

So you want to be a very good writer? First, lose the *very*

Then follow these 14 guidelines to communicate more effectively

By Paula LaRocque

The following guidelines promote clearer writing. They needn't be treated as rules, but generally observed, they'll bring our work greater clarity, brevity and precision.

- **Keep sentences short.** The period is one of the clear writer's best friends. Sentence lengths should vary to avoid tedium, but average sentence length should be below 25 words.
- **Keep to one idea per sentence.** That doesn't mean one fact or figure, but one idea.
- **Avoid jargon and formula.** But know your audience. The use of specialized jargon is sensible when you have a specialized audience. Avoid language, however, that your audience does not share - usually a given in media writing. Avoid formula writing and trite expressions in all cases.
- **Avoid having more than three numbers in one sentence.** The following example shows how too many numbers can fuzz up a sentence:
The 9th grade students did well on most of the 3-part test with at least 85 percent of the students at more than two-thirds of the schools passing seven of the 28 test objectives.
- **Avoid having more than three prepositional phrases in one sentence.** Especially unattractive are such phrases running consecutively or starting with the same preposition.
- **Keep to subject-verb-object sentences, generally.** Avoid the unnecessary use of the passive voice.
- **Avoid backing into sentences with long dependent clauses.** This guideline applies especially to first sentences. But short introductory structures are OK: a decade ago, last week in Texas.
- **Change long and difficult words to short and simple ones.** Consider:
United Nations officials on Tuesday said that they had intelligence information indicating that Iraq had attempted to mislead United Nations investigators by understating its nuclear weapons program and the amount of weapons-grade nuclear material it now possesses.
Same information, using simple words:
U.N. officials said Tuesday that Iraq had understated the amount of its nuclear weapon stock.
- **Cut deadwood and redundancy.**
Wordy:
There were three or four people in the committee who said that the company needed to give a demonstration of how its new equipment functions.
Non-wordy:
Several committee members said the company should demonstrate its new equipment.
The redundant *sum total* should be total; *end result* should be result; *free gift* should be gift; *consensus of opinion* should be consensus.
- **Use single, active verbs instead of several weak words.** They made a decision should be they decided; they have the intention should be they intend; they gave an exhibit should be they exhibited.
- **Choose concrete over abstract terms.** *Indicate* should be show, say, suggest; *thunderstorm activity* should be thunderstorms; *crisis situation* should be crisis; *surgical intervention* should be surgery.
- **Avoid vague qualifiers and choose the precise word.** Here are some vague qualifiers that fuss up our writing: very, extremely, really, rather, somewhat, quite, truly, basically, totally.
- **Try to communicate with - rather than impress - the readers.** Consider this press release:
The state air control board is initiating a Strategic Enforcement Priorities Plan '94, a plan which will create a more multi-faceted, more effective enforcement program characterized by placing a

heavier emphasis on strategic priorities and targeting use of resources.

Such pretentious, abstract language hides simple ideas.

- **Ask yourself how you would say it if you were saying it**, and use that graceful conversational writing style for your writing, too. Watch the message emerge when writers write as they speak. Here's the original:

A major reassessment that could lead to big changes in Redford County's public transportation system is beginning, prompted in part by a new anti-smog law that is boosting business' demand for better service.

And here's the conversational version:

Local government leaders want to make it easier for Redford County residents to get around without their cars.