



Ten Sure-Fire Ways to Improve your Writing

1. **Plan!** Many writers don't take much time to plan; in fact, many simply begin writing, believing that that first draft will become their final draft with just a little "cleaning up" and reorganization. For writing tasks, 80 percent of your time should be spent planning and only 20 percent should be spent actually writing, a formula that will result in less rewriting and revision and less wasted time. **Consider:** Using freewriting, brainstorming, outlining or a combination to begin planning.
2. **Figure out, in advance, what your "walk-away" message is.** Effective writers have a very good idea of the take-home, or walk-away, message of their document. If you don't know, and haven't taken the time to write it down, chances are good that your reader will come to different conclusion; consequently, you'll be less likely to achieve your goal. **Consider:** Writing a purpose statement that clearly indicates what action you want your readers to take.
3. **Understand your reader.** This involves more than simply saying, "My boss Joe is my reader." Some questions you need to ask are "Will Joe read the document in its entirety or will he skim?" "What kind of information is Joe looking for?" "Who else may read the document and what are they looking for?" You should be able to come up with a list of several questions that you need to answer about your reader. **Consider:** Using an audience rubric or other checklist to figure out what you need to know about your reader.
4. **Figure out how much information your reader needs.** Too often, writers provide every bit of information available when, if they took some time to think about it, they'd realize that readers don't necessarily need the details. Or that we can use writing strategies to emphasize the main topic and de-emphasize the details. **Consider:** Using a purpose rubric or checklist to figure out what information your reader needs and why.
5. **Know what the reader expects from the document in terms of organization and ensure that the organizational strategy you use is appropriate.** In other words, in addition to understanding the kind of information that Joe is looking for, we need to understand where Joe expects to find that information. How does he expect the document to be organized? General to specific? Specific to general? Chronological? There are many ways to organize a document and the organizational strategy that you use should be based on your reader's expectations and the kind of information you're presenting. **Consider:** Thinking about organization as a method to ensure that your reader will come to the conclusion you'd like him/her to.
6. **Understand how your reader expects the information to be relayed in both sentences and paragraphs.** Writers have many choices when it comes to structuring sentences and paragraphs; however, we need to understand how readers make sense of information to structure the information appropriately. Many writers construct their sentences using the notion of "Keep it short." Not true; if all of your sentences are short, you're going to lose the reader. **Consider:**

Using a variety of sentence lengths and ensuring that the most important information is in the shortest sentences.

7. **Figure out what terminology and verbiage your reader expects.** Unfortunately, many writers write using the most “pompous” words they can, thinking (subconsciously perhaps) that using these words makes them sound smart. The opposite may be true—readers don’t want to struggle to get through a document—they want to read it and move on. The rule is that if you can use one word rather than two or more, do; and, if you can use a one-syllable word rather than a multiple-syllable word, do (“utilize” versus “use,” for instance). **Consider:** Using the Fogg Index (<http://www.languagemonitor.com/tag/fogg-index/>) or any one of the many readability indices available to determine how much education your reader would theoretically need to be able to read and understand your document.
8. **Anticipate reader questions.** Many writers tend to not consider what questions their readers may have; instead, they write as though the reader believes the same things about the topic, has no bias, and will fully understand and/or agree with the information provided in the document. **Consider:** Reading your document from the perspective of your reader and/or asking someone with less familiarity than you to read and comment on it.
9. **Understand what you wish to emphasize.** Effective writing is more than just putting words on a page; it involves thinking carefully about what you wish to emphasize and why. Readability studies show us that readers pay closest attention to what comes first and last in sentence and first and last in a paragraph. Knowing this can help us fashion sentences and paragraphs that emphasize the appropriate information. **Consider:** Ensuring that the most important information is first and last in a sentence and that you haven’t muddied your sentences with clichés such as “It is important to note.” Such clichés ensure that the most important information isn’t first.
10. **Delete words that add no value.** One of our recent newsletters focused on this issue. It’s a simple concept: if a word or words can be deleted and the sentence means the same thing that means that those words weren’t necessary. Superfluous words do nothing but cloud the message. Consider: Using a “slash and burn” technique to eliminate all words that add no value (some obvious ones are “in order to” rather than “to” and “Due to the fact that” rather than “because”).

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