

Home
Essays
H&P
Books
YC
Arc
Bel
Lisp
Spam
Responses
FAQs
RAQs
Quotes
RSS
Bio
Twitter
Mastodon

PAUL GRAHAM

WRITE LIKE YOU TALK

October 2015

Here's a simple trick for getting more people to read what you write: write in spoken language.

Something comes over most people when they start writing. They write in a different language than they'd use if they were talking to a friend. The sentence structure and even the words are different. No one uses "pen" as a verb in spoken English. You'd feel like an idiot using "pen" instead of "write" in a conversation with a friend.

The last straw for me was a sentence I read a couple days ago:

The mercurial Spaniard himself declared: "After Altamira, all is decadence."

It's from Neil Oliver's *A History of Ancient Britain*. I feel bad making an example of this book, because it's no worse than lots of others. But just imagine calling Picasso "the mercurial Spaniard" when talking to a friend. Even one sentence of this would raise eyebrows in conversation. And yet people write whole books of it.

Ok, so written and spoken language are different. Does that make written language worse?

If you want people to read and understand what you write, yes. Written language is more complex, which makes it more work to read. It's also more formal and distant, which gives the reader's attention permission to drift. But perhaps worst of all, the complex sentences and fancy words give you, the writer, the false impression that you're saying more than you actually are.

You don't need complex sentences to express complex ideas. When specialists in some abstruse topic talk to one another about ideas in their field, they don't use sentences any more complex than they do when talking about what to have for lunch. They use different words, certainly. But even those they use no more than necessary. And in my experience, the harder the subject, the more informally experts speak. Partly, I think, because they have less to prove, and partly because the harder the ideas you're talking about, the less you can afford to let language get in the way.

Informal language is the athletic clothing of ideas.

I'm not saying spoken language always works best. Poetry is as much music as text, so you can say things you wouldn't say in conversation. And there are a handful of writers who can get away with using fancy language in prose. And then of course there are cases where writers don't want to make it easy to understand what they're saying—in corporate announcements of bad news, for example, or at the more [bogus](#) end of the humanities. But for nearly everyone else, spoken language is



better.

It seems to be hard for most people to write in spoken language. So perhaps the best solution is to write your first draft the way you usually would, then afterward look at each sentence and ask "Is this the way I'd say this if I were talking to a friend?" If it isn't, imagine what you would say, and use that instead. After a while this filter will start to operate as you write. When you write something you wouldn't say, you'll hear the clank as it hits the page.

Before I publish a new essay, I read it out loud and fix everything that doesn't sound like conversation. I even fix bits that are phonetically awkward; I don't know if that's necessary, but it doesn't cost much.

This trick may not always be enough. I've seen writing so far removed from spoken language that it couldn't be fixed sentence by sentence. For cases like that there's a more drastic solution. After writing the first draft, try explaining to a friend what you just wrote. Then replace the draft with what you said to your friend.

People often tell me how much my essays sound like me talking. The fact that this seems worthy of comment shows how rarely people manage to write in spoken language. Otherwise everyone's writing would sound like them talking.

If you simply manage to write in spoken language, you'll be ahead of 95% of writers. And it's so easy to do: just don't let a sentence through unless it's the way you'd say it to a friend.

Thanks to Patrick Collison and Jessica Livingston for reading drafts of this.

▪ [Japanese Translation](#)

▪ [Arabic Translation](#)