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Write to the Point

Writing Simply is Simply Better

"I notice that you use plain, simple language, short words and brief sentences. That is the way to write English - it is the modern way and the best way. Stick to it; don't let fluff and flowers and verbosity creep in. When you catch an adjective, kill it."

- A letter from Mark Twain to a 12-year-old fan, March 20, 1880.¹

Want a sure-fire way to save your company tons of time and money?

Cut through the bull that permeates corporate writing, and enact a company-wide policy that demands all writing from e-mails to annual reports to be correct, concise and interesting.

Sounds tough? Well, consider the alternative.

You know how it feels to be the recipient of missives that include paragraphs like this:

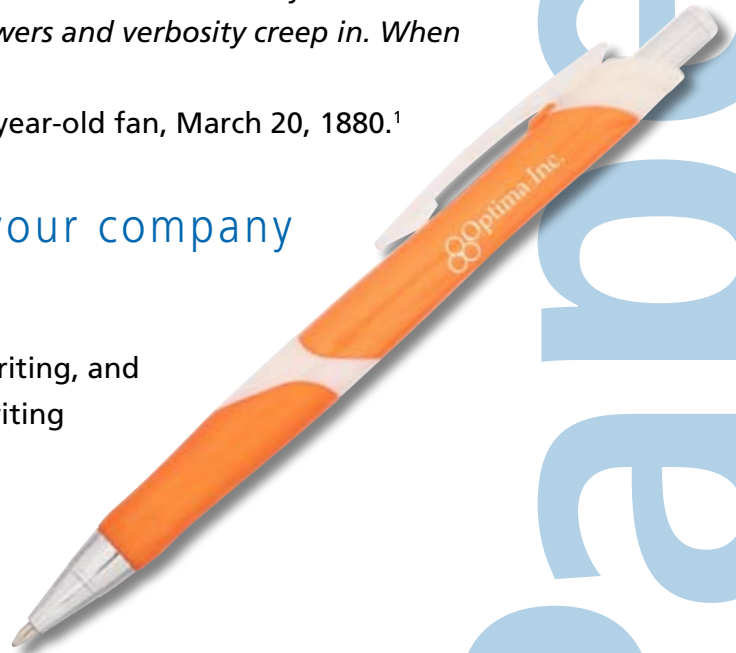
"In 2006, the minimum PDP benefit design will have a deductible of \$250. Medicare then pays 75% of the next \$2,000 of costs and the beneficiary is responsible for the coinsurance of 25%. After the beneficiary reaches the \$2,250 benefit threshold, the beneficiary is responsible for 100% of the next \$2,850 (the True Out-of-Pocket Cost, or TrOOP, a coverage gap commonly called the "donut hole,") for a total out-of-pocket expenditure of \$2,600, not counting the subscription fee. At the point, the PDP resumes coverage, paying 95% of all future costs, and the beneficiary pays 5%. There is no out-of-pocket so the beneficiary will continue to pay the 5% without limit."²

Huh? Exactly.

What exactly is **this** author trying to communicate? Reading the paragraph again only doubles the confusion, and that's a shame because the people getting the letter are already stuck in the Medicare quagmire. They don't need an unreadable letter to add to their anxieties.

¹"An Old Letter" in the *Topic of the Times* column The New York Times, December 25, 1939

²Medicare and your Medicare Supplement Prescription Drug Programs, letter from the Board of Pensions of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), August, 2005



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What the author of that mind-numbing paragraph has forgotten is that everything that he or she writes serves a purpose and conveys a message.

Does your message come across loud and clear like Google's simple three-word corporate motto: "*Don't be evil*,"³ or investment guru Warren Buffet's unflinching four-word statement: "*I was dead wrong*."⁴

Or does it sound muffled and full of static like the noise you hear at the fast-food drive-through lane?

Renowned writing instructor and author William Zinsser once wrote, "*How we write and how we talk is how we define ourselves*."⁵ How are you defining yourself with your words?

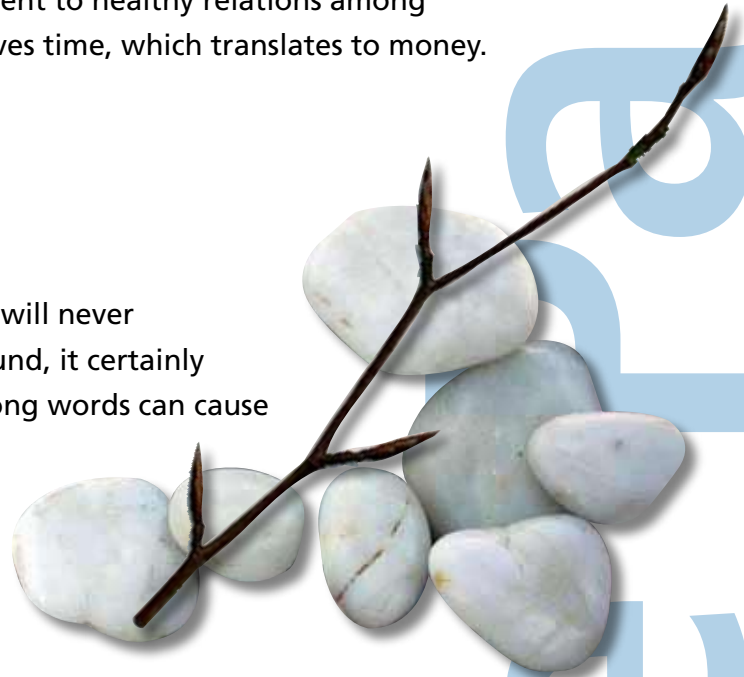
In the business arena, good writing is a key component to healthy relations among supervisors, employees and clients. Good writing saves time, which translates to money. Quite simply, good writing means good business.

Sticks and Stones

The familiar children's saying ends with "but words will never hurt me." While that may hold true on the playground, it certainly doesn't apply in the corporate world where the wrong words can cause more than bruised feelings.

Take the case of a poorly written memo.

According to a 2000 study conducted by IWCC Training in Communications, a consulting and training firm in Toronto, one employee's poorly worded memo costs a company \$4,258.60 annually.⁶ Or if you think e-mailing is the cheaper route, think again. The study shows that employees, who receive an average of 25 to 30 messages daily, spend 60 to 75 minutes each day responding to the messages. Based on an annual salary of \$35,000, at least \$357.20 each month is wasted responding to poorly written or ambiguous e-mails and e-mails sent to the wrong people.



³"An Owner's Manual" for Google's Shareholders, Letter from the Founders, Larry Page and Sergey Brin, as filed with the Securities and Exchange Commission, August 18, 2004

⁴A 2002 letter to shareholders from Warren Buffet, excerpted in *Why Business People Speak Like Idiots*, Brian Fugere, Chelsea Hardaway, Jon Warshawsky, p.144

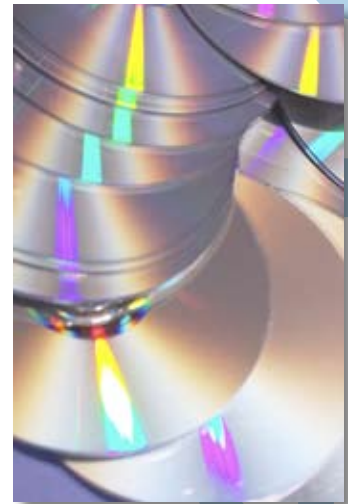
⁵*On Writing Well, The Classic Guide to Writing Nonfiction*, by William Zinsser, p. 168

⁶"How much can poorly worded memos cost you?" Entrepreneur Magazine, February 2000

Fixing the problem of fuzzy writing is not cheap. A 2004 study by the National Commission on Writing estimates American corporations spend more than \$3 billion annually to remedy deficiencies in writing.⁷

What's a Typo Hear or Their⁸

- Coleco lost \$35 million in one quarter partly because people found the manuals for a new computer unreadable and swamped the company with returns. In a statement to shareholders, Coleco blamed much of the consumer dissatisfaction on "*manuals which did not offer the first-time user adequate assistance.*"⁹ Two years later in 1985, the company ceased production of the Adam computer and declared bankruptcy in 1988.
- The owner's manuals in more than a million Honda vehicles listed a toll-free number to help drivers reach the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration. Unfortunately, Honda incorrectly printed the area code as 800 rather than 888, leading callers to a recorded message in which a woman's sultry voice encourages them to "*call 1-800-918-TALK for just 99 cents per minute.*"¹⁰
- British multimedia publisher DDS Media was forced to scrap 10,000 copies of TV anchor Eamonn Holmes' spelling game after it misspelled Holmes' name on the DVD.¹¹
- TextTrust, a company that uses a combination of software and human editors to scour the Web for spelling errors, issued a press release on the most commonly misspelled words it has found "*on the 16 million we (they meant web) pages it has spell-checked over the past year.*"¹²
- Bad writing cost a lawyer - and her firm - more than \$6.6 million. A Philadelphia court has ruled that a lease agreement drafted by the lawyer was so "inartfully written and done so in a confusing fashion ..." that it constituted malpractice.¹³



⁷"Writing: A Ticket to Work...or a Ticket Out, A Survey of Business Leaders, the National Commission on Writing, September 2004

⁸Use of incorrect homonyms was done on purpose by author of this paper.

⁹"How Does This" by John Greenwald, Time magazine, June 18, 1984

¹⁰"Dumbest Moments in Business," by Adam Horowitz, David Jacobson, Tom McNichol, and Owen Thomas, Time.com, July 2, 2007

¹¹Ibid

¹²Ibid

¹³"Attorney Hit With \$6.6 Million Malpractice Verdict" by Shannon P. Duffy, The Legal Intelligencer, April 23, 2007

The Flesch Reading Ease Scale

How does one combat bad writing? As with all self-improvement programs, you first have to recognize the problem's existence. In 1946, Dr. Rudolph Flesch devised the Flesch

Reading Ease Scale, a method to calculate the difficulty of reading a section of text. The readability score is then plotted on a scale from 0 to 100, with 100 being the easiest to read.

In his *"How to Write Plain English,"* Flesch demonstrates how his scale works with the sentence, *"John loves Mary,"* which scores a highly readable 92. But when he added some sophistication - *"John has a profound affection for Mary"* - the score falls to 67. But, Flesch asks, *"Just exactly what are John's feelings toward Mary?"* Does anyone know from that sentence?

Throw in some complexities and you get this: *"Even though John is not normally given to a display of his deeper emotions, he allegedly has developed a profound affection for Mary, as compared to the more equable feelings he seems to have for Lucy, Fran and, to a lesser extent, Sue."* Now the score plummets to the *"difficult"* rating of 32. The sentence compares in difficulty with the Harvard Law Review.¹⁴

While Flesch's method involves a complex formula, his findings are clear: Long sentences and long words demand more education and effort of the reader.

Here are some examples of his formula in practice:

Comics	92
Reader's Digest	65
Sports Illustrated	63
Time	52
New York Times	39
IRS tax code	-6

To make your copy more readable, Flesch has two tips.

1. Cut the average sentence length. Break up long, complex sentences and change them to two, three or four shorter ones. In other words, sprinkle periods over your piece of writing.
2. Replace complex words with simple ones.¹⁵

¹⁴How to Write Plain English by Rudolf Flesch, Chapter 2: Let's Start With the Formula, viewed at <http://pages.stern.nyu.edu/~wstarbuc/Writing/>.

¹⁵Ibid



The Good, the Bad and the Ugly

The good:

Business writings do not have to be long-winded, fuzzy or, worse yet, dull.

Take this sentiment:

*"Don't be evil. We believe strongly that in the long term, we will be better served—as shareholders and in all other ways—by a company that does good things for the world even if we forgo some short term gains. This is an important aspect of our culture and is broadly shared within the company."*¹⁶



The message rings loud and clear.

But contrast that with the bad and, quite frankly ...

The ugly:

*"We have robust networks of strategic assets that we own or have contractual access to, which gives us greater flexibility and speed to reliably deliver widespread logistical solutions ... We have metamorphosed from an asset-based pipeline and power generating company to a marketing and logistics company whose biggest assets are its well-established business approach and its innovative people."*¹⁷

Hands down, clear and direct writing wins.

The Painless Way to Write Letters and Memos

Jefferson D. Bates, author of *Writing with Precision*, offers several rules for writing.¹⁸

Rule No. 1: Do not write without good reason.

Bates says talking in person is quickest, least expensive, and least likely to lead to misunderstandings. He suggests following these steps before putting pen to paper:

- If you can talk your message in person, do so.
- If you can't talk it in person, telephone.



¹⁶"An Owner's Manual," Page and Brin

¹⁷Enron Annual Report, 2000, excerpted in "Why Business People Speak Like Idiots," p.44

¹⁸Writing with Precision by Jefferson D. Bates, p.85

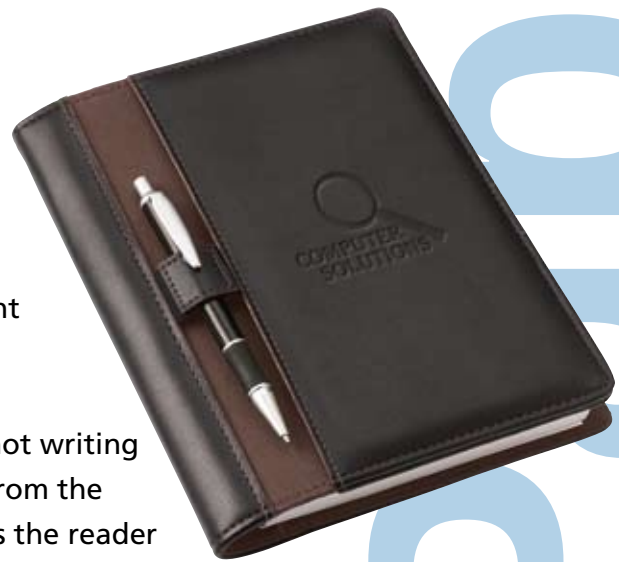
- If telephoning won't get the job done, then, and only then, write.

Rule No. 2: Slant your presentation for your audience.

Aim your message at that specific person or group of people. Regardless of what your message may be, you can't expect to deliver it successfully if you always use the same approach, paying no attention to the difference in the background of your various readers.

Rule No. 3: Get straight to the point.

- Write down your statement of purpose. Ask yourself the following questions: What is the real reason I'm writing this? What is the main idea I want to convey? What response do I want from the reader?
- Set forth the points more interesting or important to the reader at the very beginning.
- Put the conclusion near the beginning. You are not writing a detective story in which you hold things back from the reader. Do the opposite of that. Give the answers the reader needs without trying to build up suspense.



In Paula LaRocque's *The Book on Writing*, LaRocque offers a dozen guidelines to good writing.¹⁹ Here are some of the highlights:

- Be wary of jargon, fad, and cliché. LaRocque says the problem with language fad and cliché is obvious: Over time, such expression grows flat, predictable, and dull. Her list of expressions that have overstayed their welcome include the following: closure, cobble together, cusp, empowerment, got game, having said that, make no mistake about it, push the envelope, raise the bar, ramp up, ratchet up, rush to judgment, that said, window of opportunity.
- Avoid beginning with long dependent phrases. Stick to the clear and natural sentence structure of subject, verb, and object. *"That's the way we generally think and speak,"* she writes. *"You would not approach someone and say: Apparently trying to counter the notion of policy paralysis in the White House and a war campaign suddenly set adrift ... You wouldn't say that because, first, people would stop listening. And second, you try not to bore and bewilder. That same applies to writing."*

¹⁹ *The Book on Writing* by Paula LaRocque, p. 82

- Avoid vague qualifiers. If LaRocque had her way, she'd strike the qualifier "very" from the English language. LaRocque says that four-letter, over-used word "drains life and vigor from otherwise robust expression. Intended to heighten, it merely flattens." LaRocque would also limit the use of other qualifiers including extremely, totally, completely, wholly, entirely, utterly, really, quite, rather, somewhat, slightly fairly, etc. Rather than fortify the less-than-right word with an intensifier, try harder to find the right standalone word, she says.

Bottom line, words hold great power. It is up to you, the source of that power, to use it for good. Rid the world of memo-speak. Eliminate fuzzy words. Write with clarity. Write with strength. Write with purpose.

Be a superhero. Save the world – one memo at a time.

Here are some links to online writing tools:

- Plug a sample of your writing into three readability formulas including the Flesch Reading Ease Scale. http://literacynews.com/readability/readability_analyses.php
- The Top Twelve E-Mail Mistakes That Can Sabotage Your Career <http://www.chiff.com/a/business-email-format.htm>
- The Purdue Online Writing Lab has a chock full of handouts and exercises on writing. <http://owl.english.purdue.edu/>
- Strunk & White, The Elements of Style
Asserting that one must first know the rules to break them, this classic reference book is a must-have for any conscientious writer. <http://www.bartleby.com/141/>
- Ten Mistakes Writers Don't See (But Can Easily Fix When They Do) by Pat Holt, former Book Review Editor and critic for The San Francisco Chronicle. http://www.holtuncensored.com/ten_mistakes.html
- Grammar and Usage for the Non-Expert <http://www.grammartips.homestead.com/index.html>

