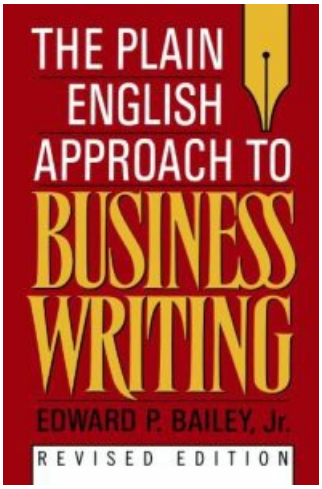

Book The Plain English Approach to Business Writing

Edward P. Bailey Jr.
Oxford UP, 1997

Recommendation

Much of what passes for business writing today is so convoluted and pompous that it is difficult to understand. Here's an example: "Subsequent to the adoption of the latest employee policy regulations-cum-guidelines, it is incumbent upon (said) employees to rigorously review the current documentation; and to then advise (or at the minimum, contact) management regarding any perceived, needed exceptions...." How about this instead: "Please review the proposed guideline changes, and let us know if they make sense and support current policies. If not, we'll change them." Far too many people think they need to write business prose with grandiose words and phrases, passive voice, third person and past tense, when actually such practices muddle their messages. Into the business-writing breach comes Edward P. Bailey Jr., a master of composition, and an expert at teaching people to write and speak plainly and simply. Although even the professor lapses into dullness now and then, *BooksInShort* thinks that anyone who wants to write – and thus communicate – more effectively can learn a lot from reading this short, sensible book.

Take-Aways

- Write as you speak – easily and informally.
- Use common words that are easy to understand.
- Put the main point of your writing right up front.
- Avoid passive voice.
- You can use contractions and personal pronouns in business writing.
- Add pop and pizzazz to your sentences with varied punctuation.
- Your writing should be clear and concrete.
- Write blueprints or executive summaries to provide valuable overviews of your main composition.
- Outlines can clarify most writing projects.
- Revise and rewrite to ensure that your writing communicates your message.

Summary

"Plain English"

The first and most important rule of English composition is to write in order to communicate, not to impress. Plain English means expressing your ideas in a simple, clear fashion. Make your sentences easy to read and understand. Write as you speak. Get to the point. Introduce your main subject up-front. Use simple words: for example, "near" not "close proximity to," "try" not "endeavor," "give" not "furnish," and "begin" not "commence." Similarly, choose "teacher" not "educator" and "lawyer" not "attorney." Don't use words to show off your vocabulary. Use them to communicate.

> "Plain English is not limited to expressing only simple ideas: It works for all kinds of writing – from an internal memo to a complicated technical report."

Consider this example from humorist and writer Russell Baker: "At the age of 80 my mother had her last bad fall." In this sentence, Baker does not use any words with more than six letters. Most are half that long or less. Baker has a simple message to communicate: his aged mother suffered a bad fall, her last. He communicates this message perfectly. No elaboration. No words to impress. No unnecessary words at all. The point of good writing is to make the reader's job easy, not hard. Of course, such writing is the opposite of verbose, showy business composition.

> "Psycholinguists have learned that we all take longer to read less familiar words (like 'commence') than familiar ones (like 'begin')."

Avoid bureaucratic prose, such as, "Every application submitted must be backed up by a detailed explanatory letter submitted in triplicate. It is required that this letter establish all pertinent facts needed by this office, that is, a full disclosure regarding all facts concerning the specific transaction." This complex word puzzle is baffling. Instead, try this: "Submit your application with three copies of a letter detailing the transaction." Businesspeople do not have time to waste. Write simply and clearly so everyone quickly understands what you want to communicate.

Style

For decades, stuffy grammarians have propagated the "Seven Nevers" rules:

1. Never start sentences with "but" or "and."
2. Never use contractions.
3. Never address the reader as "you."
4. Never use "I" in a sentence.
5. Never make the last word in a sentence a preposition ("of" or "with").
6. Never split an infinitive (that is, placing an adverb between "to" and the verb – "to quickly go").
7. Never create a single-sentence paragraph.

> "As writers, we can help our readers by preferring ordinary words...The move today is clearly toward plain English because it works."

Here's a new "never" rule to follow: never pay attention to the "Seven Nevers." Professional writers don't. Instead, they write as they speak – easily, fluidly and naturally. People are more comfortable with spoken words than written words. When you write, imagine that you are on the phone with a friend, and craft your prose accordingly. What could be simpler? Use your keyboard to "talk" to your readers. Don't be formal.

> "Write more the way you talk – with ordinary words, a variety of punctuation, personal pronouns and contractions."

Use contractions such as "isn't" instead of "is not," "they're" instead of "they are" and "don't" instead of "do not." Is doing so too colloquial and chatty? If so, then *The Wall Street Journal* is chatty, since it routinely uses contractions. So does *The New York Times*. Also, use personal pronouns, such as "I, we, us, you, your" and "yours." Doing so offers two advantages: Your writing becomes more personal and describing a person as carrying out an action helps you avoid using passive voice.

&%." Punctuation

Spicing up sentences with fancy words is counterproductive. Doing so with punctuation is not. Punctuation gives emphasis, and plays the same role in composition as inflection and gestures do in speech. Don't limit your punctuation to periods and commas. For example, use questions – and thus question marks – to gain your readers' attention. Consider the difference in the following two sentences. The first is declarative (no question): "The faulty computer disks are not the manufacturer's responsibility, but some other party in the supply chain." The second sentence is interrogatory (includes a question): "Who is to blame for the faulty computer disks?" The sentence without a question sits there like fetid water in a ditch. In contrast, the sentence with a question is like a brisk shower from a fire hose.

> "The key to plain English is...Talk to your reader. Simply talk on paper. Write the way you talk."

Dashes, colons, semicolons, ellipses and all the other punctuation marks are also useful if used well. The planned use of punctuation – such as dashes in this example – provides emphasis. The colon is a pointer signaling the reader that what follows in the sentence is important or is in the form of a list. The dash can accomplish the same thing. The semicolon is a bit archaic; current writers don't use it as much as writers did in decades past. But the semicolon does continue to have its uses, such as joining related sentences together or separating a series of items that includes commas (for example, "fruit, including pears, oranges and apples; vegetables, including celery, peas and broccoli; and bakery items, including muffins, bagels and rolls").

Organization and Layout

If you need to give someone directions, do you spend the first five minutes talking about the weather, politics and why you couldn't sleep last night? Of course not. You get right to the point, quickly explaining how to get from here to there. Do the same when you write. Put your main point right up-front – often, though not always, in the first sentence. For example, let your readers know what specific action you want them to take ("I suggest that you purchase a laser printer"); your conclusion ("Unemployment will continue to rise") or your primary purpose ("Please vote for John Smith").

> "Starting with the main point helps keep your reader on track – and you (the writer), too."

The best way to get attention is to tell your readers what you are writing about immediately. Another way is through your layout. The appearance of your document can be as important as the words you use. Dense text – lacking white space, lists, headings and so on – is not inviting. A strong layout includes short paragraphs, headings, bullet points and lists. Use different typefaces to maximum advantage. Serif type works well for the body text of your document, while sans serif type is better for headings. In serif type, the individual letters include small "lines at the ends of the strokes" called "serifs." Times New Roman is a serif font; Arial is a sans-serif font. Along with specific font choices, graphics can add valuable impact to your documents.

> "Use active voice – unless you have a strong reason to use passive."

Paragraphs generally contain one or two thoughts. Use headings to tell your readers exactly what subject you are about to cover and to show the organizational structure of your writing. Another way to make the reader's job simpler is to include lists. Formatting information as a list makes it easier to follow than bunching lots of short instructions or items together in one paragraph.

> "Tell your readers, up front, the structure of your document...Good layout helps produce good organization...The look of a page is important."

Formatting information as a numbered list reinforces how the data is sorted in the readers' minds. For example, follow these three easy steps when you plan and organize your writing:

1. Begin with your primary point.
2. Structure what follows into informational blocks in a logical order.
3. Label your blocks with descriptive headings.

> "Abstract writing ... is so vague that it asks us to stop reading and guess what it means...Keep your reader from guessing what you mean – by using examples, brief stories and comparisons."

This organizational format helps convey essential information in memos, letters and reports. However, this very structured format is less useful when you must engage your readers in a creative way – for example, in a magazine article.

Passive Voice

When it comes to business writing, one compositional transgression is worse than all the others: passive voice. Passive voice is a true "villain of readability." Here is a sentence in passive voice: "My first trip to New York City will always be remembered." This vague sentence signifies nearly nothing. Who is doing the remembering? To express the thought more clearly, use active voice: "I will always remember my first trip to New York City."

> "Writing with ordinary words doesn't mean writing with kindergarten language or producing only simple-minded ideas."

Besides being harder to interpret, passive sentences are wordy and lifeless. Consider this example: "At daybreak, the rooster's crowing could be heard." To make the sentence much stronger, express the same thought in active voice: "I could hear the rooster crow at daybreak." Active sentences are direct and vivid. Passive sentences are indirect and weak. Plus, passive sentences omit information that may be crucial to the reader's comprehension. Don't use it unless you absolutely must. Passive voice can also be a cop-out. A businessperson who says, "Mistakes were made" instead of "I made mistakes" may appear to be avoiding responsibility.

> "A clean, straightforward document can be beautiful in its simplicity and efficiency."

How do you recognize passive voice? Look for two elements that are always present in a passively constructed sentence:

1. **Any form of the verb "to be"** – Be, am, been, are, being, was, is and were.
2. **A past participle** – A verb ending in "-en" (eaten) or "-ed" (talked), plus certain irregular verbs that feature past participles with other endings, such as heard, drunk, lost, kept and so on.

> "Plain English, to put it simply, is a way of expressing your ideas clearly."

These examples of passive voice include both symptoms: "The car was demolished by Jack," "The accident was caused by defective brakes" and "The police were called."

Abstractness

Abstract or nonfigurative thinking is admirable, requiring the perspicacity to move from the particular to the general, or vice versa. However, abstract or vague writing is not admirable. Abstract writing clouds your meaning and confuses your reader.

Consider this sentence: "As a building superintendent, I occasionally come across odd situations." This sentence leaves the reader completely perplexed. What are the "odd situations" – Charred bones in the boiler? Alligators in the elevator? Tenants running around nude on the roof? Now consider the following: "As a building superintendent, I occasionally come across odd situations. At one high-rise, I discovered the maintenance man living in the meter room on workdays to avoid a long commute from his home." This supplies enough detail to make the first sentence comprehensible. Your job as a writer is to make things clear for the reader, that is, to enhance readability.

Blueprints and Executive Summaries

A blueprint tells your reader what is coming up in the form of a mini-outline at the beginning of your written piece. Here's a typical blueprint: "Three problems exist with the proposal: 1) It exceeds the budget; 2) It fails to meet objectives; and 3) It wastes time.

Extremely short documents usually don't need a blueprint. Instead, just open a short report with an immediate explanation. A blueprint also does not work well with overly long documents. No one wants to wade through a 15-point précis of a 15-part document. Like a blueprint, an executive summary provides the reader with helpful information about your document. However, instead of being a mini-outline, it is a quick overview similar to an "elevator briefing." Normally, the executive summary is only one page or one paragraph long, and it always starts with the bottom line: "This report contends that we should purchase all our future supplies from the ABC Corporation, because they have an excellent selection at reasonable prices."

Plan Ahead

No painter starts painting without first fully preparing the job – sanding, spackling, taping, mixing colors, erecting scaffolds, placing drop cloths and so on. Similarly, plan what you want to say before you begin writing. An outline can help. When you are ready to write, work in a linear fashion from one logical point to another. Revise as you go along. When you are done, give your final draft a careful review. Change anything that does not work. Make sure that your readers will understand precisely what you want to communicate.

About the Author

Edward P. Bailey Jr. teaches business communication at Marymount University. He is an expert on writing and public speaking.