

Effective Writing in the Workplace

Presented by

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Here's a straightforward, but uninteresting text

Once upon a time there was Little Red Riding Hood, Grandma, the Woodsman and the Wolf. The End

We have clear, concrete characters but no actions.



Let's describe some actions

Once upon a time, there was a walking through the woods to a house, when a jump out from the tree caused surprise.

These actions are interesting, but are not associated with clearly defined characters.



Actions now have Characters and vice versa

*Once upon a time, there a walking through
the woods on the part of Little Red Riding
Hood to her Grandma's house was,
when the Wolf's jump out from behind a
tree caused surprise in her.*

But the associations are indirect because of vague
pronouns and passive voice.

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We expect to read

Once upon a time, Little Red Riding Hood was walking through the woods to her Grandma's house when a Wolf jumped out from behind a tree and surprised her.



With whom do you communicate in writing?

- ▶ Supervisor(s)
- ▶ Reports
- ▶ Peers in your department
- ▶ Peers in other departments (HR, Sales, Admin, Legal. . .)
- ▶ Clients and Customers (AR, AP, C-level, worker bees. . .)
- ▶ Vendors, Partners, Outside Sales
- ▶ Recruits



What do you communicate through writing?

- Reports
- Training materials
- Project management artifacts (registries, charter. . .)
- Policy manuals
- Status reports, budget reports,
- Client / customer communication
- Agendas
- Meeting notes
- Functional requirements, specifications,
- Performance reviews



What forms of written communication do you use?

- Email
- Chat, IM
- Social Media: LinkedIn, FB and other professional groups,
- Text
- Word, Excel, PPT
- Visio, Lucid Chart, other process mapping tools
- Jira, Asana, other PM tracking tools
- Bug tracking software



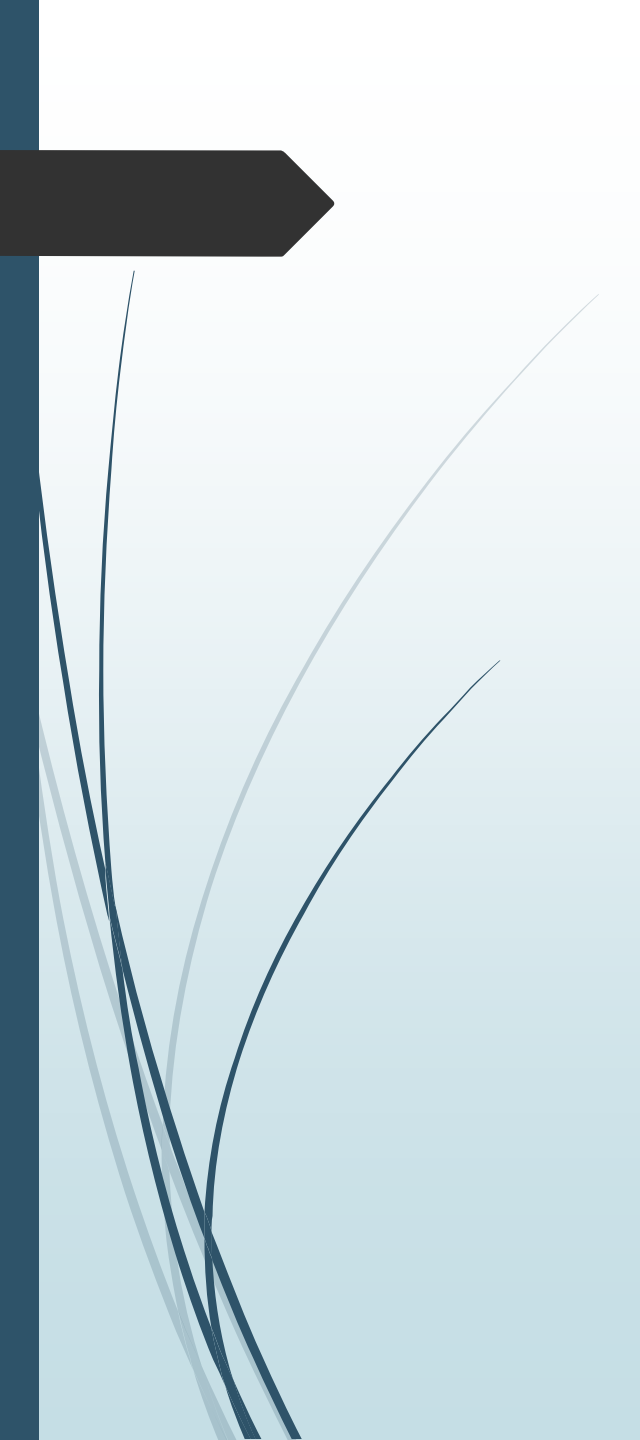
Writing versus Speaking

► Pros and Cons of Writing

- Written creates a history (CYA)
- Allows us to respond in our own time
- Can be faster
- Can take multiple iterations
- Can't see the readers' reaction

► Pros and Cons of Speaking

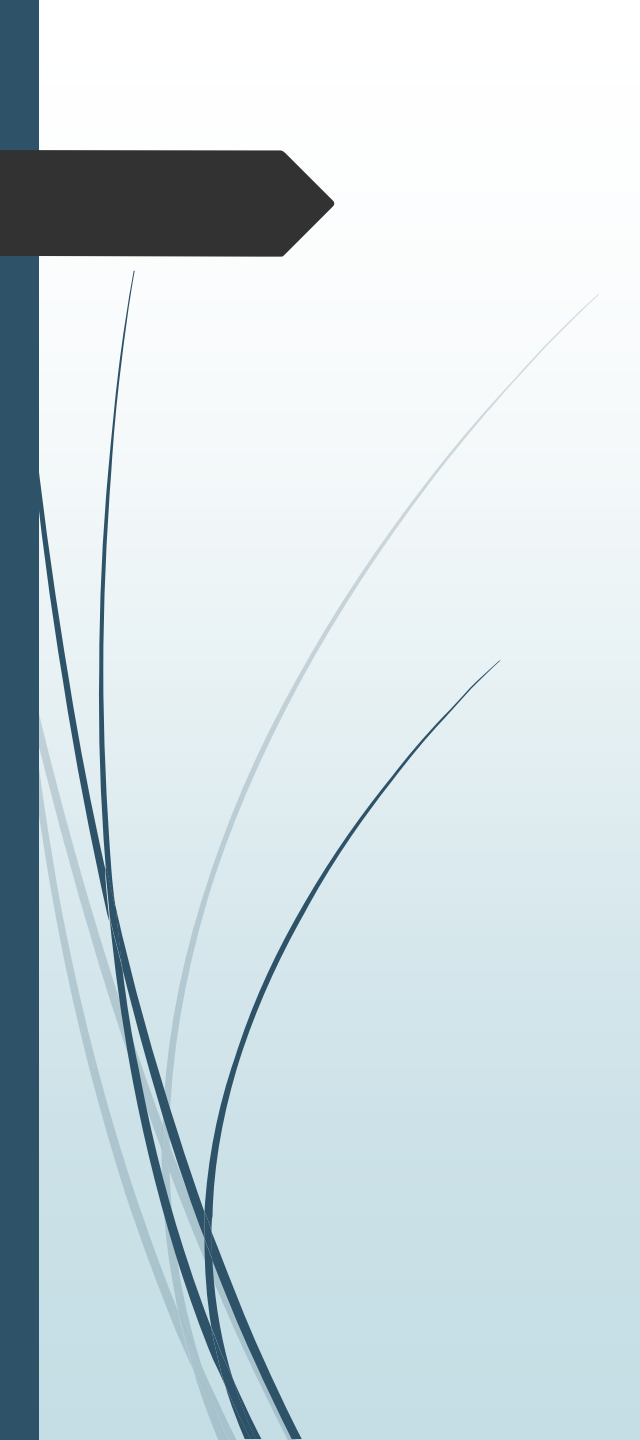
- Spoken allows you to "hear" and "see" the speakers nonverbal cues
- 93% of communication is nonverbal
- Can take longer
- Can get emotional



**DON'T YOU
TYPE AT
ME IN THAT
TONE OF
VOICE.**

Maybe your writing isn't as good as you think it is





How important is effective writing in the workplace?

- ▶ In a survey of 1,000 professionals, 28% blamed failure to deliver a project on time on poor communication*
- ▶ In a study of 4,000 employees**
 - ▶ 46% said they routinely received confusing or unclear directions
 - ▶ 36% of this group said it happened up to 3 times day
 - ▶ They estimated that 40 minutes of productivity was wasted each day



What is *effective* writing?

- ▶ Concise
 - ▶ Avoid nominalizations
 - ▶ Reduce prepositional phrases
 - ▶ Delete meaningless words
 - ▶ Delete redundant pairs and double words
 - ▶ Replace a phrase with a word, a sentence with a phrase
 - ▶ Change negatives to affirmatives
 - ▶ Eliminate unnecessary metadiscourse
- ▶ Clear
 - ▶ Give your characters actions and vice versa
 - ▶ Start sentences well
 - ▶ Join ideas with transitional metadiscourse
 - ▶ Use active voice--most of the time
 - ▶ Avoid misplaced modifiers
 - ▶ Choose precise words.



Concision

"I made this letter longer than usual because I lacked the time to make it short."

Attributed to Blaise Pascal

True conciseness consists of achieving a balance between lean prose and sufficient detail.




Elements of Concision

- ▶ Avoid nominalizations
- ▶ Reduce prepositional phrases
- ▶ Delete meaningless words
- ▶ Delete redundant pairs and double words
- ▶ Replace a phrase with a word, a sentence with a phrase
- ▶ Eliminate unnecessary metadiscourse



Avoid nominalizations

- ▶ Nouns or noun phrases express actions (movement, thought, discovery) compared with verbs that express actions (move, think, discover).
 - ▶ Eliminating nominalizations will help to maintain active voice.
 - ▶ Nominalizations are abstract and make for vague characters
- 



Nominalizations to Verbs

- Definition
 - Emphasis
 - Motivation
 - Evaluation
 - Comparison
 - Suggestion
 - Approach
 - Implementation
 - Analysis
- 



Practice: Nominalizations

- ▶ My **suggestion** is that you perform the **analysis** on the budget and timeline to determine the cost performance index.
- ▶ I would like to place **emphasis** on the fact that our revenue is down this quarter.
- ▶ Could you make a **comparison** of the various candidates for this position.



Reduce prepositional phrases

- ▶ This will be done **in** order **to** permit and encourage the owners **to** discuss **with** one another how **to** improve their specific tasks.
- ▶ The first step **in** the process **of** strategic management is **for** an organization **to** establish a mission statement.
- ▶ It is critical **to** the sponsors **of** the project **with** final authority that the charter is signed **upon** delivery and **after** the introductions



Delete meaningless words

- kind of
- sort of
- type of
- really
- basically
- definitely
- actually
- generally
- individual
- specific
- particular
- just



Practice: Meaningless Words

- ▶ We are **very** pleased to begin working with you.
- ▶ **Typically**, we meet three times a week.
- ▶ You will **actually** be meeting with the project sponsor and not the CIO.
- ▶ We are **basically** finished with the first phase of the project.
- ▶ What I **really** like about the new format is the color-coding.



Delete redundant pairs

- ▶ team members
- ▶ enhance motivation
- ▶ absolutely true
- ▶ past memories
- ▶ various differences
- ▶ true facts
- ▶ important essentials
- ▶ future plans
- ▶ terrible tragedy
- ▶ end result
- ▶ final outcome
- ▶ free gift
- ▶ past history
- ▶ unexpected surprise
- ▶ completely finish
- ▶ consensus of opinion
- ▶ anticipate in advance
- ▶ very unique



Practice: Redundant Pairs

- ▶ The **various differences** between the teams contributed to the conflict.
- ▶ This phase of the project is **completely finished**.
- ▶ Our **future plans** include automation and advance searching.
- ▶ The **end result** of the project retrospective was that the client signed a support contract.



Replace a phrase with a word, a sentence with a phrase

1. It is difficult to explain the reason that the order is delayed. ***the reason that***
2. Despite the fact that we checked the results, I found errors. ***despite the fact that***
3. In the event that the order is delayed, contact us immediately. ***in the event that***
4. I contacted her with regard to the late order. ***with regard to***
5. She is in a position to help you locate your order. ***is in a position to***



Eliminate metadiscourse

- ▶ **Let us begin by looking** at how our system is structured.
- ▶ **As stated above**, in order to provide personalized travel services each of our employees must have the required knowledge and information to do so.
- ▶ **For all intents and purposes** the project was completed over a month ago.
- ▶ **Due to the fact that** we are over budget, we must stop working on the project until the client signs a change order.



Elements of Concision

- Avoid nominalizations
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- Replace a phrase with a word, a sentence with a phrase
- Eliminate unnecessary metadiscourse

Clarity





Elements of Clarity



- ▶ Give your characters actions and vice versa
- ▶ Start sentences well
- ▶ Join ideas with transitional metadiscourse
- ▶ Use active voice--most of the time
- ▶ Avoid misplaced modifiers
- ▶ Choose precise words.

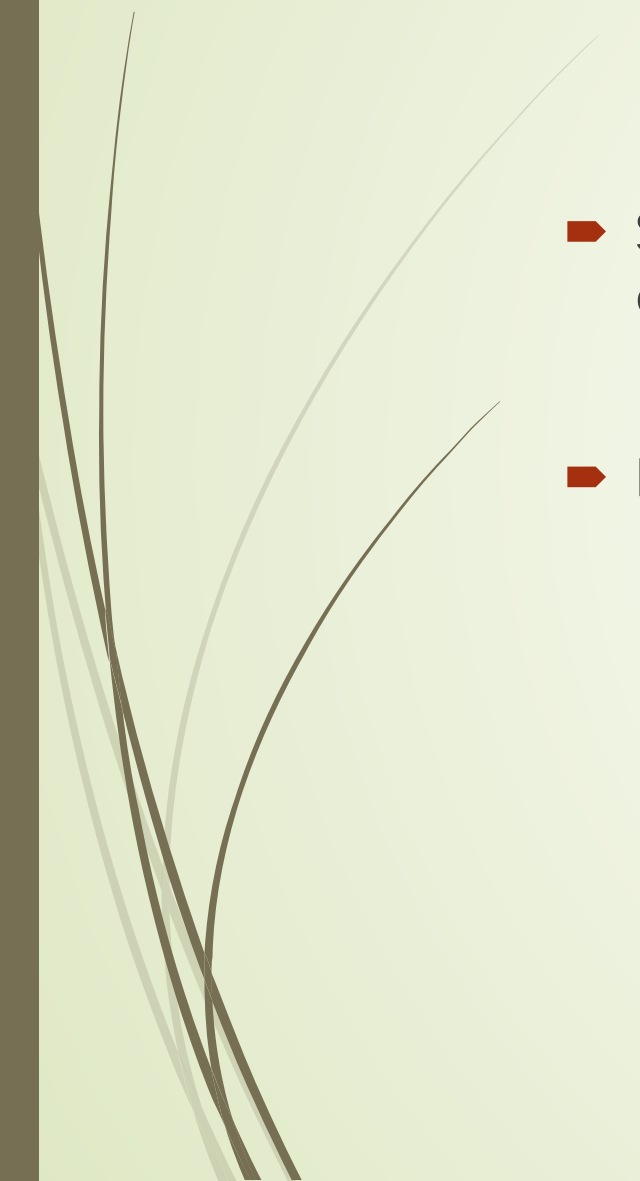


Clarity

- ▶ **“Fuzzy writing allows fuzzy thinking.** Clear writing uses well-organized, active-voice sentences to explain what is happening, what ought to happen, and what people need to do. Conversely, inexact and passive language reflects gaps in thinking.”



Characters and Actions

- ▶ Subject = Character: the topic or main actor in a sentence, using clear nouns
 - ▶ Predicate = Action: what the main actor does, using strong verbs
- 



Vague Characters and Actions

- ▶ Hopping briskly through the vegetable garden, I saw a toad.
- ▶ Being only five, the doctor did not know how to operate on me.
- ▶ We will be having our salesmen be in direct contact with our customers.
- ▶ The following list of security coordinators has authority to write policy statements.
- ▶ By focusing on employee development the process of determining rewards and compensation as well as enhancing employee motivation has been simplified.




Start Sentences Well

- ▶ “First six or seven words” rule
- ▶ Avoid the “empty subject.” i.e. starting sentences with *it, there, this*
- ▶ To connect a sentence to the preceding one we use transitional metadiscourse such as *therefore, in addition to, nevertheless.*



Practice: First 6 or 7 words

- ▶ Covered with hot melted cheese, we ate the pizza.
 - ▶ The appreciation of a host-controlled environment will become not only the best way but the only way to implement complexity of a distributed network
 - ▶ A clear understanding of the conversion that will take place is illustrated by the diagrams that follow.
- 



Practice: Empty Subjects

1. It is our philosophy that personalized travel services can only be provided by experienced agents.
2. It will be critical for upper management to implement and carry out consistent performance reviews that are accepted and agreed upon by support team members.
3. There are various evaluation systems that will be used during an employee evaluation.




Transitional Metadiscourse

- **Addition/compare:** moreover, furthermore, also, besides, likewise, similarly, also
- **Time:** meanwhile, after, next, during, later, previously
- **Contrast:** however, instead, on the contrary, on the other hand
- **Result:** therefore, so, consequently, as a result
- **Concession:** nevertheless, yet, still, at any rate, after all, of course
- **Apposition (examples):** for example, for instance, that is, in other words
- **Summary:** thus, then, in conclusion
- **Reinforcement:** further, indeed, in particular, above all, in fact



Practice: Transitions

- ▶ The stakeholders have not reviewed the contract. We cannot begin the project this week. If they sign the contract, we can begin next week.
 - ▶ The team is ahead of schedule on the Tulip project. The team is four months behind on the Sunflower project.
 - ▶ We make an investment in our employees. We are looking for a long term commitment from our employees.
- 

Active vs Passive Voice





Passive Voice

- ▶ Because passive voice submerges the Character, it often obscures the meaning.
- ▶ Typically, more words are required to construct a passive sentence than an active sentence.
- ▶ Passive voice can be a good rhetorical strategy for denials, disclaimers, or any other context in which the "actor" should be submerged ("*Mistakes were made.*")



Practice: Passive Voice

- ▶ The final evaluation given to the salesmen will be one of legal compliance.
- ▶ Each of the three levels of the organization will have similar rewards available.
- ▶ The superintendent insisted the young teacher be rehired and that an apology be written to the music teacher.



Misplaced Modifiers

A modifier is an optional element in a phrase that enhances the meaning of another element in the phrase.

Modifiers should be placed as close as possible to the text they modify.

"I met a man with a wooden leg named Smith."

"What was the name of his other leg?"



Practice: Misplaced Modifiers

- ▶ The guest speaker dedicated his new book to his dog **who was an archaeologist**.
- ▶ **While camping**, I saw a bear in my pajamas.
- ▶ The very customers whom they instruct will evaluate our Instructors **frequently**.
- ▶ One week, **all expenses paid**, vacation to one of our travel destinations



Precise Word Choice

- ▶ Avoid non-descriptive (auxiliary) verbs, such as be, have, do
- ▶ Choose words that are appropriate in context and diction
- ▶ Be sure you understand the definition before you use the word.
- ▶ Understand your reader when using buzzwords and jargon

Non-descriptive verbs





Practice: Descriptive Verbs

- ▶ I **have been** a project manager for 20 years.
- ▶ A problem that we repeatedly encounter **is** clients who can't articulate their business processes.
- ▶ I **have had** training in both agile and waterfall project management methods.
- ▶ One difference between television news reporting and the coverage provided by newspapers **is** the time factor between the actual happening of an event and the time it takes to be reported.



Practice: Context / Diction

- ▶ When I began the project I was completely **clueless** about **alot** of the work that needed to be done.
- ▶ Instructors will be involved in **enhancing** the company by improving training programs, promotional events and policies.
- ▶ Meaning
 - Skills vs abilities
 - Displaying vs demonstrating (abilities)
 - Probable vs potential (customers)
 - Irregardless



Buzzwords and Jargon

- ▶ https://youtu.be/MHg_M_zKA6Y



Practice: Jargon and Buzzwords

- ▶ Push the envelope
- ▶ Cutting edge
- ▶ Bring to the table
- ▶ Low-hanging fruit
- ▶ Ask (as a noun)
- ▶ Give (as a noun)
- ▶ At the end of the day
- ▶ Reach out
- ▶ Best of breed
- ▶ World class
- ▶ Safe harbor
- ▶ Sea Change

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A QUICK DIAGNOSIS

- ▶ Underline the first six or seven words of every sentence. Do they contain a clear character and a strong action?
- ▶ Search for empty subjects
- ▶ Read your text aloud
- ▶ Read the sentences in reverse order to ensure that they make sense
- ▶ Identify your own bugaboos
 - ▶ Search feature



Remember. . .

The reader comes first. While you certainly want to be satisfied with your writing, in professional communication you want to be thinking about how your readers judge your prose.



References

- ▶ Bernoff, Josh. *Bad Writing is Destroying Your Company's Productivity*. Harvard Business Review. September 06, 2016. <https://hbr.org/2016/09/bad-writing-is-destroying-your-companys-productivity>
- ▶ Hunkins, Alain. *Why Is Effective Communication So Difficult?* The Business of Behavior. June 7, 2015. <http://www.pioneerleadership.com/2015/06/why-is-effective-communication-so-difficult/>
- ▶ Williams, Joseph. *Style: Ten Lessons in Clarity and Grace*. New York: HarperCollins, 1989.*
- ▶ Stuff Business People Say. https://youtu.be/MHg_M_zKA6Y

Recommendations

- ▶ *Williams has published a 12th edition of this valuable work. If you're interested in writing, you will probably enjoy it.
- ▶ An excellent reference site is The Purdue Online Writing Lab (OWL). You'll find answers to everything from comma placement to MLA citations.

