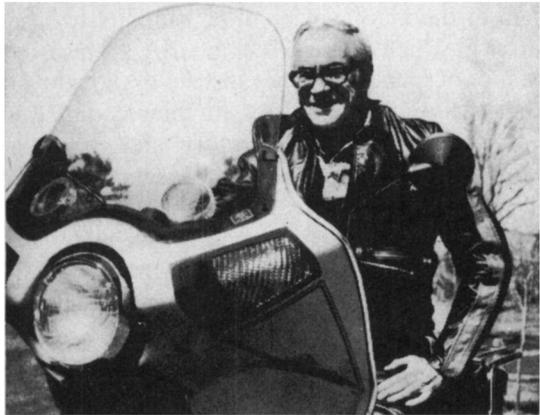
Be specific. If I tell you there's a new fuel that could save gasoline, you might not believe me. But suppose I tell you this:

"Gasohol"—10% alcohol, 90% gasoline—works as well as straight gasoline. Since you can make alcohol from grain or corn stalks, wood or wood waste, coal—even garbage, it's worth some real follow-through.

Now you've got something to sink your teeth into.

Lean heavier on nouns and verbs, lighter on adjectives. Use the active voice instead of the passive. Your writing will have more guts.

Which of these is stronger? Active voice: "I kicked out my money manager." Or, passive voice: "My money manager was kicked out by me." (By the way, neither is true. My son, Malcolm Jr., manages most Forbes money—he's a brilliant moneymen.)



"I learned to ride a motorcycle at 50 and fly balloons at 52. It's never too late to learn anything."

### Give it the best you've got

When you don't want something enough to make the effort, making an effort is a waste.

Make your letter look appetizing—or you'll strike out before you even get to bat. Type it—on good-quality 8½" x 11" stationery. Keep it neat. And use paragraphing that makes it easier to read.

Keep your letter short—to one page, if possible. Keep your paragraphs short. After all, who's going to benefit if your letter is quick and easy to read?

You.

For emphasis, underline impor-

tant words. And sometimes indent sentences as well as paragraphs.

Like this. See how well it works? (But save it for something special.)

Make it perfect. No typos, no misspellings, no factual errors. If you're sloppy and let mistakes slip by, the person reading your letter will think you don't know better or don't care. Do you?

Be crystal clear. You won't get what you're after if your reader doesn't get the message.

Use good English. If you're still in school, take all the English and writing courses you can. The way you write and speak can really help—or hurt.

If you're not in school (even if you are), get the little 71-page gem by Strunk & White, *Elements of Style*. It's in paperback. It's fun to read and loaded with tips on good English and good writing.

### Don't put on airs.

Pretense invariably impresses only the pretender.

Don't exaggerate. Even once. Your reader will suspect everything else you write.

Distinguish opinions from facts. Your opinions may be the best in the world. But they're not gospel. You owe it to your reader to let him know which is which. He'll appreciate it and he'll admire you. The dumbest people I know are those who Know It All.

Be honest. It'll get you further in the long run. If you're not, you won't rest easy until you're

found out. (The latter, not speaking from experience.)

Edit ruthlessly. Somebody has said that words are a lot like inflated money—the more of them that you use, the less each one of them is worth. Right on. Go through your entire letter just as many times as it takes. Search out and Annihilate all unnecessary words, and sentences—even entire paragraphs.



"Don't exaggerate. Even once. Your reader will suspect everything else you write."

### Sum it up and get out

The last paragraph should tell the reader exactly what you want him to do—or what you're going to do. Short and sweet. "May I have an appointment? Next Monday, the 16th, I'll call your secretary to see when it'll be most convenient for you."

Close with something simple like, "Sincerely." And for heaven's sake sign legibly. The biggest ego trip I know is a completely illegible signature.

Good luck.

I hope you get what you're after.  
Sincerely,

*Malcolm L. Forbes*

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