

Tuning up Your Sentences

10

Now, let's work on writing the paragraphs, sentences, and words of your web content.

As part of your content strategy, you must decide on the tone, voice, and style for your web messages, always remembering the key message of this book: content = conversation.

Writing conversationally is not “dumbing down”

Language changes over time. It always has. Our expectations of appropriate style also change over time. They always have.

Over the past century, the style for communicating useful information has become much less formal. And that trend has accelerated greatly with the Internet and social media.

Writing conversationally in plain language with short sentences and short words is not dumbing down. It's communicating clearly. **It's respecting your busy site visitors' time.**

Write so that busy people understand what you are saying the first time they read it.

As you write:

- Picture the people you are talking with. Which persona(s) are you conversing with?

Lists and tables – other good ways to tune up your sentences – next chapter

Keep photos and short descriptions of your personas with you as you write. Let them join your family on your desk, your corkboard, or a corner of your screen.

- Get into a conversation with those personas. If you were on the phone (speaking or texting), what would they ask you about this topic?
- Reply to them as if you were speaking or texting with them.

Ten guidelines for tuning up your sentences

1. Talk *to* your site visitors – use “you.”
2. Use “I” and “we.”
3. Write in the active voice (most of the time).
4. Write short, simple sentences.
5. Cut unnecessary words.
6. Give extra information its own place.
7. Keep paragraphs short.
8. Start with the context.
9. Put the action in the verb.
10. Use your site visitors’ words.

1. Talk *to* your site visitors – Use “you”

Converse. Make the information inviting and personal by addressing your site visitors directly, as [Etsy.com](#) does in Figure 10-1.

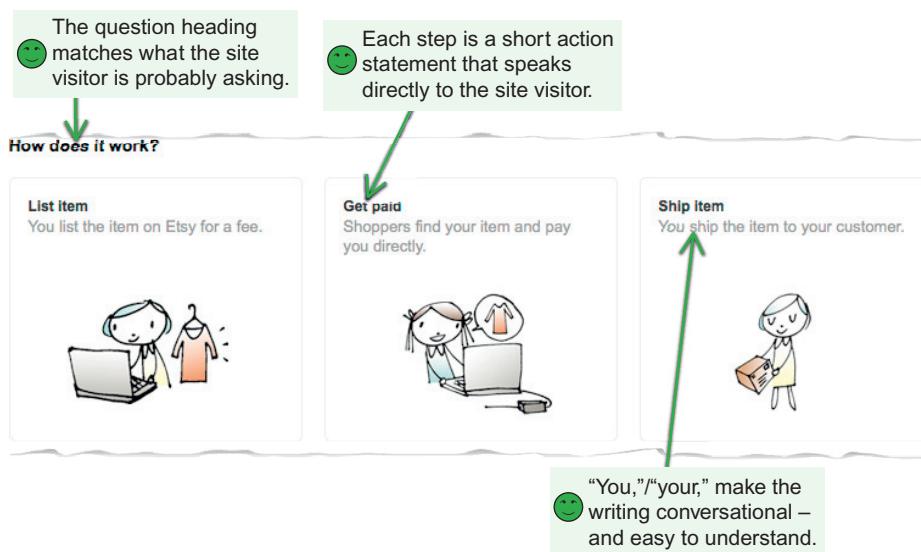


Figure 10-1 [Etsy.com](#) wants to attract artisans to sell their craft pieces through the site. The friendly writing and pictures make the site inviting.

Use the imperative in instructions

If you are giving hints or tips or instructions, use the imperative (List, Get, Ship from the example in [Figure 10-1](#)). That's a “you” form without stating “you.” When you write with imperatives you are talking directly to your site visitor. You are conversing. [Figure 10-2](#) shows a list of imperatives in tips about finding the right house to buy.

Some good house-hunting tips

- Take pictures inside and outside the home.
- Bring a spouse, family member, or friend.
- Make sure the house fits into your budget.
- Ask about utility and maintenance costs.
- Think of commuting time and costs.

Imperative=personal,
friendly, conversational=
call to action.

The line (rule) would be
better over the heading,
rather than under it.

Figure 10-2 These tips are easy to scan, read, and remember because they each start with a short, plain, imperative verb.

www.freddiemac.com

Use “you” throughout

If you can address your site visitors directly, do so – and do so throughout the content that is meant for them.

In Case Study 10-1, the writer talks directly to the site visitor with the imperative verb “ask” but never uses the pronoun “you.” Why not? If the writer talked to “you,” the doctor, the content would be both more understandable and more engaging.

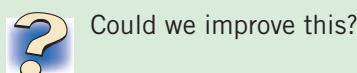
Case Study 10-1

Addressing the reader directly

Consider this excerpt. It's for doctors who are considering moving to a different state where they will have to get a new state license to practice medicine. It's the first few sentences of a web paragraph that goes on for more than 200 words.

When contacting a licensing board for the first time, ask for a copy of its current licensing requirements and the average time it takes to process applications. This will provide the physician with a solid idea of when to consider closing an existing practice and/or plan a move as well as with information about the potential problem areas to be addressed in completing an application. While initial

www.ama-assn.org



I think so.

Consider the situation

Let's start with our three planning questions:

- What does the writer want to achieve?
 - Help doctors relocate.
- Who is the primary persona? With whom is the writer conversing?
 - Medical doctor – very smart, knows a lot, but also is very busy, dealing with many things related to the move, doesn't want to spend a lot of time reading about this topic.
- What's the conversation? What does the doctor want to know?

The family has decided to move.
I know it will be a hassle – closing
this office, opening a new one,
getting a new license. And I'm still
so busy here. Can you help me plan
to move my medical practice?



Critique the original

The advice starts with an implied task. It doesn't tell the reader to do the task.

"Ask" is an imperative verb. It addresses the reader directly.

When contacting a licensing board for the first time, ask for a copy of its current licensing requirements and the average time it takes to process applications. This will provide the physician with a solid idea of when to consider closing an existing practice and/or plan a move as well as with information about the potential problem areas to be addressed in completing an application. While initial

The "physician" is the person the writer is talking to. The writer has already spoken directly to the physician with the imperative "ask." Why not continue to speak directly to the physician with "you?"

The first sentence mentions two points:

- requirements
- time

The second sentence explains why the two points are important, but it gives the rationale for time before the rationale for requirements.

Revise

Start with an imperative, rather than just implying the action "contact."

Talk directly to the doctor. Use "you."

Separate contacting from asking. Give each action its own sentence.

Contact the licensing board where you want to practice. Ask for

- a copy of its current licensing requirements, and
- the average time it takes to process applications.

Use a bulleted list, even for two items like this.

Divide the information into two shorter paragraphs.

Reading the requirements will help you understand any potential problems you may have in applying. Finding out about the processing time will help you plan when to close your current practice or when to move.

Break the original second sentence into two short sentences. Put them in the same order as the two bulleted items.

Give each reason its own sentence. The average sentence length drops from 33 to 16 words.

I've applied several other guidelines in addition to using "you." They all help make the information much easier for busy doctors to grasp quickly. When you write well, you apply lots of guidelines at the same time.

Use "you" to be gender-neutral

In English, the third-person singular pronouns (he, she, him, her, his, hers) are gender-specific. When you use these pronouns, some site visitors will think that you mean only people of that gender. To avoid even the perception of being exclusionary, avoid gender-specific writing when you are writing about or to both men and women.

Figure 10-3 is a paragraph from the current version of an example that I used in the first edition. The topic is mailing a package of food from Australia to the United States. In some cases, the sender has to tell the U.S. Food and Drug Administration about the package before mailing it.

The writers for the Australian Post Office have made some of the changes I recommended in the first edition of *Letting Go of the Words*, but not others. And now a key sentence has a gender-specific pronoun where it should not. We could easily avoid the gender-specific pronoun by talking directly to people, as I do in **Figure 10-4**.

Articles of food which are non-commercially prepared by an individual in his own residence and sent to another individual as a (non-commercial) gift are exempt from submission of this prior notice.

Has the writer created a legal problem? How should Grandma Sheila interpret this sentence?

Figure 10-3 The pronoun "his" is not appropriate in this sentence.

www.auspost.com.au

If you prepare the food in your own house (as personal items, not for sale) and send that food to another person as a not-for-sale gift, you do not have to fill out the "prior notice" form.

“You” makes the sentence apply to everyone.

Figure 10-4 My suggested revision

If you use a noun like “employee” or “customer,” you may have a problem referring to that person later in the sentence or paragraph. Workarounds like combining the two genders into “s/he” or “he or she” are awkward. The blue box, “More on gender-neutral writing,” gives you several ways to avoid the problem.

More on gender-neutral writing

Four techniques for removing gender from your pronouns:

- Use “you.”
 -  The customer may return any item she is not satisfied with.
 -  You may return any item you are not satisfied with.
 -  If you are not satisfied with any item, you may return it.
- Use the plural.
 -  A contractor must renew his insurance every year.
 -  Contractors must renew their insurance every year.
- Turn a noun phrase into a verb phrase.
 -  A prospective student must turn in his or her application at least two weeks before classes start.
 -  A prospective student must apply at least two weeks before classes start.
 -  You must apply at least two weeks before classes start.
- Use “a,” “an,” or “the” instead of a pronoun.
 -  Your supervisor must explain her decision in writing.
 -  Your supervisor must explain the decision in writing.

Use appropriate gender for specific people

Of course, if you are talking about a specific person, it’s fine to name the person and to use the appropriate gender-based pronoun to refer to that person. [Figure 10-5](#) is the beginning of a news story about an unusual female athlete.

SAN FRANCISCO -- With tiny, shuffling steps, 98-year-old Keiko Fukuda took a seat in a director's chair on the mat of her dojo, a storefront studio in an old Victorian at the corner of Castro and 26th.

This 4-foot-10, 100-pound granddaughter of a 19th-century samurai is the most revered woman in the history of judo.

In August, she became the only woman ever to attain the 10th dan, or highest degree black belt.

Figure 10-5 If you are talking about a particular person, use the appropriate pronouns.

www.espn.go.com

Converse directly even for serious messages

You can convey serious and important messages – even legal rules and notices – using “you.” In fact, people are much more likely to take in those messages if you write with “you” because they can see themselves in the text. **Figure 10-6** is from a government regulation.

More on clear legal writing online –
Interlude 4 after Chapter 11

§123.100 Am I eligible to apply for a home disaster loan?

- (a) You are eligible to apply for a home disaster loan if you:
 - (1) Own and occupy your primary residence and have suffered a physical loss to your primary residence, personal property or both; or

Figure 10-6 Personal pronouns work well even in legal documents.

<http://ecfr.gpoaccess.gov> (Title 13, Part 123)

2. Use “I” and “we”

Did you notice the pronoun “I” in the question heading of **Figure 10-6**? That’s the voice of the site visitor.

“I,” “you,” and “we” all work well in web writing.

Look back at Chapter 9,
“Including Useful Headings,” for
more examples of headings with
pronouns.

Be consistent in how you use "I," "you," and "we"

Web writers often ask me how to use these three pronouns when writing questions and answers. Whose voice should come where?

You can set your style in either of two ways:

- Picture the site visitor asking the question.
- Picture the site asking the question.

When the site visitor asks the question

I suggest using

- "I" and "my" in the question (the voice of the site visitor)
- "you" and "your" in the answer (the site is talking *to* the site visitor)
- "we" and "our" for the organization that is answering the question

The British charity, Shelter, uses this technique (Figure 10-7).

The screenshot shows a web page with the title "How do I become a volunteer?" in red. To the left, there are two green boxes with icons: one for "site visitor" and one for "organization". The "site visitor" box contains the text "At Shelter we are always looking for volunteers. Apply to become one now to gain some valuable work experience – and the satisfaction of helping a good cause." Below the "organization" box is another green box containing the text "Apply" = imperative (talking to "you") with a smiley face icon.

Figure 10-7 You can picture the people conversing through this web content.

<http://England.shelter.org.uk>

When the site asks the question

This often happens in forms.

I suggest using

- "you" and "your" in the question (the site asking the site visitor)
- "I" and "my" in the answer (the voice of the site visitor)
- "we" and "our" for the organization that is asking the question

Amazon.com does this well (Figure 10-8).



Figure 10-8 In forms, the question might have “you” and the label might have “I” and “my.”
www.amazon.com

In blogs and social media, “I” is fine

If you don’t use “I” for the voice of the site visitor, you can use it for yourself. When you use pronouns, you remind your site visitors that they are conversing with a person.

Figure 10-9 is a Tunisian blogger’s admiration for local craft work.

Tunisian Handicrafts

Like
 Tweet

I really admire handicrafts and think they’re marvellous works of art.

I remember when I was a kid, after school, I’d go to my grandmother’s house where I’d have lunch then go for my Arabic lessons. After I was done with my Arabic lessons, I’d just go wandering around discovering new places in the city.

One of the places I discovered and loved passing by every now and then was a little workshop where a number of men would be sitting on stools working on these beautiful copper plates. With a small hammer and chisel, they tapped away, carving all these amazing shapes and texts with magnificent calligraphy.

I’d just say hi and stand there watching and admiring their work. It was really so inspiring.

To this day, whenever I pass through the souks in the old medina of Tunis and see all the copper plates with their different designs, my memories take me back to that little workshop where I saw that art being created.

Figure 10-9
www.subzeroblue.com

For your own work, “I” is fine

You may be the sole author of an article or opinion piece or a story, even if it is not a blog. You may be an author or consultant with your own web site. Make the story or site be your voice. Converse with your site visitors as fantasy writer Allan Frewin Jones does (Figure 10-10).



Figure 10-10 “I” is appropriate for an author’s site.
www.allanfrewinjones.com

For an organization, use “we”

“We,” “us,” “our” are best when you are writing on behalf of a group – your team, your division, your organization. It’s what you would say in a conversation. Most web sites do this at least on the Contact Us page.

Sometimes, it’s not about “I,” “you,” and “we”

You may be talking about objects, situations, or people other than your site visitors. In that case, it’s okay to use the appropriate nouns. You can still keep the sentences short and active and follow the other guidelines in this chapter as in this example about butterflies.

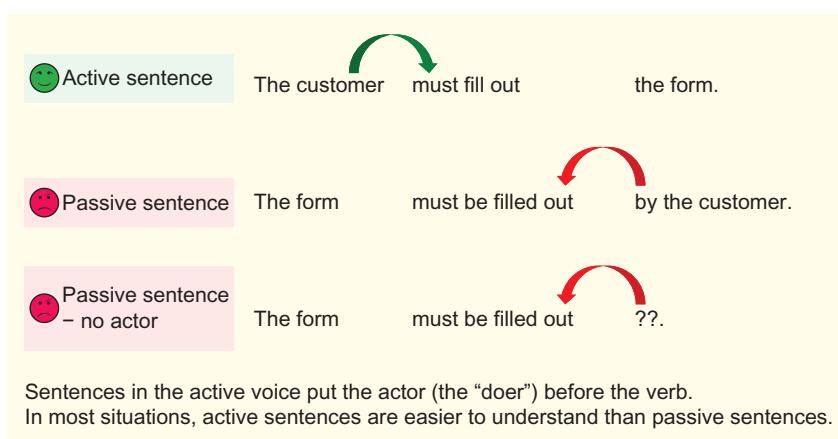
The screenshot shows the American Museum of Natural History website, specifically the Butterfly Conservatory section. The main navigation bar includes links for On Exhibit, Plan Your Visit, Calendar, Science, Education, Kids & Families, and News. On the left sidebar, there are links for Exhibition Highlights, Butterfly Cams, Ticket Info, FAQ, and Grow A Butterfly Garden, each accompanied by a small butterfly icon. The central content area features a large image of a butterfly and the text 'THE BUTTERFLY CONSERVATORY' and 'Exhibition Highlights'. Below this, there is a list of navigation links: Introduction | Anatomy | Architecture | Metamorphosis Defense | Evolution | Ecology | Conservation | Introduction. The main text discusses the Order Lepidoptera and its families. Three callout boxes on the right provide feedback:

- A green smiley face icon next to the text: This web article is facts about butterflies. So not using pronouns is okay.
- A green smiley face icon next to the text: Short, active sentences make this educational piece easy to read.
- A yellow frowny face icon next to the text: A list would work well for the three families in the last sentence.
- A yellow frowny face icon next to the text: Sound clips to hear the uncommon words would be a nice addition.

3. Write in the active voice (most of the time)

Sentences in the active voice (active sentences) describe “who does what to whom.” In an active sentence, the person or thing doing the action (the actor) comes before the verb. That’s the logical order for English sentences. Active sentences help people grab information quickly and easily.

Sentences in the passive voice (passive sentences) start with the object that is acted on instead of the actor. They either put the actor after the verb in a “by . . .” phrase or they leave the actor out entirely.



For this guideline, I’ve said “most of the time.” Sometimes, the passive is appropriate. Sometimes, the focus belongs on the object. Sometimes, it really does not matter who is responsible for doing the action. You may need the passive to avoid blaming or scaring your site visitors.

However, an entire web page in the passive is boring and difficult to understand. It’s not conversational. Eyes glaze over. People leave. Or they misinterpret the information.

A “think aloud” study showed this clearly: The study used sections of a government regulation. The people in the study were from the real audience for that regulation.

Flower, Hayes, and Swarts, “The Scenario Principle”

When these people tried to make sense of the regulation, they didn’t just shorten sentences and shorten words. They told themselves stories! They turned the original writing (long, passive sentences with no pronouns) into active sentences with actors and action verbs.

That's a lot of mental work! No wonder people give up quickly on hard-to-read content. And, even worse, the readers misinterpreted many of the passive sentences. Their translations were wrong.

Don't risk people leaving. Don't risk people misunderstanding. Write active sentences with actors and action verbs.

Case study 10-2 shows how to make writing much clearer by turning passive sentences into active ones so that "you" the reader know what to do.

Case Study 10-2

Writing in the active voice



Do you agree with my comments on this web content?

Laboratory Supplies

The ordering of laboratory supplies is done through the departmental buyer, in . The general procedure for this is to fill out form. This is the order form. A number of important points must be noted for ordering and filling out this form. Generally, supplies must be ordered at least one week

The description of the items needed must also be specific. An item number should be looked up in the catalogs in the office and written in the ITEM blank, along with a description. The QUANTITY and UNIT/SIZE items are very important. Some supplies comes in cases, thus only indicating QUAN. "1" could mean "one," or "one case." Thus, if the item comes in a case, this should be indicated in the UNIT/SIZE blank. The price must also be indicated in the appropriate blank. The order form must be signed, and the name must be printed as well. If the name is not printed, and the buyer cannot read the signature, he/she will not know whom to notify when the order arrives. To further simplify this, it would be very useful to not only write the daytime phone number, but also the e-mail address. E-mail is the easiest and most convenient method for notification. The completed order forms should be returned to the black container in the office.

The writer only names one of the people in this conversation – the buyer.

But the conversation includes two people: buyer and person needing supplies.

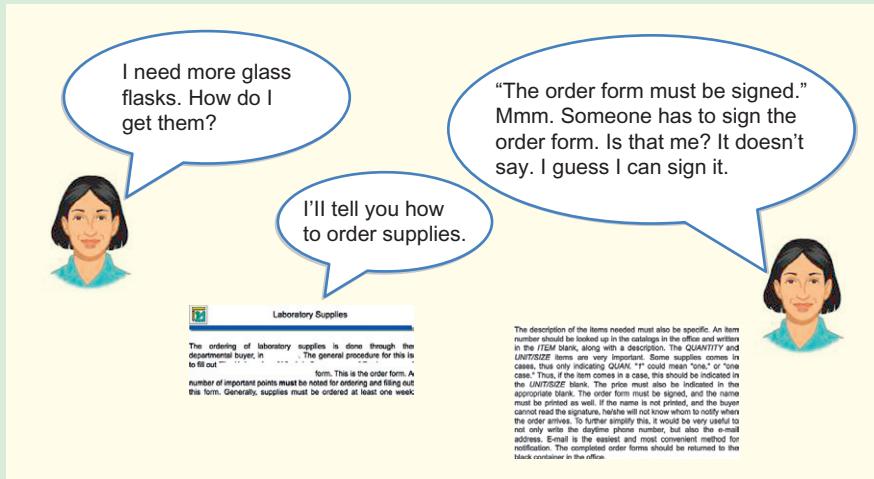
The content is about actions, but it doesn't speak to the actor.

I've put a red line under passive verbs.

Now, consider the planning questions for this web content:

- Purposes:
 - Get the right supplies to people who need them.
 - Not be bothered with questions or phone calls.
 - Have people fill out the form correctly.

- Persona: People in the organization who need supplies.
 - Very busy
 - Not my main job
 - Only do this occasionally
 - Want to get through this task quickly
 - Don't want to mess up; don't want the hassle of getting the wrong stuff
- Conversation:



When we consider purposes, persona, and conversation, we can see that these instructions are likely to fail. People will call the buyer or disturb the buyer in person with questions. Or people will fill out the form incorrectly, and the buyer will have to converse again, in email or in person, before actually ordering the supplies.

In most situations, people get information from active sentences more quickly and more accurately than from passive sentences. And writing in the active voice pressures you to find out who is responsible for actions – information that your site visitors often need.



Would this be better?

Ordering Laboratory Supplies

The departmental buyer in handles all orders for laboratory supplies. If you need supplies, fill out the form. You can get the form from the buyer in

1. Fill out the form

To assure that you get the correct supplies, you must fill out the form carefully and correctly. Please pay special attention to these parts of the form:

- ITEM: Look up the item in the catalogs in the office. Put in both the item number and a specific description.
- QUANTITY and UNIT/SIZE: Be sure to tell us both quantity and unit/size. If you write "1" for quantity but don't tell us the unit / size, we won't know if you want 1 piece or 1 case.
- PRICE: You must fill out the space for price. The catalog you are ordering from should tell you the price.

2. Sign and print your name on the form

We want to get the supplies to you; but if we can't read your name, we won't know to whom to deliver them.

3. Give us your phone number and email address

We need to know how to reach you. Please give us both a phone number and an email address. We find email is the easiest way to contact people.

4. Turn in the completed form

Put your completed order form in the black container in The buyer will handle your order and notify you when your supplies arrive.

4. Write short, simple sentences

Your busy site visitors have no time to untangle your text. Try to keep your sentences to about 10 to 20 words. Cut the fluff. Say it once clearly. Keep each sentence to one thought – or two tightly connected thoughts.

If people have to read a sentence more than once to understand it, rewrite it.

Very short sentences are okay, too

Sentences do not need even 10 words to be meaningful and sharp. If you write in questions and answers, a short answer may be all that people need.

Writing very short messages in social media

Twitter limits us to 140 characters. SMS allows us only 20 more than that. Texting on a smart phone or other mobile device can stress our thumbs. And so we tend to abbreviate, write telegraphically, drop some grammar rules.

That's fine as long as you (the sender) and the people whom you want to get the message understand what you are writing and consider the style appropriate for the medium. Your content strategy should include decisions about abbreviations and telegraphic writing – when it's okay; when it isn't. You may decide that writing Thx c u soon is fine in tweets, SMS, Facebook, Google+, and other social media – but that it is not okay in regular web content for a general audience.

If you are part of an organization, remember your brand. The voice of the brand may change slightly in different media, but that may not be your individual decision. It's part of the organization's content strategy.

Fragments may also work

The personality, tone, and style of your site may make sentence fragments acceptable to your site visitors even in regular web content. Consider the description of a blog in [Figure 10-11](#). The fragments work well here.

What's a blog?

A blog is a personal diary. A daily pulpit. A collaborative space. A political soapbox. A breaking-news outlet. A collection of links. Your own private thoughts. Memos to the world.

Your blog is whatever you want it to be. There are millions of them, in all shapes and sizes, and there are no real rules.

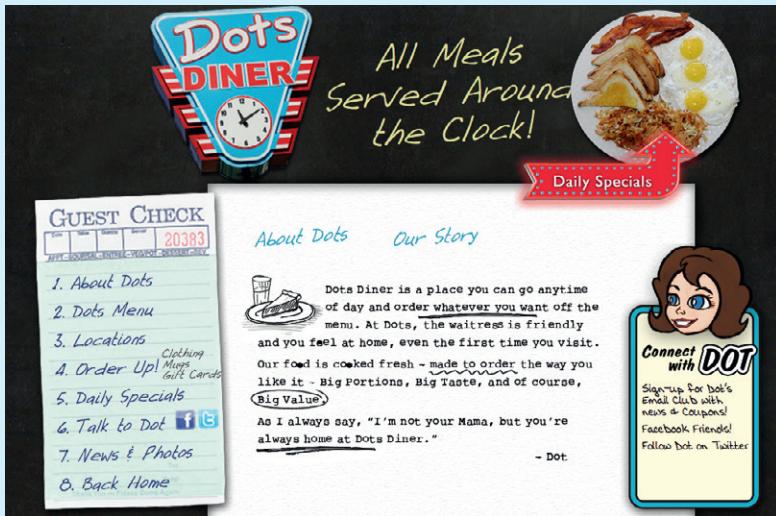
Fragments work well in the informal style of this site.

Figure 10-11 Blogger.com's explanation of a blog
www.blogger.com

Finding your voice and style

Clear, simple writing need not be monotonous. Writing can have character and flavor and still be clear. Part of your content strategy should be to understand the personality you want your site to portray: formal, informal, irreverent, funny, serious, and so on. Then match your writing style to that personality.

For example, the layout, design choices, typography, and writing style of the Dot's Diner site all show the down-home personality of these friendly Louisiana diners. Wouldn't you stop by next time you want a late-night meal?



www.dotsdiner.com

We can all think of sites where the same choices would not be appropriate. But no matter how formal and technical your site's personality is, you can still write clearly – with personal pronouns, active voice, short sentences, words your site visitors know. You can still write conversationally!

On deciding the personality you want to come through your messages – Bloomstein, *Content Strategy at Work*, 2012

Busy site visitors always need clear writing

The guidelines in this chapter apply to legal, scientific, and technical writing just as much as they do to personal sites, e-commerce, and nonprofits. In fact, the more complex the topic, the more you need to be sure that you are writing in a clear, coherent style so that your site visitors understand your key messages.

Figure 10-12 shows how the writers at the Mayo Clinic use short, active sentences with vivid word pictures to explain stress.

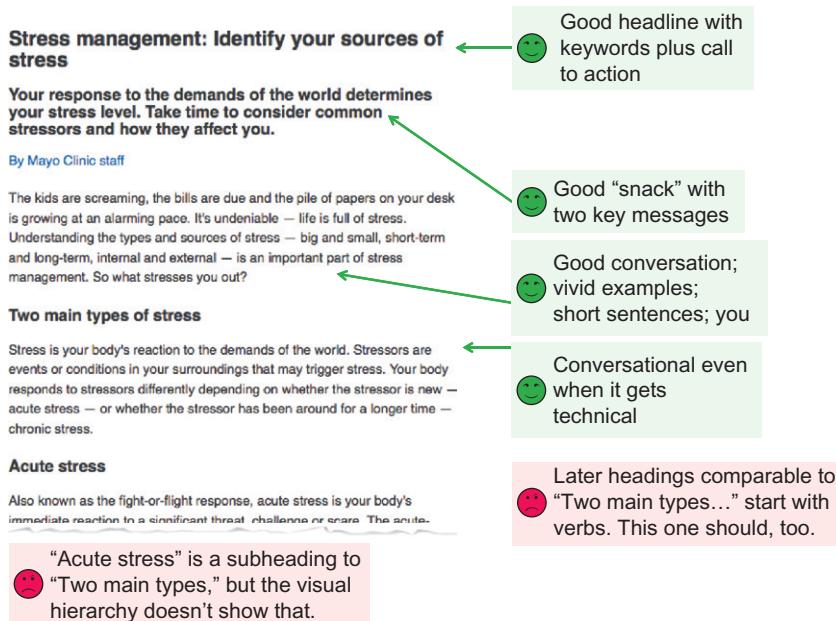
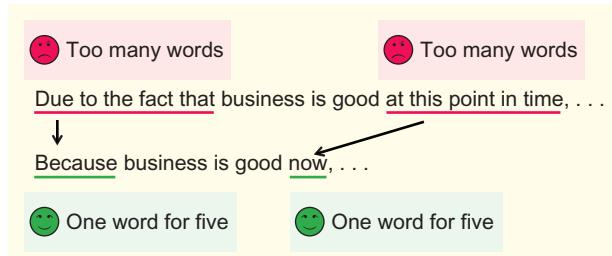


Figure 10-12 You can write clearly even about medical and technical topics.

www.mayoclinic.com

5. Cut unnecessary words

Sometimes, sentences are longer than necessary because the writer uses several words where one (or none) will do.



As I suggest in Chapter 14 on moving from first draft to final copy, don't let your first draft be your final draft. Read what you wrote and see where you can cut it. Let it rest – for a few minutes, an hour, a day. When you read it again, see what more you can cut while making your meaning clearer and sharper.

6. Give extra information its own place

In English, once we see the actor or object that starts the sentence, we look for the verb. We expect the grammatical subject and the verb to be near each other. If extra information takes us off on a tangent, we may lose track of what the sentence is about. When the extra information ends and we are back in the main sentence, we may get back on the main track – and then forget the extra information.

Don't put extra stuff between the grammatical subject and the verb.
Don't put extra stuff between the verb and the grammatical object.

[Case Study 10-3](#) shows you both how tangled a sentence can get and how to untangle it.

Case Study 10-3

Untangling a convoluted sentence



Is the first sentence of this excerpt as easy as it could be?

Interested persons, on or before June 14, 2013, may submit to the Hearing Clerk, 1000 Pennsylvania Avenue, NW, Washington, DC 20000, written comments regarding this proposal. Faxed comments will be accepted at 202-555-1234. To submit comments electronically, go to this site:



The first sentence isn't too long (26 words), but the writer interrupts the main thought twice.

Finding the underlying sentence

Let's untangle the stuffed sentence by finding the subject, verb, and object of the main clause.

subject	→ <u>Interested persons</u> , on or before June 14, 2013,
verb	→ <u>may submit</u> to the Hearing Clerk, 1000 Pennsylvania Avenue, NW, Washington, DC
object	→ 20000, <u>written comments</u> regarding this proposal.

Now you can see that the writer has stuffed the date between the subject and the verb and the address between the verb and the object.

Revising the sentence



Would your site visitors find this version easier to use?

We invite you to comment on this proposal.

Deadline: June 14, 2013

Submit written comments



electronically at
www....



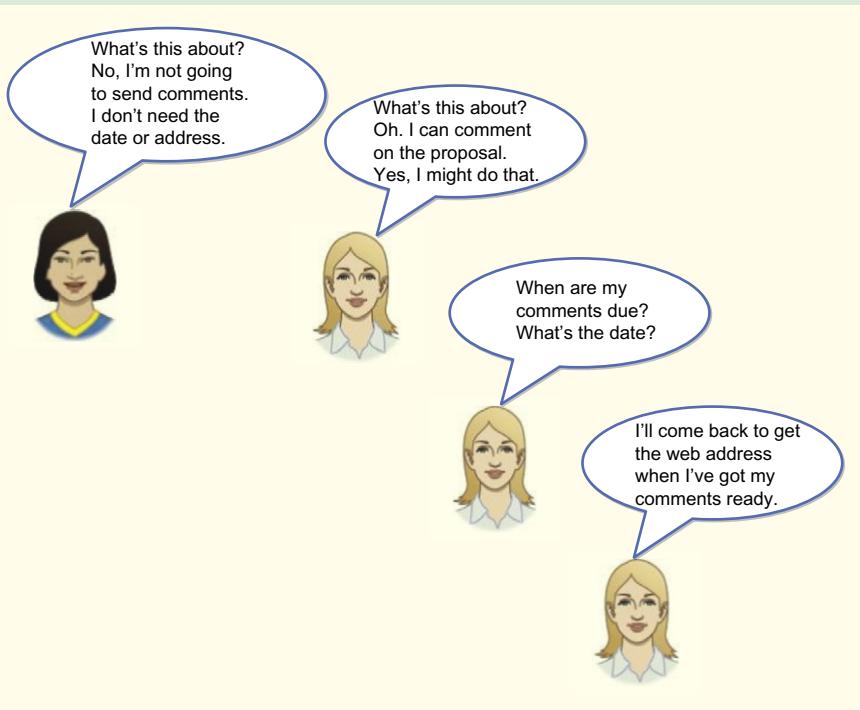
by mail to
Hearing Clerk
1000 Pennsylvania Avenue, NW
Washington, DC 20000



by fax to
202-555-1234
Attn: John Jones

Thinking “personas, conversations”

The revised sentence also matches the order in which site visitors need the information: key message first, then answers to people's questions in the order they would ask them.



Learning from this case study

A sentence with many commas probably has extra information stuffed into it. To untangle sentences like this one:

- Think of your site visitors, the questions they would ask, and the order in which they would ask them.
- If people need different pieces of information at different times, separate those pieces.
- Keep the main parts of the sentence together (subject – verb – object).
- Put the key message first.
- Pull out extra information and make each piece its own sentence (or fragment).
- Consider using visuals, fragments, and lists where they convey the information quickly and accurately.

7. Keep paragraphs short

For school essays, reports, and stories, you probably had to write at least three sentences, and more likely five or six sentences, in each paragraph. That's too long for the web – and certainly for anything people are going to read on a mobile device.

A one-sentence paragraph is fine

Keep your web paragraphs very short. Look at how short most paragraphs are on news sites ([Figure 10-13](#)).

How to make the perfect cup of tea – be patient

Making the perfect cup of tea involves a secret ingredient – patience, claims a new study.

Scientists have discovered that the key to the best tasting brew is to let it sit for six minutes before drinking.

Not only does it avoid scalding but by then it has cooled to 60C, the optimum temperature to let the flavours flood out.

But leave it until after 17 minutes and 30 seconds and the tea will be past its best.

The team at the University of Northumbria's School of Life Sciences spent 180 hours of testing and a panel of volunteers consumed 285 cups of tea in the laboratory to come up with an equation for the perfect cuppa.

They concluded that the best method was to add boiling water to a tea bag in a mug and leave for two minutes.

Then remove the bag and add the milk and leave for six minutes until it reaches optimal temperature of 60C.

Leave too long and it drops below 45C and the flavours destroying the "all round sensory experience".

The research, which was commissioned by Cravendale Milk, also found that in Britain we drink a staggering 165 million cups of tea per day, or 60.2 billion a year.

It also revealed that the average Briton makes their first cup of tea at seven and a half years old.

Ian Drury, senior lecturer at the University of Northumbria said it was the

Figure 10-13 Online, paragraphs with one short sentence make a news article easy to read.

www.telegraph.co.uk, by Richard Alleyne, Science Correspondent

Lists or tables may be even better

In many cases, you can take information out of sentences and make it more scannable through lists or tables. I'll show you how to do that in the next chapter. Before we get there, however, let's consider the last 3 of our 10 guidelines for tuning up your sentences.

8. Start with the context

Start each paragraph with a topic sentence – a sentence that sets the context, that tells readers what the paragraph is about.

Checking your topic sentences

You can use this technique to know if you have good topic sentences:

1. Leave the first sentence of each paragraph in regular black type.
2. Change the color of the rest of the paragraph to gray.
3. Read just the black type.
4. Ask yourself: Does the content make sense? Does it flow? Will my site visitors get the gist of the messages?

Even within a sentence, set the context first. Research shows that people jump to act as soon as they see something that tells them to act. They don't always read on to see if more information restricts the action.

For a fascinating study showing that people don't wait for the context, see Dixon, 1987.

Case Study 10-4 shows how the context is often in the wrong place.

Case Study 10-4

Starting with the context – the topic



Is the following paragraph instantly clear?

Approved fumigation with methyl bromide at normal atmospheric pressure, in accordance with the following procedure, upon arrival at the port of entry, is hereby prescribed as a condition of importation for shipments of yams.

Slightly simplified from a U.S. Department of Agriculture regulation

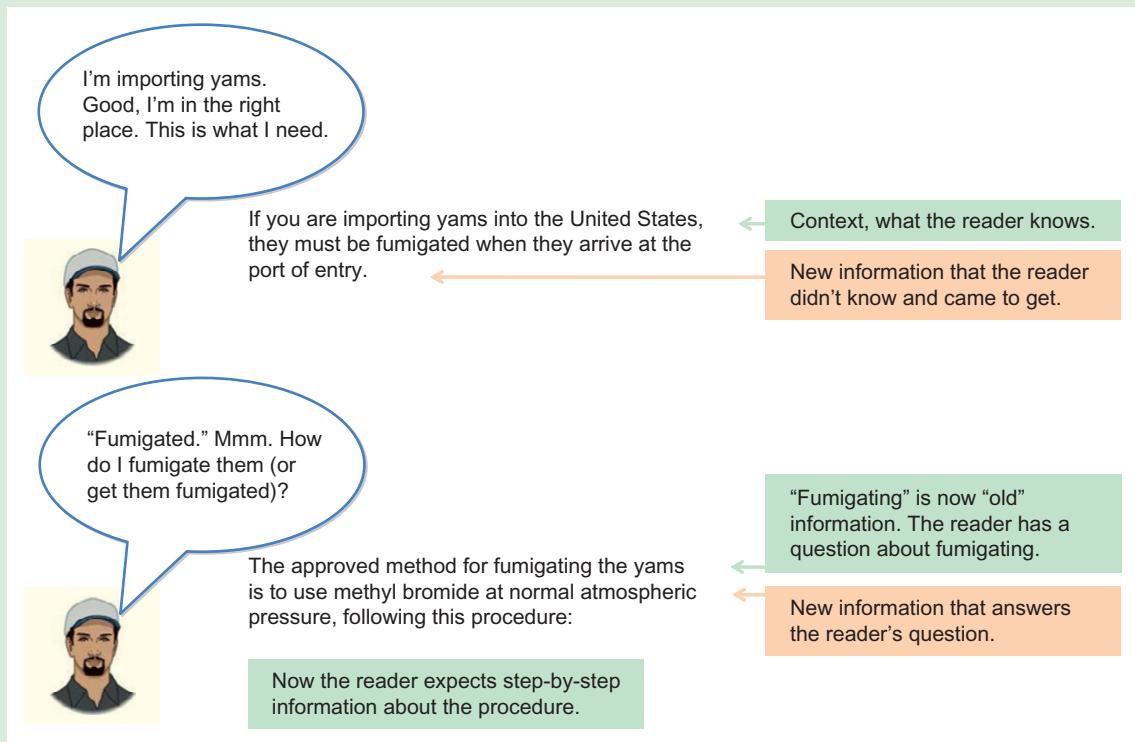


If you were talking to someone and this was the information you had to tell them, what part of the sentence would you say first? What would come next? How would you break up the information?

Reversing the order

When telling this information to someone, you would probably reverse the order. You would start with the yams because that's the answer to "What are we talking about?"

The yams are the context, the topic, the connection to what the person you're in this conversation with came to find out about. The yams belong at the beginning – whether you are telling someone this out loud or in writing.



Simplifying even further

Once you've untangled a complex sentence, you will often see other problems to attend to.

In the “yams” example, the original only talked about “fumigation.” It didn’t say who was responsible for fumigating the yams. So, in my first try at writing more clearly, I put it in the passive.

But you know that active is better. Also, our importer is going to want to know *who* does the fumigating.

Sometimes, to write clearly, you have to find out more information than you originally had.

Also, we may not have to put all those technical words into the second sentence. If an “approved fumigator” has to do the procedure, that’s the person who needs to know about “methyl bromide” at “normal

atmospheric pressure.” So, it might be better to wait and put that information into the procedure.

We might let go of more words and write this:

If you are importing yams, [person] must fumigate them when they arrive at the port of entry.

 Much simpler for the main persona – the importer.

To fumigate yams, [person] must use this procedure:

 As the writer/editor, I would have to find the subject matter specialist who knows what to put for [person]. Can it be “you”? Or is it “an approved contractor”?

Learning from this case study

Once again, we see how focusing on your site visitors helps you write well for the web.

- Think about what your site visitors do and do not know.
- Start with what they know. Then introduce new information.
- Consider using the pattern, “if, then.” It follows the reader’s logic and makes you put first things first, second things second. (You almost always need the “if” in the “if clause,” but you don’t actually need to write the word “then” in the “then clause.” For example, write “If it’s raining, take an umbrella.”)
- Hear the conversation. You don’t have to put in a heading for every question the site visitor would ask. But if you listen in your head for what someone would ask after reading each bit of what you write, you’ll convey the content in logical order for your site visitors.

The principle of “context, topic, known” before “new” is sometimes also called “given-new.” It’s based on linguistic research about how people converse. (Clark and Haviland, “Comprehension and the Given-New Contract”)

9. Put the action in the verb

Much of the web is about action. Verbs are action words.

If you bury the action in a noun, you often end up with just a form of “to be” (is, are, was, were) instead of an action verb. Weak. Boring. Uninteresting placeholder.

	noun hiding a verb	weak verb
Weak sentence	The Commission's recommendations for changes were few in number.	
Strong sentence	The Commission recommended few changes.	strong verb
	noun hiding a verb	weak verb
Weak sentence	Retention of these records for seven years is a requirement for licensees. requirement → require → must retention → retain → keep	noun hiding a verb
Strong sentence	Licensees must keep these records for seven years. You must keep these records for seven years.	strong verb

This table gives you the most common endings for nouns that hide verbs. Use the table to help you move the action out of nouns and put the action where it belongs – in the verb.

Look for this	As in this example	Which should be this verb
-al	denial	deny
-ance	maintenanc e	maintain, keep
-ence	concurr ence	concur, agree
-ment	assignm ent	assign
-sion	transmissi on	transmit, send
-tion	recommendati on	recommend
-ure	failur e	fail, if you don't

After you find the verb that's hidden in the noun, see if you can replace it with a shorter, stronger, plainer verb. You can often do that, as in

- requirement → you are required to → you must
- Please see to the transmission of this message. → Please transmit this message. → Please send this message.

10. Use your site visitors' words

Remember you are conversing with your site visitors. Make that the heart of your content strategy on every level. Keep it in mind when you decide what topics to write about and what to say for each topic. Think conversation as you construct paragraphs, sentences, lists, and tables. And when you choose words.

Write for your site visitors

You may be saying, “We have special words that have specific meaning in our field. We have to use them.” If everyone you are conversing with shares your special language, it’s fine to use those words.

As Sarah Bauer asked when she used the example in [Figure 10-14](#) from [lululemon.com](#), “How many non-yoga participants know what ‘downward-dog’ means?”

Bauer, It Works For “You”: A User-Centric Guideline To Product Pages, *Smashing Magazine*, January 10, 2012

why we made this

Scuba diving in the chilly waters of British Columbia taught us valuable lessons about the benefits of a deep hood and a well-fitted jacket. We designed this cozy hoodie to keep us toasty post-dive or pre-Downward-Dog.

Figure 10-14 Using special words your site visitors know can appeal to your market.
www.lululemon.com

Lululemon makes clothes for yoga. It knows its site visitors. It appeals to them with their vocabulary (as well as with features of its clothes, like an emergency hair tie on the hoodie’s zipper).

Know your site visitors

The examples Bauer used in her blog article were of companies that had done the research to understand their site visitors – to know the words their site visitors use when searching, when buying in other channels, when talking about the topics of the site.

I see the opposite happen: Writers greatly overestimating how much of their company’s internal jargon others know.

Your site visitors may not know words that are commonplace to you. Research shows that people who know a special vocabulary overestimate others’ knowledge of those words by about 25% to 30%.

Lydia Hooke showed this for a government regulation in the 1970s. More recently, see Hayes and Bayzek, 2008.

- A lawyer in one specialty may not know the words that are common in another specialty. And people coming to the web for information about wills or leases are probably not lawyers.
- A doctor in one specialty may not know the words that are common in another specialty. And many health care workers are not doctors. Most patients are not doctors.
- Your site visitors may come from all over the world. Many are not native speakers of the language of your site.
- Even in your country, your site visitors may include many people who are there temporarily or new to the country. They may not be fluent in your site's language.

You should offer your content in many languages and in culturally appropriate ways for your diverse site visitors. Localizing web sites and apps is an important topic, but it is beyond the scope of this book.

And always use plain language

Lots of words aren't technical terms or specific words that will help market to *your* site visitors. They're just big words that take everyone longer to read and understand.

You can often find a short, simple word that makes your content more conversational. Try it. Start with my list and add your own examples of long, less-common words that you can replace with short, simple words.

Instead of this	Try this
ascertain	find out
attempt	try
compensation	pay
component	part
inception	start
initiate	begin
inquire	ask

Instead of this	Try this
obtain	get
prior to	before
purchase	buy
request	ask for
subsequent	next
terminate	end
utilize	use

As I said at the beginning of the chapter, using these short, simple words is not "dumbing down" your content. It's respecting your busy site visitors' time.

And here's the research that supports this point: Plain language helps both low-literacy **and high-literacy** site visitors.

Kathryn Summers and her team worked on a web site for a medicine that millions of people take. They tested the web site with both

low-literacy and high-literacy web users. They then revised the site to resolve the problems the low-literacy web users had.

(Those problems were not only the words. Summers and her team also used many of the other guidelines for good web writing. They reorganized into a clear, logical, flowing story. They shortened paragraphs and sentences. They turned paragraphs into bulleted lists. And they always used the shortest, simplest, plainest word that had the right meaning.)

Then they tested the new site with both low-literacy and high-literacy web users.

Conclusion: As you see in the tables in **Figure 10-15**, the plain language changes helped low-literacy site visitors get what they needed faster and more accurately. **And those same changes helped high-literacy site visitors even more!!**

Tasks completed successfully	% of tasks		Improvement
	Before	After	
Low-literacy web users	46%	82%	+77%
High-literacy web users	68%	93%	+37%
All users	59%	89%	+52%

Time spent on tasks	Time (minutes)		Improvement
	Before	After	
Low-literacy web users	22:16	9:30	+134%
High-literacy web users	14:19	5:05	+182%
All users	17:50	6:45	+164%

Figure 10-15 Revising by following plain language guidelines improved this web site for both low-literacy and high-literacy web users.

http://iat.ubalt.edu/summers/papers/Summers_ASIST2005.pdf

High-literacy readers are likely to be the busiest and least patient of your site visitors. Respect their time by using plain language.

Summarizing Chapter 10

Key messages from Chapter 10:

- Writing informally is not “dumbing down”!
- Talk *to* your site visitors – use “you.”
 - Use the imperative in instructions.
 - Use “you” throughout.
 - Use “you” to be gender-neutral.

- Use appropriate gender for specific people.
 - Converse directly even for serious messages.
- Use “I” and “we.”
 - In blogs and social media, “I” is fine.
 - For your own articles, “I” is fine.
 - When you write for an organization, use “we.”
 - Be consistent in how you use “I,” “you,” and “we.”
- Write in the active voice (most of the time).
- Write simple, short, straightforward sentences.
 - Very short sentences are okay, too.
 - Fragments may also work.
 - Busy site visitors always need clear writing.
- Cut unnecessary words.
- Give extra information its own place.
- Keep paragraphs short.
 - A one-sentence paragraph is fine.
 - Lists or tables may be even better.
- Start with the context.
- Put the action in the verbs.
- Use your site visitors’ words.
 - Write for *your* site visitors.
 - Know your site visitors.
 - And always use plain language.
- Research shows that using these guidelines for clear writing for the web helps both low-literacy and high-literacy site visitors.