

# Good Writing Gets **Read**

Writing for business and technical markets, in print / on the web.  
A resource for communicators

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I still often refer to [your] paper "Good Writing Gets Read". It's been an immensely helpful document over the years. I'm often complemented on the precision and clarity of my work-related writing and I owe a lot of that to what [you] shared with me. / *Paul Doran, HSBC*

WRITING FROM DALHOUSIE UNIVERSITY in 1944, Oswald Avery et al established that DNA transmits genetic information. Avery's paper paved the way for Watson's and Crick's Nobel-winning work, published in 1953. Avery established the function of DNA, but Watson and Crick took the prize for work published nine years later. Why? Avery's paper was poorly written. Point 13 explains.

# Good Writing Gets Read

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# Good Writing Gets Read

Writing for business and technical markets:  
a resource for communicators

## 1. GOOD PROSE IS LIKE A WINDOW PANE

George Orwell wrote, “Good prose is like a window pane.” He might have added that the best prose is like a clean window pane.

“People don’t read, these days.” As a communicator, you hear that often. You know it is not true. People *do* read what they want to read. They read text that benefits or profits them. However, it *is* true that people with good minds have better things to do than read bad writing. Reading for comprehension takes time, demands effort, uses energy. And the more complex a message, the more energy the act of reading consumes. Bad writing tires readers while blunting their desire and ability to comprehend, let alone react.

Too much written material fails to win our respect. When that happens the message suffers. In fact, poor writing may do more than cause readers to ignore our message. Poor writing may discredit it.

## 2. THE ACT OF READING IS A GIFT – FROM A READER TO A WRITER

A written text compels no one to read it – unless it is compelling. Text is a dead thing, a dull shadow on white paper until a reader takes it up, becomes engrossed and perhaps decides to act upon the meaning of the gathered words.

## 3. EFFORT *VERSUS* REWARD, AND OTHER MUSTS OF WRITING FOR MARKETS

A reader reads when the apparent *promise* of a message outweighs the *effort* of reading it. To boost the odds of getting our message read, we therefore have two options: we either raise the level of promise, or reduce the effort of reading. As marketers and communicators, we may not be able to deliver the first option, except in matters of presentation and style. But the second option – reducing the effort of reading – is ours, and ours alone.

Communicators understand business writing concepts such as: “What’s in it for me?” (WIIFM); features, advantages, benefits (FAB); and the integrated (and integrating) roles of text and graphics. This paper will touch on those writing-for-business subtleties later. They are not its primary thrust.

#### **4. OUR PRIMARY THRUST: LESS IS MORE**

The primary thrust of this paper is to help you, as a writer, create messages that *reward your readers for donating their time* to read your prose. That reward takes the form of not tiring them. I hope to describe how explaining your messages in fewer, shorter words will win you increased attention.

What follows are hints on how you can convey the maximum thrust of your message in the fewest words.

#### **5. LET'S HEAR IT FOR THE ACTIVE VOICE**

Jimmy hit Alice. Spot bit Tim. Jack and Jill ran up the hill to fetch a pail of water. Such sentences are the stuff of a child's first reader. Three or four words tell all. The message is complete, as self-contained and as self-referential as a bird's egg. That is because they use the active voice.

We learn to speak our mother tongue in the active voice. It is the language of our early years; of daycare and kindergarten; of love and discipline at home. An agent (subject) does something (verb) to another agent (object). Life and language for children are exactly as complex as that. Three or four words spell grief or joy.

Such messages inform readers and listeners fully. They also require the minimum spatial and temporal effort, meaning they need: less room on a page; less time to say; and less mental exertion by readers who have to unravel meanings.

So why do we confound ourselves and others by using the passive voice?

#### **6. TRANSFORMATIONS: FROM ACTIVE, TO PASSIVE, TO BLAH**

What happens is this. Twenty years at school and university combine to transform children into adults who have learned to use language to dull the edge of meaning, dilute responsibility, criticize politely, banish hints of liability and conceal ignorance. The means to these ends: the passive voice. Thus we graduate to: Alice was hit by Jimmy; Tim was bitten by Spot; and the pail of water was fetched from the top of the hill by Jack and Jill who ran up there to get it.

Apart from adding superfluous words, this tendency sets up cumulative distractions. When "Jimmy hit Alice" becomes "Alice was hit by Jimmy," adult readers attempt to search our writer's subterfuge to discern an unstated cause – "Why?" – before they move on.

A writer's learned tendency of resorting to the passive voice sets up conflict in readers. A writer using the passive voice collides with readers who learned language by hearing, speaking and reading the active voice. A lengthy passage

written in the passive voice requires readers to mentally reverse the sequence of each and every sentence to extract meaning.

At this point another conflict comes into play. The flow of the *message* – as distinct from the *sentences* forming it – may be well-reasoned. Its logic may run in a linear sequence from start to finish. In this respect the linear presentation of the message makes good sense; but it conflicts with the circular nature of sentences comprising the text. If we express this conundrum as a simile: the message itself is like a stream which would run smoothly to its destination were it not for eddies and snags obstructing its passage and building in chatter.

## 7. WAFFLE BY THE WORD

No one prices sculpture by the kilogram, artwork by the square centimetre, or a symphony by the minute. But it seems accepted to measure writing by the word. The net effect is to pay a premium for bad writing while reducing the amount of data conveyed in lucid prose, and tiring readers, too. Clients who insist on pricing writing by the word are cheating themselves.

Some years ago I raised this issue in a meeting with the communications group of a major corporation. My clients had always used this method to measure fee for product.

Challenged on this point, I wrote two sentences on the board, one above the other. The first one read: “Corporex makes machines.” The second sentence read: “Machines are made by Corporex.” The first sentence uses three words in the active voice to convey the full message. The second, in the passive voice, uses five words to dilute the message. Engineers in the group took the point immediately. If we define the active voice in the above example (three words) as 100% of the message, then the passive version (five words) demands 167% as much space to convey a diluted message – while requiring more mental effort on the part of the reader.

Let’s try a more complex example:

(1) “The image appears to conform to the logic that would be expected for an area where the forest canopy has been reduced. In earlier work, NDVI has been shown to be related to leaf area index (LAI) to the extent that LAI is related to the absorbed photosynthetically active radiation...”  
[50 words]

Giving this a helping hand, we get:

(2) The image appears to conform to the logic we would expect for an area of reduced forest cover. Earlier work showed that NDVI relates to leaf area index (LAI) to the same extent that LAI relates to the absorbed photo-synthetically active radiation... [42 words]

Comparing the passive (1) to the active (2), I submit that one's brain works harder to extract meaning from the first example – and takes 20% more time to do so. The difference is consistent whether we write three words, or a corporate message involving thousands. In the latter case, of course, the drain on energy and concomitant interest is cumulative: the climb is both steeper and longer.

## **8. BEWARE THE PASSIVE'S OTHER TRAPS**

In practical terms the passive voice sets up several negative consequences. If you, the client, commission 800 words, you may lose a third of your message if your writer relies heavily on the passive voice. On the other hand, your message may fit, but its force will be attenuated to the point where a reader either stops or reaches the end with relief. Also bear in mind that the shorter a message, the more space it leaves for eye-relieving white space, illustrations, sidebars, or all the above. (Point 17 discusses this.) Less really *is* more. A short piece of text invites the eye to sample it. A large block may repel it.

## **9. WORDS MAKE CONCEPTS REAL**

The cosmologies of hunter-gatherers hold that the words people use to express a concept bring that concept into being. A dull message must express a dull concept. Animists and shamans may be in short supply, but that general idea lives on. Here is Maurice Merleau-Ponty, the thoroughly modern French “philosopher of consciousness,” discussing precision in expression:

“Esthetic expression confers upon what it expresses existence in itself (*en soi*), implants it in nature as something perceived and accessible to everyone, or inversely snatches the signs...away from their empirical existence and carries them off into another world.”

Put simply, either a message says it, or it doesn't. The last thing you need, as a writer, is to have your message snatched from readers and carried into “another

world.” In your case, as in mine, the discipline of conveying “esthetic expression” effectively must take the form of a quiet, insistent whisper demanding that you strive for the active voice before committing words to final copy or a home page.

Retraining one’s brain is not easy. But, in order to write simply, people may have to unlearn cognitive patterns which two decades of formal education stamped into their heads. If a message is to be conveyed without tiring the reader it is essential to unlearn patterns of the past. (Read the previous sentence again! I let my guard down and the passive voice slipped in. I let it stand as an example.) I *should* have said: If we want to convey a message... *et cetera*.

## 10. THE MOST ECONOMIC EXPRESSION MAY BE THE MOST COMPELLING

My own career grew out of writing narration for television programs, with an emphasis on science and current affairs. I have had a mixed practice for many years, but writing for broadcast remains the most challenging, from a technical point of view.

Try this. Pretend you have 15 on-air seconds (45 words) in which to describe the history of Western civilization as an upcoming series will present it. Repeat this exercise several times a day for a few years and you become adept at writing concisely, drafting copy that viewers grasp on the first take. (A broadcast audience does not get a second take.) You will soon find yourself rejecting every syllable that fails to advance a story. Writing narrative, or voice-over, imposes rigorous discipline.

## 11. STYLE HINTS

Many stylistic ploys can help us express our messages succinctly. The following list is not exhaustive. However, it touches aspects of style which I have constantly worked to enhance, or eliminate, during more than twenty years of commercial writing. May these hints help you, too:

- *THERE IS/ARE*: Eliminate this clause. It sets up clutter as a sentence builds, e.g. “There are some business operations that require...” [7 words]. By eliminating *There are* you also lose the need for the relative pronoun *that* which the presence of *are* demands. Try, “Some business operations require...” [4 words]
- Continuing the thrust of the previous example, we use *ELEMENTS OF THE VERB “TO BE”* unconsciously, thus: “It’s a reasonable conjecture to put the start of the recession in the last quarter of 1999.” In this sentence, although “*is*” is virtually

invisible, it functions as the primary, structure-defining verb, reducing *put* to an infinitive.

Our sentence would be more stimulating had it read, “Reasonable conjecture puts the start of the recession in the last quarter of 1999.” Now the sentence builds around the *real* verb, the *active* verb (puts). Writing it that way also strengthens the force of the subject (conjecture). The sentence becomes more assertive, more decisive – much more CEO-type speech – while dropping redundant words.

- **BACK TO BACK VERBS** obscure meaning. In this sentence – “The policy this white paper describes requires additional funding” – *describes* precedes the active verb *requires*, obscuring its force. The sense becomes clear when we separate the components, thus: “The policy described in this white paper requires additional funding.” Better still, if we say “This white paper describes a policy requiring additional funding,” we link “policy” with “funding” directly, through the appropriate verb.

- **WHICH/THAT**: Eliminate relative pronouns. Try this example: “The organ which was built by Father Willis between 1876-7 was the gift of Miss Chafyn Grove and cost \$3,000.” We can express this more concisely as: “The organ, built by Father Willis between 1876-7, was the gift of Miss Chafyn Grove and cost \$3,000.” Stylistically, we can do much better. Try: “Miss Chafyn Grove donated the organ, valued at \$3,000, built by Father Willis between 1876-7.” We cut five words in total (25%) while putting the donor where she belongs, as the generous subject of the sentence.

- **BLEND DESCRIPTORS INTO CONCISE FORMS**. We tend to link descriptive phrases, thereby forming longer sentences. The following example comes from narrative written for television: “Fringed leopard-blennies are colored, adapting them to live among coral fingers.” These twelve words take six seconds to narrate, allowing for pauses. The sentence is not unreasonable – it is my first draft, based on a client’s notes – but it describes video that runs just five seconds. So let’s cut it. Try this: “Adaptive coloring lets fringed leopard-blennies live among coral fingers.” By losing one verb, *are*, we break the temptation to start a list of characteristics; and by losing a second verbal form, *adapting*, we avoid having to repeat the subject, *them*. We can narrate these nine words in four seconds.

Here is another example where the verb *to be* intrudes in the first draft, almost subconsciously, hijacking the sentence. Any verb, no matter how inconspicuous – i.e. *are* – compels us to build a supporting structure: like a knight on a chess

board, it commands a wide field. The rest of a sentence must compensate for the structure built around its verb. The *intended* verb in this sentence, *live*, is reduced to the infinitive.

The second draft gathers the descriptors into an adjectival phrase so that the intended verb “lets...live” animates the sentence.

- *NOUNS ENDING IN “-ION”* entered English from French almost a thousand years ago. As a class they describe concepts – (redemption, production, determination, isolation) – rather than things. (In French they are feminine, and never take adjectives.) Down-to-earth English still wraps these nouns in their ancient legal and theological French construction, i.e. “in the production of,” “for the redemption of.” Scientific and business literature abounds in sentences such as “salt is used in the production of soda water,” or “a moving mean is used in the determination of derivative values.” Such uses demand passive or reflexive forms with appropriate compensating constructions.

Try using a verb instead of an -ion noun, i.e. “a moving mean *determines* derivative values.” [6 words replace 11]. Believe me, if you are trying to describe derivatives to a lay audience you need all the help you can get!

- *STARTING A SENTENCE WITH A CONJUNCTION OR A PREPOSITION* leaves the meaning “on hold” until the thought is complete. Consider this example: “Although reviewing each division’s operations was the auditor’s practice for more than ten years when X was CEO, Y discontinued it.” The writer hopes to make us link two connected statements. However, doing so by linking the first word in a sentence to the final three does not build a cohesive whole. (You may have noticed that people who start with prepositions tend to write long sentences, increasing the challenge of comprehension.)

The problem with such constructions is that they smother the meat in the sandwich. We race through the central clause of the sentence while our brain “holds that thought,” looking for the logical sequitur to follow *Although*. A stronger construction might read: “Reviewing each division’s operations was the auditor’s practice for more than ten years when X was CEO. Y discontinued it.” Now the writer spells out the auditor’s policy – no ifs, ands, buts or althoughs – before assigning full responsibility to Y for the change.

- *CONFUSING SYNTAX*. Let’s sample this opening: “Writing about women in the latter half of the twentieth century...” Does the writer ask us to consider: *writing* that takes place in the latter half of the twentieth century; or, *women* who live in the latter half of the twentieth century?

We have all been faulted here. My advice is to develop the ability to proof your own text as if you never saw it before, and as if you know nothing about the subject. This can be difficult – doubly difficult when deadlines loom and the writer is closely involved with the message. But it must be done.

- *ECONOMIES OF STYLE*. Always review your writing to find more concise, lucid means of expression. Almost any sentence can be shortened. Try this example: “Using this technique allows a statistician to...” We can trim it: “Using this technique lets a statistician...”

Many verbs – i.e. allow, permit, enable, force – require a second shoe to drop in the form of a trailing infinitive. Others – i.e. let, make – do not.

## 12. SAY IT WITH VERSE

Some topics are tough to animate. They compel a writer to play mind-games to win and hold readers. One way to cut reader-resistance is to slip under the radar by writing some copy in meter, thus:

“On the finest of days you may spy a bright glimpse of a far-away sea,  
where the sunlight, cavorting on waves, looks to landsmen like great pools  
of fire.”<sup>1</sup>

It looks like prose, but something about the pacing led you on, literally. In fact, the passage is written in dactyls (*dum di di*). Read it again, stressing the underlined syllables:

“On the finest of days you may spy a bright glimpse of a far-away sea,  
where the sunlight, cavorting on waves, looks to landsmen like great pools  
of fire.”

Whether we know it or not, we sit up and take notice of meter, especially iambic (*di dum, di dum*). We listened to the iambic meter of our mother’s heartbeat for nine months in the womb. Its hypnotic effect explains why some city-states in ancient Greece restricted its use to priests. It is also the primary meter of Renaissance English drama. As far as I know, there is no law that bars it from corporate and technical writing. (Read the previous sentence again. Here’s the clue: the dactyls start with a hard stress on “far.”)

So, slip a line or two of meter in to punch up prose. Try this:

“Schultz has studied peptides that can bind to lipid bilayers. ‘If you simulate them at a higher temperature, you can get things to happen much faster,’ he adds.”

The hard monosyllable, Schultz – a pseudonym – forces the metrical choice of trochees (*dum di*). These then jump to prose, focusing attention on the actual quote. Vary your pace to hold your readers in your tent.

Use meter when all else fails to animate tough topics. But, be warned! Short metrical passages keep readers alert. Long passages make them drowsy. Who has not gone to sleep on a train lulled by the iambic rhythm of wheels on rails (*di dum, di dum*), only to wake with a start at a switch-point? Christopher Marlowe introduced iambic meter to English drama; but it took Shakespeare, a decade later, to realize that keeping people’s attention meant knowing when to break it and hit them with prose. The repeated contrast keeps readers alert. So, use meter with caution and hide it well.

### 13. ENGLISH IN SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY: SPECIAL CONCERNS

“I have had scientists say to me, and I’ve read it, that they don’t have to write in the style we call plain English. They are exempt. This is, of course, codswallop. One of the fundamental features of science is the furtherance of knowledge. Poor writing is an impediment to this.”<sup>2</sup>

A paper by Oswald Avery *et al* makes the point. Writing from Dalhousie University in 1944, Avery established that DNA transmits genetic information.<sup>3</sup> His paper paved the way for Watson’s and Crick’s Nobel-winning work, published in 1953. Avery *established* the function of DNA, but Watson and Crick took the prize for work published nine years later. What happened?

Avery’s paper was neither widely read nor appreciated. Randy Moore argues that Avery’s writing style was the major reason for his paper’s obscurity.<sup>4</sup> Compared to Watson’s and Crick’s paper, Avery’s is “hesitant, extremely dense, verbose, highly detailed, abstract, impersonal and dull.”

Using plain English to express new, leading-edge ideas *does* matter. It matters profoundly. The *Journal of Natural Resources and Life Sciences Education* hammers home this point:

“The author and his or her closest colleagues will be the only people who read a truly murky piece of writing... A truly outstanding piece of writing will be widely read, widely quoted and cited, and will bring great rewards to its writer. [*i.e. a higher proportion of successful grant applications,*

*investor interest, respect from colleagues, readers and responses – R.F.]*  
The secret of producing an outstanding piece of writing is to always keep the reader in mind. Authors who keep readers in mind convey their information more lucidly than authors who write only for themselves. The scientist who has the attitude, ‘Why should I worry about how this is presented? Everybody knows what I mean,’ is incorrect. Everybody does not know.”<sup>5</sup>

Albert Einstein said of explanations, “If you can’t explain it to an eight-year-old, you don’t understand it.” So why should anyone else attempt to do so? Einstein’s contention returns us to Merleau-Ponty, who wrote that “esthetic existence” is either perceived and accessible, or carried off to “another world.”

#### **14. OBJECTIVITY NEED NOT CREATE OBSCURITY**

Many academics and bureaucrats have spent worthy careers under the misapprehension that writing *objectively* equates to writing *opaquely*. They start by attempting to write dispassionately, leaving no personal fingerprint on the message. In so doing they strive, appropriately, for detachment, objectivity, anonymity. The result too often renders the message itself opaque, or skillfully concealed:

“Given the natural temporal and spatial variability that exists in the plume behavior, the computer simulations for all 40 years were compiled to examine the intensity, duration and frequency of different higher pollution events. Return periods were then calculated for such events over the entire model domain. This analysis reveals that close proximity to the plant does not necessarily increase the likelihood of impact.”

I would put money on the fact that someone once taught this very senior author to equate objectivity with anonymity. This master of the passive voice works hard to obscure subjects of sentences. Unfortunately, the net effect of trying to remove the presence of a human agent as an interested party obscures a paper’s subject, not its author. (Speaking of obscurity, I have changed just about every noun in the above example, preserving only the exact structure.)

A writer’s dedication to objectivity need not translate to obscuring the message. Try this:

Plume behavior varies naturally across time and space. Researchers compiled computer simulations for all 40 years to study the intensity, duration and frequency of higher pollution events. They then calculated how often such events recurred in that period. Analysis showed that proximity to the plant does not necessarily increase the chance of impact.

## **15. NEVER MIND WHAT YOU WANT TO WRITE. WHAT WILL READERS READ?**

Your readers want what they desire. What benefit does your message convey? You, the writer, may wish to deliver benefit at the end of a reasoned explanation. That is not what your readers want. “Nobody wants a quarter-inch drill. What they want is a quarter-inch hole.”<sup>6</sup> And they want it now.

That adage hasn’t changed in twenty-three hundred years. The Chinese classic *Tao Te Ching* expresses that notion another way: “Thirty spokes share a wheel’s hub, but the hole in the middle makes the wheel useful.” And again: “Shape clay into a cup. It is the nothing [the cavity] in the middle that makes it useful.” True enough. A cup may be elegantly crafted and embellished with all sorts of delicate patterns and glazes, but we throw it away when it breaks because it no longer serves as a cavity for holding liquid.

Writing that fails to serve as a vehicle conveying ideas goes the same way.

As a writer, you wish to impart all sorts of good news. Before you do, ask yourself: how does this *benefit* my readers? And how do I demonstrate benefit as quickly and as clearly as possible?

## **16. FEATURES, ADVANTAGES, BENEFITS (FAB)**

Let us say that you are writing a quarterly statement addressed to customers of a financial services company. Your client supplies you with the following information: the company is investing \$50 million dollars in new IT infrastructure. The new system will keep financial consultants up-to-the-moment on market changes. It lets them craft perfect Markowitz Efficient Frontiers (MEF) in real time against market trends, the better to chart the ratio of risk to return in owning a given stock or portfolio.

This is wonderful. But how does it touch the customer, your intended reader – especially one who never heard of MEFs? Your client has given you a lot of data about *features* of the company’s investment: financial consultants will be more precisely informed. The data also conveys something of the *advantages*: advisors will have an up-to-the-minute appraisal on ratios of risk to return.

But customers don't buy features; and they don't buy advantages. They buy *benefits*. Benefits that touch them personally. Having decided to buy on the basis of *benefits*, customers fall back on features and advantages to reinforce their purchase decision.

To demonstrate benefit, you, the writer, may have to pry additional information out of your client. This may not be easy. As a writer, you have found that your clients often do not pass on obvious information. Not because it is confidential; simply because it is so, well, *obvious*. To them, perhaps, but not to you, and certainly not to your target audience.

Having interrogated your client, you are able to demonstrate *benefit*. It turns out that the benefit to the company's clients – your readers – is that their company offers a smart card and a PIN number to let clients access the new, ultra-secure system so they can check their portfolio as a whole or in part against risk *versus* return management assessments, and against various market indices and the Dow. *After* this primary benefit sinks in, you, the writer, can add: And, by the way, the new \$50 million system delivers several features and advantages enabling this...

Instead of starting your paper with blurb about investing in infrastructure, start with a lead: "Chart your family's gains and risks against the market."

## 17. WHAT'S IN IT FOR ME? (WIIFM)

Prime Minister John Diefenbaker understood the WIIFM principle as well as any marketer. He used it often when he was in opposition. When Lester Pearson's government announced a program, Diefenbaker would rise to state: This means that every taxpayer in Canada will pay an extra \$X in tax.

Large numbers mean nothing to individuals. If numbers are to register in the mind, they have to come in a context that rewards – or threatens – readers individually. Whenever you can, personalize.

Some years ago the TVOntario current affairs program *Speaking Out* hosted a live discussion on the death penalty. Viewers supporting the death penalty voted by dialing one telephone number; those opposed dialed another. During an objective discussion the public voted roughly 60-40 in favor. Then, half-way through the program, a criminal lawyer offered a specific example. Suppose, he said, you are a woman whose husband beats you. One day you decide you have had enough. You bring a kitchen knife to the sitting-room, anticipating an attack. The husband comes home, begins to beat you, and you kill him. The very fact that you moved the knife to the sitting-room demonstrates premeditation, and you would hang.

Instantly the voting pattern turned around. From 60-40 in favor, the final vote was something like 60-40 against.

By all means establish the theory. But, in the most literal sense of this phrase, *drive home* examples and facts where they count.

## **18. TRUE INTEGRATION: WRITING EQUALS DESIGN EQUALS PRESENTATION**

We have passed through a transition period in which the widespread discovery of communication via the Internet eclipsed the importance of text as a means of expression – for some people. Home page design and graphics took the gold and silver medals. Text was left with a tarnished bronze. We see the results every day: too many Internet sites are wastelands of awful prose.

That attitude is under rapid revision. The Internet is gaining maturity. One manifestation of this is that home pages must work harder to earn their keep. The *novelty* of the medium is no longer the message. Real messages, and their creators, are learning to master the medium. That means rediscovering text.

Communicators in graphics and text realize that attracting target audiences – serious audiences – demands clear, succinct writing as well as outstanding design. Good graphic artists and competent writers accept that, in many cases, their contributions represent fused talents striving for a unified, coherent whole. We can expect closer links among layout, graphics and text in the next decade. That goes for printed pages as well as electronic messages, although the corporate drive to create and maintain online billboards is forcing the pace. This undisputed verdict emerged from a conference hosted by the American Institute of Graphic Artists, in New York (March, 2001). In fact, Will Burtin, a member of AIGA and a design pioneer in several fields, had already forecast this concept half a century earlier in his seminal essay, *Integration, the new discipline in design*. (I co-wrote the book *Design and Science* about Burtin's work. Lund Humphries Artbooks, London U.K., September 2007.)

The competition to attract, and hold, an online audience's attention stands at the heart of this race to fuse esthetic appeal and written messages. Graphics may bring people into the tent – but graphics alone won't hold them there.

The slick and the shallow will always be with us. But good design, interlaced with succinct, competently written text can cut through the noise to deliver, on target, on message, on budget, and on time.

## 19. WRITING FOR THE WEB

Remind yourself that your main task is putting your *reader* front and center in your mind (Points 2, 3 and 4). Does your writing promise reward, or hard work? That factor is even more important when you write for the web.

Writing a story, an article or a book for *print* is a linear process. Writing for the web is circular. A reader's eye enters where it falls and may depart from anywhere else.

Web-based writing is circular in three ways. In the first place a large majority of readers are scanning, not reading (79%, according to one study). So your reader's brain is not receiving a linear presentation. It is gathering a smattering of facts, not necessarily in sequence.

Second, you hope your reader's attention *is* circular in as much as it stays on *your* page and does not wander. To help with that, every point should offer an easy entry.

Third, try to accommodate a reader's tendency to read in a circular fashion. It helps if you can place that metaphorical circle *around* your site. Do that that by letting your links take readers to *your* destinations, rather than elsewhere. You need external links as well, but try to group these near the end of your pages.

Think of the following simile when you write copy for the web: Imagine a bank of flowers above which a bee darts hither and yon. The bee drops onto a flower, seemingly at random. Does it choose, or does intuition pull it down? Almost at once it is gone, darting to another flower, or another bank of flowers. That fairly describes the attention span of many visitors to the web.

That is why you must implement the early points in this paper, making every word count, scrapping the passive voice, replacing long words with short, trashing relative pronouns, eviscerating every shred of content that will make your visitor stray.

In addition to visitors who scan, or glance at, your pages, people read web copy twenty percent more slowly than they would if it were on paper.

If you followed earlier tips in this paper you have already worked hard to make your copy concise. Now, for the web, cut out half of whatever remains. Make each word count for two (See Point 11). Distil your wine to brandy. Remember, your visitor reads with finger on mouse, your content one click from oblivion.

Knowing that visitors will *scan* your pages, help them. Don't swim against the tide. If you are writing a white paper ending with a call to action, start with the benefits. Highlight your keywords and support each one within a richer than average kernel of information.

Above all, do not waste your word ration by trying to disguise keywords in copy to raise search engine ranking. It is blatantly obvious, it ruins your writing, it aggravates readers, and it doesn't work. Camouflaging keywords went out of style around 2004. I solved this issue on my own site by listing my keywords in plain site on some of my pages, including "Marketing Communications."<sup>7</sup>

## **20. PRESENTING MESSAGES DIFFERENTLY ON THE WEB**

The difference is so important that it bears repeating in a form closer to web style. Hence these short paragraphs.

Readers will come into your web page at any point, so make your copy concise, use headlines above short paragraphs, and never assume that a visitor has already read your previous page.

Compensate for your visitor's apparent lack of continuity by linking to background on your Home page or on other well-marked pages. (Giving them links will help contain your visitors within your own site.)

Cut your copy to a minimum. That is most easily done by keeping it simple.

Put your important message first. The Internet is not a place to wind one's way to reasoned conclusions. Present your reasoning, of course, but on subsidiary pages.

Drop adjectives, and avoid hyperbole (hype). The plainer your presentation the better. Visitors don't know you, and will withhold their trust until your plain speaking helps you win their favor.

## **21. YOUR VISITORS WILL SCAN. SO HELP THEM**

A web site and its pages represent an information funnel, with a wide mouth at the top. Begin each page with a summary of its contents. If that seems counter-

intuitive, maybe it is, but that's how the mind reads the web. We are all still adjusting to Wonderland.

Write plain English in short sentences, and compile your sentences in short paragraphs. Visitors who scan are likely to omit the second and subsequent sentences in a paragraph if the text seems to be continuing the idea presented in the first. "Been there, done that," the web visitor's mind's eye seems to say.

Bearing in mind that your visitors may be clicking into the middle of your topic, use frequent headlines and subheads to guide their way.

Highlighting words serves two purposes. It indicates important focal points to the fast-moving eye; and the same words are likely to be your HTML link points. Highlight single words not phrases. When you highlight phrases you reduce the impact of the key word, diluting its force.

Your short paragraphs might resemble the layout of this present text. You may be tempted to use bullet points when you "write short," but bullets slow and trap a reader's eye. Numbered lists have the same effect. Just be concise.

- *HEADERS AND PRESENTATION*: The leading header on a web page has extra importance. It should reflect the whole page. Subsidiary headers must be precise to the content of their section or paragraph. Avoid multiple levels of "header hierarchy." Two levels are enough.

Avoid numbering your lists unless your numbers convey priority ranking. If you have more than six items in your original list, see if you can divide your points to present them under subheads in more than one list.

- *GETTING YOUR WEB SITE FOUND*: This is a subject in itself. Tens of thousands of companies promise to deliver your site to the first page of a search engine. That is not the issue here.

But *this* point is worth repeating: Do not waste your word ration by trying to camouflage keywords in your copy in order to raise search engine ranking. It is blatantly obvious, it ruins your writing, it aggravates readers, and it doesn't work.

- *IN SUMMARY*: The Internet truly is a Wonderland. The potential rewards are enormous, but to grasp those rewards you have to adopt a new set of rules. Many

of those rules seem counterintuitive. But, look at it this way: This is not the first time that the rules have changed in the human adventure of reading and writing.

Before books contained pages they consisted of rolled parchments. The start of the book was the outermost roll. A reader had no option but to start at the beginning and work to the end. By the time the reader reached the end of a book the roll of parchment lay flat, unrolled. Medieval scribes often signaled the end of a manuscript by writing *Liber explicitus est*, meaning “The book is unrolled.” Our modern word *explicit* derives from this (*Ex plicit* = without folds.) The total available information is unrolled in plain sight.

Do you see where I’m going with this? Methods have changed but full disclosure is still what you need to convey in an absolute minimum of words. So cut your message to the bone and place your important, descriptive words in plain sight.

We have moved on. But it is still the writer’s job to present information on a web site, not in sequence perhaps, but in sequence of priority. Write as the reader will read. As a writer you become your own most critical editor, reading, scanning and prioritizing your own copy as you write.

The challenge is great. The reward is greater. Good luck.

## 22. DOES THIS DESCRIBE YOUR BUSINESS CHALLENGE

Does this paragraph describe *your* business challenge? You must impress diverse audiences, give clear, memorable accounts of corporate policies or technology-related offerings, and describe precisely the value those offerings deliver and the benefits your clients can expect.

And is *this* your desired outcome? Prospects “get” your message and treat it as an action item.

If those elements are near the focus of your business challenge, perhaps I can help. **MARKETING COMMUNICATIONS** on my **MENU** gives you information.

**SERVICES** I offer and the media I serve include: business writing, corporate communication, marketing communication, brochures, ghost writing for bylined articles, white papers, newsletters, feature stories, media releases, speechwriting, thought-leader pieces, web-based copy...

**SUBJECT EXPERTISE:** information technology, I.T. in health care, science, environmental science, biology and natural sciences, engineering, pharmacy, science and technology...

## END NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> From a short story, *Whose Pig?* © Robert Fripp.
- <sup>2</sup> An article by Matthew Stevens, *Plain English in science*, supplied the basis for this section. *The Exchange*, Vol. 7, #4, 2000. Quoted passages are by Stevens, unless otherwise noted.
- <sup>3</sup> Avery *et al*, the *Journal of Experimental Medicine*, 1944.
- <sup>4</sup> Randy Moore, in the *Journal of College Science Teaching*, November 1994: 114-121.
- <sup>5</sup> The *Journal of Natural Resources and Life Sciences Education* (1993, 22:2, 198-199).
- <sup>6</sup> Ann Wylie quotes Zig Ziglar, in "Think like a reader," *Communication World*, April-May 2001.
- <sup>7</sup> <http://robertfripp.ca/index.cfm?fuseaction=ArticleList&SectionID=121>

## POSTSCRIPT

Just for fun! Look what good company I keep in this list: Rosalind Franklin and Raymond Gosling of DNA fame above me, then Florence Nightingale; with Watson, Crick, Wilson and Wilkins below. (Source: 'Further Reading' from: 'A Centenary Celebration for Will Burtin: a Pioneer of Scientific Visualization' by Howard Wainer)

### Further Reading

- Franklin, R. and Gosling, R.G. (1953) "Molecular Configuration in Sodium Thymonucleate." *Nature*, 171:740-741.
- Nightingale, F. (1858) *Notes on Matters Affecting the Health, Efficiency and Hospital Administration of the British Army*. London.
- Remington, R.R. and Fripp, R.S.P. (2007) *Design and Science: The Life and Work of Will Burtin*. Lund Humphries: Hampshire, England.
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- Watson, J.D. and Crick, F.H.C. (1953) "Genetical Implications of the Structure of Deoxyribose Nucleic Acid." *Nature*, 171:964-967.
- Wilkins, M. H. F., Stokes, A. R. & Wilson, H. R. (1953). Molecular structure of Deoxyribose Nucleic Acid. *Nature*, 171, 738-740.