

The Art of Communication

CLEAR WRITING EQUALS GREATER IMPACT

Yesterday, I received four voicemail messages and 62 e-mails. The tide has turned and we now communicate at work far more through writing than through actual conversation. So here are a few things to keep in mind about effective writing:

- **Keep your focus on the reader.**

Your document isn't about you or your content; it's about how your reader needs to use your content. If you focus on the needs of the reader, you will select the appropriate information to share, provide the correct level of detail, and use language that resonates with the reader. I once read a report from a consultant that began, "I'm going to start by conveying to you my thought process as I gathered my research." He then rambled on for 10 pages of flow-of-consciousness drivel before getting to the point. There may have been some value in the conclusions he drew later in his document, but I was so angry by the time I got to that part I was questioning why I hired him rather than the value of his suggestions.

- **Get to the point quickly.**

If the reader knows where you are heading with your analysis, or what you need the reader to do with the information, she will read the content in the larger context of the end result. If the reader doesn't know where you are headed, each piece of information conveyed seems isolated because the reader doesn't understand the big picture.

- **Keep your language simple.**

In school, we wrote to show how much we knew. However, at work, everyone already assumes we're smart. Our writing should help our audience accomplish their goals, not demonstrate an expansive vocabulary. The goal of communicating in a business context is to have impact. We have a greater chance of moving someone to action if our content is easy to understand.

- **Use strong verbs.**

Avoid the noun-forms of verbs that often complicate both the substance and the style of the delivery. Words that end in -tion, -able and -ance are nouns that mask strong verbs. By reworking the sentence to use the verb instead of the noun, you will have more direct messages.

For example, "The statute's compliance provisions require a thorough assessment of the client's Internet security procedures by an independent party" is much clearer when written "To comply with the statute, our client must hire a third party to assess its Internet security procedures."

Try this: Print a copy of the next document you draft. Circle every word that ends in -tion, -ment or -ance. Challenge yourself on each word. Is there another word in the sentence that reflects the real message you want to convey?

Some words can be nouns or verbs without changing form. For example, in "We should conduct a study of the client's compliance procedures," the word "study" is a noun. Make it the verb: "We should study how the client complies with regulations." The sentence is shorter, and the necessary action is clear.

By using strong verbs, you also will be less likely to write in the passive voice. Of course, the passive voice is not inherently bad; it simply conveys a different message. Our U.S. Constitution is the best example of legal writing that employs both the active and passive voices to meet different ends. The Preamble is written in the active voice with clear strong verbs:

We the People of the United States, in Order to form a more perfect Union, establish Justice, insure domestic Tranquility, provide for the common defense, promote the general Welfare, and secure the Blessings of Liberty to ourselves and our Posterity, do ordain and establish this Constitution for the United States of America.

Our founders wanted to ensure that their reasons for taking the actions they took were as clear as possible.

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Most of the rest of the Constitution is written in the passive voice.

All legislative Powers herein granted shall be vested in a Congress...

So are most statutes. For example: "The members of the state committee of each party shall be elected from such units of representation as the state committee shall by rule provide." New York State Election Law.

"An application for a parade permit shall be filed with the Village Police Chief not less than 14 business days nor more than one year before the date on which it is proposed to conduct the parade." Code of the Village of Pleasantville, N.Y.

The passive voice conveys a sense of greater authority since the action in the sentence is often not attributed to anyone or anything. It is immutable in terms of originating authority. However, the passive voice also allows for interpretation. The drafters of the Constitution knew the document's content would have to be applied in settings they had no way of anticipating. While scholars and common citizens have debated the content of the Constitution endlessly

since it was enacted, we accept the Preamble, written in the active voice, at face value.

The easiest way to monitor whether you are writing in the active or passive voice is to note where you have placed the "actor" in the sentence. Put the actor before the verb and you will almost always write in the active voice.

An example of the passive voice: "The document review was conducted by the junior associate." Active voice: "The junior associate reviewed the documents."

When we learned to read in grade school, the first sentences we were taught were simple declarative sentences: "Little Miss Muffet sat on a tuffet." Our brains process declarative sentences more easily than other sentences structures.

• **Use personal pronouns.**

Your documents should sound like they are written by a human being, not generated by a computer. In contracts, referring to the parties as "Buyer" and "Seller" (or "Tenant" and "Subtenant") is a necessary evil. But in your cover letter to the client, referring to yourself as "Smith & Jones, LLP" is unnecessarily formal.

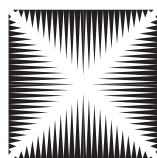
Again, look at the Constitution. The very first word is a personal pronoun—"We." If personal pronouns are good enough for the Constitution, they are perfectly acceptable in your legal correspondence.

• **Keep sentences and paragraphs short.**

Aim for a maximum of 25 words per sentence. Once a sentence is longer than that, it becomes hard for our brains to process the information. And keep paragraphs to, at most, a quarter of the page; anything longer is visually intimidating. The novel "The DaVinci Code" is a great example of the benefit of giving people information in small pieces. It was a hit on the summer reading list in part because it was so easy to read. If you have a copy, flip through the chapters. There is not a single chapter in the book that exceeds four pages.

In sum, keep the focus on the reader and on having him put your ideas to action. Keep your message simple—simple language, simple sentences, simple structure. If you make it easy for others to read your content, you have a better chance of getting their buy-in on your ideas.

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