

Overview: On Writing Well

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Writing clearly and effectively



The problem of clutter

Modern writing is often bloated with extra words and convoluted phrasing

Business, academic, and government language tends to use jargon and wordy euphemisms

This clutter obscures meaning and loses readers' attention

Striving for simplicity

Eliminate any words
that are not doing
useful work

Short words are often
better than long words
with the same meaning

Break down complex
sentences into shorter,
clearer components

Use active voice and
avoid unnecessary
qualifiers and intricacy

Simplicity takes work—
writing clearly requires
revision and refinement

Be yourself

Stripping away clutter helps the writer's natural voice emerge

Don't strain for an artificial elevated "style"

Write in first-person if it feels comfortable

Relax and don't be afraid to express yourself

Serve the reader

Clear writing shows respect and consideration for the reader's time

Don't require extra work deciphering tangled prose

Guide the reader smoothly through your thought process



**Language and
word choices**

Choosing the right words

Avoid generic, overused phrasings ("journalese")

Seek out fresh and specific words that convey your meaning precisely

Use a dictionary and thesaurus to expand your vocabulary

Be attentive to connotations, shades of meaning, and levels of formality

The sound of words

Writing is meant to be heard as well as read

Vary sentence length to create flow; use short sentences for emphasis

Alliteration, assonance, consonance, and other sound devices add musicality

Choose words not just for meaning but for their sound and feel

Developing your ear

Read your writing aloud

Study writers who write
melodiously (e.g., E.B. White)

Mimic great writers initially

Your own style will emerge as
you refine your ear

Care about language

Appreciate words for their richness and subtlety

Don't settle for the first word that comes to mind

Relish the search for the perfect word

Mastering language brings phrases to life and captivates readers

Understanding usage



The evolution of usage

Usage changes over time

Spoken language influences written language

Editors and usage panels reflect change rather than dictate rules

Determining good usage

Look for words and phrases
that fill a real need

Guard against sloppiness
and grammatical anarchy

Consider context

Usage authorities often
disagree on what is
acceptable

Cultivating your own taste

Study trusted guides and styles you admire

Know when to follow conventions and when to break rules

Respect words and use them precisely

Decide what feels comfortable to you while meeting reader needs

The spoken vs. written word

Informal spoken usage may gain wider acceptance over time

Certain expressions are appropriate in speech but not formal writing

Speech can inform writing

Listen to how people speak; it will strengthen your ear and word choice



**Balancing tradition
and innovation**

The gray area of usage

Rules and guidelines, not
definitive statutes

Debates over newly coined
words and phrases

Usage authorities differ on
what is acceptable

Spoken vs. written language

Evaluating new terms

Look for words that fill a real need

Reject terms that are imprecise or already have good equivalents

Consider appropriateness for context

Grammar vs. vocabulary

Be more liberal in accepting new words and terms

Be more conservative with grammar and syntax

Spoken idioms may loosen formal grammatical conventions over time

Guiding principles

Does the usage contribute to clear expression or muddy it?

Does it serve the purposes of the writing and the reader?

Does it fit the context?

Does it reflect the writer's true voice?

Prescription vs. description

Dictionaries describe how language is used rather than prescribe rules

A living language resists fixed statutes

Usage authorities suggest, but the writer decides

Break rules deliberately when it serves the writing

Now you try...

