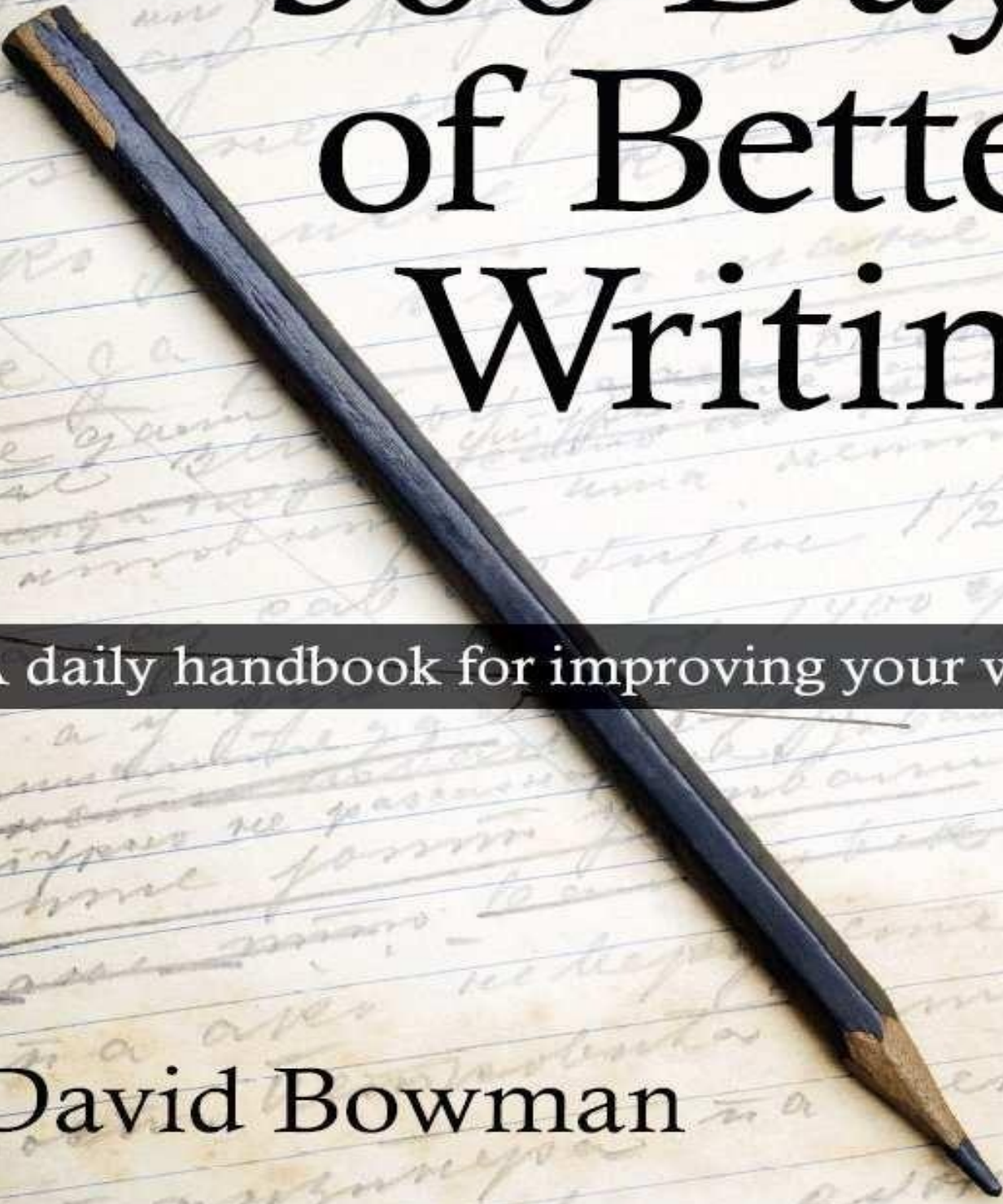


# 300 Days of Better Writing

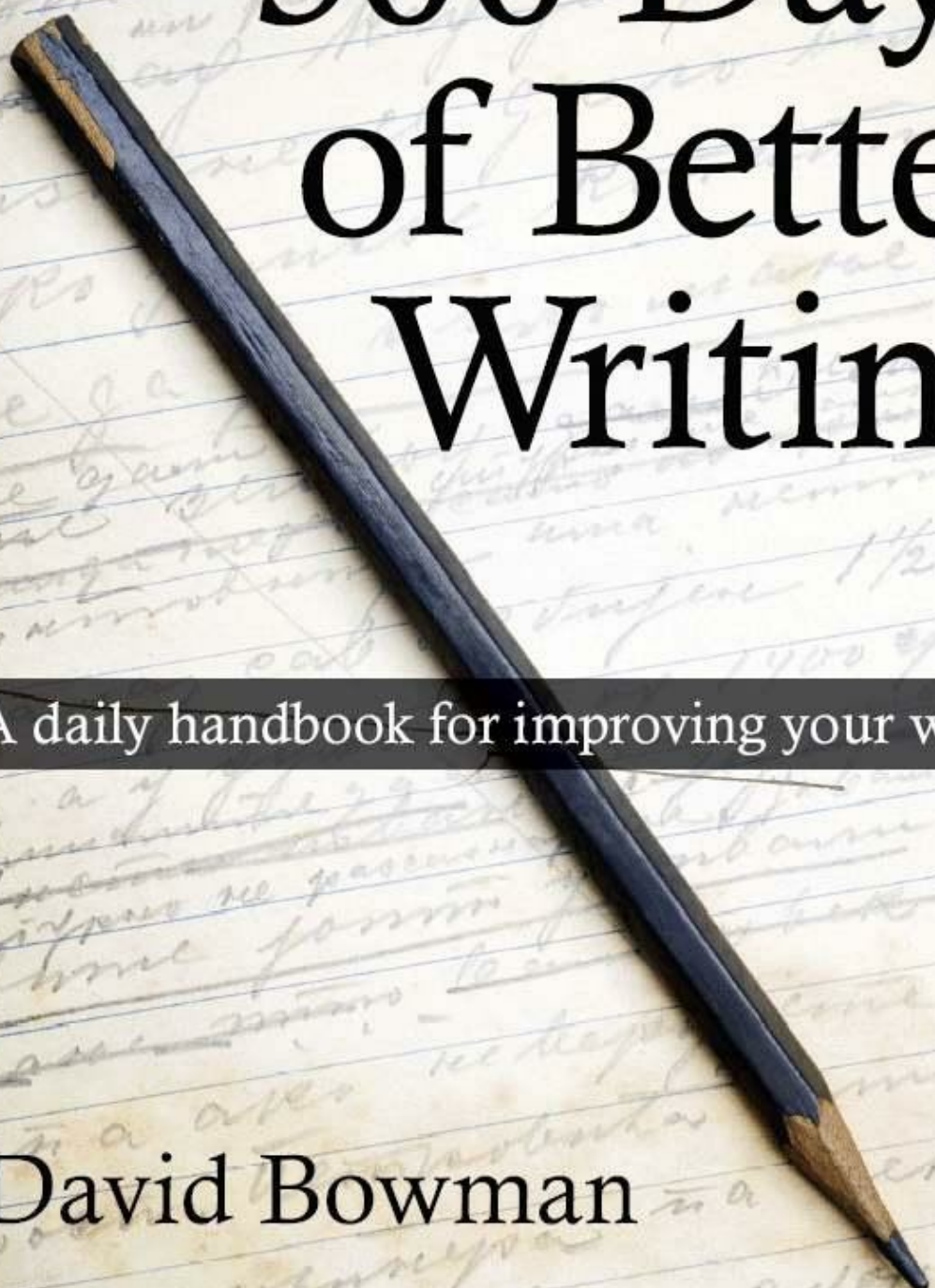


A daily handbook for improving your writing

David Bowman

**"...the book that will carefully lead you, day by day,  
to improved writing."** John UpChurch, Amazon Reviewer





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**Advance Praise for  
300 DAYS OF BETTER WRITING**

“Instead of a dry, lifeless grammar instruction book, the guide is intended as a dose of daily advice with enough variety and wisdom to make the tips stick . . . Big words and concepts don't seem nearly as intimidating when broken down into bite-sized chunks and delivered with accuracy and clarity. You'll find yourself looking forward to the tips and advice—and grasping the ideas quickly. If you want your writing to grow as you write and learn, this is the book that will carefully lead you, day by day, to improved writing.”

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## **Introduction**

Welcome to *300 Days of Better Writing*. This writing guide will provide you with 300 strategies for writing clearly, effectively, and correctly. It is a great companion to our *Precise Edit Training Manual*, although each book can be used independently. Whether you read one new tip a day, read them all at once, or find a specific topic you need, **this guide will help you write better.**

### **How this guide is organized**

This guide loosely follows the organization of the tips in our *Writing Tips for a Year* series. We distributed editing, writing, and mechanics tips so you won't receive tips of the same type all at once. Broad writing topics (e.g., paragraph structure) are broken into individual strategies. These are also distributed throughout the tips so that you have time to learn, practice, and master one strategy before learning a new strategy on the same broad topic.

### **Topic Index**

If you want to read multiple strategies on a specific topic, you will appreciate the topic index at the back of the guide. We identified 38 topics and listed the specific daily strategies related to each topic.

### **About the author**

David Bowman is the owner and chief editor of Precise Edit, a comprehensive editorial service provider helping authors, students, business professionals, and other individuals communicate well in writing. Core services include content editing, copyediting, and document analysis.

Mr. Bowman is an editor with over 18 years of experience. He has advanced degrees in both comparative literature and business administration. He is a popular writing instructor for the University of New Mexico. His articles on writing strategies have been distributed broadly across the Internet and have received much praise. His satisfaction in life comes from working with clients to meet their communication goals.

You can read more information about Precise Edit and the author at <http://PreciseEdit.com>.

### ***300 Days of Better Writing***

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For more information, contact [dbowman@PreciseEdit.com](mailto:dbowman@PreciseEdit.com).

<http://PreciseEdit.com>

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Day 300: Keep questioning your writing.





## Day 1: Use the rhetorical subject as the grammatical subject.

Every complete sentence needs a subject. The subject is the Thing, Idea, Person, or Place (TIPP) that “does” the main verb. Consider the sentence “Tom loves Julie.” The main verb here is “loves,” and the subject is “Tom.”

Another name for the subject of a sentence is *grammatical subject*. In the previous example, “Tom” is the grammatical subject because “Tom” is the subject of the sentence.

Sometimes, though, the *doer* of the main action is not the grammatical subject. Consider this sentence:

“Finding a solution is our greatest concern.”

Here, “Finding a solution” is the grammatical subject of “is.”

However, we need to ask, “What’s the action being described by this sentence?” The main action is finding a solution. Then we ask, “Who is doing this action?” The answer is “We are.” “We,” therefore, is the *rhetorical subject*. The TIPP that does the main action is the rhetorical subject, whether or not it is the grammatical subject.

For clear and effective writing, the rhetorical subject should be used as the grammatical subject. Based on this, the example sentence can be revised as follows:

“We are most concerned with finding a solution.”

## **Day 2: Place a comma before a conjunction that joins two independent clauses.**

The term *independent clause* refers to a complete sentence, whether it stands alone or is part of a longer sentence. It has a grammatical subject and a main verb, at a minimum.

Consider the sentence,

“Tom loves Julie, and Julie loves Frank.”

This has two independent clauses. The first is “Tom loves Julie,” and the second is “Julie loves Frank.” The two clauses are joined by “and,” so you need a comma before the “and.”

Whenever you join two independent clauses by a conjunction (*and, but, or, yet, so, for, nor*), put a comma in front of the conjunction. Now consider this sentence:

“Mary winked at me, and Bob sighed.”

If you leave out the comma before “and,” the reader will have to decide whether Mary winked at only me or if she winked at me and Bob. Only when the reader gets to “sighed” will he or she realize that Mary is winking at me and that Bob is the person sighing. This makes the sentence confusing, and the reader may have to re-read it to understand its meaning. That comma makes the sentence clear.

### **Day 3: Be concise.**

*Good things, when short, are twice as good.*

(Baltasar Gracian)

Although this quote could be applied to many things, Gracian refers specifically to writing. His point, and it's a good one, is that texts written simply and briefly are superior to texts written in a lengthy and grandiose style. Longer does not mean better. In fact, the opposite is generally true.

A writer who intentionally lengthens his or her documents will not produce good writing, and the reader will most likely be turned off. However, this does not mean that short is better, either. The point is for everything you write to add value to the reader.

When we talk about economical writing, we echo Gracian. Say what you have to say, but say it simply, clearly, and briefly. Then stop.



## Day 4: Avoid over-generalizing.

One of my favorite expressions as a kid was, “Oh, yeah? Prove it.” (I was a precocious child.) Over-generalizing means making a general statement or reaching a conclusion from a very limited number of examples. When you over-generalize, you invite your reader to ask, “Oh, yeah? Prove it.”

If you base an argument, concept, fact, idea, etc. on your overgeneralized statement, the reader can discredit everything you have written. The reader only needs one example to prove you wrong.

Here’s the tip that accompanies “avoid over-generalization”: When you make a general statement, make sure it’s true in EVERY case.

Some examples of over-generalizing are:

“As everyone knows . . .”

“She was always smiling.”

“People loved her cooking.”

“This is the most exciting movie.”

“The stores in this town are no good.”

“Text books are boring.”

“People do this when they’re tired.”

“Men are pigs, but women are angels.”

“It figures.”

## **Day 5: Finish sentences with the most important information.**

Why? 1) Information at the end of a sentence has the most emphasis, the most impact. 2) People tend to remember best what they last hear or read. 3) Information at the end of a sentence serves as a transition to the next sentence. When you provide important information, you will likely write more about it.

Ask yourself, “What point am I trying to make, or what important idea am I trying to communicate, in this sentence?” Revise your sentence to place that information at the end.

## Day 6: Place ending punctuation inside the quotation marks.

(Note to our friends in Great Britain: reverse the tip in the next paragraph, and you will probably do fine.)

When providing a direct quote or using quotation marks to indicate that you are writing about a word or phrase, the comma or period that ends the phrase or sentence should be placed inside the final quotation mark. (GB: outside the final quotation mark)

Examples:

John said, “I am in love with Julie.”

Many people don’t pronounce the final sound of the words “fast,” “quit,” and “stop.”

When the man shouted “Halt,” I ran away.

However, if your final punctuation is a question mark, semicolon, or colon, and if that punctuation mark is not part of the quote, then it should go outside.

Example:

Did the boss say “fire everyone you can”?

(Note: We removed the quotation marks from around the examples so the quotation marks we’re trying to indicate are obvious.)

## **Day 7: Use *you* only when you are writing to or about the reader.**

Writers often use *you* to express a general observation, but it results in incorrect information. Recently, I edited a graduate-level paper that repeatedly used *you* inappropriately. One sentence said, “When you are in a meeting with your boss, you need to respect his right to express his opinions.” My response was “But I am the boss!”

This statement did not apply to me, so the information in the sentence was incorrect. The principle being expressed might be true, but the delivery was wrong.

Here’s another example: “I like this store because they always give you a discount.” My response was “They never gave one to me!”

Unless you are writing to or about your reader, don’t use *you*.

Here’s how I revised those two sentences:

1. “The boss has a right to express his opinions in meetings.”
2. “I like this store because they always give me a discount.”



## Day 8: Limit adjective use.

Adjectives can be useful (such as the one I just used: “useful”), but when you string them together, they can bore, confuse, and turn off your readers. Consider this sentence:

“The big, green, hairy, smelly monster crept out from under the small, afraid, whimpering boy’s bed.”

This sentence has three problems. First, it is boring. The point is that a monster crept. All those extra words detract from the significance of this event. Second, it is complicated. Every time the reader finds a new adjective, he or she has to modify his or her mental image of what is happening. Third, it is confusing. Is the bed or the child small, afraid, and whimpering?

Here’s our advice, in three parts:

1. Find one word that means what you are trying to say, preferably an action verb or concrete noun instead of an adjective.
2. If you want to use an adjective before a noun, use only one adjective that means exactly what you are trying to say.
3. If you want to use adjectives after the noun, don’t use more than two.

## Day 9: Use the rhetorical action as the main verb.

A sentence may have several verbs. However, the verb in the “verb's place” following the subject is generally the main verb upon which the rest of the sentence hangs. Consider this sentence:

“Julie thinks Tom is silly.”

In this sentence, “thinks” is the main verb following the subject “Julie.”

The main action in a sentence is called the rhetorical action. The *rhetorical action* is the action that the sentence is about. The main verb and the rhetorical action may not be the same. (Generally, when we are trying to identify the rhetorical subject, we first have to identify the rhetorical action.)

If the main verb and the rhetorical action are not the same, then the sentence has a problem. In clear writing, they should be the same word. Consider this sentence:

“The long days of summer are when Susan plays in the grass.”

In this poorly written sentence, the main verb is “are,” which follows the grammatical subject “The long days of summer.” However, the main action is not “are.” The rhetorical action, what this sentence is about, is “plays.”

We want the main verb and the rhetorical action to be the same, so “plays” needs to be the main verb. The subject of “plays” is “Susan.” When we use “Susan” as the subject (grammatical and rhetorical), and “plays” as the main verb, we get

“Susan plays in the grass in the long days of summer.”

Now, the grammatical subject and the rhetorical subject are the same, the rhetorical action and the main verb are the same, and the entire sentence is clearer, smoother, and more direct.

## **Day 10: Subjects and verbs must agree in person.**

Few writers would write “Bob love tuna sandwiches.” They would write “loves.”

In the present tense, if the subject of a verb can be replaced by *he*, *she*, or *it*, the verb probably needs that final “s.” Because the name “Bob” can be replaced by *he*, the verb needs that “s.”

When you write in the present tense, find your verbs. Then find the subject of those verbs. If you can replace them with one of these three pronouns, the verb probably needs that “s.”

## Day 11: Write clearly.

*Have something to say, and say it as clearly as you can. That is the only secret.*

(Matthew Arnold)

This is probably my favorite quote on writing because it addresses two essential principles.

First, the content must have value to the reader. Know what you are trying to communicate.

Second, clarity is essential to communicate the content. Unless you craft the writing carefully, and unless your writing is economical, direct, and clear, your reader will have difficulty understanding what you have to say—assuming the reader even tries.

You have something to say, so do the work necessary to help your reader understand.

I would only add one more part to this quote: “Then stop.”

## **Day 12: Vary sentence length.**

The quality of a sentence is not determined by its length, long or short. Its appropriateness may be.

A series of short sentences makes the writing seem choppy. A series of long sentences makes the writing tedious and boring. Writing a series of similar length sentences will be monotonous. Vary them.

Here are some guidelines.

1. Use your shortest sentences (2–5 words) to create special emphasis.
2. Use a short sentence to catch the reader's attention.
3. Short sentences must be used sparsely.
4. Use shorter sentences to slow the reader's reading pace.
5. Ending a paragraph with a long sentence can reduce the impact of the paragraph.
6. Long sentences must be crafted carefully to be clear.
7. Varied sentence lengths help keep the reader's attention.

## Day 13: Avoid nominalization: Keep verbs as verbs, not as nouns.

Words like *eradication*, *utilization*, *usage*, and *transference* sound very fancy. These words are nouns that come from the verbs *eradicate*, *utilize*, *use*, and *transfer*, respectively. The process of changing a verb into a noun is called “nominalization.” Most words ending in *-tion*, *-ment*, and *-ence/-ance* are nominalizations.

Nominalizations create weak, cumbersome, and pretentious writing. For clear, engaging, and effective writing, revise your sentences to change nominalizations back into verbs. In many cases, you may be able to remove the word altogether. For example:

“Our enactment of the plan for the eradication of the disease was a failure.”

(We failed to eradicate the disease.)

“There is resentment towards this policy.”

(Some people resent this policy.)

“The commencement of the ceremony will be at noon.”

(The ceremony will commence at noon.)

Convert nominalizations back into their verb forms and revise the sentence accordingly. Then consider whether the revised sentence says the same thing as the original but in a simpler, more direct manner. In most cases, the revised sentences will be far superior to those laden by nominalizations.

## **Day 14: Antecedents and pronouns must agree in number.**

Most people know what pronouns are: *he, she, it, we, him, her, them, they*, etc. The antecedent is the word to which the pronoun refers. Consider these sentences.

“I gave Mary her box of treasures. It was small.”

The first pronoun is “her,” and it refers to the antecedent “Mary.” The second pronoun is “it,” and it refers to the antecedent “box.”

This can be confusing when the antecedent has more than one thing. Consider this sentence.

“The toy under the table and the doll on the shelf should be placed immediately in their respective containers.”

This needs the plural pronoun “their” because it refers to more than one thing: the toy and the doll.

To make sure the pronoun and antecedent agree in number, ask yourself whether the antecedent includes more than one thing. If it does, the pronoun should do the same.

## **Day 15: Express yourself confidently.**

Another way to say this is “Don’t hedge.” Phrases such as “I think that,” “I assume,” “I believe,” and “It’s possible that” tell the reader that you are not confident in what you are saying. If you are not confident in your ideas, your reader will not be confident in your authority to make whatever statement you are making.

On the other hand, if you have a good reason for your idea, state the idea with confidence. Consider this sentence:

“I think cantaloupe is good for your health.”

As a reader, I can say, “Do you think so, or do you know so? If that is only your opinion, I can ignore it.” To encourage the reader to believe you, you can write, instead,

“Cantaloupe is good for your health.”

Confident writing is stronger, more active, more believable, and more likely to get the reader response you desire.



## **Day 16: Shift the source of questionable information to maintain credibility.**

What do you do if you are not confident about your idea? You may still want to write it, but you don't want to be accused of misleading your reader if the idea is proven wrong. The most common reason for hedging, after all, is fear that you will lose credibility and, frankly, look dumb.

Here's what you do: Shift the source of the idea to a third party, i.e., give credit for the idea to someone else. Here's an example.

Hedging: "I think tomorrow will be a warm day."

[Risky approach; weak writing]

Confident: "Tomorrow will be a warm day."

[Also risky; strong writing]

Shifted: "The weatherman said that tomorrow will be a warm day."

[Not risky; shifted source; strong writing]

If the idea is proven wrong, you are not to blame, and you won't lose credibility with your reader. And you won't look dumb.

## Day 17: Use the Subject-Verb-Object sentence structure.

The most powerful sentence structure is the **Subject-Verb-Object** structure. When readers find sentence components are placed in that order, and close to the beginning of the sentence, they will have less difficulty understanding what you have written.

Based on previous strategies, you will want to use the rhetorical subject and the rhetorical action as your subject and main verb. Consider this sentence.

“On the bench in the park sat the man with the brown hat calmly feeding the pigeons.”

This sentence has the verb “sat” before the subject “man.” When we place items in order, close to the beginning of the sentence, we get

“The man with the brown hat sat on the park bench calmly feeding the pigeons.”

If we think “feed” is the rhetorical action, then the object will be “pigeons.” Using these, we might get

“The man with the brown hat calmly fed the pigeons from the park bench.”

Now we have this:

Subject: “Man with the brown hat”

Main verb: “fed”

Object: “pigeons”

With these sentence components in order, the sentence is less convoluted and easier to understand.

## **Day 18: Use a comma after every item in a series (except the last item).**

Commas in a series help the reader to separate items and groups of items in a series. When you have several items in a series, each one should be followed by a comma, except for the last item. Consider this sentence:

“I enjoy eating peaches, plums, pickles, and prunes.”

This series has 4 separate items. Each one is followed by a comma, except “prunes,” which, in this case, is followed by a period.

Some people will leave out the comma before the “and,” but this can cause confusion when parts of a series have more than one item. Consider this sentence:

“I enjoy eating peaches, plums, pickles and peanut butter and prunes.”

Without that comma before “and,” the reader will not know that I eat my pickles with peanut butter. The comma before “and” is essential to let the reader know how the items are grouped.

*By the way: I don't actually recommend eating pickles with peanut butter. Plantains and peanut butter, on the other hand, make a very nice combination.*

## **Day 19: Remove and move text as needed.**

*I believe more in the scissors than I do in the pencil.*

(Truman Capote)

Much of what we do when we edit is cut text, i.e., use the scissors. We cut text for three reasons:

1. To simplify confusing sentences,
2. To remove unnecessary information, and
3. To move ideas to a more logical position.

The revision process is more difficult than the writing process. You need to examine your text critically and make important decisions on what you write, why you write it, and how you write it. Like us, you will likely find yourself using the scissors.

## Day 20: Avoid artificial superlatives.

Artificial superlatives are words like *really*, *super*, and *very*. People use them in an attempt to get the reader excited about some idea or topic. Consider these sentences.

“The Broncos are really great. They are having a very good year.”

The problem is that these words don’t actually add anything to the meaning. For example, a “very good year” doesn’t tell the reader anything more than a “good year” because the writer’s definition of “very” isn’t defined. Also, in many cases, the reader will know what the writer is trying to do, and this may cause the reader to reject the writer’s idea.

A good writer uses the content, not these superlatives, to create enthusiasm. Clear and effective writing uses the content to describe how great, super, really, very, etc. the idea is.

## Day 21: Subjects and verbs must agree in number.

This is pretty simple. Verbs with subjects that can be replaced by *he*, *she*, or *it* require an “s.” Others don’t. Consider this sentence.

“Bob *loves* tuna sandwiches.”

“Bob” can be replaced by *he*, so “loves” needs that “s.”

This is a little more complicated with *to be* verbs. People often have problems choosing between the plural *are* and the singular *is*. Consider this sentence:

“Where this starts to cause problems **IS** when the subject and phrase before the verb **ARE** complicated, as in this sentence.”

We need the “is” because that verb is referring to “Where this starts to cause problems,” which can be replaced by *it*. We need the “are” because this verb is referring to both “subject” and “phrase,” which can be replaced by *they*.

To determine whether to use *is* or *are*, find the subject of the verb and determine what pronoun will replace it.

## Day 22: Avoid clichés.

A cliché is a phrase or expression that has become overused. The problems with using clichés are

1. they make the writer seem amateurish, and
2. they reduce the impact and importance of the thing they describe.

Because clichés are overused expressions, readers will often focus on the fact that you have used a cliché and will be distracted from the statement you are trying to make.

As you write, consider the descriptive phrases you use. Are they a common way to describe something, or are they original? Do they tell the reader something new, or are they clichés?

Here are some examples of clichés.

“Tears rolled down her face.”

“back to the drawing board”

“elbow grease”

“Every cloud has a silver lining.”

“barking up the wrong tree”

“going nowhere in a hurry”

“every man for himself”

“The left hand didn’t know what the right hand was doing.”

“play your cards right”

“right on the money”

“avoid them like the plague”



## Day 23: Use *his and her* to avoid subject-pronoun number errors.

Consider this sentence:

“Each person must write their own autobiography.”

Do you see the problem here? “Each” refers to one person, but “their” refers to more than one person.

Some writers intentionally make this common mistake to avoid the correct *his* (which sounds sexist) or the cumbersome *his and her*. Most writers make this mistake unconsciously. Consider this incorrect sentence:

“Any professional writer will edit their own documents.”

This has the same problem as the first example. If the subject is singular, our preference is to use *his and her* or its similar expressions: *he and she*, *his and hers*, *him and her*, etc.

While these phrases are correct, they can make sentences sound redundant. Consider this sentence.

“Each team member took his or her uniform to his or her mother to clean for him or her.”

The better option is to find the antecedent for the pronoun and make it plural. In this way, we revise the previous example as,

“The team members took their uniforms to their mothers to clean for them.”

If the antecedent of the pronoun needs to remain singular, use the correct version of *his or her*.

## **Day 24: Place the main verb close to the subject.**

Readers will most easily understand your sentences when you use the **S + V + O sentence structure**. Let's expand on this idea.

When you are editing your sentences, find your subject and main verb and place them close together. Otherwise, the reader may have difficulty understanding what you are trying to communicate, and the sentences will be unnecessarily complicated. Consider this sentence.

“The funding proposal, which requested financial support for the new capital improvement project and was submitted by the team of regional division directors, failed to impress the investors.”

The subject “proposal” is widely separated from the main verb “failed.” Using this tip, we get the following:

“The team of regional directors submitted a proposal to fund a new capital improvement project. The proposal failed to impress the investors.”

Notice that the revised version is two sentences. This is fine. Notice also that both sentences have the subject and verb together and that they are clearer than the original.

## Day 25: Create sentence transitions.

In the same way that paragraphs need transitions to help the reader understand their relevance, sentences need transitions. Actually, every sentence is a transition from the previous sentence to the next. This means that a sentence will refer to the information in the previous sentence and provide clues about what the next sentence will address.

To create transitions, the words near the beginning of a sentence must relate to the topic or idea of the previous sentence, and the words near the end must relate to the topic or idea discussed in the next sentence. These transitions show the relevance of information in a sentence and help tie multiple ideas together into a cohesive whole idea.

Let's look at an example.

“(1)The operant conditioning chamber was first developed by Skinner while he was a graduate student at Harvard University. (2)He used the chamber to study the effect of inputs on rats. (3)Various devices in the chamber provided inputs that, over time, ‘taught’ the rats to behave in predictable ways.”

Consider sentence two. The words “chamber” and “study” refer to the operant conditioning chamber and Skinner as a graduate student, respectively, which are discussed in sentence one. The word “inputs” refers to the topic of inputs in the third sentence.

In this way, sentence two provides a transition from sentence one to sentence three while adding new content.

## Day 26: Avoid foreign words and phrases.

The point of writing is communication. While some readers may understand a wide variety of foreign words and phrases, many won't, and this will hinder your ability to communicate clearly. For example, readers may not understand the following:

*bon mot*

*a priori*

*cause celebre*

*hoi polloi*

*nota bene*

*sans souci*

*verboden*

[Note: When you use these words in a document written in English, you will generally put them in italics.]

On the other hand, many foreign words and phrases are commonly used in English, such as these:

*foyer*

*status quo*

*faux pas*

*carte blanche*

Here's the point. If you're using a foreign term to impress your readers, don't. If you're using a foreign term that is part of the common vocabulary of your reader, fine. In every case, think about why you are using a particular word and how the reader will respond.

## **Day 27: Use a comma after introductory adverbial phrases.**

An introductory adverbial phrase is a phrase at the beginning of the sentence that tells something about the main verb, such as when it occurred, how, or to what degree. Consider this sentence.

“After reading the newspaper, John felt relaxed.”

The phrase “after reading the newspaper” tells when John felt relaxed. This phrase is an introductory adverbial phrase. It is at the beginning of the sentence, and it tells something about the main verb: “felt.” Here’s another example.

“Yesterday, he visited his mother.”

In this example, the word “Yesterday” serves as an introductory adverbial phrase telling about the action “visited.” As such, it is followed by a comma.

## Day 28: Use the active voice.

First, a very brief description of the active voice. In the active voice, the subject performs an action on something else.

Active voice: “John threw the ball.”

Passive voice: “The ball was thrown by John.”

Why should you use the active voice?

1. The grammatical subject will more likely be the rhetorical subject. In the passive voice, the grammatical subject is never the rhetorical subject.
2. The sentence will be more direct and economical.
3. The sentence will provide information in the order that people expect.
4. The sentence will be easier to understand.
5. The sentence will be more lively and engaging for the reader.

Here are a few more examples of active and passive voice.

Active: “Susan baked a pie.”

Passive: “The pie was baked by Susan.”

Active: “John discovered a process for extracting gold.”

Passive: “A process for extracting gold was discovered by John.”

Active: “The billing and expense reports prepared by our accountant gave us a bleak outlook.”

Passive: “The bleak outlook was given to us by the billing and expense reports prepared by our accountant.”

## Day 29: Avoid starting sentences with *it*.

The word *it* is often used as the subject of a sentence when the real subject, the rhetorical subject, is somewhere later in the sentence. The word *it* serves as a placeholder because something needs to be in the subject position. Consider this sentence.

“It’s understandable that you are bored.”

In this case, the word “it” means “that you are bored.” By itself, the word “it” has no meaning; it is only a placeholder. To write more effectively, put the real subject in the subject’s place, not “it.”

The sample sentence can be revised as

“That you are bored is understandable.”

Ok, so this revised sentence is a bit awkward. Figure out who is doing the action in the sentence, i.e., find the rhetorical subject, which may or may not be mentioned in the sentence. In this case, the person doing the action is “I,” “We,” or something like that. Thus, you can revise the sentence to read as follows.

“I can understand why you are bored.”

Note: The only time starting with *it* is acceptable is when *it* refers to something that you have just mentioned. For example: “I saw the ball. It was on the table.”



## **Day 30: Place the object as closely as possible to the main verb.**

Readers will most easily understand your sentences when you use the **S + V + O sentence structure**.

Now, let's expand on this idea further. To help readers understand your sentences with the least effort, place the object as closely as possible to the main verb. Consider this sentence.

“John fought for years and with strenuous effort his wicked tendencies.”

In this sample, “fought” is the main verb. The phrase “his wicked tendencies” is the object of the verb “fought.” You can ask yourself, “He fought what?” The answer, “his wicked tendencies,” is the object.

This sentence is confusing. Using this writing tip, we place the object as closely as possible to the main verb. This gives us the following, easy-to-understand, revision:

“John fought his wicked tendencies for years and with strenuous effort.”

## **Day 31: Use commas in series to indicate groups.**

A previous strategy said to use a comma after every item in a series (except the last item). However, what if some of the items in a series are not a single thing but a pair of things? By using your commas after each individual item or group of items (except the last), you let your reader know how items are grouped. Consider this sentence.

“The financial analysis examined the cost structure, the expense report and budget expectation, and the revenue stream.”

Because the commas are used after every group of items, we know that the analysis examined 3 different things. First, it examined the cost structure. Second, it examined the expense report AND budget expectation together. Third, it examined the revenue stream.

## **Day 32: State ideas in one sentence and clarify in the next.**

Writers make their writing difficult to understand when they put too much information in a single sentence. Often, writers will introduce a topic or idea, and then clarify it in the same sentence. Consider this sentence.

“The two-story parsonage, which was constructed in 1850 and appeared in fine shape, was riddled by termite tunnels.”

Adding the explanation in between the commas puts a long break between the subject and the verb, making this sentence a bit awkward to read. Also, the date of construction and appearance is off topic, though it is related. We can follow this tip to produce the following two sentences.

“The two-story parsonage was riddled by termite tunnels. It was constructed in 1850 and appeared to be in fine shape.”

## **Day 33: Use the simplest correct words.**

Using big, fancy words makes you seem smart. They make your reader think, “Wow, this writer really knows a lot!” Right? Probably not.

Using words that are outside of your readers’ common vocabulary may have three effects, all negative. First, they reduce the readers understanding of what you are trying to communicate. Second, they distract the reader from what you are trying to communicate and force the reader to concentrate on word meaning and usage. Third, they can give the impression that you are trying to impress the reader, which will make you seem pretentious. If your goals are communicating clearly and improving your credibility, use the simplest correct words.

One note about the “correct” word: While you are choosing simple words that mean what you want to say, you also need to consider how readers will respond to them. As such, you need to think about the tone you wish to create.

## Day 34: Don't use apostrophes to make plurals.

As time passes, I see more and more writers using an apostrophe-S to make a plural. This is wrong. Apostrophes are not used for that purpose. I'm not sure why this error is becoming so common. Perhaps people see it so often that it looks right, even though it isn't.

Incorrect: "Editor's get upset when writer's use apostrophe's to make plural's."

Correct: "Editors get upset when writers use apostrophes to make plurals."

Incorrect: "Shopper's in the 1990's bought many CD's as gift's."

Correct: "Shoppers in the 1990s bought many CDs as gifts."

## Day 35: Know your primary audience.

Many people may read what you write. These are your audience. Your primary audience is the person or group of people who will directly receive, or buy, what you write. For example, if you write a book, your primary audience is the person who buys the book. If you are writing a financial report, the primary audience is the person to whom you deliver the report. If you are writing text for your website, the primary audience is the website visitor you are trying to attract.

Once you have figured out who your primary audience is, think about what that person wants or needs. This is one of the most important issues to consider when you are writing and editing. Related questions are "Why is this person reading my document?" "What will this person do with the information in this document?" and "What need will this address?"

Whether you are writing fiction, nonfiction, technical documents, or poetry, you have to determine what to include in your document and how to deliver that information. When you write, you are trying to communicate information, ideas, impressions, emotions, etc. Understanding your primary audience will help you determine how to communicate effectively and accomplish your purpose.

## Day 36: Avoid splitting infinitives.

Infinitives are the root form of a verb, the *to* form. The following are examples of infinitives: *to run*, *to dream*, *to fly*. Writers often interject words between *to* and the action. Consider this sentence.

"The committee members wished to quickly and without further delay adjourn the meeting."

Splitting infinitives leads to sloppy and potentially confusing sentences. When you keep the infinitive un-split, your writing will generally be stronger. Using this tip, the sample sentence reads as follows.

"The committee members wished to adjourn the meeting quickly and without further delay."

In many cases, writers split an infinitive with only one or two words, as in

"He tried to quickly glance over his shoulder."

Revising the sentence to move the interjected words will usually result in stronger writing,

as in

“He tried to glance over his shoulder quickly,” and

“He tried to glance quickly over his shoulder.”

## **Day 37: Only use one exclamation mark, if any.**

Exclamation marks generally do not have a place in formal business writing, though they may have a use in advertising text and narrative texts. However, if you do decide to use an exclamation mark, only use one at a time. Strings of exclamation marks are characteristic of amateur writers, and most readers will interpret them as a ploy to create artificial enthusiasm. In either case, using more than one exclamation mark at a time will damage your professional image and credibility.

Improper use: “This is the best sale of the year!!!!”

Proper use: “This is the best sale of the year!”

## Day 38: Keep S-V-O combinations separate.

Here is the next strategy for using the **S-V-O sentence structure** effectively: Keep the S-V-O combinations separate. Sentences may have more than one S-V-O combination. In fact, some sentences have many such combinations. Consider this sentence.

“The legal analysis of the bill that the *consultant prepared* for us at **our request** convinced us to change our planning structure.”

The main S-V-O combination is “legal analysis . . . convinced us.” However, a second S-V combination is between the words “analysis” and “convinced”: “consultant prepared.” A third combination that looks similar to an S-V combination is also embedded between these words: “our request.”

We want the rhetorical subject, main action, and object as close together as possible. We also want our sentences to be as straightforward as possible to help readers understand. To do this, we have to keep these S-V-O combinations separate. You can use more than one in a sentence, but write them one at a time, not mixed. Using this tip, the sentence can be revised as follows.

“At our request, the consultant prepared a legal analysis of the bill, which convinced us to change our planning structure.”

In this revision, we can still find the combinations “consultant prepared,” “our request,” and “analysis convinced.” All the major ideas are there. However, these S-V-O combinations are now separate, i.e., none is embedded within another; they are presented one at a time.



## **Day 39: Use the present tense to describe general ideas.**

General ideas are ideas, facts, and concepts that are true across time, not just during one specific event. They were true in the past. They are true at this moment. And they will be true in the future.

For example, whenever Santa Fe, New Mexico, receives over 8 inches of snow during the night, state offices will be closed the following day. This is a general idea. State offices are not closed only one time or during a particular snow storm. This is generally true across time.

Using this tip, we state the idea in the present tense, as in

“State offices close following heavy snowfalls.”

In this sentence, “close” is in the present tense. Notice, we did not write “will be closed,” “are closed,” “will close,” or “closed.” Because the idea is true all the time, it is always true at this exact, present moment, so we use the present tense.

## Day 40: Use *because* not *as* to show cause.

Many words in the English language have more than one meaning and more than one use. *As* is one such word. The primary use of *as* is to communicate that two or more actions are happening simultaneously. Consider this sentence.

“I was singing as I was driving.”

In this case, “singing” and “driving” are happening at the same time.

The word *as* is also used to communicate causality. Consider the following sentence.

“I was displeased as I was unaware that the plans had changed.”

In this case, being unaware of the changed plans caused me to be displeased.

Here’s the problem. When the reader reads *as*, he or she will first think the sentence is communicating simultaneous actions. Only when the reader reads the rest of the sentence will he or she realize that the sentence is communicating causality.

To avoid this confusion, use *because* when explaining why something occurs.

*Because* only communicates causality, so the reader will easily understand the sentence. This gives us the following revision.

“I was displeased because I was unaware that the plans had changed.”

## Day 41: Quote books in the present tense and writers in the past tense.

When you take a quote from a book, you have to decide whether you are attributing the quoted material to the author or the book.

If you are attributing a quote to a book, use the present tense. Because the information is always present (i.e., always available right now), use present tense verbs, such as *states*, *notes*, *claims*, and *describes*. For example, you may write the following:

“The book *Ten Habits of Unhappy People* claims that the main reason for disappointment is a lack of communication.”

On the other hand, if you are attributing a quote to the author, use the past tense. Because the author wrote information at a specific time in the past, use a past tense verb, such as *stated*, *noted*, *claimed*, *described*, and *wrote*. For example, you may write the following:

“James Patterson, author of *Ten Habits of Unhappy People*, wrote that the main reason for disappointment is a lack of communication.”

## Day 42: Identify your central idea.

Before you actually put pen to paper, or fingers to keyboard, you engage in a variety of activities collectively called *pre-writing*. This is a misnomer because these activities are part of the writing process. Perhaps a better name for them is *pre-typing*.

The first part of the writing process is identifying the central idea. Does this sound simple? It isn't as easy as it sounds. The central idea is the one idea, one theme, one concept, that you wish to communicate. Your document will contain many ideas, but every idea should help the reader understand the central idea. This is true whether you are writing prose, poetry, or technical documents.

Ask yourself: "What is the one idea that I want to communicate?" Here's a good exercise to conduct before you begin typing. In one sentence, 20 words or less, write your central idea.

Why do this? First, this will help you clarify your purpose. Second, this will help you determine what information you need to include and what information you can leave out. Third, by identifying and writing your central idea, you can create a document that is cohesive, focused, purposeful, and effective.

## **Day 43: Keep descriptive phrases close to the thing being described.**

When a reader encounters a descriptive phrase, he or she will assume that the phrase is describing the closest preceding thing. Consider this sentence.

“The man following the dog with the big nose walked down the street.”

This sentence seems to say that the dog has the big nose, but, actually, it is the man who has the big nose. However, the descriptive phrase “with the big nose” immediately follows “dog,” so this confusion is understandable. “Dog” is the closest preceding thing.

To help the reader understand what a phrase is describing, place the phrase as closely as possible after the thing being described. Using this tip, we get the following revision.

“The man with the big nose following the dog walked down the street.”

This is still cumbersome, but the big nose is now on the man.

Here’s another example of this.

“The presidential advisors with their phones on the plane discussed the new policy recommendations.”

In this sentence, the phones are on the plane, but we don’t know where the advisors are. If the advisors are on the plane, and they have their phones with them, the sentence will be clearer as follows.

“The presidential advisors on the plane with their phones discussed the new policy recommendations.”

## **Day 44: Limit the number of S-V-O combinations in a sentence.**

Here is the final strategy for using the **S-V-O sentence structure**: Limit the number of S-V-O combinations in a sentence. To demonstrate how this tip helps clarify sentences, consider this sentence.

“At our request, the consultant prepared a legal analysis of the bill that we used to change the planning process currently operating that the previous consultant designed.”

When we examine this sentence, we find a number of S-V-O and SV combinations: “consultant prepared,” “we used,” “process operating,” and “consultant designed.” We can revise this sentence in various ways by following this tip. One revision is as follows.

“At our request, the consultant prepared a legal analysis of the bill. We used the analysis to change the current planning process, which a previous consultant had designed.”

In the revised version, the first sentence has one S-V-O combination, and the second sentence has one S-V-O combination and one S-V combination. As a result, the meaning is easier to understand.

## **Day 45: Use one apostrophe-S for each thing or group of things to show ownership.**

Most people are familiar with using an apostrophe-S to show possession. Consider this sentence.

“Bob’s dog is old.”

In this sentence, Bob owns or possesses the dog. Simple.

Where this gets tricky, however, is when you have multiple owners of multiple things. Let’s say that Bob and Mary each have one cat and that those cats are fighting. Where would you put the apostrophe-S?

“Bob’s and Mary’s cats are fighting.”

Since Bob and Mary each have an apostrophe, we know that they each own a cat individually. Bob has a cat, and Mary has a different cat. We’re using one apostrophe-S for each individual owner.

Now let’s say that they own the cats together and that the cats are still fighting. How would you punctuate that?

“Bob and Mary’s cats are fighting.”

We have used only ONE apostrophe-S to show that Bob and Mary are a group and that they own the cats together.

Here’s the point: Use only one apostrophe-S for each owner, whether an individual or a group.

Just for fun: What would this mean?

“Bob and Mary’s cat is fighting again.”

Here, Bob and Mary own a cat, and that cat is fighting something. Now, how about this?

“Bob and Mary’s cat are fighting again.”

There is only one cat. At first, it seems that the cat is owned by Bob and Mary together, but then the sentence has the verb “are.” The conclusion is that Bob is fighting with Mary’s cat!

## **Day 46: Use a single adjective or adverb to replace a descriptive phrase.**

Take a close look at your sentences and underline or circle the descriptive phrases. If you have 2 or more in a row, this tip is for you. Consider this sentence.

“An organization providing healthcare services to those patients unable to pay for services necessary to sustain an active lifestyle will encounter financial difficulties should the recipients increase in number.”

This sentence has 5 descriptive phrases, and 4 of these are in a series:

“providing healthcare services” – describes “organization”

“to those patients” – describes “providing”

“unable to pay for services” – describes “patients”

“necessary to sustain” – describes “services”

In this sentence, the writer provides one descriptive phrase, describes a word in that phrase, and so forth, producing cumbersome writing. This string of descriptive phrases also separates the rhetorical subject (“organization”) and the main action (“will encounter”). As a result, the reader may lose the writer’s meaning.

Because clarity depends, in great part, on concision, avoid strings of descriptive phrases. One simple way to do this is to use a single word or two to replace an entire descriptive phrase.

For example, instead of writing “The organization providing healthcare services,” you could write “The healthcare organization.” Also, you can replace the string of descriptive phrases “providing healthcare services to those patients unable to pay for services” with “providing charity services.”

This sentence could be improved further, but with just these 2 changes, the entire sentence is more clear and more economical:

“A healthcare organization providing charity services will encounter financial difficulties should the recipients increase.”



## **Day 47: Use connective words to connect similar ideas.**

You will often have multiple ideas to share about a topic. If the ideas all support and expand on the topic, but not each other, use connective words to introduce those ideas. These words let the reader know that they connect to the topic. Although you could use a numbered list to present them to the reader, this may not be appropriate.

Basically, you are using words to create a list, which helps the reader to organize, understand, and remember your ideas.

Here are some examples of connective words: *also*, *additionally*, *in addition*, *furthermore*, *similarly*, *plus*, *along with*, *likewise*, and *and*.

Note: You will generally do this within one (or maybe two) paragraphs.

## Day 48: Make subjects plural to remove gender bias.

Pronouns and antecedents must agree in number. The most confusing situation is when the antecedent is singular and the singular pronoun is gender specific, such as *he* or *she*. To avoid gender problems, many people will use a plural pronoun, which is incorrect. Consider this sentence.

“If someone is a customer, they should write a review.”

The antecedent is “someone,” which is singular, i.e., it refers to one person. However, “they” is plural, i.e., it refers to 2 or more people.

If you want to use “someone,” the correct pronoun is *he* or *she*. Because these are gender-specific, neither one may be appropriate. You can either

1. use *he or she* for the subject pronoun [“If someone is a customer, he or she should write a review.”] or
2. make the antecedent plural [“If people are customers, they should write a review.”].

Note: While #2 is accurate now, it is too wordy. A more direct way to revise this sentence is “Customers should write reviews.”

## Day 49: Organize ideas into large topics.

Once you have identified your central idea, the next step is to organize your ideas in large groups, each group about one subtopic.

Create categories for your major ideas, and label each category with one or two words. Then list the individual ideas for each category. Basically, what you are doing here is ensuring that related ideas are grouped together.

We have often worked on documents that introduce one topic, and then discuss another before providing more information about the first topic. The document is disorganized and hard to understand. When this tip is used, the entire document will be easier to follow and understand.

## Day 50: Replace weak verbs with action verbs.

First, let's define our terms. An action verb represents an action that can be viewed or performed. A weak verb is, simply, the opposite of an action verb.

Examples of action verbs: *perform, hold, state, create, and represent.*

Examples of weak verbs: *can, seem, exist, and feel* (the mental activity). All *to be* verbs are weak verbs, especially when followed by an *-ing* verb. These include *is, am, are, were, and was.*

To strengthen your writing, revise your sentences to replace weak verbs with action verbs. This is especially important when the main verb is weak, as in this sentence. We can use the second sentence above as an example.

Weak verb use: "An action verb is a verb that represents an action."

Action verb use: "An action verb represents an action."

This concept confuses many people, so I'll provide another example.

Weak verb use: "The novelist was considering writing a new book in his series."

Action verb use: "The novelist considered writing a new book in his series."

Sentences using action verbs state the information directly and concisely, and they give the reader a mental image, which makes them more engaging.

You won't be able to do this with every sentence, nor should you. However, be aware of how frequently you use weak verbs and limit them to the extent possible.

## Day 51: Replace ponderous verb phrases with action verbs.

Yesterday's tip said to replace weak verbs with action verbs. This is also true with ponderous verb phrases.

First, some definitions in practical, non-technical, terms:

1. *Ponderous* means awkward, unnecessarily complicated, lacking grace, and dull.
2. A verb phrase is a set of words that begins with a verb and describes a single action (e.g., "John ran as fast as possible towards the door" contains the verb phrase "ran as fast as possible," which describes a single action).
3. Action verbs represent an action that can be viewed or performed.

Consider this sentence.

"The company conducted a full-scale reorganization during the 1990s."

The ponderous verb phrase in this sentence is "conducted a full-scale reorganization." We can replace it with the single action verb "reorganized." Now, we can revise the sentence as follows.

"The company completely reorganized during the 1990s."

Here's a slightly more complicated example:

"The governor used the power of his office to fill the vacant senatorial seat with the lieutenant governor."

The ponderous verb phrase is "used the power of his office." We can replace it with the single action verb "appointed." Then, we can revise the sentence as follows.

"The governor appointed the lieutenant governor to fill the vacant senatorial seat."

The meanings haven't changed, and the sentences are easier to understand, more concise, and more engaging.

## **Day 52: Use thesis statements to introduce topics.**

A thesis statement is a sentence or two that informs the reader about the main issue, topic, or idea about which you will write. They are necessary for effective communication.

In an academic essay, the thesis usually appears in the first paragraph, and it may state in obvious terms what idea you will discuss. An academic essay generally only has one thesis statement. For example, an academic essay may contain the thesis statement

“Pollution levels in Beijing have created major health concerns for residents”  
and then continue to discuss the pollution levels, the effects of pollution on health in general, and the effect of pollution on Beijing residents.

Thesis statements are necessary in the “real world,” as well. They help the reader understand the purpose and theme of the upcoming text. A document may have several thesis statements, depending on its length and purpose. A formal letter may have only one main topic. A request for proposals may have a different thesis statement for each major section. Even a novel has a thesis statement: the introduction of the central conflict in the plot.

Thesis statements are important for two reasons.

1. They give focus and direction to the writer. This helps you write a better organized and more cohesive document.
2. They help the reader understand and mentally organize the content. This improves your communication.

Questions to consider: What is the main idea or topic of the document or document section? Do you state this idea or topic clearly?

## Day 53: Find the object of the verb or preposition.

The object in a sentence is the thing the action is done to or done for. An object may also be the thing to which a preposition refers.

Object of a verb:

Example 1: “Bob took his dog to the vet.” The action “took” is done to “dog,” so “dog” is the object.

Example 2: “Mary drove him to the house.” The object is “him.”

Example 3: “The vet gave the dog and me a treat.” This has three objects: “treat” (gave what?), “dog,” and “me” (gave it to whom?)

Object of a preposition:

Example 1: “Bob’s dog slept on the rug.” The preposition “on” refers to “rug,” so “rug” is the object of “on.”

Example 2: “The book is under me.” The preposition “under” refers to “me.” “Me” is the object of “under.”

Example 3: “I followed behind the dog and them.” This has two objects: “dog” and “them.”

One way to find an object is to ask “what,” as in “Mary drove what?” “Bob’s dog slept on what?” The answer to that question will be the object.

## Day 54: Write simply.

*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.*

(Mark Twain)

I was once asked whether our editing strategies are appropriate for creative writing or if they are only appropriate for business writing and other formal writing contexts. The answer, of course, is “Yes, they are appropriate for creative writing.” Many of these strategies echo Mark Twain’s comment above, and few people would doubt his ability to write good fiction.

When you are imparting information, whether in a technical document or a narrative document (such as a fiction novel), you need to consider how to impart that information effectively. Styles are different, as are the readers, but writing simply and clearly is necessary to accomplish the purpose for which you are writing.

## Day 55: Break up strings of prepositional phrases.

A prepositional phrase begins with a preposition (e.g., *of*, *on*, *under*, *around*) and ends with the object of a preposition. Consider this sentence.

“The gun was under her pillow.”

In this sentence, the prepositional phrase is “under her pillow.”

When a writer begins to string phrases together, he makes the writing difficult to understand and tedious to read. Consider this sentence.

“The gun was under her pillow on the bed in the room at the back of the house in a small carrying case.”

This sentence has 6 prepositional phrases in a row! Every time a writer starts a new prepositional phrase, the reader needs to revise his mental picture of where the gun is.

Here’s our recommendation: If you have 3 or more prepositional phrases in a string, examine the sentence carefully. Find a way to revise the sentence so this doesn’t occur, or break the sentence into smaller sentences.

Using this tip, we can revise the sample sentence this way.

“The gun was in a small carrying case under her pillow. By keeping it at the back of the house . . . .”

Each sentence now has only 2 prepositional phrases. The second sentence leads to further information, thus keeping the content moving forward, as opposed to simply providing a static description. [We also removed “in a room.” If something is in a house, it must be in a room, so that phrase is unnecessary.]



## Day 56: Use object pronouns as objects, not subject pronouns.

When you need a pronoun for an object, use an object pronoun. Your choices are *me*, *you*, *him*, *her*, *it*, *us*, *them*, and *whom*.

Applying this tip is pretty simple, but many people make mistakes when the object contains two or more things. They may use a subject pronoun instead: *I*, *you*, *he*, *she*, *it*, *we*, *they*, and *who*. These subject pronouns cannot be used as objects, except for *you* and *it*, which are both types of pronouns.

Consider this sentence.

“Mary drove Tom and I to the house.”

This sentence is incorrect. “I” is not an object pronoun; it is a subject pronoun. The correct pronoun is *me*. The sentence should read as follows.

“Mary drove Tom and me to the house.”

Because most people won’t make this mistake when the sentence only has one object pronoun, you can use this trick: remove one object, say the sentence aloud, and determine if it still sounds right. Then do it with the other one.

For example, you would say “Mary drove Tom to the house. Mary drove I to the house.” The first one sounds right, but the second doesn’t. You would say “Mary drove me,” so you know the complete sentence should be “Mary drove Tom and me to the house.”

## **Day 57: Organize topics into logical idea chains.**

After you have organized your ideas into large groups, consider how the ideas in groups interact. Two central questions guide this process.

First, which ideas can serve as topic sentences for paragraphs? These are ideas that comprise other ideas on your list, which become supporting ideas within a paragraph. For example, you may identify 4–5 minor ideas that all support one significant idea. If you have more than 4–5, keep refining so your paragraphs are not too general.

Second, do these topic sentences have a logical order? A reader may need to understand one idea or be convinced about one idea before reading another.

What you are doing here is creating an outline that will help you deliver your ideas in a convincing and engaging manner. You are refining the organization process from broad ideas to specific ideas. Once this process is complete, you will have identified what you want to write about and in what order, and you will be ready to write.

## Day 58: Change *-tion* of endings to *-ing* for more active sentences.

Whenever you write a noun that ends in *-tion*, stop and take another look at the sentence. In most cases, the sentence will need to be revised. This is especially true when you write *-tion of*.

Consider this sentence.

“The reorganization of the department made many employees unhappy.”

Using this tip, we will change “reorganization of” to “reorganizing.” This gives us

“Reorganizing the department made many employees unhappy.”

This is better because it implies that someone or something performed an action. While “reorganizing” is a gerund (an *-ing* verb used as a noun), it gives the sense of action that “reorganization of” doesn’t.

## **Day 59: Change *-tion* of endings to *by -ing* and name the actors for clarity.**

On day 58, we changed “The reorganization of the department made many employees unhappy” to “Reorganizing the department made many employees unhappy.” However, we still don’t know who performed the action, i.e., the rhetorical subject.

Generally, we try to remove all nominalizations and to name the people or things that perform the action. We do this with the *by -ing* structure. Using this tip, we replace “reorganization of” to “by reorganizing,” which forces us to name the person or thing performing the action.

Now our revised sentence will read

“By reorganizing the department, the management made many employees unhappy.”  
(emphasizes “unhappy”)

We can also rearrange this sentence for a different effect:

“The management made many employees unhappy by reorganizing the department.”  
(emphasizes “reorganizing”)

## **Day 60: A paragraph should only discuss one idea.**

The paragraph is the basic unit for expressing an idea, and each paragraph should only express one idea. This has two implications for effective writing.

First, it helps you determine what to write. You can think to yourself, “Ok, I’m going to write about this idea, so now I need a paragraph.”

Second, it helps you keep your writing focused, cohesive, and concise, instead of vague, disorganized, and unnecessarily lengthy. You have one idea to discuss, and only one, and when you have finished discussing it, you know your paragraph is done.

When writing: Determine the idea about which you want to write. You may need to determine any supporting ideas, which also may go in that paragraph. Then you write a paragraph about that idea.

When editing: The process is the opposite. Read the paragraph and ask, “What is being discussed here?” If you cannot summarize it as one idea, the paragraph needs to be fixed. For example, you may have two separate ideas, in which case you will need two paragraphs. If you have no main idea, you may decide that the information needs to be a part of a different paragraph, or you may strike out the paragraph altogether.

## **Day 61: Use an apostrophe to replace missing letters in a contraction.**

We like to say that apostrophes are PC. We don't mean that they're politically correct. Rather, we mean that they're used for possessives and contractions. For contractions, the apostrophe replaces any missing letters. For example:

The apostrophe in *they're* replaces the missing "a" in *they are*.

The apostrophe in *you're* replaces the missing "a" in *you are*.

The apostrophe in *isn't* replaces the missing "o" in *is not*.

The apostrophe in *it's* replaces the missing "i" in *it is*.

We are surprised when we see the apostrophe in the wrong place or more apostrophes than necessary. If a letter isn't missing, then no apostrophe is needed in that place.

One last note: The apostrophe always points or curves to the left, even when at the beginning of the word. Your word processor may automatically reverse the direction, so be careful with this.

## **Day 62: Be brief.**

*When you wish to instruct, be brief; that men's minds take in quickly what you say, learn its lesson, and retain it faithfully. Every word that is unnecessary only pours over the side of a brimming mind.*

(Cicero)

Too many words spoil the message. Say what is necessary to communicate your idea. Get to the point. Give the reader what he or she needs. Cut out what is unnecessary. Clarity often comes from concision.

## Day 63: Reduce adverbs by using the right action verb.

Adverbs describing actions are overused, particularly those adverbs that end in *-ly*. A writer will use an adverb to explain how an action is performed. A reader, however, will form a mental image of the action, and then must revise that image based on the adverb.

This can cause momentary confusion and misinterpretation of the text. Also, using adverbs can lead to text that is too wordy.

In most cases, the adverbs can be removed by using the correct action verb. Consider this sentence.

“The man walked quickly and agitatedly toward the phone.”

By choosing a different verb, the two adverbs can be removed:

“The man hurried toward the phone.”

Do you need to remove every adverb? No. Some adverbs can provide clarity and “flavor” to your writing. The problem, however, is that they are overused. Find your adverbs and find the verbs they describe. Consider using a more accurate action verb. If the intended meaning isn’t changed, and if the sentence still gives the same impression to the reader, revise the sentence to use the new verb.



## Day 64: Remove unnecessary *that is/are* and *who is/are* phrases.

Concise writing promotes reader understanding. It also helps keep the reader interested in what you are writing. Many of these tips discuss strategies for writing concisely and removing unnecessary words. This tip provides another strategy for concise writing.

Writers use these phrases to introduce a description. Consider this sentence.

“The office manager who is greeting new employees is well liked.”

Here, the phrase “who is” is being used to introduce the descriptive phrase “greeting new employees.” “Who is” can be removed without changing the meaning or damaging the clarity of the sentence, so it should be removed. This gives us

“The office manager greeting new employees is well liked.”

The reader will still know which office manager is being described. Here’s another example.

“The boys who are in the hallway are standing in front of the door that is open.”

We can apply this tip to change “The boys who are in the hallway” to “The boys in the hallway.”

However, we might not want change “the door that is open.” This phrase implies that multiple doors are in the hallway but that only one is open. In this case, the phrase “that is” is necessary for clarifying where the boys are. On the other hand, if only one door is in the hallway, we can apply this tip, resulting in “the open door.”

## **Day 65: Use a hyphen for compound, self-modifying, descriptive word pairs before a noun.**

This really isn't as complex as it sounds. Consider this sentence.

"The sky-blue paint complimented the office furniture."

The term "sky-blue" has two words, so it is compound. The word "sky" modifies, or describes, "blue," so these words are self-modifying. The word pair "sky-blue" describes and comes before the noun "paint." Thus, it needs a hyphen. Here's another example.

"The well-known actress woke up in jail."

The term "well-known" has two words, so it is compound. The word "well" describes "known," so these words are self-modifying. The word pair "well-known" describes and comes before the noun "actress." Thus, it needs a hyphen.

If you put "sky-blue" and "well-known" after the nouns they modify, you don't need the hyphen. For example, you don't need a hyphen if you write "The paint is sky blue" or "The actress is well known."

## **Day 66: Identify your audience.**

Once you have identified your ideas and organized them, the next step is to identify your audience. In many situations, this is the first step. For example, if you are assigned to prepare a report for company shareholders about some topic, then you already know who your audience is: the shareholders.

Whether you identify your audience from the onset or you identify it later, you must identify it. Whom do you expect will read what you write? The answer will affect everything you do when you write.

If you are writing an opinion letter for possible publication in the local newspaper, the audience is not the newspaper readers but the person who decides what letters will be published.

If you are creating website text, the audience is the website visitor you are trying to attract.

If you are preparing an internal memo for your organization, the audience is the people who will receive the memo.

If you are writing a children's book, the audience is either a) the parents who select the books to buy and read, or b) the children in the demographic group to whom the book will be marketed.

## Day 67: Keep adjectives as adjectives, not as nouns.

In most cases, we want verbs to remain as verbs. We find nouns that come from verbs and change them back in to verbs. We also want adjectives to remain as adjectives. We find nouns that come from adjectives and change them back into adjectives. Consider this sentence.

“The difficulty will be convincing the committee members.”

Here, the noun “difficulty” comes from the adjective *difficult*. When we use the adjective form, a possible revision is

“Convincing the committee members will be difficult.”

We prefer the revised version for a couple of reasons.

1. The focus is now on the action, so the sentence is more engaging.
2. In the original sentence, the term “difficulty” doesn’t have any meaning until you read the rest of the sentence.

Here’s another example to help clarify this concept.

“Their food was known for its awfulness.”

The bad noun is “awfulness,” which comes from the adjective *awful*. One revision using the adjective is

“Their food was awful.”

We are not as adamant about changing nouns back into adjectives as we are about changing nouns back into verbs. In many cases, a sentence using a nominalized adjective will be more concise.

Here’s our recommendation. Find nominalized adjectives and evaluate potential revisions. If the revised version is simpler, clearer, more direct, and more engaging, use the adjective form. Otherwise, use the noun form.

## Day 68: *All* is plural or singular depending on the object of *all*.

Subject–verb agreement isn’t difficult. However, some words can complicate this issue. *All* is one such word because it can be a singular or plural subject. Consider these sentences.

Plural subject:

“ALL of us ARE at the movies.”

“ALL the books FALL to the floor.”

Singular subject:

“ALL the food IS gone.”

“ALL the music SOUNDS great.”

In each sentence, the subject is “All.” We know from previous tips that the verb needs to agree in number with the subject (i.e., must be plural or singular). As we see from these sentences, though, *All* can use both plural and singular verbs.

Here’s how we determine whether to use a singular or plural verb form. We ask, “All what?” If the answer to that question is a plural thing, then the verb needs to be plural. If the answer is a singular thing, then the verb needs to be singular.

Here’s how it works, using the examples above.

“ALL of us ARE at the movies.” All what? Us. “Us” is plural, so we use the plural verb.

“ALL the books FALL to the floor.” All what? Books. “Books” is plural.

“ALL the food IS gone.” All what? Food. “Food” is singular, so we use the singular verb.

“ALL the music SOUNDS great.” All what? Music. “Music” is singular.

## **Day 69: Start paragraphs by establishing context.**

Once you have determined the one idea for the paragraph, you need to write about that idea in a way that the reader will understand

1. what the idea is, and
2. how that idea connects to the document as a whole.

You do this by establishing context.

Context is information that tells the reader why you are writing about the idea, the situation in which the idea is relevant, or how the new idea connects to the idea you discussed in the previous paragraph.

Take a look at the first paragraph above (“Once you have determined . . .”). Although that paragraph is short, it begins by establishing the context. It provides information about the person for whom the idea is relevant (you), when the idea is relevant (once you have determined the one idea for the paragraph), and the situation in which the idea is relevant (paragraph writing).

Context may or may not address the same issues that the sample paragraph addresses (i.e., who, what, when). Context does, however, provide the reader with sufficient information to understand how or why the idea is relevant.

Examine your paragraphs and ask yourself, “Have I provided the context for the idea of the paragraph? Will the reader know what topic will be discussed in this paragraph?”

## **Day 70: Punctuate bulleted series as if they were written out in a sentence.**

For lists made from a series in a sentence, use this sample as a guide.

These employees are

- smart,
- knowledgeable,
- friendly, and
- efficient.

If you were to write this out as a sentence, you would have the following: “These employees are smart, knowledgeable, friendly, and efficient.”

When creating a list, you use the same punctuation.

In the sample list, notice

- the commas after each item,
- where the “and” goes, and
- the lack of a colon after “are.”

When the items in the list are complex (i.e., they have their own commas), you can use a semicolon after each list item. Also, you can capitalize each item in the list, but you don’t need to do so because the items would not be capitalized if you were to write this out in sentence format.

## Day 71: *Thus* and *therefore* statements should follow logically from the previous statements.

The topic here is *non sequiturs*. *Non sequitur* is a Latin term meaning “does not follow.” A *non sequitur* is a problem with logic; it is a conclusion that isn’t logical, based on previous statements.

A *non sequitur* looks like this:

Idea A is true.

Idea B is also true.

Thus, Idea C **MUST** be true.

The fault in this logic is assuming that C is true just because A and B are true. In this case, C might be true, but it certainly isn’t true just because A and B are true. It is a *non sequitur*.

When you start a sentence with *thus* or *therefore*, you are saying that the statement you are about to write is the logical conclusion of the previous statements. If the *thus/therefore* statement isn’t true based on the previous statements, you have created a *non sequitur*. Let’s look at an example.

A: People love to eat beef.

B: Beef comes from cows.

C: Thus, people love cows.

The first two statements in this sample are true. The last statement might also be true, but it is not the logical conclusion of the previous statements. It is a *non sequitur*.

Here’s the point of this tip: When you start a sentence with *thus* or *therefore*, make sure the statement logically follows from the previous statements. If it doesn’t, your reader will reject your ideas.



## Day 72: Use a hyphen to clarify a prefix.

When we add a prefix to a verb, the resulting word may look like a very different word with a very different meaning than intended. We use a hyphen after the prefix to indicate which part is the prefix and which part is the main word. Consider this scenario.

We are leasing a house for 6 months. After 5 months, the owner sends us a letter asking whether we intend to stay in the house or vacate it. We want to stay in the house, so we communicate our intentions by letter. To our surprise, the owner starts showing the house to other people who may be interested in leasing it.

We confront the owner, asking why he is showing the house when we plan to stay. Once the confusion is resolved, he shows us what we wrote in the letter: “We plan to release the house when the current contract terminates.”

*Release* means *let go* and *give freedom*. This indicates that the house would be available for leasing because we would not be in it. What we wanted to communicate was that we would lease the house again. We should have written *re-lease*, meaning *lease again*. Without that hyphen, we communicated the opposite meaning.

More examples:

If your car cover (the cover you place over your parked car to protect it from dust and hail) blows off, you will have to re-cover the car (cover again). But if your car is stolen, you will need to recover (find and claim something lost) it.

An undercoat of paint is paint under the surface layer, but under-coat the paint means not using enough paint.

The misconduct (bad conduct or bad behavior) of the audience can cause an orchestra leader to mis-conduct (to conduct incorrectly) the orchestra.

When you add a prefix to a verb, analyze the result. Have you written a different word? Will the reader know what part is the main word and what part is the prefix? If not, then you will probably need that hyphen. If the prefix is obvious, you need no comma.

## **Day 73: Understand your reader's interests, goals, and behavior.**

The strategy on day 66 discussed identifying your primary audience. Now you need to think critically about that audience and ask a number of important questions.

1. Why will this person read my document?
2. What problem will this document solve?
3. What does this person want from my document?
4. When and where will this person read?
5. What knowledge does this person already have about the topic?
6. What will this person do with the information in my document?

Answers to these questions (and others you may think of) will help you make decisions about such issues as topics in general, specific content, length, complexity, format, use of headers and footers, use of lists, and word choice.

These are marketing-type questions that will help guide the development of your product: your document. You may have a specific goal to accomplish with your document. However, only through aligning your document with your reader's needs will you accomplish that goal.

## **Day 74: Cite your sources to build credibility.**

Citing your sources means giving credit to published writers (presumably recognized experts) for ideas you are presenting.

This may seem counterintuitive. If you wish to be perceived as an expert in some topic, then the last thing you want to do is let your readers know that your information comes from someone else. Right? Actually, there are two possibilities here.

First, if you are not yet a recognized authority on the topic, your readers won't consider you credible, which means your information will be received with suspicion. By citing your sources or citing writers who have made the same claims, you are telling your reader, "I'm not the only one saying this. See? These experts agree with me." This raises your credibility and improves the possibility that your readers will accept what you write.

Second, if you are a recognized authority on the topic, your readers will likely believe what you tell them about that topic. By citing your sources, you are telling your reader, "I keep up-to-date on what is happening and on what other experts are doing, so I'm right when I tell you . . . ." This strengthens your credibility, and the reader will be less likely to dispute what you write.

## Day 75: Use compound sentences with *but* to emphasize the importance of your ideas.

A compound sentence is made from two or more complete sentences (i.e., independent clauses) joined by a conjunction. Consider this sentence.

“Tom is an engineer, but he loves painting.”

This compound sentence comprises two complete sentences: 1) “Tom is an engineer” and 2) “he loves painting.” These two independent clauses are joined by the conjunction “but.”

One way to emphasize the importance of your ideas (i.e., make them interesting and valuable to the reader) is to contrast two ideas using the conjunction *but*. Let’s look at the example above to discuss this.

We could have written “Tom is an engineer. He loves painting.” This gives us a rather dull description of Tom by presenting two unconnected facts. The reader may ask, “And this is important why?”

However, if you want to demonstrate that these descriptors are important, you would apply this tip to get “Tom is an engineer, but he loves painting.” Now what this sentence says is that Tom is interesting—he is unique because he loves painting and most engineers don’t.

Using this sentence structure and the word *but*, we have emphasized the importance of both ideas.

## **Day 76: The body of a paragraph connects to the main idea and supports the conclusion.**

The strategy on day 69 discussed beginning paragraphs by establishing context. In this tip, we discuss the body of the paragraph. In this section you establish the facts, the ideas, the supporting evidence, etc. to justify and explain your main point. Each sentence must

1. relate to the main idea of the paragraph, and
2. lead up to your impact/conclusion statement.

Many writers have problems with relevancy in this part of the paragraph. They write about ideas not connected to the context or the main idea. If the sentences do not connect to the main point, then you probably have content for a different paragraph.

The second common problem is that the sentences do not seem relevant to one another. If they do relate to the main point but do not seem connected to one another, reconsider the order of the sentences or how you can revise them to show their connections. Overall, they must demonstrate a progression of ideas or information that will justify the paragraph's conclusion.

## **Day 77: Use a hyphen to attach prefixes to proper nouns.**

When you need to attach a prefix to a proper noun (e.g., names of individual people, places, and titles), use a hyphen. This is pretty simple, so I'll just leave you with a couple examples.

“The committee members were pro-Obama.”

“He has an anti-Washington attitude.”

## **Day 78: Put complex items at the end of a series.**

From the reader's perspective, series can be confusing. They have to figure out what connects to what. This is one reason why we recommend putting commas after every item but the last. Series are most confusing when some of the items are complex. Consider this sentence.

“The plan called for 25 people, 2 weeks, and the expertise, obviously, of the human resources department.”

The complex item here is “the expertise, obviously, of the human resources department.” If we write this part as the first or second item in the series, the potential for reader confusion increases. The reader will have to decide where the item begins and ends because of the extra commas.

Putting this item at the end removes any confusion about where it ends (because nothing follows it), and the sentence is clearer.

## **Day 79: Put clarifying information at the end of the sentence.**

Long sentences can be confusing. One way that writers make long sentences confusing is by including clarifying information in the middle of the sentence. The writer begins the sentence, explains something, and then continues to the end. Consider this example.

“An educator with an ineffective pedagogy, the basic philosophy that guides the educator’s instructional decision-making, will have difficulty keeping students engaged in a lesson.”

The problem here is that the description of “pedagogy” interrupts the idea being expressed. We can use this tip to revise the sentence and put the descriptive information at the end, giving us

“An educator will have difficulty keeping the students engaged if he has an ineffective pedagogy, the basic philosophy that guides the educator’s instructional decision-making.”

This revised sentence contains the same information as the original but in a different, more effective, order. Now the subject and verb are together, and the potentially confusing word, pedagogy, is still with its description.



## **Day 80: Write in the appropriate style and tone.**

You identified your main and supporting ideas. You organized them logically. You know who your readers are, what they expect, and why they are reading your document. The next step is writing.

As you write, think about how the reader will perceive you (or the organization you represent). What impression do you want to give? The answer to this question will affect your style of writing.

Also, think about the reader's emotional response. How do you want the reader to feel about the content and you? The answer to this question will affect the tone of your document.

This is only your first draft. It doesn't have to be perfect. Your purpose here is to get the ideas on paper. Other than very light editing, don't spend too much time revising. You will do that after you finish writing your first draft. You cannot effectively maintain the stream of your thoughts, focus on content, or adhere to a logical organization if you keep interrupting yourself to revise your words.

## **Day 81: Use concluding words to state your main point.**

When you are writing a document to persuade your reader about an idea, you present your supporting ideas or evidence leading up to the main point. If you do this well, your reader will come to the same conclusion that you are trying to make.

To show that you have finished making your argument (i.e., completed writing about the reasons for your idea) and are about to state the main idea, you use a concluding word. A concluding word tells the reader, “Based on this information and evidence, I conclude that . . . .” Sample concluding words and phrases are *thus*, *therefore*, *in conclusion*, and *as a consequence*.

These concluding words provide a signpost for the reader. They say, “I’m done giving the evidence, and now I’m going to tell you the idea that I want you to believe.”

You may be able to make your main point without them. However, they are very effective for helping the reader identify what it is you want them to understand.

## **Day 82: Use parallel grammatical constructions when describing simultaneous actions.**

Using parallel grammatical constructions means describing actions in the same way so that any words referring to all the actions make grammatical sense. Simultaneous actions are actions that occur at the same time. This is quickly becoming more complicated than it needs to, so let's look at an example. Consider this sentence.

“A good teacher should be helpful and provides clear directions.”

In this example, the teacher is doing two actions: being helpful and providing directions. The words that relate to both actions are “A good teacher.” The problem is that “should be helpful” is not written in the same manner as “provides clear directions.” As such, one of these (or both) needs to change.

Three possible revisions are as follows.

“A good teacher **SHOULD BE** helpful and **SHOULD PROVIDE** clear directions.”

“A good teacher **SHOULD BE** helpful and **PROVIDE** clear directions.” (This is the same as the first revision. The word “should” is implied for the second action.)

“A good teacher **IS** helpful and **PROVIDES** clear directions.”

In summary, find the actions that are occurring at the same time and make sure that they are written the same way grammatically.

## **Day 83: End paragraphs with an impact or action statement.**

How you end a paragraph is as important as how you begin it. So far, you identified the main idea of the paragraph (only one), you have established the context for the idea, and you have provided content.

Now, you need to close it. The paragraph has a single, main point, and the end of the paragraph is an effective place to state that idea. Because this statement is the main point of the paragraph, you want your reader to pay close attention to it.

You can use a very short sentence, use words that provoke a strong emotion, write directly to the reader (using “you,” if appropriate for the document), or provide a command for some action. If the paragraph is at the end of a persuasive document, an action step is probably your best choice.

This applies to both nonfiction and fiction writing. Consider this opening paragraph from Ayn Rand's fictional novel *Anthem*.

It is a sin to write this. It is a sin to think words no others think and to put them down upon a paper no others are to see. It is base and evil. It is as if we were speaking alone to no ears but our own. And we know well that there is no transgression blacker than to do or think alone. We have broken the laws. The laws say that men may not write unless the Council of Vocations bid them so. May we be forgiven!

The paragraph opens with context: sin, doing something wrong. Then it describes the sinful actions. Finally, it ends with a high-impact action statement: “May we be forgiven!”

## **Day 84: Use a comma to set off appositives.**

An appositive is a word or phrase that provides non-essential information (i.e., not required to make the sentence grammatically correct) and that renames a previous word. Consider this sentence.

“The automobile, a great invention, provides mobility to many people.”

The phrase “a great invention” is not necessary to the idea of the sentence, “The automobile provides mobility to many people,” and it renames or describes “the automobile.” Here’s another example:

“Fred put on his scarf, a long, flowing snake-like thing.”

In this example, “a long, flowing, snake-like thing” is not essential to understanding Fred’s action, and it renames or describes “scarf.”

As you can see from the examples, appositives are set off from the rest of the sentence by commas. In the first example, we used commas before and after the appositive. In the second example, we only needed a comma before the appositive because the sentence ends with a period after the appositive.

## Day 85: Remove cliché redundancies.

Common speech patterns contain many redundancies. When we use them to write, we create wordy, inflated documents. To communicate effectively and directly, we remove the unnecessary words and simply write what we mean. Consider these wordy phrases and their revisions.

*if it is determined that* can be written *if*

*actually, in reality* can be written *actually* or *in reality* (*actually* and *in reality* mean the same thing, and both are usually unnecessary.)

*practice simulation* can be written *practice* or *simulation* (*practice* and *simulation* mean the same thing, in most cases. In cases where they don't mean exactly the same thing, use the one that is most appropriate, not both.)

*critically necessary* can be written *necessary*

Consider the words you write and ask yourself if you are saying the same thing twice. If you are, then remove the unnecessary words.

Here's a sentence based on a document we edited.

"Children need the dexterity to perform the motor skills necessary for legible handwriting."

"Dexterity" means having the motor skills to perform some task, so this sentence has a redundancy. When we remove the redundancy, the sentence can be revised in two ways.

"Children need the dexterity necessary for legible handwriting."

"Children need the motor skills necessary to write legibly."

This can be further reduced because "need" and "necessary" imply the same meaning. Now we have this revision:

"Children need the motor skills to write legibly."

## **Day 86: Place clarifying adverbial phrases before or after the subject–verb combination.**

A central tenet to clear writing is to keep the subject and main verb as close together as possible. However, you may need to include clarifying adverbial phrases to help the reader understand when or how the action occurred. Consider this sentence:

“The man yesterday after the wind blew fell from his ladder.”

This grammatically correct sample has two adverbial phrases: “yesterday” and “after the wind blew.” These adverbial phrases are between the subject and main verb (“man” and “fell,” respectively), making this sentence confusing and awkward.

To fix this sentence, we move the adverbial phrases before or after the subject–verb combination, resulting in 2 possible revisions. revisions.

“After the wind blew yesterday, the man fell from his ladder.”

“The man fell from his ladder after the wind blew yesterday.”

This may not be necessary in every situation, but it will improve your sentence in most cases. In every case, this is a good tip to keep in mind so you can evaluate your sentences.

**Day 87: Punctuate bulleted lists as if they were written out in a sentence, using capital letters.**

Here's an example of a sentence with a list. "The dog has three toys: a squeaky rubber frog, a tennis ball, and Mr. Sock."

If we transform this into a bulleted list, we get the following.

The dog has three toys:

- A squeaky rubber frog,
- A tennis ball, and
- Mr. Sock.

You should notice 4 main elements:

1. The colon after "toys,"
2. The comma (or semicolon) after each list item,
3. The placement of the word "and," and
4. The period at the end.

## **Day 88: A one-sentence paragraph should present a complete idea.**

Paragraphs can be written many ways. In nonfiction documents, a paragraph may first establish context, provide supporting details, and conclude with an impact statement that leads to the next idea.

In fiction or narrative documents, for another example, a paragraph may show a single action or provide a character's immediate response to an experience. Some writers use long paragraphs to fully explore an idea, while others may prefer short, terse paragraphs.

In all cases, however, the purpose of a paragraph is to present one idea to the reader. The complexity of the idea and the reader's need for explanation determine paragraph length. A careful writer will balance the reader's need with his or her style preferences.

This brings us to a question I have been asked occasionally. How many sentences should be in a paragraph? The answer I give is based on the "one idea per paragraph" concept: at least one.

If the preceding paragraphs have provided sufficient information for the reader to understand the idea, and if the connections between the ideas are clear, and if the value and implications of the idea will be obvious to the reader, one sentence may be sufficient.



## **Day 89: Place explanatory phrases in an order that reduces commas.**

Commas are great. They help readers understand. However, every time you add a comma, you create a pause. If a sentence has too many pauses, it will seem choppy and awkward. This is especially true with introductory adverbial phrases and other such explanatory phrases. Consider this sentence.

“Yesterday, when the wind blew, the man fell from the ladder.”

The order of the two phrases “Yesterday” and “when the wind blew” creates an awkward phrasing. “Yesterday” serves as an introductory phrase to “when the wind blew,” so it requires the comma.

We can follow this tip to change their order, giving us

“When the wind blew yesterday, the man fell from the ladder.”

“Yesterday” is no longer introductory, so the comma is not needed. Overall, this sentence is much smoother.

Our recommendation: When you are stringing together explanatory phrases with commas, consider their order and how it may be changed to reduce the number of commas.

## Day 90: Create transitions to the next paragraph.

The final sentences of a paragraph have two functions. First, they need to provide a conclusion, impact statement, or action statement relevant to the single idea of the paragraph. Second, they need to create a transition to the idea of the next paragraph.

This transition is created by using words and phrases relevant to the next idea or by specifically noting how the current idea relates to the next one. Let's look at two examples.

NONFICTION EXAMPLE:

**End of paragraph one:** “Throughout the grades, teachers build this disposition by asking questions that help students find the mathematics in their experiences, and by encouraging students to persist with interesting but challenging problems.”

**Beginning of paragraph two:** “Students who can successfully solve problems are able to apply and adapt a variety of appropriate strategies.”

[National Council of Teachers of Mathematics, 2000]

The first paragraph discusses teaching strategies, and the second discusses types of problem-solving strategies. The transition is created by the underlined at the end of the first paragraph, which relate to the idea described in the context of the second paragraph.

FICTION EXAMPLE:

Gloucester: I hope they will not come upon us now.

King Henry: We are in God's hands, brother, not in theirs.

[Shakespeare, Henry V, act 3, scene 6]

Gloucester's comment discusses actions by the enemy, using the word “they.” This reference to the enemy creates a subtle transition to the beginning of Henry's speech, which starts with a reference to the enemy: “theirs.”

## Day 91: Series in sentences do not require colons.

You want to write a sentence that has a string of items in it. Do you or don't you use a colon to introduce that string of items? Depends. If the items are in a series, then you don't use a colon.

Items in a series are part of the grammatical structure of the sentence. If you use a colon, you set them apart from the grammatical structure of the sentence. That's what a colon does. Thus, if you use a colon for a series, you remove the items from the grammatical structure of the sentence, and the sentence will be incomplete.

This is how a series differs from a list. A list can be removed, but a series can't. Consider this sentence.

“The man went to the store to buy a hammer, find a hat, and replace his handkerchief.”

The three items in the series cannot be removed without creating a sentence fragment. “The man went to the store to:” is not a complete sentence. The only way to make this example grammatically correct is to leave out the colon.

## Day 92: Reduce ambiguous “counting” phrases to single words.

An ambiguous “counting” phrase is a phrase that tells the reader that multiple things exist without giving the precise number. Ambiguous counting phrases include *a number of*, *a few*, *more than a few*, *more than one*, *a large number of*, and *two or more*.

If you know the exact number (and wish to reveal it), then write the exact number. However, if you need to be ambiguous (because you don’t know the number or you are trying to “spin” your facts), you might choose to use one of these phrases.

The problem with these phrases is that they weaken writing. They use too many words. You can replace these weak phrases with more direct, but still ambiguous, words. Some examples are *some*, *several*, *many*, *multiple*, and *myriad*.

Note: You have to be careful with *myriad*. It literally means *thousand*. In common usage, *myriad* refers to a very large, but unspecified, number, as in “The myriad questions posed by scientists have challenged traditional religious thinking.”

## Day 93: Use an introductory adverbial phrase or clause to reduce sentence complexity.

An introductory adverbial phrase/clause is a description of the action that occurs before the subject in a sentence, and it is followed by a comma. Here is a sentence with an introductory adverbial clause:

“When John saw the car approaching, he hid behind the tree.”

The adverbial clause is “when John saw the car approaching,” and it describes the action “hid.”

A sentence with multiple explanatory phrases may be difficult to understand. This is especially true if they are strung together, i.e., one follows immediately after the other. Consider this sentence.

“John would not have yelled at his wife while she was providing directions as they drove to the shopping mall if he had understood her intentions.”

This sentence has several adverbial phrases and clauses, including 1) “while she was providing directions,” 2) “as they drove,” and 3) “if he had understood her intentions.” Because they are strung together, they make this sentence confusing. The reader has to keep revising his understanding of what happened and when.

Also, if the explanations are strung together, the reader has to do a lot of work, and this makes reading tedious. In the meantime, nothing is happening in the sentence. The main action has already occurred or hasn’t yet occurred. In this sentence, the main action is “would have yelled.” All the descriptive phrases are written after the main action.

We can apply this tip to the sample sentence. We will move “if he had understood his wife’s intentions” before the subject. This gives us the following revision.

“If he had understood his wife’s intentions, John would not have yelled at her for providing directions as they drove to the mall.”

This revision is more direct and easier to understand. Also, it is more active because the main action breaks up the string of descriptions.

We could have moved a different description. We moved “If John had understood his wife’s intentions” because 1) the subject of the introductory adverbial clause is the same as the subject of the sentence, which is required, and 2) it is a different type of adverbial phrase than the others in that it explains why the action occurred and not when it occurred. This was, of course, a subjective decision.

## Day 94: *Effect* is a noun; *Affect* is a verb.

*Effect* is a noun that approximately means *result*. You can write “the effect,” “one effect,” and “an effect” because *effect* is a noun.

*Affect* is a verb that approximately means *influence*. You can write “affects,” “affecting,” and “affected” because it is a verb. [*Affect* can only be used as a noun when you are writing about an emotional response. A person’s affect is his or her emotional state. In all other cases, it is a verb.]

If you’re not sure which one you need, and you can’t decide whether you need a noun or a verb, try replacing the word with *result* and then with *influence*. Which one is grammatically correct and approximates what you are trying to say? If *result*, then use *effect*. If *influence*, then use *affect*.

## Day 95: Provide signposts to help readers organize information.

Signposts are words that help the reader (and the writer) organize information. They are especially useful when you are providing a lot of information or information that is complicated. They tell the reader three things: here's where we were, here's where we are, and here's where we are going.

Not all documents require signposts. However, if your document contains more than 4 or 5 paragraphs, you may need to provide signposts to help the reader identify, understand, remember, and act upon your ideas.

Signposts come in four categories: outline, internal reference, point indicator, and heading (our terms).

### A. Outline

Outline signposts help readers order the information. As the name implies, these signposts create a verbal outline of the information. Outline signposts include the words and phrases *first*, *second*, *part one*, *next*. The actual outline may be explicitly stated in technical documents (as in this writing tip). These are sometimes called *sequence markers*.

### B. Internal reference

Internal reference signposts help show how current information connects to information elsewhere in the document. Internal reference signposts include the words and phrases *as discussed previously*, *based on*, *furthermore*, *in addition*, *as will be shown*, and *explained later*.

### C. Point indicator

Point indicators are words and phrases that tell the reader that you are about to make a new point, discuss a new issue, or provide a key piece of information. They are the equivalent of a sign that says, "You are here." Point indicator signposts include the words *now*, *at this point*, *however*, *the issue/point/idea is*, *thus*, *to summarize*, and *finally*.

### D. Heading

Headings are the most obvious type of signpost. They are used to title sections of a document, each of which addresses a single topic. Major headings label broad ideas or document components. Minor headings label narrow or specific ideas. Most style guides will provide specifications for font size, placement, capitalization, and other text styles for various levels of headings.

## **Day 96: Use “additive” words to show how a new idea connects to the topic.**

You have just written an important idea. Now you want to make another point related to the same topic, and you want the reader to know that it is just as important as the previous idea. You can use “additive” words to do this.

“Additive” words are words that show you are adding to the previous idea. [I’m using quotes around “additive” because this is our word, not the official word.] Sample “additive” words are as follows: *additionally*, *also*, *similarly*, *likewise*, and *furthermore*.

These words provide useful signposts to your readers, telling them that the next idea you state is on the same topic as the previous statement, that it is a new idea (not redundant), and that it is as important as the previous statement.



## **Day 97: Limit compound sentences to two independent clauses.**

A compound sentence is made up of two or more independent clauses. Consider this sentence.

“The personnel director wrote his report, and I was admonished for selling company property.”

This sentence contains two independent clauses, each of which could be a complete sentence. The first is “The personnel director wrote his report.” The second independent clause is “I was admonished for selling company property.”

A sentence expresses a complete thought. A compound sentence expresses two or more thoughts. If you have too many thoughts in one sentence, the sentence will be too wordy, and the reader will have difficulty interpreting what he or she should know. Overall, the writing will be amateurish.

For this reason, we recommend that you don’t have more than two independent clauses per sentence. If you have more to say, use additive words or other strategies to discuss them.

## Day 98: Link paragraphs to the prior paragraph.

The beginning of a paragraph establishes the context for the ideas it will present and shows how the new ideas connect to what you have just written. As such, the words and phrases at the beginning of a paragraph need to reflect the ideas at the end of the prior paragraph.

What this does is show how your ideas, as a whole, are logically connected, creating a sense of “flow” among the ideas so that the ideas do not seem disjointed. Let’s look at an example.

End of paragraph one: “What ground have we for thinking that art has ever been inspired as a message or revelation? What internal evidence is there in the work of great artists of their having been under the authoritative guidance of supernatural powers?”

Start of paragraph two: “It is true that the answer to so mysterious a question cannot rest alone upon internal evidence; but it is well that you should know what might, from that evidence alone, be concluded.” (John Ruskin, 1870, “Lectures on Art”)

Ruskin connected paragraph two to paragraph one by using the words “answer” (referring to the questions just asked); “mysterious” (referring to “supernatural powers”); and “internal evidence” (referring to “internal evidence”), making paragraph two the logical continuation of paragraph one.

## Day 99: Use subject pronouns, not object pronouns, as subjects.

The subject pronouns are *I, you, he, she, it, we, they, and who*. The object pronouns are *me, you, him, her, it, us, them, and whom*. When you need a pronoun as the subject of a verb, use a subject pronoun.

Very few people make errors when only using one pronoun. However, when the subject is compound, errors are more common. For example, I occasionally hear or read something like this:

“Me and her went to the movies.”

In this example, the main verb is “went,” and the subject is “me and her.” These are not subject pronouns. Instead, this should be written

“She and I went to the movies.”

Sometimes this is even more complicated. The pronouns may be the subject of a verb that is not the main verb. Consider this sentence.

“The postman knocked when him and I were at home.”

The pronouns “him and I” are serving as the subject to “were.” “Him” is not a subject pronoun, so the sentence should be written

“The postman knocked when he and I were at home.”

You can use this trick. Write the sentence with one pronoun at a time and listen to how the sentence sounds: “When him was at home” vs. “When he was at home.” Which one sounds correct? A native English speaker will choose the correct option nearly every time.

## **Day 100: State new ideas using familiar language.**

*The secret of good writing is to say an old thing in a new way or to say a new thing in an old way.*

(Richard Harding Davis)

If you say an old thing in an old way, you will quickly bore your reader, and you will lose credibility as a writer because you will be trying to communicate what the reader already knows. If you say a new thing in a new way, your reader may have difficulty understanding. On the other hand . . .

Writing an old idea in a new way allows the reader to think about the topic from a fresh perspective. Also, writing about a new topic using familiar terms and relating the new information to already known information helps the reader to make sense of the new information.

## Day 101: Edit from your readers' perspective.

*When you publish a book, it's the world's book. The world edits it.*

(Philip Roth)

Roth addresses two important concepts here.

1. Readers will evaluate and criticize what you write. They will judge the clarity, the style, the ideas you present, and the correctness of the spelling, grammar, punctuation, and word usage. Ask yourself, "How will readers judge this?"
2. Readers will interpret what you write. They will take your words and make their own meanings. You want their meaning to be equal to the meaning you intend. Thus, when you write, ask yourself, "How might the reader interpret these words?"

After you have written the first draft, put the document away for some time. Generally, the more emotionally and cognitively you are involved with the content, the longer you should put it away. Then, when you do re-read it, try to criticize it from the readers' perspective and ask yourself the two questions above.

## Day 102: Think or feel or believe or realize.

Writers often interchange the phrases *I realize that*, *I think that*, *I believe that*, and *I feel that*. However, these four phrases have unique meanings.

1. *I realize that*—expresses a new understanding or awareness
2. *I think that*—expresses an idea, a fact, etc. that, in your opinion, is true
3. *I believe that*—expresses an opinion or an expectation about a future occurrence
4. *I feel that*—expresses an emotional state

When a writer uses these phrases inappropriately, he or she confuses the readers. When they are used correctly, they accurately describe the writer's confidence level and mental activity regarding a topic.

## Day 103: Major Writing Process—Editing

Let me give you three quotes that are particularly appropriate here (one of which you have already seen).

1. *It is perfectly okay to write garbage—as long as you edit brilliantly.* (C.J. Cherryh)
2. *Rewriting is the essence of writing well: it's where the game is won or lost. That idea is hard to accept. We all have an emotional equity in our first draft; we can't believe that it wasn't born perfect. But the odds are close to 100 percent that it wasn't.* (William Zinsser)
3. *Rewriting is called revision in the literary and publishing trade because it springs from re-viewing, that is to say, looking at your copy again—and again and again.* (Jacques Barzun)

After you write, put away your document. Leave it long enough so that you may see it without preconceptions and without remembering what you were thinking at the time. Then look at it again. Does it satisfy your purpose? Have you communicated clearly? Can you make it more concise without losing essential content? Are the ideas logically presented? Keep criticizing it, refining it, until it is as good as it can be. Then give it to others (perhaps your editor) to evaluate.

Here's the main point: Your first draft will need editing. The editing process is what will make your document an effective communication tool, regardless of the genre. Make sure you have time for this stage. It is critical.

Here's the secondary point: If others recommend (or make) changes, don't be offended. First drafts will always need improvements.

## Day 104: Using the Title Case

When writing a title, capitalize all words except *the*, *a*, prepositions, and conjunctions, unless they are the first word or follow a colon.

Incorrect examples and their corrections:

Wrong: A study of the inner-city schools

Right: A Study of the Inner-city Schools

Wrong: Long-term Effects Of Lead Consumption

Right: Long-term Effects of Lead Consumption

Wrong: Hubert Longely: a man of the times

Right: Hubert Longely: A Man of the Times

Wrong: the Precise Edit training manual

Right: The Precise Edit Training Manual



## Day 105: Remove colloquialisms from formal writing.

Colloquialisms are words and phrases that writers use to imitate informal, friendly talk. They are not appropriate in formal writing for three reasons.

1. Colloquialisms are not formal, so the tone and style will be inappropriate.
2. They don't convey the literal meaning of the words and, therefore, are subject to misinterpretation.
3. They are often specific to geographic regions or cultural groups. As such, others may not understand the message you are trying to communicate.

Here are some examples of colloquialisms and an option for a more formal way to express the intended message. Depending on how the term is being used, the formal option will change.

*walls between* = *barriers to*

*iron out* = *resolve*

*thorny [issues]* = *complicated [issues]*

*no brainer* = *simple*

*hang-up* = *animosity*

## **Day 106: Combine two sentences by using an introductory phrase or clause.**

Let's say you have two short sentences or one average-length sentence with a short sentence that provides additional information. To prevent your document from sounding too choppy or repetitive, you can combine the two sentences into one. One way to do this is to create an introductory clause or phrase from the additional information. Consider these sentences.

“Our grant writing consultant expressed his belief that the proposal will be funded.”

“He made this statement to the district superintendent.”

These two sentences are nearly the same: the person + speak + statement. This makes the two sentences sound repetitive. Sentence two provides some extra information about the main concept in sentence one. Using this tip, we can create an introductory phrase from sentence two. This gives us the following revision.

“While speaking to the district superintendent, our grant writing consultant expressed his belief that the proposal will be funded.”

With the extra information in an introductory phrase and not in the main sentence, the main idea of the sentence is clear. This is also a good way to vary sentence length, resulting in more engaging writing, without making your sentences difficult to understand.

## **Day 107: Use single quotes inside double quotes.**

If you are quoting someone or some other text, you know to place double quotation marks ( “ ” ) around the words you are quoting. But what if the words you are quoting include a quote? For example, what do you do if you are quoting these words?

Original text: The author supports the president's statement that “all economic problems resolve themselves in a free and competitive market.” [Outside quotation marks removed.]

This text you want to quote already contains a quote, so here's what you do. Place the double quotation marks around the entire text, and then convert the original double quotation marks to single quotation marks. Your text will look like this:

Your version: “The author supports the president's statement that ‘all economic problems resolve themselves in a free and competitive market.’ ”

The single quotation marks let the reader know that you are quoting a quote. Also, notice the extra space between the single and double quotation mark at the end.

## **Day 108: Use square brackets to insert comments into quotes.**

Let's say you are quoting your department supervisor in a letter to customers. The reader may not know the meaning of a particular word the supervisor used, so you want to include a definition. However, the definition is not part of the quote. You use square brackets to indicate that you are inserting words that are not part of the quote. These are square brackets, a.k.a. braces: [ ]. Consider this sentence.

“The consumer reactualizes the initial subscription fee.”

What does the speaker mean by “reactualizes”? We can provide that information in this way:

“The consumer reactualizes [repays] the initial subscription fee.”

Any time you want to interject text into a quote, use square brackets to let the reader know that the words you included are not part of the quote but are your own words.

## Day 109: Simplify three common, weak phrases.

Vigorous, direct, and persuasive writing is concise. Here are three common weak phrases and their concise replacements.

*in order to—to*

This is a simple replacement. The sentence “I will use my card in order to buy snacks” becomes “I will use my card to buy snacks.”

*there is a—a*

This will likely require additional revision, but the result will be better. The sentence “I see that there is a dog on the couch” becomes “I see a dog on the couch.”

*with/in regards to—regards*

This changes the verb to *regards*. The sentence “This letter is in regard to your delinquent account” becomes “This letter *regards* your delinquent account.”

## **Day 110: Be prepared to work hard at your writing.**

*Easy reading is damned hard writing.*

(Nathaniel Hawthorne)

(Please excuse the curse word. It may indicate Hawthorne's frustration with the work necessary to produce good writing, or it may indicate the strength with which Hawthorne believes this.)

The point of this quote is that clear, easy-to-read writing is not easy to produce. Instead, it is the result of writing, analyzing what you write, and re-writing—perhaps many times.

When you write, you are attempting to communicate. The more work you put into writing, the better you will be able to communicate. Hard work by you leads to easy understanding by your reader.

People have told me, "Writing is so easy for you." This isn't true. I have practiced writing, studied writing, and analyzed what makes writing clear. The documents they read are the result of much work: writing, criticizing, and rewriting until they are "easy reading." That's what great writers aim for: not easy writing but easy reading.

## **Day 111: Use the power of three for impact.**

Our brains are funny. They tend to understand, organize, and remember groups of three. Groups of three, as a result, have an impact on the way we think. We can use the power of three to create impact in our writing.

We do this by using a group of three items for statements that we want readers to focus on, think about, and act upon. Let me give you an example of the power of three in action.

“Our tax system hurts businesses, deters savings, and creates hardships for families.”

In a larger context, a statement like this can work as the introduction to a larger discourse about the three effects mentioned. By using the power of three, the writer helps the reader organize and understand the content to follow. And the reader will more likely remember these key points. That’s impact.

Such a statement also works well as the conclusion to a paragraph, which is where we often find impact statements. If we use this example as the final point, the summary impact statement, we might revise it as follows.

“These data tell us that the tax system is bad for the economy. It hurts businesses, deters savings, and creates hardships for families.”

The point is this. You can use the power of three to emphasis your ideas, influence your readers, and create impact.

## **Day 112: Provide credible references for new or controversial information.**

Unless you are a recognized expert about a topic, your reader will have no reason to believe what you write. For example, I could tell you, “You shouldn’t eat eggplant. It’s bad for you.” You will ask, rightly, “What makes you an expert on eggplant?”

Unless the reader has a reason to believe that you are an expert on the topic, you need to provide a reference. A reference gives credibility to the information. A reference provides the source of the information you are communicating. This is especially important if your information is controversial, new, or contradictory to what the reader believes.

Name the source of the information, if known. If you have specific names, use them. This sentence contains a credible reference: “Louise Wilson, a researcher at the University of Nebraska, claims that people should not eat eggplant.”

You can also be more general, if needed, by using titles and descriptors, such as *researchers*, *industry experts*, or *government officials*. For example, you can write, “Nutritionists claim that people should not eat eggplant.”

## Day 113: Use the em dash for impact.

An em dash is the long dash (“—”). It is named *em dash* because it is about the width of the letter *M*, based on old typesetting standards.

The em dash has two uses:

1. To interject off-topic ideas into a sentence, and
2. To create impact by emphasizing some point.

The em dash creates a pause so that whatever follows it will be stressed. Consider this sentence.

“John is a great singer—at home.”

The em dash emphasizes the words “at home.” If we leave out the dash and write “John is a great singer at home,” we allow the reader to think that John is considered a great singer other places, too. With the dash, we make the point that John is not considered a great singer other places—only at home.

When you do this at the end of a sentence, you emphasize the importance of whatever follows the dash. Write a complete sentence before the dash, and then conclude with the impact statement after the dash.

Using two hyphens is acceptable in situations where the em dash cannot be displayed. For formal documents, use a regular em dash, not two hyphens.



## **Day 114: Know your secondary audience.**

The immediate recipient of your document is your primary audience. Your secondary audience receives the document from the primary audience. In many cases, the document is not transferred to the secondary audience—only the information is passed on.

For example, if you write a financial analysis of a new program, your primary audience may be your supervisor or contracting agent. If that person takes specific information from the report and uses it to create his or her own report, or if that person passes on the document to another person, then the document or information moves from the primary to the secondary audience.

For example, if you write a fiction book, the person who buys the book is the primary audience. However, if that person passes the book on to another person, or if the book is read with a child or another person, then the child or other person is the secondary audience.

Why is this important? Nearly every document or manuscript will have a secondary audience. The needs of that person may be different than the needs of the primary audience. To ensure the effectiveness of your writing (or the widest distribution of the content), identify the secondary audience and consider that person's needs. You will want to address both the primary and secondary audiences' needs.

## Day 115: Use adjectives instead of prepositional phrases for descriptions.

In writing that is artificially formal, such as in much academic writing and business writing, prepositional phrases are used to provide descriptions. Consider this sentence.

“His style of leadership was abusive.”

Here, the prepositional phrase “of leadership” is describing “style.” Grammatically, this sentence is fine. However, prepositional phrases tend to make writing lifeless and unnecessarily complex, i.e., not engaging and straightforward.

We use this tip to remove the prepositional phrase and revise the sentence as follows.

“His leadership style was abusive.”

We could also revise the sentence to remove the weak verb “was.” This might give us the following sentence:

“He had an abusive leadership style.”

This revision is better because it replaces the weak verb “was” with the action verb “had.”

What did we do here? First, we revised the sentence to use an adjective instead of a prepositional phrase. Second, we revised the sentence to use an action verb instead of a *to be* verb. The result is vigorous, engaging writing.

## Day 116: Remove prepositional phrases showing ownership.

Prepositional phrases inhibit direct and engaging writing. While they may provide useful descriptions, they do weaken writing. For this reason, we try to avoid them when possible. One way we do this is by revising prepositional phrases indicating ownership. Consider this sentence.

“The book by the new author was well received.”

This can be revised as

“The new author’s book was well received.”

For a more complicated example, consider this sentence.

“The Economic Council of the City of Santa Fe met to discuss road construction.”

We could revise this as follows.

“The City of Santa Fe’s Economic Council met to discuss road conditions.”

(In this case, we didn’t change “City of Santa Fe” because that is an official name.)

## **Day 117: Lead the reader to your conclusion.**

In classical argumentation, you build a case for some idea. You present facts, theories, and assumptions. Then, you reveal the conclusion. If you have done your job well, the conclusion will be the inevitable result of the discussion.

If you start with the idea, you either confuse your reader (because he or she won't have the necessary information for understanding) or you will create an antagonistic relationship with the reader (because he or she disagrees with you).

Here's what this means. If you have a new idea about which you want to convince your reader, or if your idea is controversial, lead your reader to it. Your reader will have the necessary information to understand and believe the idea—before you present it.

## **Day 118: Creating bulleted lists from nonsense items.**

Bulleted lists are punctuated as if they are written out in a sentence. When creating a list of sentence fragments, and other non-sentence items, this still holds true. Here is an example.

Our mufflers are the best.

- Low price
- Big sound
- Great appearance

The sample demonstrates important characteristics.

- Period at the end of the introductory sentence
- No punctuation after the list items
- Capital letters on the list items

## **Day 119: Remove unnecessary words by emphasizing the actor.**

To write clearly and concisely, you want to use the main actor (i.e., rhetorical subject) as the main subject. This lets you remove unnecessary, but common, phrases at the beginning of sentences. Consider this sentence.

“One way that writers make readers confused is by using unfamiliar words.”

In this sentence, the subject is “way.” However, the main actor (rhetorical subject) doing the main action (“confuse”) is “writer.” Writers are doing the action being described by this sentence, so “writers” should be the subject. When we use “writers,” we get the following possible revision.

“Writers make readers confused by using unfamiliar words.”

This gets rid of the unnecessary phrase “one way that” and places the emphasis on the actor: “writers.” We can further revise this by changing the adjective “confused” back into a verb:

“Writers confuse readers by using unfamiliar words.”

We can revise this even further by asking, “What confuses readers?” This gives us our final revision:

“Unfamiliar words confuse readers.”

## Day 120: Use active verbs to reduce verb phrases.

A verb phrase is a string of words that describe a single action. Concise writing is usually better than wordy writing, so whenever possible, we try to replace verb phrases with single verbs. Consider this sentence.

“The new fuel will have an effect on engine efficiency.”

The verb phrase here is “will have an effect on.” This describes a single action and can be replaced with the active verb *affect*. This gives us the following revision.

“The new fuel will affect engine efficiency.”

Here is a slightly more artistic example:

“John proceeded in an unfocused and inconsistent manner to write his paper.”

This can be revised as,

“John muddled through his paper.”

Now we have one active verb that accurately and concisely describes what John did.

## Day 121: Use *who* for people, *that* for things.

This tip describes a fairly common problem with writing mechanics: *Who* vs. *That*. Consider these two sentences.

“He is the man who/that followed me home.”

“This is the apple who/that I’m saving for breakfast.”

Most people will correctly use *that* for sentence two. However, the use of *that* is so common that many people will incorrectly use *that* for sentence one as well. Sentence one is referring to a person, so we use *who*. This gives us

“He is the man who followed me home.”



## Day 122: Repeat *to* when using infinitives in a complex series.

First, a quick note about infinitive forms of verbs. The infinitive form is the *to* version. One example of an infinitive is *to run* as in “I like to run.” Now, on to the tip.

In a series, one word will often refer to all the items in the series. Consider this sentence:

“She has beautiful hair, eyes, and teeth.”

The word “beautiful” refers to all the items in the series. When people write a series of verb infinitives, they will often write *to* only one time. Consider this sentence.

“The rare African moth is known to drink blood from recently dead animals, follow herds of elephants for miles, often for months at a time, in both rainy and dry seasons, and make noises with its wings, which resemble the rattle of a snake, to frighten away potential competitors.”

This sentence is unclear. Readers will have a hard time finding the beginning of each item in the series because the items are complex (they have commas). By using this tip, the sentence is much clearer:

“The rare African moth is known to drink blood from recently dead animals, to follow herds of elephants for miles, often for months at a time, in both rainy and dry seasons, and to make noises with its wings, which resemble the rattle of a snake, to frighten away potential competitors.”

## Day 123: Replace 3-word prepositional phrases with single words.

Writers often use 3-word clichés when they could use a single word. In nearly every case, if you can replace a phrase with a single word, do so. The sentences will be clearer, more direct, more engaging, and more straightforward. Here are some examples of these cliché 3-word phrases and their 1-word counterparts.

*in regards to* = *regarding*

*in reference to* = *about*

*in spite of* = *despite, however*

*in light of* = *given*

*on or about* = *approximately*

*out of doors* = *outside*

*at the present* = *now*

*at the moment* = *now*

*at this time* = *now*

*at this place* = *here*

*out of sight* = *hidden, invisible*

*as soon as* = *when*

## **Day 124: Respond to expected criticism.**

If you present your ideas well, most readers will agree with you. However, some won't, and they may have valid reasons for disagreeing. To earn their agreement, you have to think like they think. You have to address their criticisms. This is part of understanding your readers.

When writing, ask yourself, "What reasons will my readers have for disagreeing with me?"

I recommend that you list those reasons. Then, you have two strategies for addressing them. First, you can address those criticisms directly. For example, you might write, "While the argument can be made that . . . , in fact . . .&nbsp;&nbsp;&nbsp;." Although this strategy works, you might seem as if you expect criticism (which you do) and are insecure about your ideas.

Second, you can revise, expand, and strengthen your arguments and rationale so that those criticisms are not possible. This is the more difficult, but more effective, strategy.

## Day 125: Items in a series need to be structurally parallel.

Items in a series may be single words, phrases, clauses, or, even, entire sentences. These need to be written with a parallel, or same, grammatical structure. For example, all the items need to be adjectives, or all the items need to start with a present tense verb.

This is important for two reasons.

First, it is correct. If you have different types of items in a series, the sentence is incorrect. This type of error is called, appropriately enough, a parallelism problem. Readers who notice the *parallelism problem* will discredit your authority on the topic—and your professionalism.

Second, parallel structures create a strong impact on the reader. If you have different types of items, you will damage the impact of the statement, potentially resulting in the opposite effect—the loss of professional credibility.

Let's look at several examples of non-parallel structures and possible revisions.

Wrong: "The expected results are impact, credibility, and making a good impression."

Right: "The expected results are impact, credibility, and a good impression."

Wrong: "I am sure that he is guilty. I am sure that he is the culprit. And I am sure of these facts."

Right: "I am sure thathe is guilty. I am sure thathe is the culprit. And I am sure thatthese facts are correct."

Wrong: "A query letter should describe the contents of the book and why you think people will read it."

Right: "A query letter should describe the contents of the book and discuss why you think people will read it."

## **Day 126: Use exclamation marks only to show your own excitement.**

Writers will often use exclamation marks in an attempt to generate readers' excitement about some idea. This rarely works. The purpose of the exclamation mark is to show your (the writer's) excitement about an idea or topic.

If a reader thinks you are using the exclamation mark to create enthusiasm, the reader will likely have a negative impression of your idea. Save them for expressing your feelings.

Thus, "Buy now!" doesn't work well, but "The movie was excellent!" does.

## Day 127: Use HUPAs sparingly.

HUPA is an acronym for “Hey, You! Pay Attention.” HUPA is our term for any phrase, word, or strategy that is specifically intended to grab the reader’s attention.

HUPAs can be created in many ways. When you start a sentence with attention getting words such as *now* and *thus*, you are using a HUPA. Any kind of inflammatory word, i.e., a word used to provoke a strong reaction, is a HUPA. Strings of short sentences are often HUPAs. Most rhetorical devices are HUPAs. Whenever you think to yourself, “That will get their attention,” you have probably created a HUPA.

Now for the tip, in 5 parts.

1. HUPAs are fine—and sometimes necessary. However, if you find yourself using HUPAs frequently, revise. Using too many HUPAs has a negative effect on readers.
2. If you are trying to make everything seem like the most important information, then nothing will be the most important. All the information will be equally important.
3. Using too many HUPAs indicates that the information isn’t interesting by itself and requires some strategy to make it seem interesting.
4. Using too many HUPAs makes reading the text a tiring activity. You are simply “hitting” the reader too many times, which creates subconscious mental stress on the reader.
5. An astute reader will realize that you are using strategies to artificially elevate the importance of the contents. This makes you seem amateurish and shifts the reader’s attention from the content to you.

Use HUPAs only when absolutely necessary.

## **Day 128: Common knowledge does not need a reference.**

Although we recommend providing references for new or controversial information, we do not recommend providing references for common or widely accepted knowledge. We also do not recommend providing a reference for commonly accepted definitions or descriptions.

For example, you do not need to provide a reference for this information: “Clouds are formed from water molecules.” This is common knowledge.

You also would not need a reference for this information: “Books are composed of bound papers, which often contain words or images.”

Basically, if your readers already know, understand, and believe the information, you will not need a reference.

## **Day 129: Use the S-apostrophe to show possession for a plural noun that ends in S.**

Using the apostrophe-S to show possession is pretty simple. Consider this sentence.

“Bob’s dog is barking.”

We added the apostrophe-S to show that the dog is owned by Bob.

However, if you need to show possession by a plural noun, then you may only need the S-apostrophe. This is only true if the noun already has an S to make it plural. Consider this sentence.

“The boys’ car is broken.”

Here, the car belongs to more than one boy. It belongs to the boys, and *boys* is a plural noun ending in S. Thus, we only need to add the apostrophe after the S. Here’s another example:

“When the dogs’ house got wet, the dogs moved inside.”

Because we’re writing about more than one dog owning the house, we only need the apostrophe. (Writing “dog’s” would indicate that the house belongs to only one dog.)



## **Day 130: Organize ideas from broadest ideas to smallest details.**

The overall process for organizing your documents follows a very specific pattern, which may be implemented before writing or during the editing process.

1. Identify your broadest ideas. These are the central themes that will be elaborated throughout the document. A document may have several or it may only have one. For example, a funding proposal may have two or three, which an essay or a letter may only have one.
2. Identify the main ideas that support or address those broad ideas. These, not the broad ideas, will be specifically addressed in the document.
3. Identify the details, arguments, facts, etc. that support the main ideas.

In most cases, you will address one broad idea at a time and discuss it fully with supporting ideas and details before discussing the next broad idea. The result is that you provide a full explanation of the broad ideas identified in step one. The organization will seem logical to the reader, which helps him or her make sense of what you are communicating.

## **Day 131: Use introductory phrases to keep most important information at the end of a sentence.**

The most important information in the sentence should be placed at the end of the sentence. However, some information requires additional explanation, which you may choose to place in the sentence, as opposed to providing it in the next sentence. This can create complicated sentences. Consider this sentence.

“The concept of evolution is a scientifically supported theory, though many people disagree with the theory.”

If the most important point here is that evolution is supported by science, then this information should be at the end of the sentence. The remainder of the sentence is explanatory.

We use this tip to move the explanation to the beginning of the sentence and place the most important information at the end. This gives us the following revision.

“Though many people disagree with the theory of evolution, it is a scientifically supported theory.”

## **Day 132: Typical paragraph length is 3 to 10 sentences.**

A paragraph discusses only one idea and has three basic components:

- context (why the paragraph is relevant and what it's about),
- content (the discussion of the idea), and
- conclusion (impact/action and transition).

Generally, a well-written paragraph has 3 to 10 sentences. However, if you have 3 or fewer sentences, read it critically to ensure that it has the three components.

Also, if you have more than 7 sentences, make sure you are only discussing one idea. You might need more than one paragraph. In most cases, though, you can discuss your idea, and address the three components in 3 to 10 sentences.

In truth, the number of sentences isn't nearly as important as the value of the content. If everything in the paragraph can be summed up as one idea, and if the paragraph contains the three essential components, the number of sentences doesn't matter.

## **Day 133: Use a comma in dates when including the day.**

This is easier to demonstrate than to explain, so here are the correct uses of the comma in dates.

“June 15, 2001” (This has a comma because it includes the day.)

“June 2001” (This has no comma.)

If you are using the format in example 1 as part of a larger sentence, you also need punctuation after the year.

“The explosion on June 15, 2001, was minor compared to the explosion on August 15, 2008.”

## Day 134: Remove introductions to the content.

Many writers introduce their topics, letters, documents, and memos with phrases that prevent clear and direct communication and that don't provide any useful information. Here are a few examples.

"I would like to tell you about . . ."

"You might have heard that . . ."

"The purpose of this document is . . ."

"I am going to . . ."

"This is about . . ."

The first step to beginning your document is to establish the context for the topics and ideas that you will address. If you do this well, you won't need any of these introductory phrases. For example, instead of writing

"I would like to tell you about a new opportunity for selling eggs"

you can simply write

"You have a new opportunity to sell eggs."

Instead of telling the reader what you are going to write about, just write about it. Instead of writing,

"Let me tell you about the sacred burial grounds in the Grand Canyon. They are . . ."

you can simply write

"The sacred burial grounds in the Grand Canyon are . . ."

This way, you get the reader focused on the content and not on you.

## Day 135: When writing about words, use italics or put the words in quotation marks.

At times, you may need to write about words, not use the words but define, describe, or refer to them. You need to indicate that you are writing about them and not using them. Consider this sentence.

“The term *codependency* refers to the back-and-forth transition from dependency on another person to control over that person.”

Without identifying the word *codependency* in some way, you may confuse the reader. Consider this sentence.

“The main problem is the use of because. You have to avoid it.”

Without marking the word *because* in some way, the reader may misunderstand these two sentences; “because you have to avoid it” seems like one clause. However, when we write it this way, the reader will not be confused:

“The main problem is the use of *because*. You have to avoid it.”

Italics vs. quotation marks: Italics are preferred, when possible, but quotation marks are acceptable if italics aren’t possible.

## Day 136: Creating bulleted lists from sentence items.

Bulleted lists are punctuated as if they are written out in a sentence. When creating a list of complete sentences, this still holds true. Here is an example.

The reasons for your success are simple.

- You work hard.
- You stay up-to-date on current research.
- You have made good connections in the physics community.

Notice these characteristics.

- The introduction to the list is a complete sentence and has a period.
- Each list item is a complete sentence.
- Each list item is followed by a period.

## Day 137: Use topic chains to create cohesive paragraphs.

If you write a long paragraph (more than 4 or 5 sentences), how do you keep focused on the topic? How do you keep the reader aware of the main idea being discussed?

You do this with topic chains. A topic chain is basically a series of words and phrases that refer to the main idea. In most cases when you use a topic chain, each sentence will have one or more words that refer to the idea. If this is not possible with a particular sentence, you may need to consider whether or not that sentence belongs in the paragraph. Consider this paragraph from a proposal for state authorization to provide after school services to at-risk children.

The term disabilities comprises many conditions that may inhibit student learning. Often, students with disabilities require specialized instructional strategies to reduce the degree to which these inhibitors affect learning. Students with special needs require a highly-qualified teacher with training and experience in addressing such needs. As part of the tutor selection process, [the company] identifies those teachers possessing these unique skills, resulting in the ability to match students with special needs with teachers possessing appropriate teaching skills. Teachers will use strategies that allow for differentiated pacing with careful sequencing, monitoring, and control of the learning process.

The underlined words create the topic chain. As you can see, each sentence contains words that refer to the topic introduced in the first sentence. These words keep the reader focused on the topic.



**Day 138: Use quotes around words to draw special attention or when using them in a new or ironic way.**

When you are using a word in a new way or you want to create ironic emphasis, you can place the word in quotes. This is the same as using “air quotes” while speaking. Generally, you do this to indicate that the meaning you are communicating is different than the usual meaning of a word. Consider this sentence.

“He tried to be ‘friendly’ with the woman seated next to him at the opera.”

The quotes around “friendly” indicate that you are communicating something other than normal friendliness. (Perhaps he tried to put his arm around her at the movies while pretending to stretch.)

**Day 139: Use *from/to* to include terminal values in a range, *between/and* to exclude them.**

Let's say you need to write about a range of dates, as in this example:

"Between 1910 and 1934, the company experienced steady growth."

Because you have used "between . . . and," company growth started AFTER 1910 and ended BEFORE 1934. The terminal years are not included—only the years between. The first year of growth is 1911, and the final year of growth is 1933. Now let's write it the other way:

"From 1910 to 1934, the company experienced steady growth."

Because you have used "from . . . to," company growth started IN 1910 and ended IN 1934. The terminal years are included. Two more quick examples:

"Road repair will disrupt traffic from mile markers 10 to 15."

[Repairs start at marker 10 and finish at marker 15.]

"Road repair will disrupt traffic between mile markers 10 and 15."

[Repairs start after marker 10 and end before marker 15.]

## Day 140: Good writing is about attitude—and editing.

*Good writing will permit your readers to concentrate on your ideas, and may help you to give the impression that you know what you are talking about . . . My formula for good writing is simple: once you decide that you want to produce good writing and that you can produce good writing, then all that remains is to write bad stuff, and to revise the bad stuff until it is good.*

(Marc Raibert)

This long quote discusses three important concepts.

1. What is good writing? Because your readers can forget about you and focus, instead, on your ideas, they will believe in your authority to discuss those ideas. They respect you because they can ignore you.
2. What personal characteristics are necessary to produce good writing? You desire to write well, so you are willing to do the necessary work. You believe you can write well, so you know that the work will succeed.
3. What is the work of writing well? Rewriting until the writing is great.

## Day 141: Use two overlapping topic chains to change the focus of a document.

On day 137, we discussed using a topic chain to keep readers focused on your main idea in a paragraph. However, in some cases, you may need to change the focus of a document, not just transition between ideas but change the focus completely. You can overlap topic chains to create this transition.

For example, let's say you have been asked to write about a particular topic or answer a specific question. Maybe you want to write about something else or answer a different question. You can't simply ignore the original requirement, but you can shift the focus while addressing the requirement.

The strategy is fairly simple to understand. At the beginning of the paragraph, you start a topic chain that reflects the original question or topic. This topic chain will conclude before the end of the paragraph. You will introduce the second topic chain a few sentences into the paragraph. The second chain will continue to the end.

For example, if you have 8 sentences in your paragraph, sentences 1 to 6 may include the first topic chain, and sentences 3 to 8 may include the second chain.

Let's look at an example.

The term **disabilities** comprises many **conditions** that may **inhibit** student learning. Often, students with **disabilities** require specialized instructional strategies to reduce the degree to which these **inhibitors** affect learning. Students with **special needs** require a highly qualified teacher with training and experience in addressing **such needs**. As part of the tutor selection process, our company identifies those teachers possessing these unique skills, resulting in the ability to match students with **special needs** with teachers possessing appropriate teaching skills. Teachers will use strategies that allow for differentiated pacing with careful sequencing, monitoring, and control of the learning process.

The terms in **bold** reflect the topic of students needs, which was the topic required. However, this company wanted to talk about their expertise in working with those students. The underlined terms promote their expertise.

You can see that the required topic begins the paragraph but then disappears. The desired topic starts a little later and then ends the paragraph. This allows the writer to begin the next paragraph on a completely different topic than the topic with which this one started. This is an advanced technique.

## Day 142: *Everybody* vs. *Every body*

*Everybody* and *everyone* refer to the entire group of people at once, as one collective group. For example,

“Everybody has a good time at the movies. Everyone eats popcorn and drinks lemonade.” On the other hand, “every one” and “every body” refer to the frequency of individuals or individual things.

*Every one* is very uncommon and refers only to frequency of some thing. For example, you can ask, “How often should I send an invoice? Every two weeks? Every three?” You might receive the answer, “No, every one,” meaning a frequency of every one-week period.

*Every body* means *each body*. For example, if you are examining a crime scene and ask, “How many bodies have you found?” you might receive the answer, “Every body.”

## Day 143: If it “goes without saying,” don’t say it.

Writers insult their readers when they tell their reader that some idea is obvious. It might not be obvious to the reader. You have just told the reader that everyone ELSE knows the idea, so if you don’t know it, you’re stupid. Also, if the idea is obvious, then the reader will be insulted that you want him to waste time reading something he already knows. In either case, you create a confrontational situation.

And if something is obvious, why write it at all?

Sample phrases stating that some idea is obvious:

“It goes without saying that . . . .”

“It is obvious that . . . .”

“Clearly . . . .”

“As everyone knows . . . .”

“It is common knowledge that . . . .”

Our advice: First decide whether you need to write the idea. If the answer is “Yes,” then the second advice is to remove the insulting phrase. For example, instead of writing,

“As everyone knows, you can reduce disease risk by washing your hands,”  
you can write,

“Hand washing reduces the risk of disease.”

## **Day 144: Move explanatory phrases to reduce comma use.**

Every comma creates a momentary pause. When you have many commas in a sentence, you create many pauses, and the sentence will seem awkward and unpleasant to read. Consider this correctly punctuated sentence.

“The book, which is red, slipped, as if it were a bar of wet soap, from my fingers.”

The two phrases that make this sentence seem awkward are “which is red” and “as if it were a bar of wet soap.” We can move these two phrases to reduce the number of commas in the sentence. Now we have the following sentence.

“The red book slipped from my fingers as if it were a bar of wet soap.”

Here’s the point: If you need commas to include a descriptive phrase in a sentence, consider whether or not you can move the descriptive phrase and reduce the number of commas. If you can, you probably should.

## Day 145: Comparative phrases beginning with as need to end with as.

Many descriptive phrases come in two parts. For example, *not only* is paired with *but also* (or some derivative). One such 2-part phrase is the *as . . . as* phrase. Consider this sentence.

“I am as tall as the door.”

This sentence compares “I” to “door.” The comparative phrase is “as tall as.” This is pretty easy. However, I see many errors when the comparative phrase includes more than one type of comparison. Consider this sentence.

“I am as tall or taller than the door.”

This is an error. The first “as” needs to be paired with a second “as.” The correct version is

“I am as tall as or taller than the door.”

“As tall as” is a single descriptive phrase and needs both instances of “as” to be complete.



## Day 146: Put a positive spin on negative information by writing *not* + [positive term] + [excuse].

When we talk about *spin*, *spinning*, or *putting a spin on* information, we mean writing information in a manner that leads to a particular interpretation. This is used to make good news seem bad or unimportant. This is also used to make potentially unpleasant information seem more acceptable. Spin is very common in the media and political world, but it is also used in everyday writing and speech. You will have to decide for yourself whether or not this is ethical.

With that said, here is one spin strategy for down-playing information or understating the negative characteristics of some fact, idea, or event. To explain this strategy, we will use the following example sentence.

“The client was angry that we missed our deadline.”

Now let’s apply this strategy.

1. Determine what word can be used to accurately describe the bad fact, idea, or event. The word describing the client’s feeling is “angry.”
2. Identify a term that is the opposite or conveys the positive version of the negative descriptor. For example, you might identify *happy*, *satisfied*, *pleased*. Then add *not*, as in *not happy*.
3. Write the reason for the negative attitude from a positive perspective and using positive action words. In this case, instead of writing “we missed our deadline,” you could write “the time needed to produce quality work.” The word “missed” is negative; “produce quality” is a positive action. This step is essential. If you write this from a negative perspective (“not happy that we missed our deadline”), you emphasize the degree of negativity, producing the opposite effect.
4. Put this all together: “The client was not pleased by the time needed to produce quality work.”
5. If possible, and if appropriate, put the positive terms at the beginning of the sentences and the “not” phrase at the end. This would give us “Quality work is not produced quickly.”

One more example:

Negative: “The new budget is too expensive for American taxpayers.”

Positive spin: “The new budget will not be cheap as it improves American’s health.”

Even better positive spin: “Improved healthcare is not free.”

## **Day 147: How to use a one-sentence paragraph.**

The purpose of a paragraph is to present one idea to the reader. The complexity of the idea and the reader's need for explanation determine the length of the paragraph. A careful writer will balance the reader's needs with his or her style preferences.

This brings us to a question I have been asked occasionally. How many sentences should be in a paragraph? The answer I give is based on the "one idea per paragraph" concept: at least one.

If the preceding paragraphs have provided sufficient information for the reader to understand the idea, and if the connections between the ideas are clear, and if the value and implications of the idea will be obvious to the reader, one sentence may be sufficient.

Examine your own one-sentence paragraphs and determine whether they meet these criteria.

## **Day 148: Keep the description of an action close to the action.**

Readers tend to link descriptive words and phrases to the closest preceding thing or action. If the action words and their descriptions are not together, the reader may misinterpret the sentence. For example, consider this sentence.

“The alligator swam past the man walking quickly.”

Who was moving quickly? The alligator swimming or the man walking? While either interpretation is possible, this sentence seems to imply that the man is the quick one. If that is the intention, the sentence is fine. However, if the alligator is the quick one, then the sentence should read,

“The alligator swam quickly past the man walking.”

Here’s another example:

“The alligator ate the small dog while we were fishing with violent twists and turns.”

This sentence implies that we were violently twisting and turning as we were fishing. This is a hard way to catch fish. Instead, the sentence could read as follows:

“The alligator ate the small dog with violent twists and turns while we were fishing.”

This is much better. By placing the description closer to the action, the reader is more likely to interpret the sentence correctly.

However, it could still be misinterpreted. Maybe the dog was twisting and turning. This is an unlikely interpretation, but it is possible. Our recommendation is this:

“With violent twists and turns, the alligator ate the small dog while we were fishing.”

Now only one interpretation is possible because the closest word that can be described by these words is “ate.”

## Day 149: Keep main verbs in one tense.

The main verbs are the verbs that are connected to the subject in a sentence. Consider this sentence.

“The proposal succeeded locally but failed when reviewed by the governor.”

In this sentence, the two main verbs are in the simple past tense. Writers sometimes make mistakes with verb tenses when the sentence has more than one main verb. The mistake is using one verb in one tense, and the other verb in a different tense. For example, this sentence has an error:

“The proposal succeeds locally but failed when reviewed by the governor.”

The first verb is in the present tense, and the second verb is in the past tense. They should both be the same. To correct this, we might revise the sentence to use two present tense verbs or to use two past tense verbs, as in the first example.

## Day 150: Use an en dash to show a range.

The en dash is longer than a hyphen and shorter than an em dash. It is called an *en dash* because it is approximately the same width as the letter *N* based on old typesetting standards. The primary use of the en dash is to demonstrate a range of values that includes fixed lower and upper limits. Here are some examples.

“The cost is \$12–\$14.”

“June–August is my favorite time of year.”

“The years of the Civil War (1861–1865) were difficult for both sides.”

“pages 22–24”

You can usually find the en dash under symbols or on the character map. Most word processors will convert space-hyphen-space to the en dash, though you may need to remove the extra spaces. The en dash has no spaces between it and the words on either side.

Text editors may not convert the hyphen to the en dash. If you cannot produce the en dash, you can simply use space-hyphen-space. In formal documents, however, use the en dash.

## Day 151: Organize sentences to create transitions.

In clear, effective writing, each sentence creates a transition from the sentence before to the sentence following, while adding new content. Also, the final sentence or two in a paragraph need to create a transition to the following paragraph. This gives us two principles for how we order sentences.

Consider this paragraph (plus the first sentence from the next paragraph):

“(1) The first commercially produced simulator used to train clinicians was available in 1994. (2) The newest simulator is the SimX-4. (3) The SimX-4 is completely wireless and provides vascular access and numerous clinical scenarios, as well as the ability to customize scenarios to accommodate administering intravenous drugs. (4) Clinical simulation is being used increasingly to teach skills to clinicians.

(5) The content of training programs for administering drugs is not changing.”

Can you see which sentence is out of place?

Sentence #4 is misplaced. If we move sentence 4 to the beginning of the paragraph, it establishes the context for the entire paragraph, and it provides a transition to sentence #1 with the terms “teach” and “clinicians.” Also, now sentence #3 can make a smooth transition to the next paragraph with the terms “administering drugs.” Here is the revised version.

“(4) Clinical simulation is being used increasingly to teach skills to clinicians. (1) The first commercially produced simulator used to train clinicians was available in 1994. (2) The newest simulator is the SimX-4. (3) The SimX-4 is completely wireless and provides vascular access and numerous clinical scenarios, as well as the ability to customize scenarios to accommodate administering intravenous drugs.

(5) The content of training programs for administering drugs is not changing.”

Overall, we have satisfied our two principles. Each sentence creates a transition from the previous to the next sentence, and the final sentence creates a transition to the next paragraph. The revised passage is more coherent, direct, and logical.

## **Day 152: Maintain one voice in a sentence.**

This specifically refers to the use of active and passive voice. In brief, this tip means use either the active or the passive voice in a sentence, not both. Consider this sentence.

“I wrote the weekly project status report, but it wasn’t delivered on time.”

This sentence begins in the active voice but concludes in the passive voice. By using only one voice, the sentence will be more direct and more effective for accomplishing your purpose. Two possible revisions are as follows.

“I wrote the weekly project status report, but I didn’t deliver it on time.” (active)

“The weekly project status report was written but not delivered on time.” (passive)

Determine which voice will best accomplish your purpose and use it for the entire sentence.

## **Day 153: Place the thesis statement at the beginning or end of your introduction.**

The thesis statement introduces your major topics in a paper. One question that often arises is where to put it.

English teachers may have told you to put your thesis statement at the beginning of the first paragraph. This is one option. The thinking behind this rule is as follows: tell the reader what you are going to write about, and then write about it. In this way, the thesis statement is part of the context you provide. Using this technique, you provide the main point before providing the evidence or arguments.

The second option is to conclude your first or second paragraph with the thesis statement. Using this technique, you first provide context for the topic, you then provide information, evidence, etc., and then you conclude with the main point. This technique mimics the way people think. It leads your reader to your thesis statement. When you provide the thesis statement, the reader is able to understand it.



## Day 154: Beware *non sequiturs*.

*Non sequitur* is a Latin term meaning “it does not follow,” or making a conclusion that is not supported by the preceding arguments. Some *non sequiturs* are easy to spot. Consider this obvious *non sequitur*.

“Cows stand on four legs. My dog stands on four legs. Thus, my dog is a cow.”

Most *non sequiturs* are more subtle. Consider this example.

“The primary concern at XYZ Company is child safety. If you care about child safety, you are one of us.”

The faulty assumption is that these people, and no one else, care about child safety. However, other people may care about child safety, too, so caring about child safety does not make you part of XYZ company. (If it does, where’s my paycheck?)

Now consider this even more subtle example, paraphrased from a radio advertisement I heard recently.

“Our face cream is so good that it was given away at a famous movie festival.”

I had to ask, “Why does that prove how good the cream is?” I could give away free bags of dirt, but that doesn’t make dirt good for your face.

If you make a *non sequitur*, you risk having your reader reject your ideas and discredit you.

## **Day 155: Pace ideas within paragraphs with context, content, and conclusion.**

An effective paragraph discusses one idea and uses the context, content, and conclusion structure. Let's say you are going to write a long paragraph about a "big" idea, one that has several sub-topics, supporting arguments, or details. How can you organize one paragraph to fit all this in?

Many writers will break the large paragraph into a series of shorter paragraphs. This is a good strategy. The smaller paragraphs with discrete topics compose your entire discussion of the larger idea. But now let's say that you want to discuss the entire idea in one paragraph.

To make these long paragraphs understandable, logical, and coherent, you use the same pattern: context, content, and conclusion. However, you do this for each sub-topic in the paragraph, i.e., you repeat this pattern for each point you make. This paces your ideas, helps the reader identify individual issues, and organizes the information logically. This also allows you to make a series of concluding, or impact, statements that, together, present the one central idea of the paragraph.

In short, use the 3 Cs for each sub-topic in your paragraph.

## **Day 156: Spell out your acronyms.**

Acronyms are great. They allow you to repeat titles, names, and concepts easily. The problem is that your reader may not know what they mean, and this hurts communication. Our advice is simple: the first time you use an acronym, write out the full name first and add the acronym in parentheses.

Do this for every acronym, even if you think most readers will know what it means because some might not. You only need to do this the first time you use the acronym. After that, you can freely use the acronym without risking losing your readers.

How to do this:

“The Association for Advancement of Retired Persons (AARP) was founded in 1958. The AARP provides . . . .”

## Day 157: Use *although* for contrast and *while* for time.

To help readers understand your message with as little effort as possible, you will want to use unambiguous words, i.e., words that mean exactly and only what you are trying to communicate. You want the readers to think about the content, not work to understand your writing.

One example of this is the choice between *although* and *while*. The word *although* establishes a contrast, as in

“Although he was old, he was very active.”

I have seen many writers use *while* in place of *although*, as in

“While he was old, he was very active.”

This is technically correct. *While* can be used to establish a contrast.

However, *while* is most commonly associated with time, as in

“He was singing while showering.”

Upon reading “while,” the reader may first assume that you are referring to time, and then be required to re-read the sentence to understand the correct meaning. This is too much work.

Our advice, use *although* and not *while* to establish contrast. A better, clearer way to write the previous example is as follows.

“Although he was showering, he was singing.”

## Day 158: Edit for, and with, your readers.

*Write with the door closed; rewrite with the door open.*

(Stephen King)

This quote by King can be interpreted in 2 ways, both useful as you seek to improve your own writing.

1. When you write, you should be concerned with only your ideas, but when you rewrite (or edit), you should be concerned with your audience.
2. You write alone, all by yourself, but the rewriting (editing) process involves others, i.e., you don't do it alone.

In either interpretation, the writing is a deeply personal and private process, but the rewriting and editing process occurs from the reader's perspective.

## Day 159: Reduce *-ing* words to increase reader engagement.

In nearly every case, a verb form ending in *-ing* will weaken your writing. These verbs do not show a definite action as it occurs but a general, on-going action. When used as verbs, these words often require a linking verb of some kind (such as the verb *to be*, which will always weaken your writing). Finally, they are more difficult for the reader to visualize. To produce, strong, direct, vigorous writing, change the *-ing* words to specific actions. Consider these sentences.

“The man was running down the street.”

“The man ran down the street.”

“We were planning on attending the conference.”

“We planned to attend the conference.”

## **Day 160: Use possessives instead of prepositional phrases.**

Prepositional phrases are characteristic of loose writing. Sometimes they are necessary, but when they are not, we remove them. One way to do this is to convert prepositional phrases showing ownership into possessives. Consider this sentence.

“I understand the minds of the readers.”

Here, the prepositional phrase is “of the readers,” which is being used to describe ownership of the minds. Since we are trying to show ownership, we can use the possessive form, which gives us the following sentence:

“I understand the readers’ minds.”

The revision removes the prepositional phrase and is more concise.

## **Day 161: Use a 1-sentence paragraph to emphasize a critical idea.**

Every paragraph discusses one and only one idea. In most cases, a paragraph will have 3 to 7 sentences. However, you can use a 1-sentence paragraph that satisfies the requirements for an effective paragraph. If the reader already understands the context, and if the idea is self-explanatory and does not require discussion, your paragraph may only need the final impact statement.

The 1-sentence paragraph only contains an impact statement.

Unlike paragraphs with multiple sentences, a one-sentence paragraph places heavy emphasis on the idea. It is a high-impact tool for telling the reader, “This is very important.”

Few ideas require this level of emphasis. Used sparingly, one-sentence paragraphs can be very effective for pointing out critical ideas or keeping the reader mentally focused on the content.

On the other hand, a document with too many one-sentence paragraphs loses this effect. The writer who uses too many, or uses them too close together, is telling the reader that many of the ideas are very important. As a result, he or she loses the ability to point out specific ideas as being the most important.



## Day 162: Change [have] + [be] +- *ing* expressions to the simple present or past tense.

This tip specifically refers to phrases such as *had been running*, *has been watching*, and *have been eating*.

These types of phrases are not direct. They are hard to visualize because the reader cannot form a mental image of an action that is on-going. Finally, they use a lot of words to express the idea, making the writing loose.

Although sometimes you have to use these phrases to express an idea accurately, we recommend that you change them to the simple past or simple present whenever possible. Using the examples above, you could write *ran*, *watches*, and *eat*.

In most cases, making this change will force you to revise the sentence completely. The revised sentences will be more direct and more engaging. For example, consider these three sentences.

Sloppy, should be revised: “They had been eating for over two hours.”

Sloppy, but necessary: “When John arrived, they had been eating for over two hours.”

Direct: “They ate for over two hours.”

## **Day 163: Use transition words and phrases to switch topics.**

You are writing about one idea, and now you want to write about a new idea. You could just switch from one to the other, but this may confuse the reader. This is a bad idea. The reader may exclaim, “Wait a minute. I thought I was reading about . . . Why am I now reading about . . . ?”

You can use transition words and phrases to answer this question and make the transition smoothly. These words and phrases inform the reader that you are changing topics. Some examples are below.

“In light of these ideas/concepts/facts, . . . .”

“This raises the idea that . . . .”

“Additionally, . . . .”

“Furthermore, . . . .”

“This brings us to the idea that . . . .”

“Having discussed . . . , we need to turn our attention to . . . .”

“Next, . . . .”

## **Day 164: Place adverbs immediately before or after the word or phrase being modified.**

Adverbs are great. Not only can they describe three parts of speech (i.e., verbs, adjectives, adverbs), they can be moved around in a sentence. However, their ability to move around makes them problematic.

For example, consider the adverb “quickly” in these sentences:

“Quickly, he ran to the door.”

“He quickly ran to the door.”

“He ran quickly to the door.”

“He ran to the door quickly.”

In these samples, the adverb “quickly” is obviously describing “ran.” Using it at the beginning of the sentence, however, requires a comma, which makes this sentence choppy. The other three sentences are fine.

Now let’s look at a more complicated sentence, also using the adverb “quickly.”

“He swam across the river flowing down the mountainside quickly.”

Here, the adverb can describe either “swam” or “flowing.” We want to describe how he swam, but the adverb is closer to the verb “flowing,” so our first response is to assume that it describes “flowing.” We can fix this confusion by placing the adverb immediately before or after the verb it describes, depending on preferred style. This gives us these options.

“He quickly swam across the river flowing down the mountainside.”

“He swam quickly across the river flowing down the mountainside.”

## Day 165: Avoid preaching to your readers.

Words such as *should*, *must*, and *ought to* are preaching words (their official name is *modal auxiliaries*). These words express an opinion as a general rule or command. They make your statements moral and ethical judgments. Although such words might be appropriate from a pulpit, they are not appropriate in formal writing.

Let's look at an example. We found the following statement in the conclusion of a document we were asked to edit:

“To help more children read, this legislative body **SHOULD** allocate more money to schools.”

In a sense, the writer is saying, “If you don't allocate more money, you obviously don't care about children reading! You are bad people unless you do what I tell you.” That's preaching, and it is offensive. The reader may respond in one of three ways to preaching words.

1. Wow, you have really convinced me to change my ways! I'll do what you tell me to do. (This is the least likely response.)
2. I understand your opinion, but I have other options, other things I can do instead. (While this response is very polite, it is also unlikely.)
3. Who are you to tell me what to do? You have no authority over me. (This is the most likely response.)

Our recommendation: Avoid preaching to your readers.

## **Day 166: Use introductory HUPAs sparingly.**

A HUPA is any word or phrase that tells the reader, “Hey, you! Pay attention.” Some HUPAs can be used to begin a sentence and alert the reader that what follows is very important.

Examples include *now*, *thus*, *well*, *look*, *please note*, and *remember*. Consider this sentence.

“Remember, your loan payments are due on the 15th of the month.”

The word “Remember” gets the reader’s attention and alerts him or her that the following statement is very important.

These words are fine, but use them sparingly to help the reader identify only the most important information. If you use them too often, the reader will have difficulty identifying important points, and this strategy will lose impact.

## Day 167: Place a comma between coordinate adjectives.

Coordinate adjectives? When you have two adjectives that describe the same noun, they might be coordinate adjectives. Here is the test:

1. The order can be reversed without changing the meaning.
2. The comma can be replaced with *and* without changing the meaning.

The explanation will be easier to understand with an example. Consider this sentence.

“I want to buy a small, inexpensive car.”

The two adjectives in question are “small” and “inexpensive.” They both describe “car.” Let’s see if they are coordinate adjectives.

1. Can we replace the comma with *and* without changing the meaning: “I want to buy a small and inexpensive car”? Yes.
2. Can we reverse the order without changing the meaning: “I want to buy an inexpensive, small car”? Yes.

Based on this test, “small” and “inexpensive” are coordinate adjectives, so they need to be separated with a comma. What about this sentence?

“The popular American author will visit tomorrow.”

In this sentence, “popular” and “American” are not being used as coordinate conjunctions. They both describe “author,” but they don’t pass the test above. Thus, you don’t need the comma.

## Day 168: Avoid using *there* as a subject.

The word *there* is often used as a subject. In nearly every case, this makes the writing wordy and loose. Consider these sentences.

“There is a reason for this. The reason is that the prisoners are too crowded.”

“There is a season for every action.”

“There is a book titled *Living Large* that explains this goal.”

When sentences start with *there*, the writer needs many extra words to explain the idea. By revising the sentences to avoid using *there* as a subject, the sentences become more concise and direct, thus expressing the idea more clearly and persuasively.

By revising the sample sentences, we get the following revisions.

“The reason for this is that the prisons are too crowded.”

“Every action has a season.”

“The book *Living Large* explains this goal.”

## **Day 169: Paragraph length is determined by the complexity of the idea.**

How many sentences should a paragraph contain? Previously, we discussed one-sentence paragraphs and the essential components in paragraphs (i.e., context, content, and conclusion). Other than the one-sentence paragraph, a paragraph generally contains 3 to 7 sentences. But this is only a general rule of thumb.

The overall guidelines are these:

1. The paragraph must be about one, and only one, idea.
2. Everything in the paragraph must be about the one idea.
3. The paragraph must link to prior and next paragraphs.

These three guidelines give you a lot of flexibility on length. The complexity of the central idea will, ultimately, determine how many sentences you need. More complex or broad ideas will need more content to discuss them, while very narrow ideas will need only a few.

As an analogy, think about a branch on a tree. The central idea is the main branch. The supporting ideas and discussion are the leaves that grow from the branch. If you extend this analogy a bit, you see how branches (i.e., ideas) are connected to each other.

Some paragraphs are long because, for the purpose of this analogy, the author chose a big branch that has smaller branches on it. Some are short because the author chose the smallest identifiable branch.

Here's my recommendation. Follow the guidelines above and don't worry about the paragraph length. Focus on the structure and content of the paragraph, and the length will be appropriate.



## **Day 170: When communication is difficult, write simply.**

*The more elaborate our means of communication, the less we communicate.*

(Joseph Priestley)

When we write, our goal is communication. We have something that we want the reader to understand. If we write in a complicated manner, we reduce the possibility that the reader will understand.

One major issue that we address in clients' documents is unnecessary complexity. Many writers try to put too much information in one sentence, or they state their ideas in a convoluted manner. Our task, then, is to simplify what they write. This includes reordering the phrases, removing unnecessary words, breaking sentences into shorter sentences, and choosing single words to replace multiple words.

Clear, simple writing does not mean simplifying the message. It means writing in a manner that allows the reader to understand without difficulty. It means communicating effectively.

## Day 171: Capitalize *mom* and *dad*, and other relations, when used as names.

Capitalization rules may seem inconsistent, but they are not. For example, sometimes you capitalize *mom* and sometimes you don't. However, you already know the rule that you capitalize people's names and other proper nouns.

The same rule applies to *mom* and *dad*. When you use them as a name, you capitalize them, otherwise not. Consider this sentence.

"Did Dad give Mom anything for her birthday?"

Here, "dad" and "mom" are being used as the proper name for those two people, so they get capitalized. Now consider this sentence.

"My mom and dad are at home watching a movie."

Here, "dad" and "mom" are being used to describe a type of relative, not as proper names, so they don't get capitalized.

This is the same reason why we don't capitalize *president* when referring to the office of the presidency, but we do capitalize it when used as a name or part of a name, as in these examples:

"The president will address the troops at lunch."

"The troops will have lunch with President Obama."

"Mister President, do you have a comment on the food you ate?"

## **Day 172: Use transition words infrequently.**

Day 163 discussed using transition words to inform your reader that you are switching topics. Although this is perfectly acceptable (and sometimes necessary), you should only use this technique sparingly.

In effective writing, you relate new topics to previous topics so that each new idea seems like a logical extension of the previous topic. When you begin writing about the new topic, your first task is to discuss how it relates to the previous topic. If you are switching to a new topic, ask yourself these questions:

1. Why do I need to write about this new topic at this time?
2. How does this new topic relate to the one I just discussed?
3. Will the reader be able to answer the first two questions?

Do this well, and the reader will know you are writing about a new topic and will understand why. You won't need the transition words.

## Day 173: Age, color, material, shape, and nationality adjectives are never coordinate.

You already know the rule about placing a comma between coordinate adjectives, discussed in Day 167. For example, you now know to place a comma between “musty” and “dilapidated” here:

“The musty, dilapidated hotel room was my new home.”

You can reverse their order, and you can add *and* between them without changing the meaning. This tells you that they are being used as coordinate adjectives.

Some types of adjectives cannot be coordinate adjectives, regardless of whether they are first or second in the pair of adjectives. The meaning of the sentence will change if you reverse their order or if you add *and* between the two adjectives. As such, you will not need the comma. They are as follows.

- Age: “The young tired man sat heavily on the trail.”
- Color: “The inflated red balloon drifted away.”
- Material: “A dirty cotton shirt hung over the fence.”
- Shape: “He built a sturdy round house on his property.”
- Nationality: “The attractive Spanish girl winked at me.”

## Day 174: State quantities accurately.

References to quantities give many writers, and their readers, difficulties. Most difficulties occur when speaking of terminal values in a range.

Consider this sentence:

“I am willing to sell up to 15 tickets.”

Will this person sell 15 tickets if possible? Based on this statement, the person will not sell 15 tickets. “Up to” includes any value lower than 15, but not 15. If this person is, in fact, willing to sell 15 tickets, which is implied, this can be written simply as

“I’m willing to sell 15 tickets.”

Another way to state this is to write, “I am willing to sell as many as 15 tickets,” but this is more wordy than necessary. Now consider this sentence:

“This book has almost 200 pages.”

Here, the book could have more or fewer than 200 pages. 190 pages and 210 pages are both “almost” 200. If the writer wants to communicate that the page count is below 200 pages, he could write

“This book has slightly fewer than 200 pages” or

“The page count is just under 200.”

Finally, consider this sentence:

“The company has the budget to rent 6 or 7 vehicles.”

Which is it? Can the company rent 6 vehicles or 7 vehicles? The implied message is that both are possible. So, if both are possible, then this sentence should be written,

“The company has the budget to rent 7 vehicles.”

After all, if the company has the budget to rent 7 vehicles, then the company has the budget to rent any quantity under 7.

## Day 175: Clarify when you are writing about words and phrases, not quoting.

In British conventions, double quotes are used for text that is exactly quoted. Single quotes (called *inverted commas* in British conventions) are reserved for text that is not directly quoted or for emphasizing a word or words. Consider this sentence using British conventions:

‘Hot’, ‘sexy’, and ‘foxy’ all mean the same thing: ‘attractive’.

[We removed the double quotation marks that we normally put around examples.] The use of the inverted commas lets the reader know that “hot,” “sexy,” and “foxy” are all being discussed as words. The writer is not actually quoting someone.

In American conventions, double quotes are used for everything, and the reader has to guess or figure it out from the context. Consider this sentence using American conventions:

“Hot,” “sexy,” and “foxy” all mean the same thing: “attractive.”

Is the writer quoting someone else who used these words? Or is the writer discussing the words without quoting someone? Who knows? Your guess is as good as mine.

If you are using American conventions when writing about words, emphasizing words, or discussing word meanings, let your reader know. You can clarify the American sample by writing the following:

The words “hot,” “sexy,” and “foxy” have the same meaning as the word “attractive.”

By adding “the words,” you indicate that you are writing about words. However, based on earlier tips, you can avoid this problem entirely by placing the words in italics, which is preferred for formal writing.

*Hot, sexy, and foxy* all mean the same thing: *attractive*.

## **Day 176: Move adverbial phrases to vary sentence structure.**

Based on many previous tips, you know that using the Subject– Verb–Object sentence structure helps you write clearly. However, you don’t want all your sentences to “feel” the same to the reader. Readers need variety, or they will quickly become disinterested in your content.

One of the simplest ways to vary the sentence structure is by moving adverbial phrases. Where you move the phrases depends on your style. However, many can be moved to the beginning of the sentence, which also may help you keep the S–V–O structure intact. Consider this sentence:

“He walked in the afternoon to the store.”

The adverbial phrase is “in the afternoon.” This phrase describes when he walked. We can move this phrase as follows:

“In the afternoon, he walked to the store.”

This sentence now has a different sentence structure. It also keeps the S–V–O sentence structure intact and focuses on the main point.

## Day 177: Use subject pronouns in comparisons with implied verbs.

This is easier to demonstrate than explain in technical terms. Consider this sentence:

“I am taller than she/her.”

Which pronoun do you use, “she” or “her”? I often hear people use “her” in cases like this, but this is incorrect. This sentence implies the final verb *is*, as in “I am taller than she is.” Since the pronoun in question is serving as the subject to the implied verb *is*, you need a subject pronoun: “she.”

Here are two more examples.

“That man is smarter than I.” [“That man is smarter than I am.”]

“Who knows better than he?” [“Who knows better than he knows?”]



## Day 178: Change preaching language to persuasive language.

On day 165, we discussed the problem of preaching to your readers. To write persuasively and avoid angering your readers, revise your preaching sentences to objective sentences that connect an outcome to an action.

Here is the 5-step process we use:

1. Identify the rhetorical subject, the one you want to do the action.
2. Add the word *can* or *will* after the subject, followed by an action word.
3. Add the purpose of the action (the “why”).
4. Add the desired action (the “ought to” action).
5. Remove *can* or *will*. This last step is optional, depending on whether or not it strengthens the sentence and whether or not the resulting sentence is grammatically correct.

This process works in almost every case. Let’s try it with the following sentence.

“To help more children read, this legislative body SHOULD allocate more money to schools.”

1. This legislative body.
2. This legislative body will help
3. This legislative body will help children learn to read
4. This legislative body will help children learn to read by allocating more money to schools.
5. This legislative body help children learn to read by allocating more money to schools. (Removing “will” makes the sentence grammatically incorrect, so we used the sentence in the fourth step.)

Now, the outcome, “children learn to read,” is connected to the action of “allocating more

money.” This is presented as an objective fact, not as a moral statement or opinion.

Most importantly, the resulting objective statement is more likely to produce the action desired without creating a confrontation with the reader.

## **Day 179: Reduce the impact of lower-than-expected results by using inflation words.**

Let's say you need to impress your reader with great results and high quantities, but your results aren't great and the quantities aren't as high as you would like. You can make your results seem better by using "inflation" words, i.e., words that "inflate" values.

Inflation words include *nearly*, *reaching*, *almost*, and *approaching*. These words show progress, and you can use them to round up your figures to a more impressive level.

For example, let's say you are writing a report, and your supervisor wants a status update. You want to impress the boss but the report is only 15 pages long. Round 15 up to 20 and send him or her a note stating that the report is nearly 20 pages. You have told the truth.

This strategy works, but you will need to decide for yourself whether or not this is ethical as it may seem a bit deceptive.

**Day 180: Use an exclamation mark only after the interjection, not after the statement.**

If you want to start a statement with an interjection, and if you want to use exclamation marks to create emphasis, only use the exclamation mark after the interjection. The interjection carries the emphasis, not the statement. This isn't really about right and wrong. It's a style issue that separates amateur and professional writers.

Amateur: "Hey! Watch where you're going!"

Professional: "Hey! Watch where you're going."

Amateur: "Cool it! You're going to get us in trouble!"

Professional: "Cool it! You're going to get us in trouble."

## **Day 181: *Between* for two; *Among* for three or more.**

Although mistaking *among* and *between* is quite common, it is easy to understand and correct.

*Between*: Use this when only 2 things are involved.

“I placed the book between the chair and the door.”

“This is a secret between us.”

*Among*: Use this when 3 or more things are involved.

“The man strolled among the cars in the lot.”

“Among the nations represented, Burma stands as an example of beauty.”

## **Day 182: Write and rewrite until you communicate clearly.**

*Failure doesn't mean you are a failure . . . it just means you haven't succeeded yet.*

(Robert Schuller)

When I write a new article for publication, for posting on our blogs, or for inclusion in our training manual, I have someone else read it. Here's the typical scenario.

I give the article to my marketing specialist. She points to a particular paragraph and says, "This doesn't make sense to me." We talk about it, and I rewrite it. I give it to her again, and she says, "Ok, I get it now, but it's still too complicated. Can you make it simpler?" So I do it again.

In the draft article, I am trying to communicate certain ideas, but I'm failing. The words are all there, and they make sense to me, but I am not communicating. I keep re-working the article until I can clearly communicate those ideas.

This back-and-forth process we use is a necessary part of the writing process. I could say, "Ok, I give up. I'm tired of re-working this piece. I can't do it. Just publish it like it is." Then, and only then, will I be a failure. But when I stay with the process, I will succeed with my goal: communication.

## Day 183: Revise *-ing* verbs to simple present or past tense verbs.

Words that end in *-ing* reduce the impact and directness of your writing. Instead of describing a specific action occurring at a specific time, they describe an on-going action. This is hard for the reader to visualize. Furthermore, they generally require the use of the verb *to be*, such as *is* and *was*. As such, you need extra words in the sentence and you de-emphasize the action. Consider this sentence.

“The corporation was running a deficit in 2008.”

To revise this sentence, we want to change the “was running” to the simple past tense *ran*. This gives us

“The corporation ran a deficit in 2008.”

Now the sentence describes the action directly and removes the emphasis on “was.”

## **Day 184: Place the most complex items at the end of a series.**

When you are writing a sentence that contains a series of three or more items, consider the word count and complexity of those items. For clarity, place the most complex and longest item at the end.

For example, let's say that your series will have the following three items:

1. “a covered area for fans, such as benches under a canopy”
2. “good parking”
3. “clean bathrooms”

The first item above is the most complex. If we write it as the first or second item in the list, the reader may think the part after the comma is a new item. The reader will figure out that the final phrase in the item is an explanation of the covered area (probably), but this is more work for the reader than necessary, and people reading quickly might misinterpret your words.

To write in a straightforward and easy-to-understand manner, place that item at the end of the series.

“A softball arena should contain good parking, clean bathrooms, and a covered area for fans, such as benches under a canopy.”



## Day 185: Use relative words to compare 2 things, and superlative words to compare 3 or more.

Relative words include *bigger, faster, older, more, and brighter*.

Superlative words include *biggest, fastest, oldest, most, and brightest*.

When you are comparing only **two things**, and you want to state that one of the things has a GREATER level of some quality, use relative words.

“I run faster than he does.”

“This car is older than that one.”

“He is a better boxer than his opponent.”

When you are comparing **three or more things**, and you want to state that one thing has the GREATEST level of some quality, use superlative words.

“I run the fastest of all the boys.”

“This is the oldest car.”

“He is the best boxer [of all the boxers].”

## **Day 186: Write to sell love or money, not both.**

I have heard that all businesses sell either love or money, and the concept seems true to me.

Selling love means providing the customer with a strong positive emotion. For example, when we work with an author to prepare a book for publication, we are usually selling love: the satisfaction and self-esteem of publishing a great book.

Selling money means either providing a cost savings or helping to generate revenue. For example, when we assist businesses with their reports, we are usually selling money: the time savings of outsourcing, facilitating the writing and publishing processes, etc.

This concept is true in writing, as well. What are you “selling” to your reader: love (enjoyment, satisfaction, catharsis, relief, etc.) or money (information, ways to do a job well, ways to work more effectively, etc.)?

When you can answer this question, you gain more focus and direction for the writing process; you understand your purpose.

I have one caution for you. Be careful about mixing up your purposes. If you try to sell both money and love equally in the same document, you may confuse your reader. The reader will have a difficult time responding to the text. Focus on only one.

## Day 187: Use ultimate words cautiously.

Good writing displays confidence. A confident writer states information objectively and as facts. However, this confidence can get a writer into trouble if he or she uses “ultimate” words. Examples of “ultimate” words are *absolutely*, *definitely*, *certainly*, *clearly*, and *without a doubt*. These words cause problems for two reasons.

First, they are unnecessary. They don’t add new information. Instead, they describe the writer’s attitude (i.e., opinion) about the content and provide an artificial sense of importance to the statement. For example,

“This pie is definitely the best I have ever eaten”  
means the same thing as

“This pie is the best I have ever eaten.”

Second, and more relevant to this tip, these words beg the reader to disagree, and they make it easy for the reader to reject your information. They indicate opinions. For example, if you write

“People are certainly going to be unhappy about the new plan,”  
the reader can think “This is not certain, only probable.” By making that counter-statement, the reader can reject your conclusions based on information you claimed was “certain.”

As another example, if you write

“Clearly, the president has a hidden objective,”  
the reader can respond, “That’s not clear. It is only an opinion, so you are making a *non sequitur*.” If you avoid “clearly,” you state a fact, which is stronger and less likely to be contradicted.

My recommendation: avoid these words entirely. Your writing will be more concise, more direct, and more persuasive.

## Day 188: Use compound sentences with *but* for impact.

I am not usually a fan of compound sentences (two or more independent clauses joined by a conjunction). They tend to provide too much information at once. However, compound sentences using *but* are good tools for creating impact. Consider this sentence.

“I received your application for paid travel, but I denied it.”

The text that follows the word “but” carries a lot of emotional weight. The word “but” clues the reader to pay special attention to the information that follows.

You can increase the level of impact by following *but* with a very short, active clause. Consider these two sentences. The second one creates more impact.

“The new software provides unique opportunities for tracking inventory and billing records, but it has flaws that cause it to crash unexpectedly.”

“The new software provides unique opportunities for tracking inventory and billing records, but it crashes unexpectedly.”

## Day 189: Two-part sentences need to be parallel.

A two-part sentence has two phrases or clauses that depend on each other to provide information. Consider this two-part sentence.

“The hybrid engine runs smoothly and burns fuel efficiently.”

The first part is “runs smoothly.” The second part is “burns fuel efficiently.” They are parallel, which means they use the same grammatical structure. Now consider this sentence.

“Students learn more when they participate than by listening to the teacher.”

The first part is “when they participate.” The second part is “by listening to the teacher.” These two parts are not parallel; they do not have the same grammatical structure. Either both parts need to have the “when they [verb]” structure or they need the “by [-ing verb]” structure. When we make the two parts parallel, we get the following sentences.

“Students learn more when they participate than when they listen to the teacher.”

“Students learn more by participating than by listening to the teacher.”

## Day 190: Use *that* to start restrictive phrases.

Mistakes using *that* and *which* are probably the most common grammar problems we fix. This tip will deal with using *that*.

To understand how to use *that*, you need to understand restrictive phrases. It's not too difficult, actually. Think of a category of things, such as cars at a repair shop or trees surrounding a house. A restrictive phrase focuses the reader's attention on particular items in a category, such as one specific car or tree. Consider this sentence.

"The car that is being repaired needs new brakes."

Based on this sentence, multiple cars exist, but we want to identify one particular car: the car "that is being repaired." In this way, we restrict, or limit, the reader's attention from all the cars to one particular car. Here is another example.

"We removed the tree that was struck by lightning."

Here, multiple trees exist. We want to restrict the reader's attention from all the trees to one particular tree: the tree "that was struck by lightning."

Here's the simple rule for remembering this. If you need to tell the reader which one, use *that*, not *which*.

## **Day 191: Write about, not with, emotions.**

*Speak when you are angry—and you'll make the best speech you'll ever regret.*

(Dr. Laurence Peter)

You may be required to write about topics that anger you. A customer has written you a derogatory letter. An employee has demeaned the organization. A local politician has taken an insulting stance. Now, you are going to write a letter in response.

Write the letter, but don't send it. In a professional setting, communications laden with negative emotions, condescending language, or insulting words will not help you convince others that you are right and they are wrong. Instead, use an objective tone.

The writing process may help you think through your ideas on the topic and overcome the angry feelings. But don't send it—yet. Let it sit until you can approach the topic logically. Then re-write it.

You will make a much stronger case for your ideas when you can express them logically. Describe your feelings; don't use them. Otherwise, you may not like the response you receive in return.

## **Day 192: Use alliteration to create impact and improve reader memory.**

Alliteration is the repetition of sounds. Consider this sentence.

“The novel expressed the terror and trauma of childhood.”

In this sentence, the “t” sound is repeated in “terror” and “trauma.”

Although you are writing and not speaking, most readers “hear” what they read, and this means they will respond to alliteration. When you use this for pairs of phrases or words (as in the example) or in a series, you will further increase the impact of this technique.

Because this technique creates a strong emphasis on the words or phrases, your reader will be more likely to remember them.

One caution: This is a highly poetic technique, and the reader will realize that you are using it. As such, use it very, very sparingly. If you use it often, the reader will think that you are trying to be overly artistic. The technique will lose its impact, and you will lose credibility.



## Day 193: Remove the preposition from phrases ending in gerunds.

Prepositional phrases provide many problems with direct, active writing. Prepositional phrases ending in gerunds are especially problematic. (A gerund is a verb ending in *-ing* that is being used as a noun, such as the name for a type of activity. A gerund is similar to a nominalization in that the verb is being used as a noun.)

You can improve most sentences containing these phrases by removing the preposition and then revising the sentence. When possible, also change the gerund so that it is being used as a verb. Consider this sentence.

“We would like your help with locating a new car.”

The prepositional phrase ending in a gerund is “with locating.” In this sample, removing the preposition “with” does not require any revision for grammatical correctness:

“We would like your help locating a new car.”

Now consider this sentence.

“We would like your support for presenting our audit findings.”

The prepositional phrase ending in a gerund is “for presenting.” We can revise this sentence in the same manner as in the previous sentence. However, we can revise it more deeply by changing the gerund as well:

“Please help us present our audit findings.”

As you can see, by removing the preposition and changing the gerund to an action verb, the sentence is more direct and concise.

## Day 194: Use framing to provide cohesion and impact in paragraphs or sections.

Framing means connecting the content at the beginning and end of a paragraph or section. This may be done by using similar (or same) words at the end as you used at the beginning. You may also frame paragraphs and sections more subtly by referring to the same concepts and ideas. For example, a framed paragraph may look like this:

“We required the director’s resignation to prevent further misuse of company funds . . . [content about the misuse] . . . This resignation will allow the company to use funds for the benefit of the stakeholders.”

As you can see from the example, the same concepts and words from the first sentence are closely related to the concepts and words of the final sentence. Framing does three things.

1. It helps keep the reader’s attention on the topic,
2. It provides a sense of organization and cohesion, and
3. Most importantly, it emphasizes the central point you are trying to make.

The reader, therefore, will have a better understanding of the issue you are discussing and will remember and respond to your central point. This is impact.

## Day 195: Use *which* to begin non-restrictive phrases, not *that*.

Mistakes using *that* and *which* are probably the most common grammar problems we fix. This tip will deal with using *which* correctly.

To understand how to use *which*, you need to understand nonrestrictive phrases. A non-restrictive phrase provides additional information about some noun. The information is not essential for the reader to know which thing you are describing. It can be removed from the sentence, and the reader will still know what you are talking about. Consider this sentence.

“Legal counsel approved the brief, which was well written.”

In this sentence, we already know which brief we are discussing. The information “which was well written” provides an additional description of “brief.” The phrase is not essential to the meaning. Thus, “which was well written” is a non-restrictive phrase.

Remember to set the non-restrictive phrase apart from the rest of the sentence with commas. If you forget the commas, your grammar check may suggest adding them. Be careful, though. The real problem may be that you don’t need *which* but *that*.

For example, if we had written

“Legal counsel approved the brief that was well written,”

then we know that legal counsel considered multiple briefs but only approved the well-written one. “That was well written” is a restrictive phrase because it tells us which brief was approved.

As you can see, *that* and *which* communicate different information. Using the correct word helps you communicate accurately.

Here’s the simple rule. If the reader already knows which one, use *which*. If you need to tell the reader which one, use *that*.

## Day 196: Use *were* for unreal situations.

Which is correct?

“If I was a race car driver, I would be on the track, not the highway.”

“If I were a race car driver, I would be on the track, not the highway.”

In situations where you are describing an unreal situation, you use *were* and not *was*. Although you would normally say “I was” when describing events in the past, when you are describing unreal situations, you say “I were.” (This is the subjunctive verb tense.) In these examples, you are not a race car driver, so the situation you are describing is unreal, and you use *were*.

A good clue for using *were* in this way is the word *if*. This word indicates that you are talking about an unreal situation.

## **Day 197: State information positively to put a good spin on it.**

You are working on a project, but it is not finished. You saved the company money, but not quite the amount needed. You called customers, but you didn't reach as many as hoped. The event was well attended, but fewer people came than expected.

You failed. Of course, you don't want to write that you failed. Instead, put a positive spin on the information. You could write that you failed—or you could write that you nearly succeeded. As an analogy, instead of describing the glass as half empty, describe it as half full.

“The project is nearly complete.” That's sounds pretty good.

“The company saved nearly the amount desired.” That's pretty good, too.

“I almost reached the number of customers expected.” Ok, that sounds fine.

“Attendance was almost as high as expected.” No problem there.

As with any form of spin, you will need to decide two things: 1) What impression are you trying to create? 2) Are you ethically comfortable creating that impression.

Unless you are only giving the raw facts, you *will* create an impression of some sort. If you write you didn't succeed, you give an impression, a bad one. This tip will help you give a good one.

## **Day 198: Use one-sentence paragraphs sparingly.**

The one-sentence paragraph is a powerful tool for emphasizing a critical idea. It is a high-impact rhetorical device. However, using too many one-sentence paragraphs, or using one-sentence paragraphs close together in a document, has the opposite effect.

If you use many one-sentence paragraphs, the reader will have difficulty understanding which ideas are the most significant. By trying to emphasize many points, you lose the ability to communicate those that are truly important.

Furthermore, each one-sentence paragraph creates an emotional impact. The reader will need time to recover, meaning the reader is no longer considering new information as it relates to the high-impact statement. If the effect of the previous emotional impact has not yet “worn off,” adding another impact places emotional stress on the reader's subconscious. Eventually, the reader will become mentally fatigued, and the entire document will lose value.

One last note: This does not apply to journalistic writing. One-sentence paragraphs are a common style for journalistic writing.

In summary, here are three guidelines for using one-sentence paragraphs effectively.

1. Use them only for stand-alone ideas that do not need explanation.
2. Use them when you want to create heavy emphasis for an idea.
3. Use them infrequently.

## Day 199: *Hopefully* describes actions; *Hopeful* describes people.

*Hopefully* is an adverb, which means that it can describe verbs, adjectives, and other adverbs. Consider this sentence.

“Hopefully, Bob ran to the store.”

In this sentence, “hopefully” describes “ran.” Bob’s running is characterized by hope. This is similar to writing “Quickly, Bob ran to the store.” In this sentence, “hopefully” is used correctly. However, *hopefully* is frequently misused to describe a person’s attitude about a future event. Consider this sentence.

“Hopefully, the store will be open.”

This is wrong. In this sentence, we are not trying to describe the manner in which the store is open. Instead, we are trying to describe how we feel about the store being open. In short, we are hopeful. Because we are describing ourselves, we need to use the adjective *hopeful*, not the adverb *hopefully*. Here are two ways to write this correctly:

“We are hopeful that the store will be open.”

“We hope that the store will be open.”

The first correction uses the adjective “hopeful” to describe “we.” I prefer the second sentence, which uses the action verb “hope” instead of the weak verb “are” plus the adjective “hopeful.”

## **Day 200: Think more about your reader than about yourself.**

*When I am getting ready to reason with a man, I spend one-third of my time thinking about myself and what I am going to say and twothirds about him and what he is going to say.*  
(Abraham Lincoln)

This quote summarizes the art of persuasion. You have your ideas about a topic, and you have reasons for believing those ideas. What ideas does your reader have? Why does your reader have those ideas? What arguments will your reader make about your ideas?

When you wish to persuade your reader, not only do you have to present a compelling case for your ideas but also you need to address and counter your reader's ideas. If you only present your ideas, your reader may consider you to be shortsighted, misinformed, and naïve. If you only attack your reader's ideas, your reader will consider you to be argumentative, hostile, and contentious. Hence, do both.

## Day 201: Increase emphasis by repeating the beginnings of sentences.

This rhetorical device is for increasing the impact of successive words or concepts, and it is easy to understand. Repeat the beginning of each sentence, placing the word or concept for emphasis at the end. (The official name of this strategy for impact is *anaphora*.)

What this does is focus the reader on the words at the ends of the sentences, causing each sentence to carry a bit more impact than the previous one. Consider these two ways to use this strategy.

“I want a new store. I want a bargain. And I want it now.”

“To dance is to celebrate. To sing is to rejoice. To love is to live.”

The first sentence is the most obvious because the actual words are repeated. The second is more subtle. Instead of repeating the actual words, this sentence repeats the grammatical structure for each sentence. In both cases, the final sentence carries the most impact.

Be careful with this strategy. It may sound contrived or overly poetic for professional writing. Use it infrequently, or it will lose its impact.



## **Day 202: Combine two sentences by using an introductory phrase or clause.**

Let's say you have two short sentences or one average-length sentence followed by a short sentence that provides additional information. To prevent your document from sounding too choppy or repetitive, you can combine the two sentences into one.

One way to do this is to create an introductory clause or phrase from the additional information. Consider these sentences.

“Our grant writing consultant expressed his belief that the proposal will be funded. He made this statement to the district superintendent.”

These two sentences are nearly the same: the person + speak + statement. This makes the two sentences sound repetitive. Using this tip, we can create an introductory phrase from sentence two. This gives us the following revision.

“While speaking to the district superintendent, our grant writing consultant expressed his belief that the proposal will be funded.”

With the extra information in an introductory phrase and not in the main sentence, the specific facts of the sentence are still clear. This is also a good way to vary sentence length, resulting in more engaging writing without making your sentences difficult to understand.

## Day 203: Guidelines for apologizing in a business letter.

You or your organization did something wrong. You overcharged a client. You missed a deadline. Something. And now you need to apologize. Whether or not you apologize in person, I recommend that you apologize by a formal letter. With this in mind, here are 11 guidelines for a formal apology.

1. Use company letterhead.
2. Send the mail to the actual person, and name that person by name and position.
3. Start the letter with the apology, using the word *apology*.
4. Follow with a description of what you did wrong. This lets the recipient know that you understand the nature of the error.
5. Provide a brief explanation of why the problem occurred, but don't pass the blame or make excuses.
6. Take responsibility.
7. Provide a solution or steps that you will take to remedy the current problem.
8. Describe how you will prevent the same problem from occurring again.
9. Close with a brief apology (e.g., "Again, I apologize for the inconvenience this may have caused you").
10. Sign the letter with your personal signature. If you are sending the letter as an e-mail attachment, scan the document with your signature or, better yet, add your electronic signature to the document.
11. Don't wait to apologize. Be proactive.

Think about your goal here. You want to keep that client. Do the work necessary.

## Day 204: State accomplishments confidently.

Strong, confident writing is good writing. However, many writers weaken their writing when describing their accomplishments, which is self-defeating. They do this by adding adverbs indicating accomplishment. This seems like a contradiction, but it isn't.

Consider these adverbs: *clearly*, *successfully*, *enthusiastically*, *proactively*, and *effectively*. When used to describe your actions, they weaken the writing. Consider this sentence.

“He successfully transformed the company payroll system.”

In this sample, either he transformed the system or he didn't. The word “successfully” doesn't add any meaning here. Instead, it weakens the writing by reducing the focus on “transformed,” which is the point of this sentence. Instead, this sentence can be written,

“He transformed the company payroll system.”

This is a stronger, more confident statement.

Our advice: Remove the adverbs and focus on positive actions.

## Day 205: Use big, positive conceptual terms to spin controversial ideas.

Words like *freedom*, *honesty*, *truth*, and *support* are great. They invoke positive feelings in readers. They are “big” terms, meaning they express many ideas.

Different readers may interpret them differently. For example, *honesty* may have different connotations to different readers. Without explanation, they are empty of meaning. This makes them perfect for spinning controversial ideas. Consider this example.

Controversial idea: “We are going to require upper and middle class taxpayers to share an increasing percentage of the cost for health insurance for non-taxpayers.”

Big, positive conceptual term: “healthy”

Spin: “We are going to enact legislation to ensure that all citizens are healthy.”

In this sentence, “healthy” is not defined, but it provokes positive emotions in the readers. With the focus on “healthy,” readers may overlook the essential question: “How?”

Controversial idea: “Our employees are encouraged to keep quiet about any alleged company wrong-doings and face termination without warning if they discredit the company in public.”

Big, positive term: “loyalty”

Spin: “We encourage employee loyalty.”

In this sentence, “loyalty” is not defined, but it provokes positive feelings in the readers. With the focus on “loyalty,” readers may not ask, “How do you encourage loyalty?”

## Day 206: Use retronyms for clarity.

A retronym is a word with a modifier that is necessary to indicate the original meaning of the word when changes in language use make the original meaning unclear. That's a complicated definition. Perhaps I should provide a few examples.

*Regular coffee* is a retronym for *coffee*. Originally, all coffee was regular coffee. Only one type of coffee existed. Now we have decaffeinated coffee, light coffee, dark coffee, and other types of coffee. We use the retronym *regular coffee* to indicate the original type of coffee. If you only write *coffee*, the reader won't know exactly what you mean.

*Straight razor* is a retronym for *razor*. Originally, all razors were long blades with a handle. Only one type of razor existed. Now we have safety razors, disposable safety razors, and electric razors. We have to use the term *straight razor* to indicate the original type of razor. If you only write *razor*, the reader won't know exactly what you mean.

Here are a few more retronyms: *acoustic guitar*, *regular soda*, *a.m. radio*, *whole milk*, *silent film*, *biological parent*, *cloth diaper*, and *film camera*.

Here's the point. When you write clearly, the reader will know what you mean. If new developments obscure the meanings of terms, use retronyms as needed to express your ideas.

## Day 207: Replace [be] + [adjective] + [preposition] phrases with action verbs.

No verb in the English language makes writing as lifeless as *to be*. Forms of *to be* include *am*, *was*, *is*, *are*, and *were*. These *to be* verbs prevent the author from describing actions. Instead, they describe a static state of being, which is why they are called “state of being” verbs. We advise writers to limit their use of *to be*.

One particularly troublesome use of *to be* verbs is the [be] + [adjective] + [preposition] construction. These phrases characterize stuffy, wordy, tedious writing. This construction results when writers change verbs into adjectives. As such, the adjective can be changed back into a verb, making the sentence more vigorous and active.

Consider these examples of dull phrases and their active replacements.

*is applicable to*—*applies to*

*is in agreement with*—*agrees with*

*is indicative of*—*indicates*

*is in possession of*—*possesses*

*is supportive of*—*supports*

Your writing will be more vigorous because the sentences will emphasize the action verbs.

## **Day 208: Move prepositional phrases describing the main verb to an introductory position.**

Prepositional phrases cause many problems with conciseness and clarity. In some cases, as discussed by this tip, they can lead the reader to unexpected understanding when they are in the wrong place. Consider this sentence:

“I will buy the shirt with my credit card.”

The prepositional phrase is “with my credit card,” and it seems to describe the shirt. Based on this sentence, I’m looking at several shirts. One shirt has my credit card in it, so I decide to buy it. That’s strange. Why is my credit card in the shirt?

The problem is that descriptive phrases generally appear to describe the thing to which they are closest. In this sentence, the closest thing is the shirt. However, in this sentence, we want to use the prepositional phrase as an adverbial phrase describing “buy,” not as an adjectival phrase describing “shirt.” To clarify our meaning, we move the prepositional phrase closer to “buy.”

We can move it to the position following buy, which gives us this clear but awkward sentence:

“I will buy with my credit card the shirt.”

Another place close to the verb, rather than after the verb, is before it. Using this tip, we’ll move that prepositional phrase to the beginning of the sentence and make it an introductory adverbial phrase. Now, we have this clear sentence.

“With my credit card, I’ll buy this shirt.”



## **Day 209: Revise sentences to remove descriptive prepositional phrases.**

Yesterday, we transformed the vague and confusing sentence “I will buy my shirt with my credit card” to the clear sentence “With my credit card, I’ll buy this shirt.” As we saw from yesterday’s tip, however, the end result can still sound awkward, regardless of its clarity. This brings us to part two: revise sentences to remove descriptive prepositional phrases. This strategy begins where yesterday’s left off.

“With my credit card, I’ll buy this shirt.”

The root sentence of the sample is “I’ll buy this shirt,” which has the main verb “buy.” We’ll revise the root sentence to incorporate the descriptive phrase “with my credit card.” One option is as follows.

“I’ll use my credit card to buy this shirt.”

What have we done? First, we moved the descriptive prepositional phrase to an introductory sentence. This helped us identify the root sentence. Second, we changed the main verb so that the verb, not the prepositional phrase, described the action. The resulting sentence is both clear and pleasant.

## Day 210: Don't place a comma between the subject and predicate, part 1.

Every complete sentence has a subject and predicate. We have used the term *subject* many times, but you may not be familiar with the term *predicate*. Basically, the predicate is the main verb in the sentence and everything that modifies or extends it. Consider this sentence.

“The man with the broken nose stumbled on the broken flagstone.”

The simple subject is “man,” and the entire subject of the sentence is “The man with the broken nose.” The main verb is “stumbled,” and the predicate is “stumbled on the broken flagstone.”

According to this tip, you should not place a comma between the subject and predicate. While this seems pretty obvious with the simple sentence above, I see many clients put a comma there when the subject is complicated. Consider this sentence.

“When the following morning finally arrived, the president of the bank that collapsed when the stock market tumbled was found dead.”

Here, the subject ends with “stock market tumbled,” and the predicate is “was found dead.” Due to the complexity of the subject, with its multiple phrases and clauses, some writers will put a comma after “tumbled.” Regardless of the sentence’s complexity, however, no comma is needed there.

## Day 211: Don't place a comma between a subject and predicate, part 2.

In yesterday's tip, we explained that a comma should not be placed between a subject and predicate, and this is true. However, if the subject ends with an appositive, interjection, or other type of phrase that is set off with commas, you will have a comma in that place. Consider this sentence.

"The man with the broken nose, which was purple with bruises, fell on the floor."

The complete subject of the sentence is "The man with the broken nose, which was purple with bruises." The predicate is "fell on the floor." As you can see from the sentence, a comma is between the subject and predicate. Here's why.

The phrase "which was purple with bruises" is a non-restrictive phrase, and these are always set off with commas, one before the phrase and one after.

The most common error I see is a writer using the final comma but not the first comma, though both are necessary for this type of phrase.

These phrases are not essential to the meaning of the sentence and can be removed, along with their required commas. The commas, therefore, are a function of the phrase and not the subject. When we remove the phrase, we get the following sentence.

"The man with the broken nose fell on the floor."

Now that we have removed the non-restrictive phrase and its required commas, we see that the sentence, in fact, has no comma between the subject and predicate.

Writers make another type of mistake when putting commas between the subject and predicate. The second most common error I see is the writer setting off a phrase by using commas that are not required. Consider this sentence.

"The man with the nose, that is broken, fell on the floor."

Those two commas are not correct because the phrase "that is broken" is necessary to understanding which man we are describing. When we remove the incorrect commas, we get the following sentence, which has no commas between the subject and predicate.

"The man with the nose that is broken fell on the floor."

## **Day 212: Create appositives from compound descriptive phrases to prevent misunderstanding.**

Compound descriptive phrases are two or more descriptive phrases strung together. Consider this sentence.

“The company opened a store in the Las Vegas area called Gamblers’ Row.”

The two descriptive phrases are “in the Las Vegas area” and “called Gamblers’ Row.” Here’s the problem. People tend to link descriptions to the closest noun in the sentence. The reader could interpret this sentence to mean that Las Vegas has an area called Gamblers’ Row and that the company will open the store there. “Called Gamblers’ Row” seems to describe “Las Vegas area.”

We could switch the order of the phrases to get the name close to the word “store.” This gives us the following:

“The company opened a store called Gamblers’ Row in Las Vegas.”

The reader may ask, “What is the store called in other places?” This sentence is still confusing.

Here’s how we fix this confusion. We make the first descriptive phrase an appositive. By making it an appositive, set off with commas, the reader is informed that “Gamblers’ Row” has the same meaning as “store” and that the base sentence is “The company opened a new store in Las Vegas.” This gives us this clear, nonconfusing, revision:

“The company opened a store, Gamblers’ Row, in Las Vegas.”

## **Day 213: Use semicolons to separate items in a series when those items have commas.**

We are going to put the following three items in a series:

1. Fido, my friend's dog
2. Spot, my dog
3. Bowser

Now, here's the sentence with these three items in a series:

"I love dogs. My favorite dogs are Fido, my friend's dog, Spot, my dog, and Bowser."

This series seems to describe 5 dogs: 1) Fido, 2) Spot, 3) Bowser, 4) my dog, and 5) my friend's dog. Each comma in a series sets off another item, so this series seems to include 5 dogs. Of course, we can guess that my dog is named Spot and that my friend's dog is named Fido, which gives us 3 dogs, but this is only guessing. The sentence is not clear.

Those extra commas could indicate a different dog in the series, or they could indicate that we are re-naming the preceding word or phrase (e.g., "Fido" equals "my friend's dog"). To make this clear, we use semicolons to separate the items. When we do this, the semicolons, not the commas, identify each item in the series. This gives us the following revision with 3 dogs.

"I love dogs. My favorite dogs are Fido, my friend's dog; Spot, my dog; and Bowser."

Now we only have 3 dogs, which is correct.

## Day 214: Remove adjectives.

*As for the adjective, when in doubt leave it out.*

(Mark Twain)

Sentences are about verbs first and then nouns second. Everything else is in the sentence to explain the verbs and nouns. The verbs and nouns, then, are your tools to communicate the central ideas. If you remove the adjectives and adverbs, will the reader still understand the central idea in the sentence? If not, then reconsider your nouns and verbs; don't add more adjectives and adverbs.

After this analysis, you may find that you no longer need the modifying words. A well-chosen noun generally does not need an adjective, just as a well-chosen verb typically does not need an adverb.

## Day 215: People don't share body parts.

Writers can create strange visual images if they forget this simple rule. Consider this sentence.

“When people get a good idea in their head, they should act on it.”

Here's the problem. According to this sentence, multiple people are sharing one head. This is a number agreement problem: plural people, single head. Here's another, slightly more complicated, example.

“When the audience members hold a candle in their hand, the entire room lights up.”

Again, we are writing about multiple people, who cannot share one hand, so we need *hands*. This gives us the following:

“When the audience members hold a candle in their hands, the entire room lights up.”

However, this may imply that each person is using two hands to hold the candle, which may not be true. Perhaps each person only uses one hand to hold the candle. By solving the agreement problem, we have changed the meaning. (This example also seems to imply that all the audience members together are holding only one candle, which is another number agreement problem.)

Here's my recommendation. Either make the body parts plural, as in the first example, or revise the sentence to avoid the problem. The second example can be revised several ways, but two possibilities are as follows.

“When the audience members hold candles, the entire room lights up.”

“When each audience member holds a candle in his or her hand, the entire room lights up.”

## Day 216: Repeat to in complex series.

You can link many words and phrases together with one word. Consider this sentence.

“The officer directed the driver to slow down, obey traffic laws, and use his turn signal.”

In this sentence, the word “to” is linked to “slow,” “obey,” and “use.” This is common and fine. Each phrase in the predicate (e.g., “to slow down”) is simple, so the sentence doesn’t have problems with clarity.

However, when the predicate contains several complex phrases or clauses linked with *to*, clarity suffers. Consider this sentence.

“The officer directed the driver to keep his speed low, preferably under the speed limit, pay attention to other drivers, including those who appear to be following traffic regulations and those obviously not, and use his turn signals before changing lanes, unlike most drivers who give them a single blink when half-way into the next lane.”

This sentence is fine grammatically, and, if you work at it, you can find the three items in the series. (They begin with “keep,” “pay,” and “use.”) They are complex (e.g., “pay attention to other drivers, including those who appear to be following traffic regulations and those obviously not”).

To make the work less difficult for the reader, however, we don’t use *to* as a linking word. We repeat it for every item in the series. This helps the reader find the items. Here is the same sentence, repeating *to*.

“The officer directed the driver to keep his speed low, preferably under the speed limit, to pay attention to other drivers, including those who appear to be following traffic regulations and those obviously not, and to use his turn signals before changing lanes, unlike most drivers who give them a single blink when half-way into the next lane.”



## **Day 217: Don't use a comma before *because* when joining two independent clauses.**

“I don't want to go” is an independent clause. It has a subject and predicate, and it can stand alone as a complete sentence. “I am busy now” is another independent clause.

In previous tips, we discussed using a comma before coordinating conjunctions that join two independent clauses, as in “She was fired, but she hasn't left the building.” Based on this rule, some people will place a comma before *because* when *because* joins two independent clauses. This is not correct because *because* is not a coordinating conjunction.

Wrong: “I don't want to go, because I am busy now.”

Right: “I don't want to go because I am busy now.”

## Day 218: Use reader-friendly terms to persuade your reader to act.

Unless you are writing in a journal or a diary, you are writing to an audience. And if you want your reader to think, believe, or act in some way, you are writing persuasively. One of the ways to persuade your reader is to use terminology that reflects your reader's interests.

While facts are fine, you need to show your reader how to think about them, i.e., you need to provide an interpretation of those facts. The interpretation should be relevant to the interests of the reader. This is a form of spin. You provide the information, but you provide it in a way that leads to a particular interpretation.

For example, let's say that a store is extending its hours on the weekends. The store owners want people to shop during those hours, particularly people who don't otherwise shop at that store. The advertising people could distribute information saying

"ABC Store is now open until 8:00 p.m. on the weekends."

This is the fact, but how does this connect with customer's interests? On the other hand, the advertising people could interpret those facts and say,

"We extended our weekend hours for active lifestyles."

A person receiving this information will think, "I'm pretty active. Those extended hours are perfect for me."

Here's another example. Let's say a movie theater knows that the movie *Three Candles* won't have many viewers. *Three Candles* is a gushy drama about parents' relationships to their children, and that means low ticket sales. The theater owner realizes that lowering the ticket price will encourage more people to attend, and an increased audience size will more than make up for losses on individual tickets. How, then, will the theater owner get more people to buy tickets for *Three Candles*?

The theater could promote the facts:

"We are lowering our ticket price for *Three Candles*."

That will encourage some people to attend. On the other hand, the theater could promote

"We're offering family-priced tickets for *Three Candles*."

Now, the reader may think, "Hey, I have a family, so I need to be careful about expenses. A family price is just what I need to take my family to the movies. Let's go!"

## Day 219: Remove superfluous quantifiers.

Writing style and writing quality are difficult to balance effectively. Writing style is the habitual use of particular expressions, word choices, and sentence and paragraph structures. As an editor, I believe that style has lower importance than audience appropriateness, clarity, and concision.

One characteristic of style that can be revised is the use of superfluous quantifiers, i.e., unnecessary words that refer to a quantity. Consider these two sentences.

“She made a presentation to the entire board of directors.”

“I will inform all of the stakeholders.”

The superfluous quantifiers are “entire” and “all of,” respectively. For example, “the board of directors” implies all the members of the board, or the entire board. The sentence meanings don’t change when these words are removed, giving us these concise sentences.

“She made a presentation to the board of directors.”

“I will inform the stakeholders.”

“Yes,” you might be asking, “but what if the writer doesn’t mean the entire board or all the stakeholders?” The writer will need to explain:

“She made a presentation to the board members who attended the meeting.”

“I will inform the appropriate stakeholders.”

## Day 220: Use plural subjects to avoid gender bias.

Subjects and pronouns must match in number. This means using a singular pronoun with a singular subject, or a plural pronoun with a plural subject. Consider this sentence.

“The driver turned off his meter.”

The subject is “driver,” and it refers to only one person. The pronoun is “his,” and this, too, refers to only one person. Thus, the subject and pronoun agree in number. This gets tricky when referring to a group of people or a type of person. Consider this sentence.

“No driver will turn off the meter when they are waiting for the passenger.”

Here, the subject is still “driver.” However, the pronoun being used for “driver” is “they.” This avoids using *he*, which demonstrates a gender bias. (After all, women can be drivers, too.) Although using “they” avoids gender bias, it is incorrect. The subject is singular, but the pronoun is plural.

You can write *he* or *she*, which is correct, but this is cumbersome to read. The best choice is to make the subject plural: change “The driver” to *Drivers*. Now we have this correct, non-biased sentence.

“No drivers will turn off the meter when they are waiting for a passenger.”

## Day 221: Avoid flowery verbs.

A flowery verb is any verb that calls attention to itself for being colorful, poetic, or unexpected in a particular context. Flowery verbs steal the reader's attention from the content, and they may promote an un-professional, inappropriate tone. Let's look at some examples.

“His career bloomed under his mentor's direction.”

[flowery: “bloomed”; professional: “advanced”]

“Our collection is creeping towards 100 pieces.”

[flowery: “is creeping towards”; professional: “is approaching”]

“The funding proposal screamed our need for new services.”

[flowery: “screamed”; professional: “strongly expressed”]

Prose and other nonfiction, including business writing, doesn't have to be boring. A well-written document of any type will have some artistic expression and feel, even while maintaining economy and effectiveness. Word choices, sentence structure, and organization still combine to express your style. However, if you are using words simply to provide an artistic flair to your writing, and if those words will distract your reader from the content, you are using the wrong words.

## Day 222: 3 pairs of commonly confused words

### *Compose* vs. *Comprise*

*Comprise* means to join multiple parts into a single whole. A good synonym is *assemble*. (“The neighborhood association comprised people from many professions.”) Notice that *comprise* is not followed by *of*.

*Compose* means to make a whole by putting together multiple parts. A good synonym is *create*. (“The neighborhood association was composed of various residents.”) Notice that *compose* is generally followed by *of*.

### *I.E.* vs. *E.G.*

*I.E.* is an abbreviation of the Latin term *id est* and roughly translates as *meaning*. Use *i.e.* to re-name, restate, or to clarify, as in, “He fell out of the window, i.e., down.”

*E.G.* is an abbreviation of the Latin term *exempli gratia* and roughly translates as *for example*. Use *e.g.*, to provide examples, as in, “He liked falling from heights, e.g., out of windows, from airplanes, off of ladders.”

Both are followed by a comma when used.

### *Like* vs. *Such as*

Use *like* to show similarities. Example: “He was falling like a rotten tomato that missed the stage.”

Use *such as* to provide examples. Example: “Everything falls at times, such as tomatoes and bodies from windows.” You can use *e.g.*, to replace *such as* in most cases. Also, *such as* is generally preceded by a comma when used in this way.

## Day 223: Remove throw-away reality words.

Concise writing is vigorous and economical. It keeps the reader focused on the topic, and it promotes agreement and action by your reader. On the other hand, writers produce lifeless, uninspiring writing when they use more words than necessary or provide redundant information.

This strategy requires removing throw-away reality words. These are words that say something is true. Consider these examples.

“The plan was, in reality, acceptable to the team.”

The throw-away words are "in reality." If the plan is acceptable, then it is acceptable in reality, as opposed to in fantasy.

“The president was truly amazed by the public protest.”

The throw-away word is "truly." If the president was amazed, then he was truly amazed. However, if the word “truly” is being used to show an extreme level of amazement, then use a better word than “amazed,” such as “dumbfounded.”

“The client was, in fact, less than satisfied.”

The throw-away words are "in fact."

“For sure, the cakes were delivered on time.”

The throw-away words are "for sure."

“This is pretty rare.”

The throw-away word is "pretty."

Here are a few more throw-away reality words (depending on how they are used):

*indeed*

*surely*

*clearly*

*in truth*

*obviously*

You might use these words for emphasis when countering contradictory information, so consider their use carefully. In most cases, you can simply throw them away.

## Day 224: Our process for writing a summary of articles

We are often called upon to assist graduate students prepare summaries of articles. You probably know the kind of assignment to which I am referring. Find some articles on a topic and create a single paper on a theme using those articles as references.

Students do this regularly, but business professionals, consultants, researchers, and writers for professional journals also do this. For example, we assisted a state official who was asked to prepare a summary of current research on grammar instruction (a topic near and dear to our hearts!).

This type of task can be overwhelming, and the more articles you have, the more complicated it can seem. What do you say? Where do you start? How do you put together the information so that it makes sense and presents a logical, organized discussion?

Fortunately, we have a process for this, and it may assist you. I am a believer in processes for writing. Here are the steps to ours. I know that having 20 steps seems complicated, but I have tried to be as specific as possible.

Once you have done this one time, it will seem both logical and simple.

### Part A: Research

1. Read the articles. (Of course!)
2. Highlight significant points, facts, opinions, findings, statements, etc.
3. Create a table on your word processor and list the highlighted text in columns under the article name (i.e., the article title is at the top of the column, and the findings are below the title). We call these raw article findings.
4. Print out your table.

### Part B: Generating ideas

5. Review the article findings and begin creating a list of key words and topics addressed in the articles. Do this on paper.
6. Organize the topics into an outline on a separate sheet of paper. This will be the outline of your summary. We recommend starting with an overview of the central theme, moving into specifics, and then concluding with consequences, next steps, or results. You will have to create an outline appropriate for your purpose.
7. Label each component of your outline. Instead of the typical A, A.1, A.1.a format, use initials that represent the content of each part of the outline. For example, a topic on Teachers might be labeled “(T)” and a subtopic on Teacher Experience might be labeled “(TE).”

### Part C: Coding the research findings

8. Now, go back to your printed table and start labeling the findings. Label each item in your table with a code from your outline.
9. Create additional subtopics from findings that do not seem to fit your outline, or create new levels in your outline if you have many findings that fall under one heading. Perhaps the subtopics can be further defined. When you are finished, each finding should have a

label that corresponds to a label on your outline.

#### Part D: Preparing to write.

10. Create a separate document on your word processor, and copy your outline to it. Leave 3 or 4 blank lines in between each heading.
11. Select a column on your table, and color the text (e.g., make the text dark red or green).
12. Using your labeled, printed copy of the findings as a reference, start copying and pasting the findings from your original table into the matching place on your outline. Do this for one article at a time. Because you colored the text in the columns, you will be able to identify the source for each piece of copied text later.
13. At the top of the outline, put your in-text citation information for each article, and color the citation information to match the text for findings from that article. For example, if you colored the text for article A in dark green, also color the citation for article A in dark green. Note: if you have more than 6 or 7 citations, you may wish to create a separate document for them.
14. Consider the text under each heading. Organize them in a logical manner that meets your purposes. Think about how you will organize the findings into a paragraph or two. Remember context first, followed by content, and ending with conclusion, impact, or action. Consider how you will create a transition to the next topic.

#### Part E: Writing:

15. You now have all the details, and they are organized. Underneath the findings for the first outline topic, start writing the ideas in your own words. Only do this for one topic on your outline.
16. Copy and paste the in-text citation information as needed.
17. Create a new document. This is your draft. When you have finished writing about the first topic, copy it to the new document.
18. Delete the heading, findings, and text from the outline so that the label and findings from the next topic are now below the list of citations (or at the top of the page if you created a separate document for citations).
19. Continue with each subsequent topic on your outline, writing text for the findings, copying the text to the draft, and deleting the findings from the outline document. Eventually, the outline document will be empty and the draft document will be completed.
20. Edit, revise, format, etc. the draft as needed, and create your reference list to match the in-text citations.

Congratulations! You now have your summary of the articles.



## Day 225: Choosing the correct verb tense for events in the past.

One issue we frequently address while editing is the verb tense used to describe past events. Specifically, many writers have difficulty with the difference between the simple past tense and the present perfect tense.

The simple past tense is used to describe an action that occurred once at a specific time. These sentences use the simple past tense.

“I ate a hot dog.”

“The car stopped working while I drove it home.”

“The clients refused to pay their bills.”

The present perfect tense is used to describe actions that occurred multiple times, or over time, in the past in respect to the present time. These sentences use the present perfect.

“I have never eaten so many hot dogs in one meal.”

“The car has stopped working several times, but the mechanic has not been able to fix it.”

“The clients have refused to pay their bills several times.”

Note that the present perfect tense requires the present tense of *have* (i.e., *have*, *has*).

Sample incorrect sentences and their corrections:

Wrong: “I took this trip many times.”

Right: “I have taken this trip many times.”

Wrong: “She has ate the pizza.”

Right: “She ate the pizza.”

Wrong: “Hot dogs are the best food I ever ate!”

Right: “Hot dogs are the best food I have ever eaten!”

## **Day 226: Use *were* for the unreal situations and statements contrary to fact.**

Writers get confused between using *was* and *were* for describing situations that are not real. Let's look at an example to understand what I mean by an unreal situation. Consider this scenario.

My uncle had a barbeque last weekend. I did not go, but your brother was there. I have never met your brother. Today, you come to me and ask, "Hey, what do you think of my brother?" and I respond, "I don't know him." You look confused and ask, "Didn't you meet him at the barbeque?" And I explain, "If I WERE at the barbeque, I would have met him."

In this scenario, we are describing an unreal situation and making a statement contrary to fact. We already know that I was NOT at the barbeque, so writing and talking about being there is describing an action that didn't happen. It is unreal. In cases such as this, we use *were* and not *was*. (For grammar junkies, this is called the subjunctive mood.)

Here are two more examples to demonstrate this concept.

"If I WERE a millionaire, I would buy a better car."

(I'm NOT a millionaire (yet), so this situation is unreal.)

"We should continue to work as if he WERE still supervising us."

(He is NOT supervising us at the moment, so this is unreal.)

## **Day 227: Focus on success to avoid describing failure.**

This is a form of spin that helps you create a more positive impression than the facts merit. Everything you write will create an impression. This technique guides your reader into interpreting the facts in a complimentary manner.

Let me give you an example that paraphrases a radio advertisement I heard recently. A woman said, in paraphrase,

"I lost 25 pounds using the Super Stepper."

Some listeners will think, "Wow! That's pretty good." Because I am an astute consumer, I wondered how long it took to lose those pounds. Maybe the weight loss occurred over a year, in which case I would consider the Super Stepper a failure. However, the advertisement doesn't give all the facts; it focuses on success, and it has told the truth. Here's another example.

"Our new economic plan has created 25,000 new jobs."

That's sounds pretty good. The plan seems to be successful, right? What is not being said is that during the same time, 50,000 jobs were lost. This means that for every new job, two were lost. This is a failure. However, when someone hears this statement, he or she will think the plan is a success. The statement focuses on success, not failure, and it has told the truth.

Here's the bottom line. Describe your successes to avoid describing failure.

## **Day 228: Use an en dash to connect words that modify a third term.**

The en dash is the "middle-length" dash: shorter than the em dash and longer than a

hyphen. While the primary use of the en dash is to show a range of values (e.g., 15–18), its secondary use is to connect two non-self-modifying words that together modify a third term. Consider this example.

“The Bush–Kennedy education plan has received much criticism.”

In this example, the terms “Bush” and “Kennedy” together modify a third term: “plan.” However, they do not modify each other, i.e., “Bush” does not describe “Kennedy” and vice versa. For this reason, they need to be connected with an en dash. Here is another example.

“U.S.–Saudi negotiations are proceeding smoothly.”

Here, the words “U.S.” and “Saudi” do not describe each other, but together they describe “negotiations.” For this reason, they need to be connected with an en dash.

Most word processors will convert space-hyphen-space to the en dash. Also, you can usually find the en dash under symbols or on the character map. However, make sure the en dash has NO spaces between it and the words on either side.

Some text editors do not convert the hyphen to the en dash. If you cannot produce the en dash, you can simply use space-hyphen-space.

## **Day 229: Use action verbs as main verbs in your sentences.**

By action verb, I mean a verb that describes an action you can observe. These are the opposite of state of being verbs, such as *is*, *are*, *seems*, and *became*. Find the main verb in your sentence. Using an action verb for your main verb will make your writing more vigorous and engaging. Consider these sentences.

“This is a great book for improving writing” [Main verb: “is”]

“This book provides great writing instruction” [Main verb: “provides”]

In this example, we removed the weak, lifeless, inactive verb and replaced it with an active verb. This forced us to revise the sentence further, resulting in a more active and engaging sentence.

Find your main verbs. Are they active or lifeless? While you may not be able to revise all sentences this way, you should do so to the extent possible.

## **Day 230: Use the em dash to create emphasis.**

The em dash (the long dash) has two uses. First, you can use it to interject comments into your sentences, which we discussed already. Second, you can use it to make an impact statement at the end of a sentence. The em dash causes the reader to pause slightly, so whatever follows it will have more emphasis. Consider this sentence.

“The play was wonderful—if you like amateur performances.”

In this sample, the em dash will make the reader pause and, therefore, will put heavy emphasis on the final phrase. When using this technique, the text after the em dash needs to be some form of impact statement or the technique will fail. Here is another example.

“The driver swerved to the right—accidentally.”

Most word processors will convert two hyphens to an em dash. Some plain text word processors can't, in which case two hyphens will be acceptable. For formal documents, though, use an em dash.

## Day 231: Change *-ness* words into adjectives.

Words such as *happiness*, *usefulness*, and *hardness* are nouns made from adjectives. By adding *-ness*, a writer complicates his or her writing by changing a simple, easy-to-understand adjective into a vague, undefined concept or idea, e.g., the concept of being happy, the concept of being hard.

Changing the concept word back into an adjective will typically force the writer to revise the sentence, but the result will be a sentence that directly states what the writer intends. Consider this sentence.

“The looseness of the dress made me uncomfortable.”

When we revise this, and change “looseness” into “loose,” we get

“The dress was loose and made me uncomfortable.”

Another possible revision is

“The loose dress made me uncomfortable.”

When considering revisions to remove *-ness*, you might find that you can completely change the sentence to express your idea better:

“I feared the loose dress would reveal more than I intended.”

While this revision has more words than the original, it more accurately expresses the writer’s meaning.

## **Day 232: Use short sentences for complicated ideas.**

This tip is about increasing the potential for readers to understand your ideas. Here's the central concept of this tip: If the ideas are complicated, make the writing as simple as possible. Break the discussion of the idea into individual, discrete units, and make each unit a separate sentence. This will have two results.

First, and most importantly, short sentences make the reader slow down so that he or she will pay attention to each unit of information and not skip or miss them.

Second, short sentences help the reader organize the information. When the information is provided as a series of short sentences, the reader can make a mental outline that helps him or her organize, remember, and understand the idea.

Because the reader will read all the details, and because the reader will organize the points you make, the reader will have a better chance to understand your complicated idea.

## **Day 233: Separate disrupters with commas.**

You are writing a sentence, and in the middle of the sentence, you need to add a clarifying point or comment. The clarifying text is a disruptor. It disrupts, or interrupts, the point you are making with the sentence. It needs to be separated from the rest of the sentence. Usually, you will do this with commas, but you can also use em dashes or parentheses. Consider these sentences with disruptors.

“Our marketing strategy targets a new population, consumers with young children, representing a potential \$6 million in new revenue.”

“Environmentally friendly materials, such as used in the construction trades, are becoming easier to access.”

“A new public library, able to house over 40,000 books, will enhance the community.”

“The discussion of partnership support followed the discussion of internal resources, resources that have dwindled during this economic downturn.”

As you see from these examples, the disruptors are not on the specific topic of the sentence, so they are blocked off from the rest of the sentence with commas.



## **Day 234: Disparage critics as being opponents of progress and productivity.**

You have a new idea or new information to share with your readers. You want to propose a new plan, program, or process. You want to change how things are done now. You will receive criticism. That's life.

How do you deal with criticism and increase the potential that your readers will agree with you and not your critics? One strategy, which I have already discussed, is to predict and counter those arguments.

Another way is simply to disparage, or criticize, your critics. Your criticism doesn't even have to be true; it only has to be true from your perspective. (Note: This is a common strategy employed by politicians.) Let me give you a recent example of this.

The president wants to change the government's role in health care, and he is encountering a great deal of resistance. He has a new way to do things, and other people don't agree. Sound familiar?

Instead of using the first strategy we discussed (i.e., countering those arguments and discussing the advantages of his plan and the faults with their ideas), he is disparaging their criticism. Instead of saying "My plan is better because..." and "Their ideas are wrong because..." he is saying, "They are opponents of reform."

To state this in more aggressive terms, when your ideas are under attack, counterattack by stating that your opponents are against something good (e.g., reform). By putting the focus on your critics, you take the focus away from the idea. By claiming that your opponents oppose progress or productivity, you demonstrate that you are for these positive things and have, therefore, the superior claim—without having to prove the merits of your claim.

Most people want to be for something good, so when they see the argument not from the basis of facts and logic but as a choice between being on the side of good versus being on the side of bad, they are more likely to agree with you.

## **Day 235: Place your most important words before or after a period.**

Words at the end of a sentence carry extra emphasis. Also, whenever you make the reader pause, you increase the impact of words on either side of the pause, such as when using an em dash. When we combine these two ideas, we find that words before the period and words after the period can both carry extra emphasis, i.e., the last word of one sentence and the first word of the next. Consider this example.

“The village council understands the community’s basic needs. Water rights are not matched with adequate water supply.”

This example emphasizes the words “basic needs” and “Water rights.” These are two central concepts expressed in these sentences, so they have been purposefully placed just before or after the period, giving them extra emphasis. (This sample also emphasizes “adequate water supply” by placing that phrase at the end of the second sentence.)

One point to remember is that this is done purposefully. Once you identify words or phrases to emphasize, or concepts that need extra emphasis, place them before or after the period and revise the rest of the sentences accordingly.

## **Day 236: Replace disparaging descriptors with positive actions.**

I remember the old adage “There are two sides to every story.” One interpretation of this adage is that every story can be told in more than one way, and this has implications for writing.

Events, facts, ideas, etc. can be told from a positive or negative perspective. Your purpose will determine how you choose to describe them. If your purpose is to produce a positive reaction, or at least to mitigate a negative reaction, replace disparaging descriptors with positive actions. Consider this sentence.

“The company is losing money.”

The word “losing” has a negative connotation, and “losing money” is a disparaging descriptor of the company. Now let’s replace the disparaging descriptor with positive actions.

“The company expects to meet financial goals in the third quarter.”

We have replaced “losing money” with “meet financial goals.” The overall tone is positive. We changed the interpretation, and we have told the truth. After all, if the company expects to meet goals later, then it is not meeting them now, and this includes losing money.

This is spin. You will need to decide whether or not this is appropriate for your purpose and aligns with your ethics.

## Day 237: Avoid judgment words.

Judgment words reflect your opinion about a topic. The following sentences contain judgment words.

“The loudmouths at the back of the hall disrupted the meeting agenda.”

“This board of directors wasted essential time on non-important items.”

“The spectacular fireworks display demonstrated their patriotism—and their love of things that go bang.”

While this may be appropriate in some cases, it is generally not appropriate for professional, objective writing for three reasons.

First, the writing is not objective but subjective, which means that it is not based on evidence, facts, or broadly accepted information. When you use judgment words, you are giving your opinion, which leads us to the second reason.

Second, when you provide your opinions, you don’t give the reader the necessary information to make his or her own opinion based on the facts, evidence, etc. Astute readers will understand that you are providing an opinion and, in the absence of the evidence, will not accept your information.

Third, you disrespect the reader. You don’t allow him to determine his own opinion. You told him what opinion to have—yours.

## **Day 238: Put the period after embedded parenthetical comments.**

To explain or elaborate on some point in your sentence, you might conclude with a comment inside parentheses. Consider this sentence.

“The new furniture will arrive on Monday (most likely in the afternoon).”

The entire parenthetical comment is embedded in the sentence. It is not a separate sentence. The period needs to follow the closing parenthesis. Simple. Here is another example.

“We upgraded our software (the new version is more stable).”

Although the parenthetical comment could be written as a separate sentence, in this case it is embedded in the main sentence. Thus, the period goes after the closing parenthesis.

## Day 239: Clarity is more important than style.

*Who cares what a man's style is, so [long as] it is intelligible, as intelligible as his thought. Literally and really, the style is no more than the stylus, the pen he writes with; and it is not worth scraping and polishing, and gilding, unless it will write his thoughts the better for it. It is something for use, and not to look at.*

(Henry David Thoreau)

Thoreau makes an essential point here: Style is practical, not aesthetic. Style is secondary to communication and should be guided by the writer's purpose.

Instead of striving to write in a particular style, a writer should strive to communicate thoughts in the most effective manner possible. Style is only valuable inasmuch as it improves the writer's ability to communicate his or her ideas. As Thoreau says, use style as a tool to communicate.

## Day 240: Avoid *what is* and *what are* phrases.

We already know that *to be* verbs weaken writing. Examples of *to be* verbs are *is*, *am*, *was*, and *are*. These words are also problematic when combined with *what* to make *what is* and *what are* phrases. Consider these sentences.

“You know what the reasons are.”

“The technician discovered what the problem is.”

In both sentences, the weak phrases can be removed without making any other changes in the sentences and without changing the meanings. This is a clue that the phrases can, and should be, removed. They don’t add value, just more words. The revised sentences are as follows.

“You know the reasons.”

“The technician discovered the problem.”

You might not be able to do this in every case, but when you see those weak phrases, remove them and evaluate the revised sentences. In most cases, the writing will be more direct and concise.

## **Day 241: Use judgment words carefully when appropriate.**

On day 237, we discussed avoiding judgment words, i.e., words that express your opinion. Generally, this is good advice. However, you need to ask yourself, “Is my opinion relevant?” Answer this question critically.

For example, if you are writing a letter of complaint, your opinion is NOT productive: stick to the facts. On the other hand, if you are writing a document that is intentionally and clearly an opinion piece, and the reader understands that you are expressing your opinion, then judgment words might be useful to show how you interpret the facts.

Here’s the caution. If you use judgment words, an astute reader will quickly realize that you are expressing opinions and not facts. This can discredit you as an authority in the subject and give the reader permission to disagree with your ideas—because they are opinions.

We don’t have any hard and fast rule about this, which is why we recommend removing judgment words in general. The best advice I can give you is to use judgment words only when the document is clearly an opinion piece—but avoid them when you want to demonstrate knowledge and persuade your reader.



## Day 242: When to use a colon when creating a list or series.

First we need to understand the difference between a list and a series.

List: You create a list when you have an independent clause followed by some items. The items ARE NOT part of the grammatical sentence, and the sentence is complete if you remove them.

Series: A series contains multiple items that ARE part of the grammatical sentence, and the sentence is incomplete if you remove them.

Now let's look at what a colon does.

A colon is used to end an independent clause and link it to something else.

When you create a list, you have an independent clause followed by some items, so you need the colon. With a series, you don't have an independent clause followed by some items, so you cannot use the colon.

Maybe some examples will help.

List (with colon): "We bought 4 pieces of fruit: 2 bananas and 2 apples." ("We bought 4 pieces of fruit" is an independent clause.)

Series (without colon): "We bought 2 bananas and 2 apples." ("We bought" is not an independent clause.)

List (with colon): "The team comprises many experts: an engineer, a salesperson, a computer technician, a receptionist, and a manager." ("The team comprises many experts" is an independent clause.)

Series (without colon): "The team comprises an engineer, a salesperson, a computer technician, a receptionist, and a manager." ("The team comprises" is not an independent clause.)

## **Day 243: Emphasize the degree to which a person or thing has a particular characteristic by referring to an extreme example.**

If you want to point out some characteristic that is expressed to a greater or lesser degree than common, you can emphasize it by referring to an extreme example in a well-known person. You can refer to either a real person or a fictional/mythological person. Mythological personages are particularly useful as they seem, by their very nature, exceptionally important or representative.

Use this to point out how big, small, great, weak, etc. the characteristic is, i.e., how extreme the person's demonstration of the characteristic is. However, make sure to select an example of the characteristic that the reader will know and understand.

These two sentences use this technique:

“His addiction to alcohol is his only Achilles' heel.”

“With the stature and poise of Lincoln, he addressed the hostile mob.”

## Day 244: Reduce *that* and *which* phrases.

Phrases starting with *that* and *which* add description to a sentence. They can be useful, but they make the sentence complicated. For simple-to-read text, we try to limit the number of these phrases in a document. Consider this sentence.

“She threw the apple at the man that was standing by the tractor.”

In this sentence, we can simply remove the word “that” and the “was” that is required by “that.” “That” is implied, so it is not necessary:

“She threw the apple at the man standing by the tractor.”

This also removes an unnecessary verb, so the entire sentence is more concise. Now consider this sentence.

“She threw the apple, which was on the table, at the man standing by the tractor.”

In this sentence, we have a non-restrictive phrase starting with the word “which.” Like all non-restrictive phrases, this phrase is not necessary to make the sentence grammatically correct. We can remove it, but then we will lose content. Instead, we can revise the sentence so that we don’t need “which.” This gives us the following sentence.

“She threw the apple on the table at the man by the tractor.”

## Day 245: Change clichés for impact and engagement.

Here are two premises:

1. Clichés are bad. People will notice them and think you don't have any new thoughts. This is bad impact.
2. Original language is good. People will notice it and think you have a new perspective on the topic. This is good impact.

For really good impact, however, take a familiar cliché and modify it in a unique way. Of course, the modification must communicate a meaning relevant to your ideas. This will get the reader's attention, make him think about the topic in a new way, and make you appear clever, knowledgeable, and interesting.

Three common ways to do this are

1. reverse words in the cliché, i.e., put them in a new order,
2. replace one of the key words with a new word, and
3. add additional information to the end.

Example cliché: "It's the journey that matters, not the destination."

Re-ordered words: "It's the destination that matters, not the journey."

Replaced words: "It's the company that matters, not the destination."

Replaced and re-ordered words: It's the company that matters, not the journey."

Additional information: "It's the journey that matters, not the destination, unless you're on your way to the bank."

## Day 246: Match gerunds with nouns, not with verbs.

A gerund is verb form, usually ending in *-ing*, that is the name of an action. For example, in the two sentences below, the first sentence uses “running” as a gerund naming an action, and the second uses “running” as verb describing an action.

“Running is a good pastime.”

“He was running down the street.”

Here’s the point: Gerunds act like nouns. When you are linking words and phrases in a series, remember that gerunds can only be linked with other nouns and not with verbs. Otherwise, your sentences will have problems with parallelism. You will be mixing nouns and verbs. Consider this sentence.

“The committee chairperson noted that she supported people who disagreed but not arguing.”

In this sample, the chairperson supports the action of disagreeing, but not the activity called arguing. “Disagreed” is a verb, and “arguing” is a gerund naming a particular type of action.

(We could make the claim that “arguing” is matched with “people who disagreed,” which would make this correct. Both of these are acting like nouns in this sentence. However, we’re still matching different types of things: a type of person with a type of action.)

To make this sentence correct, we need both words to have the same part of speech. Two possible revisions are as follows.

“The committee chairperson noted that she supported people who disagreed but not those who argued.” (This uses two verbs.)

“The committee chairperson noted that she supported disagreement but not argument.” (This uses two nouns.)

As you can see, when we revised this sentence to resolve the problem with parallelism, we found that one of the revisions, the second sentence, was very clear and concise. By solving the error, we produced an economical and forceful sentence.

## Day 247: Use parallel construction in lists.

Parallel construction means all the items have the same grammatical structure. For example, all the items may be complete sentences, or all the items may start with present tense verbs.

In a list, you have multiple items. Each of those items needs to be parallel. Consider this list, with an opening statement.

Our books provide exceptional value:

- Reasonable price,
- High-quality content,
- You can buy them on-line.

While each of these statements might be true, they have been expressed poorly. As you can see, the first two items have an adjective followed by a noun. The last item is an independent clause. As such, this list has a problem with parallelism. To fix this, we change the final item to “available online.” We could change the first two items instead, but this will add many words.

If your list items are not parallel, not only will you have an error but also the text will read poorly.

## Day 248: Use jargon carefully.

Jargon is language and words specific to a particular group of people (e.g., librarians, plumbers, editors). For example, when journalists speak about a *morgue*, they may be referring to the files of old stories. Network managers (and other technology-savvy people) may speak about *plug-ins* and SAAS.

Jargon is great. These specialized terms help people communicate complex ideas with only one or two words. They contribute to concise writing. When you're writing, however, they can cause problems with clarity.

Think about what words the reader knows. If you are writing to colleagues in your field, you probably should use jargon. Explaining all the concepts will make you seem either foolish or condescending, as if your reader isn't "in the know." And the document will be unnecessarily wordy. On the other hand, if you are writing to people who may not know the jargon, then you shouldn't use it (or you should provide an explanation of the terms). Otherwise, your reader may have difficulty understanding you.

Here's the basic point: Think about the terms you use and select the ones that lead to understanding. Use jargon carefully.

## Day 249: Use bargain verbs.

A bargain verb is a single word that describes an action in a particular way. In a sense, a bargain verb combines an action with its description. Consider this sentence.

“The bicycle wheels made a high-pitched whistling sound as he rode by.”

Instead of using the weak verb “made” and the descriptive phrase “a high-pitched whistling sound,” we can use the bargain verb *whirr*, which includes both the action and its description. *Whirr*, therefore, is a bargain verb. This gives us the following revision.

“The bicycle wheels whirred as he rode by.”

The result of using bargain verbs is concise, active text. It is also more engaging for the reader.



## Day 250: Use similes to explain complex concepts.

A simile expresses the idea that one thing is similar to a different type of thing. Similes may use the words *like* or *as*, but these words are not required to make a simile. Other words, such as *similar to*, *suggests*, and *resembles* can be used. In addition, a simile may be implied if you are clearly making this comparison. Consider this example:

“The mental process of a psychopath resembles two interlocked springs.”

In business use, I don’t recommend using *like* or *as* because 1) these words will clearly indicate that you are using a simile, which may distract your reader, and 2) making similes with these words can create an artistic tone, which may not be appropriate in business writing.

Why use a simile? When you have a complex concept that you want the reader to understand, you can use a simile to show how the unfamiliar concept is like something the reader can visualize or something with which the reader is already familiar. This helps the reader create a mental framework for understanding the concept. You show how the familiar thing resembles the unfamiliar thing, and the reader can then apply his or her understanding to your concept. The reader will be more able to understand your concept. Here’s another example:

“The electron beam emits a unidirectional flow of electrons similar to a hose shooting water.”

## Day 251: 10 Strategies for writing a sloppy sentence

You may think that writing a sloppy, weak, confusing sentence is difficult, but it is not. To do so, use these strategies. If you can use them all in one sentence, you will have a very sloppy sentence.

### VERBS:

1. Use the verb *to be*, especially as the main verb of the sentence.  
These include *is*, *are*, *was*, *were*, and *am*.
2. Use the passive voice.  
For example: “The rules were developed without considering enforcement strategies.”
3. Use many *-ing* verb phrases  
For example: “When he was taking a shower, she was chasing the cat.”

### NOUNS:

4. Take your most interesting and active verbs and change them into nouns (i.e., nominalizations).  
For example: “The elucidation of the subject by the author was diminished by his distraction.”

### DESCRIPTIONS:

5. String together prepositional phrases.  
For example: “In the morning of the first day of the year, the new product rolled off the assembly line in the factory on the outskirts of town.”
6. Use descriptive terms that provide obvious or implied information.  
For example: “Before noon on the morning of his birthday, he quickly chased his cat around the house.”

### SENTENCE STRUCTURE:

7. Use *there* and *it* as the subject, not the rhetorical subject.  
For example: “It was unclear to us whether we needed to upgrade our customer database.”
8. Separate the subject and main verb with many descriptive phrases.  
For example: “The processing power of the new dual processors now being installed in current models available to customers who are willing to spend the extra money is useful.”
9. Interrupt yourself.  
For example: “Checking accounts, such as those offered by credit unions, as opposed to those offered by regular banks, meaning commercial banks, offer, or rather, provide, benefits.”
10. Use nested subject-verb combinations.  
For example: “The president, addressing a group of **businessmen** at the conference the *foundation set up* **eating lunch**, dropped his notes.”

ONE MORE:

Here's one last strategy for writing a sloppy sentence. This strategy is not about what you do while writing, but **what you don't do** after writing.

11. Publish your rough draft. Don't edit.

## Day 252: 3 sets of commonly confused words

### ***All ready vs. Already***

*All ready* means *each prepared*.

“The boys are all ready to leave now.”

“The computers are all ready for shipping.”

*Already* means *before now*.

“I have already baked the cookies.”

“We have already covered that issue.”

### ***Continuous vs. Continual***

*Continuous* means *incessant* and *without pause*.

“The continuous rain dampened our spirits.”

“Summer months in Alaska are characterized by continuous sunshine.”

*Continual* means *occurring regularly*.

“His continual speeches are not winning over his opponents.”

“How can I get any work done with these continual telemarketing calls?”

***Skim vs. Scan*** [the verbs, not the adjective or noun, respectively]

*Skim* means *review quickly* and *take a superficial look*.

“The editor skimmed the paper for obvious mistakes.”

“Please skim this and see if the formatting looks right.”

*Scan* means *review carefully* and *examine in detail*. [Sometimes, *scan* is used to mean *skim*, but this is substandard usage.]

“I scanned the document and found no errors.”

“The radar beam scanned the sky for incoming aircraft.”

## Day 253: Guidelines for e-mail etiquette, part 1

### *Greeting lines:*

Personal e-mails: Use the recipient's first name followed by comma. Just using the name is sufficient. I don't recommend using "Dear." Because of the informal nature, you may wish, instead, to start with some other greeting, such as "Good morning" or "Hi."

Formal, business e-mails: Use the recipient's first name followed by a colon, just like in a business letter. Use the same greeting line information that you would use in a formal business letter. Here, you may wish to use "Dear" followed by the name. Interestingly, "Dear" gives the e-mail a formal touch.

### *Closing lines:*

Personal e-mails: You can generally omit closing lines. Finish the content of the message and follow it with your signature information.

Formal, business e-mails: Follow the content of the body with some form of tag line, such as "I look forward to hearing from you" or "Please let me know if you have any questions." You can leave out letter closings, such as "Sincerely," or you can include them. Either way is acceptable.

## Day 254: Guidelines for e-mail etiquette, part 2

### *Paragraphing:*

Use short paragraphs to make on-screen reading easier. Readers may have difficulty following the content if you have more than 4 or 5 lines of text. Put a blank line between paragraphs. Don't indent the first line—you don't need to because you're adding the blank lines.

### *Mechanics:*

Mechanics are important. The recipient of a personal e-mail may forgive you for errors; the recipient of a business e-mail will not and should not. Mechanics are as important in your e-mail as in a business letter. They may affect meaning, which is critical for communicating accurately.

### *Signature:*

At a minimum, include your name. For business e-mails, also include your e-mail address (even though it is already included in the e-mail routing information) and phone number. Also include the URL for your main business website.

### *General format:*

For personal e-mails, pretty much anything goes. For business emails, you need a formal appearance. This means no artistic fonts (which may be hard to read and may not be present on the recipient's computer), no background images (which may make the text difficult to read), and no brightly colored text (for the same reason). The point is that business e-mails are formal.

If the content is very long, longer than one screen, for example, consider writing a synopsis in the e-mail body and attaching a formal business letter with detailed content. Use a PDF if possible.

## Day 255: Save *would like* for actions with conditions.

When you say you *would like* to do something, you imply that you won't do it unless some condition has been met. Here's the first problem. Many writers use *would like* to discuss an action that they will do or are already doing. Consider this sentence.

"I would like to express my appreciation for your generosity."

As the reader, I ask, "Ok, if you would like to express it, then why aren't you expressing it?" This sentence implies a condition for your action. In fact, you are expressing your appreciation, so the phrase *would like* is incorrect. Instead of writing that you *would like* to do something, just do it. This sample can be revised as

"Thank you for your generosity."

The other major misuse of *would like* regards the writer's interest or desire. Consider this sentence.

"I would like the pastrami sandwich."

You are not expressing a condition here ("I would like it if . . ."); you are expressing a desire. Thus, the sentence can be revised as follows:

"I want the pastrami sandwich."

## Day 256: Place a comma before a final *too* that means *also*.

The word *too* has two meanings: *excessive* and *also*. When *too* is used to mean *also*, and when it is written at the end of a sentence, put a comma before it. Consider these statements by John.

“I want to go to the store, too.”

“I want to go to this store and that store, too.”

“I will buy bananas and grapes, too.”

Be careful when using *too* in this way. The meaning might not be clear without the context. For example, the first sentence might mean that Sally wants to go to the store and that John also wants to go to the store. It also might mean that John wants to go to several places but also wants to go to the store. You have to write these sentences carefully to ensure that the meaning is clear.

To further explain how this is tricky, consider the third sample. Perhaps Sally said that she will buy bananas and grapes. John replies that he will also buy bananas and grapes. Perhaps John means that he will buy bananas and that he will also buy grapes. You will need to provide the context.

When both options are in the sentence (e.g., “this store and that store”), we try to revise sentences so they don’t need *too*, thus removing an unnecessary word and avoiding this confusion.

In either case, the comma goes before the final *too*.

## **Day 257: Name the actor of the actions.**

When you keep your actors hidden, you will produce listless writing. By actors, I mean the people who perform the action. Consider this sentence.

“The budget adjustment request submitted to the state department will allow the development of new programs.”

This grammatically correct sentence doesn’t state who has performed the action, although we know “budget adjustment request” is the subject of “will allow.” However, we don’t know who performed the action of submitting the request, and this prevents the sentence from having an active, engaging tone.

This also may damage the clarity of the sentence because a central action, “submitted,” has no subject. We can improve this sentence by naming the actor of this action. We can also change “development” to the verb “develop” and name the actor for this action. This gives us the following revision.

“The executive director submitted a budget adjustment request to the state department, which will allow agency staff to develop new programs.”

The overall result is a sentence that is clearer and more active.



## Day 258: Separate fact from opinion.

When you express facts, you show respect for the reader. You provide information to the reader and allow the reader to decide how to interpret or use them. If the facts are valid and comprehensive, your reader will interpret them correctly—the same way you interpret them.

On the other hand, when you provide opinions, you don't give the reader this opportunity. As importantly, when you provide opinions, not facts, you create the opportunity for the reader to discredit your authority. Consider these sentences:

“Coffee is a wonderful beverage. The caffeine helps you wake up and keeps you alert. It is a good choice for early-morning people.”

This sample has two glaring opinions: “wonderful beverage” and “good choice.” Here is the response you desire: “I trust you, so I respect your opinion.”

However, an astute reader may respond in one of three ways.

1. “This is only your opinion, so I don't need to believe you.”
2. “I disagree with your opinion, so my trust in your authority is gone.”
3. “I have different information about this topic, so my opinion is better than yours.”

Based on this, when you provide opinions, not facts, you are more likely to lose credibility than you are to increase reader trust. To increase your authority, establish your credibility, increase the value of your writing, and persuade the reader to respond as you wish, provide facts.

## Day 259: *Either* is single.

Should you write “Either of these books is fine” or “Either of these books are fine”? In these two sentences, “either” is the subject. The main verb is either “is” or “are.”

*Either* is singular, being short for *either one*. Because *either* is singular, you need the singular verb *is*.

In the sentences above, you are stating “This book is fine, and that book is also fine.” You are referring to only one book at a time, which also helps explain why you need the singular verb. Consider this sentence.

“The client informed us that either of the two revisions [meet/meets] his needs.”

Here, “either” is the subject of the verb “meet” or “meets.” Again, “either” is singular, referring to only one, or one at a time, so we need the singular verb. The solution, therefore, is as follows.

“The client informed us that either of the two revisions meets his needs.”

## Day 260: Use short, common words when possible

This tip is for professionals writing on behalf of their organizations. Writers who strive for an artistic tone (e.g., poets, novelists, essayists) may choose words for their sounds or length, but they, too, should consider this tip. By using this tip, writers will write clearly and concisely.

Here's the point. To provide information in a manner that requires the least work from the reader, use short words when possible. To ensure that your reader understands your meaning, use common words. For example, consider this pair of sentences.

“An aluminum surface provides a glistening visage.”

“An aluminum surface provides a shiny look.”

The second sentence has the same meaning, and implies the same message, as the first sentence. However, the second sentence has two words that are shorter and more common. Without changing the meaning, therefore, the second sentence communicates more economically than the first.

Should you do this for all words in all situations? Probably not. A little style, a little art, may be acceptable in some contexts. On the other hand, you should consider this rule as you determine your purpose for writing. If your purpose is clear, direct, concise writing, use short, common words.

## **Day 261: Provide details in examples to increase engagement.**

When the idea is complex or unfamiliar to the reader, an example or anecdote can help the reader understand. For this reason, they are important, and you want the reader to pay attention to them. This means that you need to engage your reader.

One effective way to increase reader engagement in your examples is to name the details. For example, if you are writing about changing ethics in today's society, you might provide an example about how people respond to money they find. You could begin this example as follows:

“A man working in a store leaves change on the counter.”

This sentence is pretty dull. It doesn't give the reader anyone or anything to visualize because it doesn't provide the details of this anecdote. What's happening here? To improve this example of the concept, we could revise this as follows.

“Bob is a new checker at Piggly Wiggly. He goes on break and doesn't notice that he has left a roll of quarters on the counter.”

(Note: Piggly Wiggly is a real grocery store chain. It used to be the largest in the U.S.)

The result of this is that the reader can form a mental picture, identify with the people in the example, and remember the example. And that leads to greater understanding and application of your concept.

## Day 262: Trust your instincts. Don't trust your instincts.

What does it mean **to trust your instincts**? It means that when you think a sentence should be improved, it probably should. When you think you have a better way to express an idea, you probably do. When you think you are not explaining yourself well, you probably aren't.

What does it mean **not to trust your instincts**? It means that when you think you have explained a complex idea clearly, you probably haven't. When you think you have written a particularly catchy, witty, or artistic phrase, you probably haven't. When you think that your first draft is pretty good, it probably isn't. When you think you don't need to revise your document, you probably do.

Here's the point: Trust yourself when you doubt what you have written. Don't trust yourself when you think your first draft is fine.

## **Day 263: Use distinctive words only once, or rarely.**

A distinctive word is any word that catches the readers' attention. It may be unusual, be used in a new way, have a particularly harsh or pleasant sound, or be colloquial. It may have an emotional connotation. Consider this sentence.

“The press corps arrived with flamboyant enthusiasm for the speaker.”

The distinctive word here is “flamboyant.” The reader will ask, “What does it mean to have ‘flamboyant enthusiasm’? What does ‘flamboyant’ mean in this context?” This makes the distinctive word a form of HUPA.

When you use such a word, you create a strong emphasis on the word, which means your reader will pay attention to the word. This is risky because it pulls your reader from the flow of the ideas and forces him or her to focus on the word. It also makes your reader stop momentarily to think about what the word means in this context. But it does have an impact.

If you use a distinctive word, only use it once—or rarely. Each subsequent use will lower the impact of the word, and the overall effect you are trying to establish will be lost.

## Day 264: Correlative pairs don't have commas.

A correlative pair is a pair of words or phrases that connects the meaning of two parts of the sentence. They must always be used in these pairs, i.e., you can't use just the first part of the pair. Here are some examples of correlative pairs:

*either . . . or*

*not only . . . but also*

*both . . . and*

*neither . . . nor*

Now, to the point of this tip on writing mechanics. You don't need a comma before the second part of the correlative pair. Consider this example.

Wrong: "She will either find the employee handbook in the workroom, or she will download it from the network." [Notice the comma before "or."]

Correct: She will either find the employee handbook in the workroom or she will download it from the network." [This has no comma before "or."]

Caveat: If you have a non-restrictive phrase before the second part of the pair, you may have a comma before the second part. The entire non-restrictive phrase is set apart from the sentence with commas (one before and one after).

For example: "She will either find the employee handbook in the workroom, which is on the second floor, or she will download it from the network." The commas are required by the non-restrictive phrase, not by the correlative pair.

## **Day 265: Place descriptive prepositional phrases carefully.**

Groucho Marx once made the witticism “I shot an elephant in my pajamas.” The prepositional phrase “in my pajamas” seems to describe the elephant, leading to a very strange visual image.

Like most descriptive words and phrases, descriptive prepositional phrases tend to describe the thing to which they are closest. The reader may be able to figure out what you mean by the context of the sentence, but this asks the reader to do too much work to understand your meaning.

To make sentences clearer, and to prevent odd interpretations, we must evaluate whether the prepositional phrase will be associated with the correct word or something else. Consider this sentence.

“I leaned away from the desk in my office chair.”

This sentence implies that the desk was in the chair, not me. This occurs because the prepositional phrase “in my office chair” is closer to “desk” than to “I.”

To fix these two humorous sentences (and to make their meanings accurate), we can move the prepositional phrases as follows.

“In my pajamas, I shot an elephant.”

“Sitting in my office chair, I leaned away from the desk.”

These may still seem a bit awkward, and they can benefit from further revision, but they do accurately communicate what is happening.



## Day 266: Bullets vs. Numbers

Some technical writers prefer bulleted lists, and others prefer numbered lists. They are making a style choice about which to use. However, the choice between these types of lists isn't, or shouldn't be, a mere matter of style. Bulleted lists and numbered lists have specific and unique uses.

Use numbered lists when

- the list items are ordered by priority,
- the items reflect a process,
- you have indicated that you will write about a set number of items, or
- the reader should pay attention to a set number of ideas.

Use bulleted lists when the list items meet three criteria:

1. The items are non-sequential;
2. The items are not inter-dependent (i.e., the meaning of one item is not dependent upon the meaning of the other items); and
3. The list items have equal significance.

(Notice that the first sample is a bulleted series, not a list. As such, the introductory statement is not an independent clause and is not followed by a colon.)

## **Day 267: Use semicolons to join two independent clauses.**

Semicolons serve a purpose that is part comma and part period. The primary use of the semicolon is to show how two thoughts are connected; they join independent clauses without a conjunction. Consider these two sentences.

“The desk surface was rough. His arms were rubbed raw.”

These are two separate thoughts. The connection between them isn't clear. What does sentence two have to do with sentence one? We use a semicolon to show that connection.

“The desk surface was rough; his arms were rubbed raw.”

This sentence has two independent clauses joined by a semicolon. Now we know that the significance of sentence two derives from the content in sentence one.

As you can see from this example, we don't need a conjunction after the semicolon as we would with a comma in that place. Also notice that both parts could stand as complete sentences. We can't do this with sentence fragments.

## **Day 268: Know when to use the fire hydrant and when to use the garden hose.**

Fire hydrants and garden hoses are metaphors for two ways to think about providing information to your readers. Each of these reflects an approach to the quantity and thoroughness of the content you write.

**The fire hydrant approach** means providing as much information about a topic as possible, including all the various facets, details, explanations, and considerations about the topic. This approach is appropriate when your reader is deeply interested in the topic or is an expert in the subject area. For example, if I am writing about a specific form of online marketing to experts in search engine optimization, I might choose this approach.

**The garden hose approach** means providing a limited set of information about a topic. This does not mean the information is superficial, though this might be the case. Using this approach, you will not provide an exhaustive examination of the topic. Instead, you will provide the information desired by a more general reading audience or the answer to a specific question.

Think about your intended audience. Are they experts in the topic seeking in-depth, detailed, and complete information? Do they need the information to address specific questions pertaining to the topic or general information about the topic? Once you determine the readers' needs, choose the approach that is most appropriate.

## **Day 269: Employ iambic rhythm for natural sounding speech—and graceful writing.**

These writing tips are not about poetry. In spite of this, prose writers can learn much from poets about producing graceful writing. One major concept that is relevant across writing genres is rhythm, in particular the use of iambic rhythm.

Rhythm refers to the pattern of accented and non-accented syllables in your writing. The iambic rhythm is the most natural and simple rhythm. It is, simply, alternating accented and non-accented syllables, starting with a non-accented syllable. Consider this sentence:

“The plan will benefit our town.”

Here is the same sentence with the accented syllables in capital letters:

“the PLAN will BEN-e-FIT our TOWN.”

Because this is the natural speech pattern of English speakers, using this rhythm in our texts helps the reader to respond positively to the text, to remember it, and to be engaged in it.

Don’t do this throughout your text. Not only will this make your text “sing-songy” but also doing so will be unnecessarily difficult to write. Instead, think about your longer sentences with complex information. Consider using this rhythm for your central points and impact statements.

The reader will understand your text more easily, and your impact statements will be more emphatic.

## **Day 270: Emphasize successively important ideas by repeating the beginning words of sentences or phrases.**

One way to create impact is to place the words you want to emphasize at the beginning of the sentence, phrase, or clause, and then repeat those words in subsequent sentences. (The “official” name for this technique is *anaphora*.) Each repetition will carry more emphasis than the last, leading up to a final emphatic concept. The reader will unconsciously transition from “ho-hum” to “wow.” The following two samples demonstrate this technique.

“The health care plan will raise medical costs. The healthcare plan will bankrupt the nation.”

“Our policy is to treat our customers well. Our policy can cause long work days.”

By building the impact in this way, you get the reader to make a commitment to the final statement, which results in the reader remembering the final point and responding to it emotionally. Be careful with this strategy. It tends to sound contrived or overly poetic. Use it infrequently, if at all, or it will lose its impact.

## **Day 271: Emphasize negative aspects of counterarguments by asking the reader to advise you.**

By asking the reader for advice on a choice, you force the reader to make a choice. The choices you provide are all negative aspects of various counter-arguments. You are making the reader realize that by accepting any of the arguments with which you disagree, he or she is consciously choosing to accept something bad. Accepting what you propose, therefore, is the best choice. Consider this example.

“Her plan will force me to bankrupt the company, and his will make me break the law. Which plan should I accept?”

In this example, the writer (or speaker) shows how two options will lead to negative consequences. The question at the end makes the reader reflect on the options and realize that neither choice is a good one. The conclusion the reader comes to, therefore, is that your idea or plan is superior.

One caution with this strategy: You are telling the reader that only a limited number of choices can be made, and you want the reader to believe that only those choices are possible by accepting others’ ideas. However, an astute reader with strong knowledge of the issues may be able to find other options, which will discredit your authority and destroy your argument.

## Day 272: People have plural possessions.

This tip is about number agreement, which is to say it is about choosing between singular and plural. If you write that a person has something, you use a singular something. Consider this sentence.

“A man makes up his own mind.”

In this sample, we have one man and one mind. That’s singular “mind.” However, when you are talking about “people,” you need to use plural possessions. Consider this sentence.

“People will make up their own minds.”

In this example, we need to use plural “minds.” We’re talking about “people,” and people don't share one mind. People also don't share body parts, relatives, or most other things. I have seen many incorrect sentences similar to

“All boys respect their father.”

This incorrect sentence means that all boys share one father, which isn't true. The correct version is

“All boys respect their fathers.”

When choosing between singular and plural, ask yourself, does each person have one of his or her own, or do they all share the same one? Then choose plural or singular as appropriate.

## Day 273: A good style is transparent to the reader.

*A good style should show no signs of effort. What is written should seem a happy accident.*  
(W. Somerset Maugham)

Good writing takes effort. Let there be no doubt about that. (Remember the quote from Hawthorne? “Easy reading is damned hard writing.”) The effort is there, but from the reader’s perspective, the effort is not visible, which is to say that the writing seems like natural speech. It is not awkward but fluent—regardless of the writer’s style.

I espouse the strategy of reading aloud. When you are reading aloud, consider whether the text seems like natural speech or seems forced or convoluted. Each sentence on which you need to pause and consider the meaning needs revision. When you find yourself mixing or missing words when reading aloud, you have found another sentence to revise. When your text causes you to stop and start over, the text needs to be reworked.

Writers have many styles. According to Maugham, however, you can divide the “good” styles from “not-good” styles by the degree to which the writing is transparent and the message is clear. As you read aloud your own text, ask yourself this central question: “Does this sound natural?”



## Day 274: Criticize elliptical expressions carefully.

Elliptical expressions are phrases and clauses that leave out implied words. Consider this sentence.

“I like cookies more than cake.”

Here, the elliptical expression is “more than cake.” It implies the words “I like,” as in “I like cookies more than I like cake.” This elliptical expression won’t cause clarity problems. Now consider this sentence.

“I like cookies more than John.”

This sentence could have two very different meanings.

1. I like cookies more than John likes cookies.
2. I like cookies more than I like John.

The problem is that the sentence doesn’t give the reader any clues to figure out which interpretation is correct. The solution is to provide sufficient clues so that only one interpretation is possible. Assuming that the sentence means that I like cookies more than John likes cookies, I could revise the sentence as follows.

“I like cookies more than John does.”

Criticize your elliptical expressions carefully to make sure they mean only what you intend.

## **Day 275: Start sentences with old information and end with new information.**

This tip affects the cohesion of your sentences, meaning how they seem related. In a cohesive passage, the reader is moved through a logical series of ideas around a central theme. Each sentence expands on the ideas addressed in the previous sentence and provides the reader with new information. Consider these two trios of sentences.

“The regulation restricts digging of new wells. Owners can apply for permits to dig wells from their county office. The water table level may be adversely affected when owners dig too many new wells.”

“The regulation restricts digging of new wells. New wells can affect the water table level, creating supply problems. To ensure that these problems are avoided, owners need to apply for digging permits from their county offices.”

In the first sample, the sentences seem unrelated, as if the writer is simply stating a series of disconnected facts. However, in the second sample, each sentence seems logical and necessary based on the content of the previous sentence. This is accomplished because sentences start with a reference to previously stated information. New information follows the known information. The entire second sample seems cohesive as a result.

## Day 276: *And* makes plurals; *Or* makes singular.

Most people will correctly choose a plural verb in sentences like

“The computer and the telephone make life easier.”

In this sentence, both “computer” and “telephone” serve as the subject for “make,” and they can be substituted with the pronoun *they*, which is plural. This is why we need the plural verb “make.” This is pretty simple.

On the other hand, I see many errors with the use of *or*. Consider this sentence.

“The computer or the phone is a necessary tool for business.”

Again, “computer” and “telephone” are both serving as subjects to the verb. Because we have used “or,” however, we are referring to these subjects individually. We cannot substitute *they* for the two subjects; we have to use *it* for each subject. As such, we need the singular verb “is.”

The second sentence is a condensed version of “Either the computer **IS** a necessary tool for business, or the phone **IS** a necessary tool for business.” When we write out the sentence this way, the choice of the singular verb becomes obvious.

## **Day 277: End impact statements with a thump.**

Some words have more emotional or cognitive impact than others. They make the reader stop and pause. They create a mental thump. We call these heavy words. For example, nouns are heavier than adjectives, which, in turn, are heavier than prepositions. Nominalizations, which we don't like on principle, are the heaviest words.

Here's a scale of word "heaviness," from lightest to heaviest:

Prepositions – adjectives and adverbs – verbs – nouns – nominalizations.

Sentences need to build up in strength to create impact, so ending with a heavy word creates a sentence that feels complete. When we conclude an impact statement with heavy words, we create additional impact on the reader. The act of focusing on a word and pausing after it creates impact.

What this means is that we strengthen our sentences when we conclude them with a heavy word. This is particularly important when making a statement on which you want the reader to pay special attention. Consider these three sentences.

Lighter: "A man who tries hard will get what he dreams for."

Moderate: "A man will accomplish his dreams when he tries hard."

Heavier: "A man who tries hard will accomplish his dreams."

Look at the endings of these samples. The first sentence ends with a preposition; the second ends with an adverb; and the third sentence ends with a noun. The third sentence carries the most impact.

## Day 278: When to avoid the first person in objective writing.

Having written and edited many scientific papers, I can assure you that *I* and *we* are acceptable in scientific writing. So why do many professors keep insisting that their students avoid those words?

The problem is not the use of these words but the injection of personal opinion in what should be objective writing. Opinions, therefore, are the real problem. This brings us to the question: When should you avoid the first person in objective writing?

Avoid the first person in these expressions (or those that are similar):

“I think”

“I feel”

“I believe”

“I assume”

“I want”

“I am sure”

“I know”

The same list is true for *we*. These expressions indicate that you are about to write an opinion, and opinions have no place in scientific writing or other forms of objective writing.

## **Day 279: Limit yourself to one introductory phrase or clause.**

Readers want to know who did what. This means that when they read your writing, they are mainly looking for the subject and main verb of the sentence. Anything that delays finding the subject and main verb weakens your writing.

On the other hand, if your sentence has several descriptive phrases or clauses in a string after the subject or main verb, you may wish to move one or more to the beginning. Consider this sentence.

“John returned clients’ phone calls instead of listening to the traffic report as he was driving home while already stuck in traffic.”

We can reduce the string of modifying phrases and clauses by moving one to the position before the subject.

“As he was driving home, John returned clients’ phone calls instead of listening to the traffic report while he was already stuck in traffic.”

We used this tip to move only one clause to the beginning, resulting in a clear, simple sentence.

## **Day 280: People make better actors than concepts do.**

Let's start right away with an example, and then let's discuss it. Consider this sentence.

"Allegiance to the nation causes a man to serve his community."

The subject of this sentence is "allegiance." "Allegiance" is a concept, an abstract idea. If I ask you to picture "allegiance" in your mind, you can't do it. The reader will have the same problem. "Allegiance" cannot be visualized because it is a concept. Concepts don't have a physical shape. They just are.

To engage readers in the text, to keep them interested and focused, we want to give them something that they can picture. We also want our subjects to be capable of acting. Concepts don't act; people do. For these two reasons, the subject of the sentence should be something that can act.

We can revise the sentence above to make "man" the subject. You can picture a man, and a man is capable of performing actions. With this in mind, one revision is as follows.

"A man with allegiance to his nation will serve his community."

## **Day 281: Place commas around the name of a person whom you are addressing.**

Whenever you are writing to a person and using that person's name, you will need to separate the name from the rest of the sentence with commas. In these cases, the name is being used as an expletive, and expletives are always set apart with commas. Consider these correct samples.

“The problem, John, is that you are lazy.”

“Susan, I see that you have learned to use e-mail.”

“This funding cycle, Madam Chair, is about to begin.”

“I met your sister, Susan.”

[The fourth example has a problem. Is “Susan” the name of the sister or the name of the person to whom you are writing? Because you are writing to the person, he or she will know the difference. In either case, the comma is correct.]



## Day 282: Write what you mean, simply and clearly.

*In literature, the ambition of every novice is to acquire the literary language; the struggle of the adept is to get rid of it.*

(George Bernard Shaw)

I was asked recently why so many students write in a convoluted, pretentious manner typified by the excessive use of modifying phrases and nominalizations. For example, a student may write

“The result of our marketing analysis of red ink is a questionable understanding of its commercialization potential.”

Huh?

Ask this student what he means, and he may respond,

“We conducted a marketing survey to determine whether or not we could make any money selling red ink, but we don’t know.”

Ok, that’s better. So why didn’t he write like that in the first place? He had fallen into the trap of trying to impress with his word use and sentence complexity—instead of impressing with his ideas.

Here’s the point: Nothing is wrong with writing simply, concisely, and plainly. Impress your readers with your ideas, not your delivery. By focusing on the ideas, your delivery may also impress. However, if your delivery is poor, neither your delivery nor your ideas will impress.

## **Day 283: For the subject of your sentence, choose the actor you wish to emphasize.**

Even after you apply all the strategies and tips for writing clearly, you still may find yourself having to choose who will be the subject of the sentence. Consider these two similar sentences.

“Wilson sold Johnson a gun.”

“Johnson bought a gun from Wilson.”

These two sentences are in the active voice, they are clear and concise, and they describe the same event accurately. So what’s the difference?

The subject of the sentence is the main actor (the main do-er), and the reader will focus on the subject as being responsible for the action being described. In the first sentence above, Wilson is more responsible for the event than Johnson; in the second sentence, the reverse is true.

Once you decide whom to make responsible for the action, whom to focus on, use that person as the subject.

## **Day 284: Invent actors as needed to make active sentences.**

We often have to ask ourselves who is performing the action described by the sentence. In many cases, the answer is not found in the sentence. The writer hasn't told us. We want to name the actors of the main action and make them the subject of the sentence, so we need to invent. Consider this sentence.

“The committee session was frequently interrupted by ‘boos’ until the chairman cleared the room.”

In this sentence, we could make the chairman the subject, which would focus the sentence on the action of clearing the room. This would give us the following revision.

“The chairman cleared the room because booing frequently interrupted the committee session.”

The sentence is now clearer and more direct than the original. However, we think the sentence is not about clearing the room but about the frequent booing. Who is the actor of that action? The sentence doesn't tell us. We need to invent.

We think carefully about the situation described and decide that booing must come from audience members. Audience members, therefore, are our actors performing the main action of booing. Now we have the following clear, active sentence.

“Audience members frequently interrupted the committee session by booing until the chairman finally cleared the room.”

## Day 285: Place commas around interpolated asides.

Interpolated asides? An *interpolated aside* is a word or phrase that interjects the writer's opinion or some qualifier into the sentence. Perhaps some examples would help. These 3 sentences each contain interpolated asides.

“He was, perhaps, the best mayor in the history of the city.”

“The president is, in my opinion, doing a great job.”

“The movie, I am sure, will fail at the box office, though, as we have seen, critics tend to like bad movies.”

The term *interpolated aside* is, most likely, new to some subscribers, but, I believe, they are simple to understand. Separate the interpolated aside from the rest of the sentence with commas. (You noticed, I hope, the commas in the samples above.)

## Day 286: Use the passive tense to avoid long, complex subjects.

The active voice is preferable to the passive voice in nearly every case. In the active voice, the sentence structure is as follows: Grammatical/rhetorical subject + main action + object of the action, i.e., the S–V–O sentence structure. This is good writing.

The passive voice will use the object as the grammatical subject, which generally produces weak writing. However, the rhetorical subject can be long and complex. In such cases, the passive voice can help you simplify the sentence. Consider the following sentence.

“The difficult and time-consuming decision about whether to purchase new office equipment and hire an administrative assistant or to outsource basic administrative services took time away from our core duties.”

The subject of this sentence has 24 words. The length is not a problem, grammatically, but it does delay the reader from getting to the main verb, “took,” and may cause the reader to miss the central point of the sentence: the decision took time away from our core duties. We can write the sentence in the passive voice to solve these problems. One possible revision is as follows.

“Time needed for our core duties was taken up by the difficult and time-consuming decision about whether to purchase new office equipment and hire an administrative assistant or to outsource basic administrative services.”

Using the passive voice, the grammatical subject is shorter, only 6 words, and the reader can get to the main point quickly.

## **Day 287: Use the first person in objective writing to describe processes.**

Many professors claim that students should not use the first person in objective and/or scientific writing. But this is wrong. As we saw previously, the problem is not using the first person (e.g., *we*, *I*, *us*, *our*). The problem is that opinions are not appropriate. As long as we avoid opinions, we can use the first person.

The most obvious time to use the first person is when you are describing processes, i.e., when you are describing what you did. Consider this sentence, which avoids the first person.

“The researchers and authors of this report dissolved the molecular bonds.”

Readers of this report know who are the “researchers and authors of this report.” This phrase provides unnecessary information. More importantly, this sentence does not state an opinion; it describes a process, an action by the “researchers and authors of this report.”

The original sentence faithfully adheres to a mistaken “rule,” and it sounds fancy and formal. Actually, though, it is pretentious and laden with unnecessary information. Both problems are solved by using the first person when describing a process.

“We dissolved the molecular bonds.”

## Day 288: Revise long noun strings serving as subjects.

Long noun strings can confuse the reader, and they certainly prevent active, engaging sentences. Consider this sentence.

“The early casualty response coordination team arrived at the scene.”

The noun string here is “casualty response coordination team.” What we don’t know is whether “early” is a part of the name for the team (i.e., the team that deals with early casualties) or whether we’re writing about the team that arrived early. Also, as a subject, this noun string is ungainly and confusing. The reader may be left wondering “What kind of team?” and then have to study it to understand. Even so, the reader still might not understand.

The problem is that the subject has 4 nouns in a row. We can revise it using verbs and prepositional phrases. For example, the nominalization “coordination” can be reverted to the verb “coordinate,” and the noun “casualty” can be rewritten as the prepositional phrase “to casualties.”

Here’s one possible revision.

“The team coordinating the response to early casualties arrived at the scene.”

Now the confusion is gone, and the simple subject is easier to identify: “team.”

## **Day 289: Use familiar words as subjects.**

Strong, clear sentences use familiar words as subjects and end with new information. Writers do this for two reasons:

1. This strategy helps the reader answer the basic question of “who did what?” With familiar information at the beginning of the sentence, the reader will be able to find the subject and identify the main verb.
2. New information at the end creates a transition to the next sentence, which may use the now-familiar information at the beginning, resulting in cohesive, organized writing.

Consider these two sentences.

“The early 19th century was marked by class warfare and ideological epiphanies. These epiphanies, in particular, spawned new relationships among the classes.”

The first sentence begins with familiar information and ends with new information. That new information, having been introduced, is now familiar and can be used at the beginning of the second sentence. When the reader reads the second sentence, he can easily find the subject and main verb of the sentence.



## Day 290: *Anxious* and *eager* have different meanings.

People often use *anxious* to mean *eager*, but this is incorrect. These words have different meanings.

For example, I might hear someone say “I’m anxious to go,” meaning he or she is eager and excited to go. What this person is saying, however, is that he or she is worried about or afraid of going. So let’s take a moment and define these two words.

*Anxious* means, roughly, *worried* and *fearful*. This word is typically followed by *about*. You are anxious about something.

Correct use: “I am anxious about the upcoming presentation.”

Correct use: “The man anxiously waited for his summons.”

*Eager* means, roughly, *excited* and *longing for*.

Correct use: “I am eager to go.”

Correct use: “I am eager for this day to be over.”

Correct use: “She eagerly opened her mail.”

## Day 291: Make your point obvious.

*If you have an important point to make, don't try to be subtle or clever. Use a pile driver. Hit the point once. Then come back and hit it again. Then hit it a third time—a tremendous whack.*

(Winston Churchill)

Did someone ever tell you, “Oh, so that’s what you mean”? Did someone ever ask you, “What’s your point?” In both cases, and in similar situations, the problem is the same. You have an important point to make, some issue to state, or some important idea to convey, but the meaning is obscured by your style. You were not clear.

Churchill made an astute admonition: Make your important points clearly and without artifice.

As I have written a number of times, style is important, but it is secondary in importance to clarity. To improve communication, write clearly so that your reader can easily identify and understand your important points.

Ask yourself, “What does the reader really need to know? What do I want the reader to understand about this?” Then state it as clearly, concisely, and obviously as possible.

Having done so, you might think that you are too blatant, too plain, and too obvious. But that’s exactly what you want for your most important points. You want to use the “pile driver.”

## Day 292: Reduce or avoid metadiscourse.

Metadiscourse is writing about what you are writing or will write. Sometimes, metadiscourse provides signposts to organize the information. An example is “First, I will discuss . . . .” Other times, metadiscourse may be used to indicate a specific topic, such as “An important topic that deserves our consideration is . . . .” In even other cases metadiscourse discusses the writer’s opinion about the topic, as in this case: “Although I was expecting to discover . . . .”

Direct, active writing will avoid or, at a minimum, reduce metadiscourse. It is generally unnecessary. Consider these sentences, each of which has an example of metadiscourse.

“The first issue to understand is that youth sports are not for all youths. To understand this point, you need to consider the wide range of interests that youths have.”

Each of these sentences begins with metadiscourse about the topic that adds no value to the point the writer is making.

When we remove the metadiscourse, we get these clean, direct, and active sentences that contain all the essential content and present it more persuasively.

“Youth sports are not for all youth, considering the wide range of youths’ interests.”

In complex and lengthy documents, some metadiscourse may be useful to help the reader organize and differentiate the information. Other than for that purpose, most metadiscourse can be avoided.

## **Day 293: Use negative/positive restatement for emphasis.**

Positive/negative restatement means describing what something is, then describing what it isn't—or vice versa. When you do this, you strongly emphasize the final description. Let's look at some examples.

“Although you think you are strong, you are weak compared to him.”

“Freedom is not the absence of responsibility towards others. It is the acceptance of responsibility for yourself.”

“She was more than beautiful. She was a goddess.”

As you can see from these examples, we described each subject twice (restatement). First we gave a faulty description, and then we replaced it with a true description (negative/positive). In this way, we're saying, “It's not this. It's that.” The final statement will carry heavy emphasis, provoking an emotional and cognitive response, which contributes to the reader's remembrance.

You can write several such expressions in a series to create increasing impact. Whether you use one expression or several in a series, don't use this strategy again until the impact has had time to wear off, which might be pages later, if ever.

## Day 294: Choose the correct pronoun in elliptical sentences.

An elliptical sentence is a sentence that leaves out implied words. For example, if I am writing about two boys, I can write “The two left school early.” The word “boys” is implied and not written.

Generally, this doesn’t cause problems. It gets tricky when using elliptical sentences making a comparison that end in pronouns. Consider these two sentences with very different meanings.

“Sue likes cake more than I.”

“Sue likes cake more than me.”

Both sentences are grammatically correct. Depending on your meaning, you will choose one or the other. Here’s how you decide.

“I” is a subject pronoun, which means that it needs a verb. The verb is not here. Given the context of the sentence, the implied action is “like cake.” “Sue likes cake more than I [like cake].” This works for other subject pronouns, too.

“Me” is an object pronoun, which means that it is the recipient of an action. The implied action here is “like.” “Sue likes cake more than [she likes] me.” This works for other object pronouns, too.

Here’s the point. When choosing the correct pronoun for this type of sentence, consider what words you are implying, and then choose a subject pronoun or object pronoun to match the implied words.

## **Day 295: When possible, subordinate qualifications.**

A qualification is a statement that says your idea is not true in every situation or that makes some point about your idea. The qualification is not your main point; it is about your main point. You want to express it without confusing the reader into believing that it is your main point or that it is as important to the topic as your main point.

For example, let's say you are writing about using social media for marketing purposes. You could write this:

“Social media present new opportunities for reaching your target market segment. You need to be consistent in updating your social media outlets.”

What's the main point here? Is this about how social media provides opportunities or about how you need to use it consistently? In this case, the writer wants to talk about opportunities, not about consistent use. Without subordination, it is not clear.

To improve this, we take the qualifying statement (i.e., consistent updates) and make it subordinate to the main point (i.e., new opportunities). This gives us the following sentence.

“Social media present new opportunities for reaching your market segment, although you need to be consistent in updating your social media outlets.”

This is better. However, the reader will put more emphasis on the final statement in a sentence. As it is written, the final statement is not the main point; it is a qualifier. To improve the sentence, we'll move the subordinate statement to the beginning of the sentence, leaving the main point in the final position for emphasis.

“Although you need to update them consistently, social media outlets present new opportunities for reaching your target market segment.”

Now the reader will know and focus on the point of the sentence.

## Day 296: Make your examples obvious, if needed.

Broad topics, big concepts, and major ideas present a problem. The reader may have difficulty understanding what they mean in practical terms. To overcome this problem, you can present an example or analogy that shows the reader how the concept etc. is implemented, what effects it has, or what can be observed to support it.

Illustrations and examples helps, but they also create a potential trap for the writer. If the reader doesn't know you are providing an example, he or she may conclude that the idea only applies to the illustration.

Let's say you are writing about how increased rainfall can slow plant growth, and to illustrate this idea you state that a particular type of cactus stops growing during rainy seasons. Your reader may conclude that rainfall only affects that particular cactus.

The strategy for avoiding this trap is simple, though you have to think carefully about using it. You can clearly state that you are providing an example, using such words and phrases as *for example*, *one such case*, *consider*, and *an illustration of this is*. When reading these, the reader will know that the example you are about to provide is only an example, not the complete application of the concept.

On the other hand, repetitive use of these clues can lead to tedious reading and limit the impact you are trying to create. As such, you may choose not to use them. You have to make a judgment call here.

If you think there is a possibility that the reader will misunderstand, use them. If you are sure the reader will not reach a false conclusion, i.e., will know that the example is only an example, leave them out.

## **Day 297: Interject and isolate statements for impact.**

One way to emphasize a point is to interject it into a sentence and isolate it with punctuation. Consider this sentence.

“The modern poet, thriving on his own perceived cleverness, will break the conventions of language use.”

We could have used “thriving on his own perceived cleverness” to make a separate sentence. However, by interjecting it into this sentence, and then isolating it with commas, we force the reader to pay close attention to the idea it communicates.

First, the reader will pause before the phrase (due to the first comma). This alone creates emphasis. Then, when the reader realizes that we are stopping the main idea of the sentence to express some idea, the reader will pay close attention to what we are stating. After all, if we are willing to interrupt ourselves, we must think that the idea is very important. The reader, as a result, will pay close attention. This is impact.



## **Day 298: Use the pyramid structure to provide descriptions.**

The pyramid structure is familiar to journalists. It involves starting with broad information and proceeding to specific details. Good descriptions do the same. They start by providing a broad look at the thing described and proceed to detailed information. Here's an example.

The library was empty of books. Shelf after shelf was covered only in dust. The reading carrels were missing the familiar stacks of books. The check-out desk was unmanned, and the book return cart held nothing but air.

As in this example, we start with a general picture of the thing we're describing. This allows the reader to create a context for the details that will follow. We provide a framework that gives meaning to the details. As we move toward greater specificity, the reader can begin filling in details, and each new piece of information will make sense due to the broader description that precedes it.

The end result is that the entire description makes sense, each piece of information has value, and the reader understands and can picture what we are describing.

## Day 299: Avoid the “washboard” effect.

Imagine running your fingers down a washboard, the type with the ridged surface that people once used to wash clothes. Your fingers are going to go bump-bump-bump-bump-bump.

Now imagine you are reading a series of sentences that all start with the subject as the first word. Your brain will quickly realize the pattern of subject-content-subject-content-subject-content. And so on. Each subject makes a mental “bump.”

This is called the washboard effect because it provokes the mental equivalent of running your fingers down a washboard.

The effect on the reader is significant and negative. After a few such sentences, the reader will tire of reading and lose focus. Additionally, you will seem like a boring and amateurish writer. Consider this paragraph.

“The automobile industry suffers from heavy labor demands. Labor demands have grown over the years. They now include extended time off with pay and greatly increased pension plans. The cost of supporting these labor demands is high. Manufacturers have had to reduce their profit margins to meet them. Lower profit margins cause slower or no growth. Automotive laborers are the ones who will suffer most. Fewer jobs will be available for new hires. Some current laborers will be retired or laid off. Manufacturers will find robotic technologies to reduce the need for expensive workers.”

In each sentence, the first words are the subject. Although the sentences are clear and the paragraph is well organized, they quickly become tedious to read due to the washboard effect.

To solve this bump-bump-bump pattern, we can vary the sentence openings. For example, we can start some sentences with adverbial or prepositional phrases. Others we can start with single transitional words, such as *therefore* and *however*. We can even re-arrange some sentences to push the subject farther back.

Here are some sentences that have been revised to break up the washboard pattern.

“Over the years, these labor demands have grown.”

“In spite of their good intentions, these demands will hurt automotive laborers most.”

“To reduce the need for expensive laborers, manufacturers may find robotic technologies to replace them.”

Consider your own sentences and look at the patterns they create, if any. If you find yourself using the same pattern consistently, revise to provide more variety.

## Day 300: Keep questioning your writing.

*The important thing is not to stop questioning.*

(Albert Einstein)

Here we are, at the last tip for *300 Days of Better Writing*. We have learned a lot. We have looked at clarity, conciseness, and organization. We have examined issues, great and small, dealing with writing mechanics. We've considered our audience, our purposes, and our processes. But are we done learning?

No.

As writers, we are left with one central question that we must ask as we face every document we write:

What can I do to improve the way I am delivering my ideas?

Our writing will continue to improve as we continue to question our writing. The act of questioning, itself, leads to continued improvement. With the knowledge and skills we now have at our disposal, we have tools and strategies to answer this question. We may find new answers, as well—if we continue to ask this question.

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### **Logic/Making Sense**

Day 4: Avoid over-generalizing.

Day 7: Use *you* only when you are writing to or about the reader.

Day 57: Organize topics into logical idea chains.

Day 71: *Thus* statements should follow logically from the previous statements.

Day 81: Use concluding words to state your main point.

Day 117: Lead the reader to your conclusion.

Day 154: Beware non sequiturs.

Day 224: Our process for writing a summary of articles.

### **Mechanics**

Day 6: Place ending punctuation inside the quotation marks.

Day 34: Don't use apostrophes to make plurals.

Day 45: Use one apostrophe-S for each thing or group of things to show ownership.

Day 61: Use an apostrophe to replace missing letters in a contraction.

Day 65: Use a hyphen for compound, self-modifying, descriptive word pairs before a noun.

Day 91: Series in sentences do not require colons.

Day 99: Link paragraphs to the prior paragraph.

Day 104: Using the title case

Day 108: Use square brackets to insert comments into quotes.

Day 126: Use exclamation marks only to show your own excitement.

Day 129: Use the S-apostrophe to show possession for a plural noun.

Day 138: Use quotes around words to draw special attention or when using them in a new or ironic way.

Day 145: Comparative phrases beginning with “as” need to end with “as.”

Day 149: Keep main verbs in one tense.

Day 171: Capitalize *mom* and *dad*, and other relations, when used as names.  
Day 173: Age, color, material, shape, and nationality adjectives are never coordinate.  
Day 180: Use an exclamation mark only after the interjection, not after the statement.  
Day 213: Use semicolons to separate items in a series when those items have commas.  
Day 238: Put the period after embedded parenthetical comments.  
Day 267: Use semicolons to join two independent clauses.

### **Organization**

Day 19: Remove and move text as needed.  
Day 42: Identify your central idea.  
Day 49: Organize ideas into large topics.  
Day 52: Use thesis statements to introduce topics.  
Day 57: Organize topics into logical idea chains.  
Day 60: A paragraph should only discuss one idea.  
Day 76: The body of a paragraph connects to the main idea and supports the conclusion.  
Day 81: Use concluding words to state your main point.  
Day 95: Provide signposts to help readers organize information.  
Day 130: Organize ideas from broadest ideas to smallest details.  
Day 153: Place the thesis statement at the beginning or end of your introduction.  
Day 155: Pace ideas within paragraphs with context, content, and conclusion.  
Day 169: Paragraph length is determined by the complexity of the idea.  
Day 172: Use transition words infrequently.  
Day 194: Use framing to provide cohesion and impact in paragraphs or sections.  
Day 298: Use the pyramid structure to provide descriptions.

### **Paragraphs**

Day 60: A paragraph should only discuss one idea.  
Day 69: Start paragraphs by establishing context.  
Day 76: The body of a paragraph connects to the main idea and supports the conclusion.  
Day 83: End paragraphs with an impact or action statement.  
Day 90: Create transitions to the next paragraph.  
Day 98: Link paragraphs to the prior paragraph.  
Day 130: Organize ideas from broadest ideas to smallest details.  
Day 132: Typical paragraph length is 3 to 10 sentences.  
Day 137: Use topic chains to create cohesive paragraphs.  
Day 141: Use two overlapping topic chains to change the focus of a document.  
Day 155: Pace ideas within paragraphs with context, content, and conclusion.  
Day 169: Paragraph length is determined by the complexity of the idea.  
Day 194: Use framing to provide cohesion and impact in paragraphs or sections.

### **Paragraphs, 1-sentence**

Day 88: A one-sentence paragraph should present a complete idea.  
Day 147: How to use a one-sentence paragraph.  
Day 161: Use a 1-sentence paragraph to emphasize a critical idea.  
Day 198: Use one-sentence paragraphs sparingly.

### **Parallelism**

Day 82: Use parallel grammatical constructions when describing simultaneous actions.

Day 125: Items in a series need to be structurally parallel.  
Day 189: Two-part sentences need to be parallel.  
Day 201: Increase emphasis by repeating the beginnings of sentences.  
Day 246: Match gerunds with nouns, not with verbs.  
Day 247: Use parallel construction in lists.

### **Preaching**

Day 165: Avoid preaching to your readers.  
Day 178: Change preaching language to persuasive language.  
Day 237: Avoid judgment words.  
Day 241: Use judgment words carefully when appropriate.  
Day 258: Separate fact from opinion.

### **Prepositional Phrases**

Day 53: Find the object of the verb or preposition.  
Day 55: Break up strings of prepositional phrases.  
Day 115: Use adjectives instead of prepositional phrases for descriptions.  
Day 116: Remove prepositional phrases showing ownership.  
Day 123: Replace 3-word prepositional phrases with single words.  
Day 160: Use possessives instead of prepositional phrases.  
Day 193: Remove the preposition from phrases ending in gerunds.  
Day 208: Move prepositional phrases describing the main verb to an introductory position.  
Day 209: Revise sentences to remove descriptive prepositional phrases.  
Day 265: Place descriptive prepositional phrases carefully.

### **Pronouns**

Day 14: Antecedents and pronouns must agree in number.  
Day 23: Use *his* and *her* to avoid subject-pronoun number errors.  
Day 48: Make subjects plural to remove gender bias.  
Day 56: Use object pronouns as objects, not subject pronouns.  
Day 99: Use subject pronouns, not object pronouns, as subjects.  
Day 177: Use subject pronouns in comparisons with implied verbs.  
Day 215: People don't share body parts.  
Day 220: Use plural subjects to avoid gender bias.  
Day 294: Choose the correct pronoun in elliptical sentences.

### **Quotation Marks**

Day 6: Place ending punctuation inside the quotation marks.  
Day 107: Use single quotes inside double quotes.  
Day 108: Use square brackets to insert comments into quotes.  
Day 135: When writing about words, use italics or put the words in quotation marks.  
Day 175: Clarify when you are writing about words and phrases, not quoting.

### **Readers/Audience**

Day 26: Avoid foreign words and phrases.  
Day 35: Know your primary audience.  
Day 54: Write simply.  
Day 66: Identify your audience.  
Day 73: Understand your reader's interests, goals, and behavior.

Day 80: Write in the appropriate style and tone.  
Day 101: Edit from your readers' perspective.  
Day 112: Provide credible references for new or controversial information.  
Day 114: Know your secondary audience.  
Day 127: Use HUPAs sparingly.  
Day 140: Good writing is about attitude—and editing.  
Day 165: Avoid preaching to your readers.  
Day 170: When communication is difficult, write simply.  
Day 178: Change preaching language to persuasive language.  
Day 186: Write to sell love or money, not both.  
Day 200: Think more about your reader than about yourself.  
Day 218: Use reader-friendly terms to persuade your reader to act.  
Day 232: Use short sentences for complicated ideas.  
Day 248: Use jargon carefully.  
Day 253: Guidelines for e-mail etiquette, part 1  
Day 254: Guidelines for e-mail etiquette, part 2  
Day 268: Know when to use the fire hydrant and when to use the garden hose.  
Day 296: Make your examples obvious if needed.

### **References/Citations**

Day 74: Cite your sources to build credibility.  
Day 112: Provide credible references for new or controversial information.  
Day 128: Common knowledge does not need a reference.

### **Sentence Structure**

Day 5: Finish sentences with the most important information.  
Day 9: Use the rhetorical action as the main verb.  
Day 25: Create sentence transitions.  
Day 36: Avoid splitting infinitives.  
Day 43: Keep descriptive phrases close to the thing being described.  
Day 55: Break up strings of prepositional phrases.  
Day 79: Put clarifying information at the end of the sentence.  
Day 86: Place clarifying adverbial phrases before or after the subject – verb combination.  
Day 89: Place explanatory phrases in strings in an order that reduces commas.  
Day 97: Limit compound sentences to two independent clauses.  
Day 106: Combine two sentences by using an introductory phrase or clause.  
Day 111: Use the power of three for impact.  
Day 131: Use introductory phrases to keep most important information at the end of a sentence.  
Day 144: Move explanatory phrases to reduce comma use.  
Day 164: Place adverbs immediately before or after the word or phrase being modified.  
Day 176: Move adverbial phrases to vary sentence structure.  
Day 184: Place the most complex items at the end of a series.  
Day 202: Combine two sentences by using an introductory phrase or clause.  
Day 208: Move prepositional phrases describing the main verb to an introductory position.  
Day 209: Revise sentences to remove descriptive prepositional phrases.

Day 212: Create appositives from compound descriptive phrases to prevent misunderstanding.  
Day 232: Use short sentences for complicated ideas.  
Day 235: Place your most important words before or after a period.  
Day 265: Place descriptive prepositional phrases carefully.  
Day 270: Emphasize successively important ideas by repeating the beginning words of sentences or phrases.  
Day 275: Start sentences with old information and end with new information.  
Day 277: End impact statements with a thump.  
Day 279: Limit yourself to one introductory phrase or clause.  
Day 286: Use the passive tense to avoid long, complex subjects.  
Day 289: Use familiar words as subjects.  
Day 295: When possible, subordinate qualifications.  
Day 299: Avoid the “washboard” effect.

### **Sentence Structure, S-V-O**

Day 17: Use the Subject-Verb-Object sentence structure.  
Day 24: Place the main verb close to the subject.  
Day 30: Place the object as closely as possible to the main verb.  
Day 38: Keep S-V-O combinations separate.  
Day 44: Limit the number of S-V-O combinations in a sentence.

### **Series**

Day 18: Use a comma after every item in a series (except the last item).  
Day 31: Use commas in series to indicate groups.  
Day 78: Put complex items at the end of a series.  
Day 91: Series in sentences do not require colons.  
Day 122: Repeat *to* when using infinitives in a series.  
Day 125: Items in a series need to be structurally parallel.  
Day 184: Place the most complex items at the end of a series.  
Day 213: Use semicolons to separate items in a series when those items have commas.  
Day 216: Repeat *to* in complex series.  
Day 242: When to use a colon when creating a list or series.

### **Spin**

Day 92: Reduce ambiguous “counting” phrases to single words.  
Day 117: Lead the reader to your conclusion.  
Day 146: Put a positive spin on negative information by writing *not* + [positive term] + [excuse].  
Day 179: Reduce the impact of lower-than-expected results by using inflation words.  
Day 197: State information positively to put a good spin on it.  
Day 205: Use big, positive conceptual terms to spin controversial ideas.  
Day 218: Use reader-friendly terms to persuade your reader to act.  
Day 227: Focus on success to avoid describing failure.  
Day 234: Disparage critics as being opponents of progress and productivity.  
Day 236: Replace disparaging descriptors with positive actions.

### **Subjects**

Day 1: Use the rhetorical subject as the grammatical subject.

Day 29: Avoid starting sentences with *it*.  
Day 48: Make subjects plural to remove gender bias.  
Day 119: Remove unnecessary words by emphasizing the actor.  
Day 168: Avoid using *there* as a subject.  
Day 220: Use plural subjects to avoid gender bias.  
Day 257: Name the actor of the actions.  
Day 280: People make better actors than concepts do.  
Day 283: For the subject of your sentence, choose the actor you wish to emphasize.  
Day 284: Invent actors as needed to make active sentences.  
Day 286: Use the passive tense to avoid long, complex subjects.  
Day 288: Revise long noun strings serving as subjects.  
Day 289: Use familiar words as subjects.

### **Topic Chains**

Day 137: Use topic chains to create cohesive paragraphs.  
Day 141: Use two overlapping topic chains to change the focus of a document.

### **Transitions**

Day 25: Create sentence transitions.  
Day 47: Use connective words to connect similar ideas.  
Day 90: Create transitions to the next paragraph.  
Day 96: Use “additive” words to show how a new idea connects to the previous idea.  
Day 98: Link paragraphs to the prior paragraph.  
Day 141: Use two overlapping topic chains to change the focus of a document.  
Day 151: Organize sentences to create transitions.  
Day 163: Use transition words and phrases to switch topics.  
Day 172: Use transition words infrequently.  
Day 275: Start sentences with old information and end with new information.  
Day 289: Use familiar words as subjects.

### **Using the Correct Word (Usage)**

Day 7: Use *you* only when you are writing to or about the reader.  
Day 33: Use the simplest correct words.  
Day 40: Use *because* not *as* to show cause.  
Day 67: Keep adjectives as adjectives, not as nouns.  
Day 92: Reduce ambiguous “counting” phrases to single words.  
Day 94: *Effect* is a noun; *Affect* is a verb.  
Day 102: Think or feel or believe or realize.  
Day 121: Use *who* for people, *that* for things.  
Day 139: Use *from/to* to include terminal values in a range, *between/and* to exclude them.  
Day 142: *Everybody* vs. *Every body*  
Day 157: Use *although* for contrast and *while* for time.  
Day 181: *Between* for two; *Among* for three or more.  
Day 185: Use relative words to compare 2 things, and superlative words to compare 3 or more.  
Day 190: Use *that* to start restrictive phrases.  
Day 195: Use *which* to being non-restrictive phrases, not *that*.  
Day 196: Use *were* for unreal situations.

Day 199: *Hopefully* describes actions; *Hopeful* describes people.

Day 206: Use retronyms for clarity.

Day 222: 3 pairs of commonly confused words

Day 248: Use jargon carefully.

Day 252: 3 sets of commonly confused words.

Day 260: Use short, common words when possible

Day 290: *Anxious* and *eager* have different meanings.

### **Verb Usage**

Day 9: Use the rhetorical action as the main verb.

Day 10: Subjects and verbs must agree in person.

Day 13: Avoid nominalization: Keep verbs as verbs, not as nouns.

Day 28: Use the active voice.

Day 39: Use the present tense to describe general ideas.

Day 41: Quote books in the present tense and writers in the past tense.

Day 50: Replace weak verbs with action verbs.

Day 51: Replace ponderous verb phrases with action verbs.

Day 63: Reduce adverbs by using the right action verb.

Day 120: Use active verbs to reduce verb phrases.

Day 149: Keep main verbs in one tense.

Day 152: Maintain one voice in a sentence.

Day 162: Change [have] + [be] + [ing] expressions to the simple present or past tense.

Day 183: Revise *-ing* verbs to simple present or past tense verbs.

Day 189: Two-part sentences need to be parallel.

Day 193: Remove the preposition from phrases ending in gerunds.

Day 196: Use *were* for unreal situations.

Day 207: Replace [be] + [adjective] + [preposition] phrases with action verbs.

Day 221: Avoid flowery verbs.

Day 225: Choosing the correct verb tense for events in the past.

Day 226: Use *were* for the unreal situations and statements contrary to fact.

Day 229: Use action verbs as main verbs in your sentences.

Day 249: Use bargain verbs

Day 255: Save *would like* for actions with conditions.

Day 259: *Either* is single.

### **Writers' Quotes**

Day 3: Be concise.

Day 11: Write clearly.

Day 19: Remove and move text as needed.

Day 54: Write simply.

Day 62: Be brief.

Day 100: State new ideas using familiar language.

Day 101: Edit from your readers' perspective.

Day 110: Be prepared to work hard at your writing.

Day 140: Good writing is about attitude—and editing.

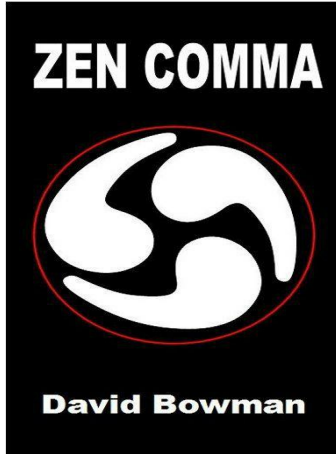
Day 158: Edit for, and with, your readers.



Day 170: When communication is difficult, write simply.  
Day 182: Write and rewrite until you communicate clearly.  
Day 191: Write about, not with, emotions.  
Day 200: Think more about your reader than about yourself.  
Day 214: Remove adjectives.  
Day 239: Clarity is more important than style.  
Day 273: A good style is transparent to the reader.  
Day 282: Write what you mean, simply and clearly.  
Day 291: Make your point obvious.  
Day 300: Keep questioning your writing.

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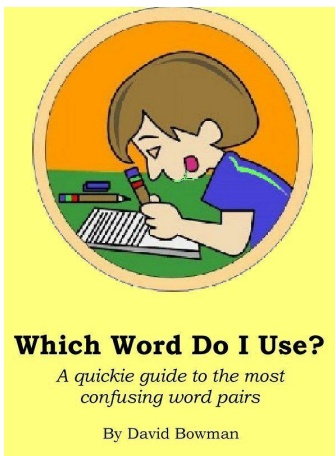


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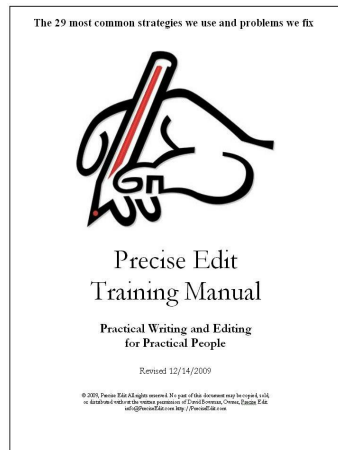
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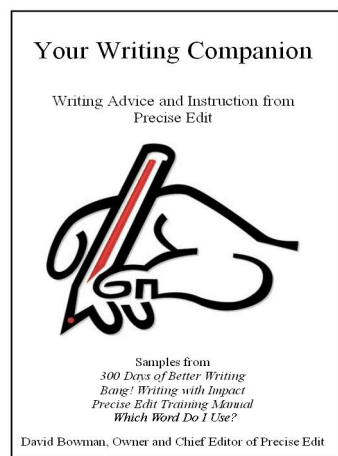
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