



# Making Your Point



How to write  
for websites,  
brochures,  
engineering  
documents, or  
email. BY DON KRESKI

If you want to write in a way that makes your business more successful, you may have to forget what your high school English teacher taught you.

I know that because I was once an English teacher—or at least I was trained to be one before I started my career in marketing. In many ways, I've had to forget what I learned in high school in order to succeed as a writer.

The problem with high school English teachers is that most (though not all) teach a very formal writing style that's widely used and really dull. So unless you have a strong moral conviction that boredom and pain should be part of the working day, I'd like to make a few suggestions.

First of all, loosen up. If you have trouble getting started or dislike the process of writing, you can begin just by putting the information into the computer without worrying about your style. You can go back and polish what you wrote later.

## **SIMPLICITY AND CLARITY**

Clarity is your number-one goal in any written communication. People are busy. They want to know what you're saying and understand it quickly. It's almost always the case that if you can rephrase something in fewer words, you're better off. I can often trim 20 percent from the word count in a draft I've written without losing any meaning. The result is something that's easier to read and quite a bit more interesting.

The most deadly (and common) problem in American writing is passive voice, sentences where there is no subject. A phrase like "The conference center was designed for high definition" is inherently dull. We don't know who designed the system and we don't care. Rephrase it to read: "Ace designed a

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high-definition system." It says more in fewer words.

Some people don't like to use personal pronouns. That's a problem, too, because it forces them to passively say, "The system will be programmed to..." Take some responsibility for what you do: "We will program the system ..." or "I believe that ..." or "We will include ..." It's true that Miss Pence told you not to use "I" or "we" in a formal essay, but in the real world, people will appreciate your clarity and candor.

Some people avoid contractions.

It is legitimate to keep your writing a little more formal than your conversation, if that's what you prefer. But realize that great writers in every age have tried to capture the sound of the spoken word. Individual styles vary, but if yours is wordy, unclear, or hard to read, you're going to have trouble communicating.

#### **A GOOD LEAD**

Make your most important point first. You will get people's attention if you start out by telling them that they're going to save \$50,000 by accepting your proposal. If you were writing a novel, you'd keep the climax for the end, but in a press release, a blog entry, or even just a note, the main thing you have to worry about is whether they will read it at all.

Journalists call the first sentence of an article the "lead," and they know that it's the most important sentence they will write. If you can write a good

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lead when you first sit down, the rest of the piece will follow naturally. Still, most people have to write a first draft before they can figure out what's most important or what will be most likely to grab their reader's attention. When that happens, pull your lead from wherever you find it and rewrite or rearrange as necessary.

### **BREAK THINGS UP**

People like to digest complicated explanations in pieces. If you're telling the story of your company on your website, for example, write one topic per page and try to present each topic with a single theme that you introduce with a strong lead. If you're writing a proposal, separate the topics into distinct sections.

Within a given web page, letter, or article, organize your ideas into subsections and use subheads to set them off. Present your thoughts in bite-sized pieces, arranged in a logical order to make your point. If some readers skim your work rather than pore over it carefully, the subheads can help them follow your ideas. Miss Pence would never allow bullet points, but they can help you communicate to readers in a hurry.

### **CONVINCE YOUR READERS**

Avoid hype. Superlatives are not enough. Because we are constantly bombarded by advertising messages, any time you overstate your point, readers get suspicious.

What you need to do is find out what's true about the thing you're trying to describe, then state that simply and clearly. Prove, if possible, why it is "great," "best," or "world-class." Most of the time, if you give the reasons and skip the adjectives, you'll be more convincing.

For the sake of clarity, good spelling and punctuation are a must. Usually you're better off avoiding slang, jargon, and offbeat language, but it's OK to

have fun once in a while, if you're sure your reader will appreciate it.

If it's an important document, read it aloud at the end of the writing process. Pronouncing the words, even in a whisper, forces you to stumble over any awkward phrases, anything that's unclear, and anything that's too formal. If you're worried about tone—say you're writing an email about something that makes you angry—reading the piece aloud can help you see it from your reader's perspective.

Your reader, after all, is the person you must please. Forget the formal style that you learned in high school and you'll be a much more effective writer. You'll have more fun, too. [SVC](#)

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