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MY VIEW

Reading More Helps Make You A Better Writer

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While taking a business writing program, whether it's with bankers, accountants or lawyers, a participant will ask how to become a better writer. The answer is easy: Become a better reader. But how, people ask, and then an excuse usually follows: "I don't have time," "I read too slowly" or "I don't know what to read." These may be truisms, but they shouldn't hold you back.

First, give yourself permission to read everything. If it looks interesting, pick it up. Newspapers and magazines are great examples of how to organize information. Articles and editorials lead with the key point and then add details, evidence and facts to support the key point. In your own writing, try thinking like a reporter and follow the story in the reports you write. What happened? Who did it? What will happen next? This gives a report structure and helps logically present the specifics to the reader.

The fairly short sentence and paragraph structure in newspapers, and most general interest magazines, is immedi-

ately transferable to writing business e-mails. Eliminate all those unapproachable walls of text and create reader-friendly paragraphs.

Feeling emboldened now? Let's move from the newsstand to the bookstore. Don't think twice about picking up a romantic novel. Consider how well those writers choose their verbs. In these books you rarely read, "He kissed her." Instead these characters lunge, languish, smother and squirm. Active and dynamic verbs keep the characters, the plot and action moving along heatedly. Boring verbs, especially the overused "to be" verb, bore readers. Consider the opening line of Jacqueline Suzanne's *The Valley of the Dolls*: "It hit 90 degrees the day she came to town." Who wouldn't want to read on?

Similarly, a tantalizing thriller from Brad Meltzer or Janet Evanovich proves that good pacing holds a reader's interest. These books are fast reads because they use language that is easy to read and understand. Also, thrillers focus on the action, without any extra words or details. Try writing this way: Tell just the action and leave out all the fluff.

Read nonfiction too. Autobiographies provide great examples of writing in the first person — the same as in most business writing. Histories and biographies show the value of thoroughly researching and mastering a topic. They also shine as examples of talking about events that happened in the past, but without writing about these actions in the passive voice.

Finally, some good tips for readers: Read book reviews in newspapers and magazines and listen to authors on television or radio shows. Then compile a list of books you'd like to read and one of books you have read. This way you will never lack for things to read or recommend to others.

Also, keep a folder of articles, editorials or features you enjoyed reading to inspire you when you're stuck.

Adult readers don't receive gold stars for finishing books. Try reading the first 75 pages. If it bores you, move on. There's no shortage of things to read. So go crack a few spines.

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