

Writing rules, there to be broken

Rules, principles and guidance in writing

I have been working with a few clients recently on their writing skills in English. I realise that writing this article is thus a hostage to fortune, but needs must as there is stuff to share.

It's been fascinating to see how clients react to some writing by someone else: reactions vary from strong applause to derision. And when the tables are turned on their own craft, they can see the flaws and their eyes open to the possibilities. Firstly, they can all write, so this is improvement to a higher level.

English as a written language is made all the harder by a lack of ownership and authority, it's a global language with many ways it can be written. Once the basics are in place we cannot say 'that's wrong', and we don't hold with many of the 'rules' of writing. But we can try alternatives and see then some are better than others.

Here are a few good principles though to follow:

First, we support the philosophy of 'write for the readers not the writer, so write to *express* not to *impress*'. That alone triggers vigorous debate, disagreement and it has many consequences. Writers like to show they know a lot, and to some extent that's important. But much more so is being understood.

So our **second** principle is to 'make it *easy* for the reader on *first pass* to understand and remember what you have written'.

Third, that the reader should *enjoy* what they have read (within reason). That one requires a creative brain that is willing to deploy some Rhetorical Tools. Remember that if it's not literal, it must be metaphorical, and that stories are still the brain's best friend.

Fourth, as Des also said in his article, '*to fail to prepare is to prepare to fail*'. So, before writing anything down, lay it out in draft and summary form to establish a structure and a path for the reader to

follow.

Fifth, if you are going to make a claim or argument, you must provide sufficient evidence in support. The best evidence is independent, quick and easy to verify

Sixth, the design of each page matters, including white space and visuals.

Seventh, it should contain no errors, such as typos, errant apostrophes, or incorrect punctuation. So please check, check and check again. Then get someone else to check it as they are sure to find more mistakes. MS Word will spot about half of all typing errors, so please don't rely solely on it.

Finally, that the writer does not detain the reader any longer than needed. This will be longer where there is a story to tell, but that's OK so long as the writing is *efficient*, and not *verbose*.

This gives us a few areas of guidance for you our readers, not really of our own invention, but collected up from the musings, 'laws' and 'rules' that others such as George Orwell have handed down.

1. If you can cut out a syllable, word, sentence or paragraph, cut it out. Nothing superfluous or inefficient.
2. Try to write in the Active and Personal rather than Passive or Impersonal; '*Your cat sat on my mat*' is much better than '*the mat was sat on by your cat*'.
3. Anglo-Saxon wording is usually better than Latinate, as the former has fewer syllables. Which do you prefer: "*I attempted to initiate the internal combustion engine on my motor vehicle*, or "*I tried to start my car*". I do hope it's the latter!
4. Adjectives. Ah yes, people do love to write a whole string of these in series. Did you know there is a rule for the sequence that actually holds? There is a correct order, which everyone seems to get right even though no-one recalls



Ewan Pearson

Advice *squeezed*
straight from the
experts



Writing rules, there to be broken (cont.)

having a lesson on it at school. This rule is called “The rule of ablaut reduplication”, and it says this: Multiple adjectives are always ranked accordingly: **opinion, size, age, shape, colour, origin, material, purpose**. You can write these (but you shouldn’t): “*My Greek Fat Big Wedding*”, or “*leather walking brown boots*”. See?

5. Spelling, punctuation and grammar. Tomatoes are not allowed to be Tomatoe’s. It’s not correct to write its wrong. What you written is poor English. Eats shoots and leaves is missing something. Ain’t it?

6. Sub-clauses can be used, but do so sparingly. Try this one: *“I am a massive movie fan, particularly of Marvel action movies such as Spider Man, so, naturally, I wish I could confidently claim that the quote, from one of those movies, that I shared with you, above, was both factual, and – hopefully – from actor Nicholas Cage.”*

7. Try to avoid other contortions such as **Jargon, Acronyms, Corporatese, Industrese, Slang**, and other complicated words and terms. There are many acronyms that have become words, but many others that we see where we say ‘what’s that?’ We use [The Economist Style Guide](#)² to help us navigate us over these hurdles. Their advice for acronyms is to use the full version with the acronym in brackets straight afterwards, so that readers can refer back to it if needed. For example: EBITDAC, an accounting term. Most people know this as EBITDA, but with a C? I’ll spoil your guessing game by telling you it stands for Covid (or did, from the CFO who used it). The sample below was in a company Annual Report. The renowned journalist, Lucy Kellway, included it an article she wrote about Jargon some 20 years ago³:

others) has not yet produced any improvement, but we live in hope.

8. Font sizes, colours and spacing. Most of these options are tools to allow the author to emphasise selected words or phrases. Just be sensible here by being consistent, because there is too much choice. Bold, Bold and italics, Blue, Red, Green? It’s best to have your own Corporate Style Guide to ensure consistency. We can send you a template if that would help.

9. Capitalisation. I have given this a guide of its own, as there are FAR TOO many Capitals being used, especially on Slide Decks And Consulting Reports. This is a bad habit which it seems originates from North America, and Especially Those Darned Investment Banks! Here’s a suggestion based on standard and well accepted international norms: Use capital letters for the first word of each new sentence, and for proper nouns only. That has always been the generally agreed principle. Then add a few extras for EMPHASIS IF YOU MUST, BUT TRY NOT TO SHOUT WHEN YOU WRITE!

10. Images, diagrams, charts, photos. These should be either (a) helpful in explaining the words to a reader, or (b) a good way to make the document more appealing, or (c) both, or don’t use them.

By Ewan Pearson

References:

1. This is a Quote from Benjamin Franklin. It’s a good key point about writing skills and it’s also an Antimetabole, these are two of the many Rhetorical Tools at your service.
2. The 12th edition of Economist Style Guide is available from The Economist as other sources such as Amazon.
3. FT article, 11th February 2002. Copy held by GPB on file.

“Our company combines strategy with technology and insight with action, working with clients to deliver results today that endure tomorrow.”

Any ideas on what that means, or who it might be? It would seem that Lucy’s efforts to reduce Jargon (and ours, and

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