

How to Write What People Read

Ideas that Breathe Fire into Your Writing and Compel Readers to Action

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Executive Summary

This document provides bullet lists of writing ideas and principles. If you heed them, you will improve your writing effectiveness. More readers will enjoy and respond positively to your work. When you finish reading this document, you will know the basic methods to use to convince readers to take the action you want them to take. The points within apply to all writing disciplines.

The author has plied the writer's craft for nearly 5 decades in product definition, engineering, technical manuals, data sheets, marketing brochures, user guides, poetry, travel, fiction, blogs, web sites, and a variety of legal, social, religious, and political commentaries.

How to Write What People Read

Ideas that Breathe Fire into Your Writing and Compel Readers to Action

Organize to Keep Readers interested and On-Track

- ⤴ Start with a bold, catchy title
- ⤴ Amplify or zone in with a subtitle
- ⤴ Provide an Executive Summary
- ⤴ Group topics under catchy headings
- ⤴ Proceed logically from the general to the specific
- ⤴ Put most important information first
- ⤴ Belabor the issues in footnotes or endnotes
- ⤴ Build credibility by citing references to proof sources in footnotes or a reference section
- ⤴ Close with a Summary and Conclusion
- ⤴ Always end with a Call to Action in sales, political, or religious writing, **if** you want the reader to take some action. Make it easy for the reader to take the recommended action.

Format to Make Your Work Classy

- ⤴ Use an attractive design; get ideas [here](#).
- ⤴ Use black font on white background for easiest legibility.
- ⤴ Carefully select and place graphics to keep content from seeming too burdensome.
- ⤴ Use bold point san-serif font (Arial) for headlines (14 to 16 point) and sub-headings (12 to 13 point).
- ⤴ Use non-bold 9 to 13 point Verdana or serif (Georgia) for paragraph text on web pages, or Arial / Helvetica / Times Roman for reproduction on paper.
- ⤴ Use consistent spacing between headings and paragraphs.
- ⤴ Use **ONLY** one graphic per page or major topic, **if** it relates directly to the author, story, or a character in it. Keep it small and near the related text. Drawings, graphs, and charts necessary to the text constitute exceptions. Try never to flow them from one page to the next.

Stylize to Make Readers Love the Experience

- ⤴ Use excellent grammar, case, and punctuation.
- ⤴ Avoid phrasing that would unintentionally offend a gender, gene, or religion group.
- ⤴ Economize; do not become enamored of your own writing such that you write only to use words. Use only the words you must to express the thought. Express only the thoughts that make the points needed to sell the concept or product. Recraft sentences as necessary to remove useless text.
- ⤴ Write on your reader's level. Do not write like a pedant to people with a 9th grade reading level.
- ⤴ Avoid jargon that your readers will not know. Define special words and phrases in-line, in hyperlinks, or in footnotes. Remember that misunderstood words and phrases put people to sleep and make it impossible for them to understand what you write.
- ⤴ Present thoughts in sentences. Limit sentences to 17 words.
- ⤴ Organize thought groups into concept paragraphs of 3 or 4 sentences.
- ⤴ Limit sentences to 17 words.
- ⤴ Give your sentences punch. Express a thought with a full sentence. Put the subject at the beginning. Follow it with the verb. Follow that with phrases or words that amplify or explain.
- ⤴ Use active voice, not passive voice. Passive voice creates ambiguity and engenders confusion in the mind of the reader.
- ⤴ Eliminate to-be verbs (be, am, is, are, was, were) except when expressing identity. Read about "[e-prime](#)." To-be verbs generally create linguistic inaccuracy, ambiguity, and confusion.
- ⤴ Buy, memorize, and obey Strunk & White's tiny 4th Edition of *The Elements of Style* (check the 1918 [on-line version](#)). Go to <http://lagriffedulion> and see how The Claw of the Lion sets up his articles. He manages to make his dry subject (genes and statistics) interesting.

Structure Content to deliver a powerful message

- ⤴ Put an irresistible, gripping title at the top. Use a subtitle to refine focus.
- ⤴ Insert an Executive summary at the top to accommodate busy, impatient readers.
- ⤴ Use informative, catchy headings to identify content segments.
- ⤴ Separate text into paragraphs showing logical flow.
- ⤴ Connect paragraphs with linking sentences as needed.

- ⤴ Put all sequences or lists of more than 3 items in bulleted or numbered lists.
- ⤴ End with a Summary and Conclusion to explain what the reader should remember from the article
- ⤴ Include Call to Action in the conclusion for all sales and marketing pieces.
- ⤴ Put everything needed for making a buying decision in one article, brochure, or web page. Read [The Gary Halbert Letter](#) for good tips.
- ⤴ Respect other authors' copyrights.
- ⤴ Properly cite your proof sources using one of the major style guides.
- ⤴ Use a spell-checker and grammar-checker. Proofread and correct your work at least twice before publishing.
- ⤴ Conform to the demands of the setting. Consider trial court legal writing court for example.
 - ⤴ Keep your main pleading brief, clear, punchy, supported with citations.
 - ⤴ Limit the pleading to 3 pages (where possible), the typical attention span of trial judges.
 - ⤴ Lead the reader to the conclusions your writing has made inescapably obvious.
 - ⤴ Attach a supporting brief or memorandum of law that goes into detail and supplies replete citations.
 - ⤴ Actually read the cited texts and make certain they support your points the way you think they should.
 - ⤴ Avoid hyperbole, but let your style *compel* the judge to read the whole document.

Use Powerful, Standardized Publishing Tools

- ⤴ Use OpenOffice.org, LibreOffice (free), or Microsoft Word (\$) for normal composition; use Scribus (free), or Microsoft Publisher, Adobe InDesign, QuarkExpress, or Ventura Publisher (\$) for page layout such as for magazines.
- ⤴ For pure graphics, use IrfanView (free), which gives you touch-up, cropping, resizing, and creates excellent thumbnails fast. Or for real power, use Gimp (free). Of course, you get basic graphic tools in Word 2010 and OpenOffice.org. Or use Adobe Photoshop and Illustrator (\$) or CorelDraw Suite (\$) to create and edit bitmap or vector graphic images for publishing. Note that for-pay tools also have page layout features.
- ⤴ Try to standardize your articles in the Microsoft Word 2007 or 2010 standard Open Document Text (ODT) or equivalent Microsoft Open Document XML (DOCX) format. These consist of Extensible Markup Language (XML) documents grouped together into a single ZIP archive with the DOCX or ODT extension. Every major web service can

read

files in those formats.

- ⤴ Save your documents in Adobe Acrobat PDF (portable document format) for more reliable WYSIWYG (what you see is what you get) viewing and printing on computers everywhere, and less likelihood of tampering. If you want to get Kinkos, Staples, or some other printing service to publish the document, PDF makes it easy for them.
- ⤴ Password-protect your documents in your word processor or Adobe Acrobat if you don't want people to modify them or print them without your permission.
- ⤴ Use Adobe Digital Editions if you want to charge money for your documents and let people view them for a fee without risk that they will copy and pass them on without paying you.
- ⤴ Obtain Adobe Acrobat Professional if you want to manipulate or use graphic representations of text or Adobe Flash movies in your document. Everyone in the world can get Adobe Reader free to view the PDF documents. Acrobat Pro has incredible power and a wide range of features, including OCR (optical character recognition), automated form creation, production of database entries from information readers type into form, slide show presentations with animation and movies in them, editing of and commenting in documents for shared work projects, digital signing (complies with electronic notarization laws)

Follow Design Guides for Broader Acceptance of Your Work

Numerous style guides exist for various types of writing. They specify such items as

- ⤴ Case, case, abbreviations, and spelling;
- ⤴ Use of bold, italics, underlining, superscript, subscript;
- ⤴ Line spacing, leading, kerning;
- ⤴ Creating reference citations, bibliographies;
- ⤴ Creating tables and figures, including graphics and captions;
- ⤴ Creating indexes, table of contents, glossaries;
- ⤴ Rendering headings and outlines, headers, footers, footnotes, end notes;

Professionals get meager exposure to this in High School, more intense exposure in college, and remorseless exposure in publishing enterprises. You can get abbreviated style guides free, but the really good ones cost money.

Most creative writers loathe style guides, but technical and academic writers and publishers must adhere to them. Adhering consistently to style allows the reader to focus on content without style distractions. Each of the following pertains to a particular style of writing articles, academic papers, newsletters, press releases, academic books, technical books, novels,

magazines, etc.

- ✦ [*E-prime*](#) – all writing – elimination of to-be verbs for clarity
- ✦ [*The Elements of Style*](#) – ordinary writing
- ✦ [*ACS Style Guide*](#) – for physical sciences
- ✦ [*AMA Manual of Style*](#) – for medical texts
- ✦ [*The Associated Press Stylebook*](#) – for journalists
- ✦ [*The Chicago Manual of Style*](#) - for non-journalist professionals, general publishing
- ✦ [*Turabian*](#) – for academic papers
- ✦ [*The Elements of Typographic Style*](#) – fonts and timesteps
- ✦ [*ISO 690*](#) – for bibliographies and monographs
- ✦ [*MHRA Style Guide*](#) – for theses
- ✦ [*MLA Handbook*](#) – for research papers
- ✦ [*MLA Style Manual*](#) – scholarly writing
- ✦ [*The New York Times Manual*](#) – for newspapers
- ✦ [*The Oxford Guide to Style/New Hart's Rules*](#) – for Oxford University Press
- ✦ [*The Publication Manual of the APA*](#) – for social sciences
- ✦ [*The ASA Style Guide*](#) – for sociology journals
- ✦ [*Yahoo! Style Guide*](#) – for web content
- ✦ [*Florida Style Manual*](#) – for laws and other government writing

Spread the Word on the Web

Consider these methods of making your work available to a wide audience of readers:

- ✦ Get accounts at Google.com, Facebook.com, Twitter.com, Microsoft Office Live, Scribd.com, DocStoc.com, and Archive.org. These provide archival space, online writing tools, and Google search engine indexing
- ✦ Use your Google account to start a blog (web log) at blogger.com, and make it visible to search engines like Google.
- ✦ You can create and manage multiple blogs, each with different purposes or focuses. Remember the rifle approach to marketing and information distribution. If you target a specific niche audience, instead of everyone in general, with a given blog account, your writing might gather a cult following.
- ✦ Set up Google AdSense on your blog and web sites. While Google Ads can distract

readers, they can also earn revenue and *drive* readers to your site. Why? Google tracks your site traffic and the reader click-throughs from your site. Since they and their advertisers want those click-throughs, Google will divert as much traffic as possible to your log if it has a lot of viewers.

- ⤴ Use your Google account to set up Google Docs. Put a copy of your writing in Google Docs, and share it.
- ⤴ Publish your articles to Scribd and DocStoc. You can cause Scribd to import items from Google Docs. Google indexes Scribd content almost immediately.
- ⤴ If you publish PDF files, make sure you can search and find the text they contain. Otherwise, Google and other search engines will not index the text in the document and web searchers will not find it. Some PDF files contain graphic images of text that you cannot edit or find in a text search.
- ⤴ Some systems, like Google Docs, will convert the graphic into actual editable, searchable text, but these might not work well. OmniPage Pro and Acrobat Pro contain Optical Character Recognition (OCR) engines that convert graphics to text. With OmniPage, you can see the text it renders without interference by graphics. You might have to mess with formatting, but you get highly accurate text that you can edit to repair OCR errors. Acrobat Pro sometimes does a poor job of OCR conversion, but you cannot see this by looking at the text because you see only the graphic image, not the converted text. You can only notice bad conversion when a search fails to find text you know the document contains. You have to decide how much time you want to spend on the conversion and editing process.

How to “Write Great”

The late, infamous ad copywriter Gary Halbert once explained a key to writing great works. He said if you want to learn to write great you must write great.

He meant you must study what great writers write, and find something you truly admire. Then you must write long-hand, word-for-word, precisely what they wrote. After a few dozen pages, you will begin to pick up and adapt to that style, making it your own. Then, according to Halbert, “you will write great.”

He also explained that to write great ad copy you must learn to tell a story. He always did, including himself in it, often deprecating himself and showing his flawed humanness. This tended to make readers feel closer to him. Why? Because all readers know that all people have flaws. They know that only the phonies want to impress you will camouflage the flaws with impeccable manners. By revealing his flaws, he made the readers drop the typical sales resistance. That made them become willing to enjoy the entertaining story and internalize his message. That led them to ACTION – buying the product.

I read somewhere that the great Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes once proclaimed that “All

conversation is for the purpose of persuasion.” Encyclopedia Britannica claims “Not all communication is intended to be persuasive; other purposes include informing or entertaining. Persuasion often involves manipulating people,...”

I agree with Holmes. Regardless of the resulting actions we want the reader to take (laugh, give attention, buy, vote), we write **only** to persuade. Therefore, **anything** we write which does not lead **to** that objective ultimately leads **away** from it.

I believe “writing great” includes these devices:

- specifically using a style that makes the reader comfortable;
- using organization that leads the reader from general to specific toward the intended action;
- using a story that warms the reader to the idea of taking the intended action; and
- using words that take the reader on a bee-line to the intended action.

Anything else wastes the time of both the writer and the reader, and takes up useless cyberspace, shelfspace, and mindspace. Word cops should ban it. I, self-appointed Word Cop, have sought to do precisely that by focusing your attention on the elements that makes writing great.