

Write to Express, Not to Impress

18 quick fixes to sharpen your writing



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“Thesaurus carpet-bombings and long-winded sentences are commonly mistaken for fine writing because they feel authoritative and intellectual.

But they’re just masks; effective writing is lean, clean, and easy to read.”

— Gregory Ciotti

Ciotti adds that **the root of the problem lies in our desire to impress.**

He’s probably right. I wasted the first two years of my blogging journey trying to impress my audience even though I wasn’t a native English speaker.

I learned most of my English in high school. And if you’ve ever taken a high school English class, you probably had to meet those word counts on papers. Add to that the pressure to satisfy your teacher’s demands by adding extra adjectives to “enrich your writing.”

Sophisticated writing is good writing, I learned from those academics.

Applying complex high school writing to Internet blogging didn’t work, though. I’m not sure how many posts I deleted during those two years, but I was never going to be a writer. Blaming my teachers

didn't help, nor did imposter syndrome or playing the victim of not being an English native.

On the positive side, such negative self-talk elicited a lot of questions. And by 2015, I had some answers. In *How I got 6.2 million pageviews*, I shared my biggest lesson from those failed blogging attempts:

“Keep your writing as simple as possible. Let the real writers blow our minds. Meanwhile, we'll try to get our message across as clearly as possible.”

Write to express, not to impress, I learned from the Internet.

You may not consider yourself a “writer,” but to strengthen your writing, you don't have to be. Good writing shouldn't be reserved for English majors or professional authors.

My writing is still nowhere near perfect, but over the years, I've been bookmarking a collection of practical tricks to sharpen it — hopefully, they will help you as much as they have helped me.

. . .

1 Turn prepositional phrases into adjectives: When a prepositional phrase (they often start with “in” or “of”) describes the noun before it, try turning it into a one-word adjective instead.

No: CEOs in the tech sector

Yes: Tech CEOs

. . .

2 Replace adverbs with strong verbs: Adverbs, which add detail to verbs, can often be replaced with a single, stronger verb. Since verbs are the “engine” of your writing, choose powerful and accurate ones instead of tacking “-ly” words on to dull verbs.

No: The child cried loudly.

Yes: The child screamed.

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3 Avoid the passive voice: While the passive voice adds words to sentences, it also distances readers from what's happening. Use the active voice whenever you can for crisper, more concise writing.

No: I was given a raise by my boss.

Yes: My boss gave me a raise.

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4 Delete “that” when you can: Unnecessary “thats” are like fat in a sentence. They just clutter your writing, and nine times out of ten, you can cut them. A useful resource is [here](#) if you want to learn more.

No: I hope that my colleagues enjoy my presentation.

Yes: I hope my colleagues enjoy my presentation.

. . .

5 Think twice about intensifiers: Using an intensifier like “very,” “really,” “truly,” or “extremely” is often a sign you just need to choose a better adjective.

No: It’s extremely cold outside.

Yes: It’s freezing outside.

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6 Eliminate conjunctions: If you’re using two adjectives to describe a noun, you can often cut out conjunctions and use a comma instead.

No: The long and crowded flight exhausted the flight attendants.

Yes: The long, crowded flight exhausted the flight attendants.

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7 Don't start sentences with "there": Starting a sentence with "there" isn't just wordy. It also buries the real meat of the sentence. Instead of beginning with "there," try flipping the sentence around and starting with a noun.

No: There is a common thought among the students that school days should be shorter.

Yes: The students think school days should be shorter.

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8 Swap nouns for verbs: Many times, writers unnecessarily water down sentences by using phrases that could be single words. Nouns in place of verbs are one example.

No: I made a decision to exercise daily.

Yes: I decided to exercise daily.

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9 Cut wordy phrases: Wordy phrases don't accomplish anything except bulking up your word count and distracting readers from the point. Exchange the multi-word phrases below with the following simpler, less clunky alternatives.

- In order to / to
- Due to the fact that / because
- On account of / because
- In the event that / if
- A large number of / many
- The vast majority of / most
- In spite of the fact that / although
- In most cases/ usually
- With regard to / regarding
- At the present / now
- During the course of / during
- After the fact/ afterward
- In terms of / in or for
- In the midst of / amidst
- So as to / to
- In advance of / before

- After the fact / after

No: In order to use their time effectively, the employees worked through lunch.

Yes: To use their time effectively, the employees worked through lunch.

. . .

10 **Avoid adjective strings:** If you have to use more than two adjectives to describe something, you should probably choose one stronger adjective instead. Not only will the description be more concise; it will probably be more accurate.

No: The customers are happy and excited about today's product launch.

Yes: The customers are thrilled about today's product launch.

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11 Don't use noun strings: More than three nouns in a row breeds confusion for readers — plus, a cluster of nouns technically makes the first two nouns into adjectives. Delete unessential words or introduce a preposition to clarify the meaning.

No: Company vacation rollover policy

Yes: Company policy on vacation rollover

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12 Use positive description, not negative: Instead of wasting words describing what something isn't, describe what it is instead. Your writing will seem both more confident and concise.

No: The living room lacks sunlight.

Yes: The living room is dark.

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13 **Replace “to be” verbs:** If you’re using a verb like “is” or “are,” experiment with putting stronger verbs in their place. “To be” verbs sound lifeless and flat, and they don’t show any action.

No: The parent and teenager are in a state of disagreement about the curfew.

Yes: The parent and teenager disagree on the curfew.

. . .

14 **Opt for common words:** If you’re not writing a scientific study or a legal document, you can probably simplify your language. Choose simple, easy-to-understand words whenever possible.

No: My core competency relates to getting buy-in from all stakeholders.

Yes: I like to ensure that everyone agrees.

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15 Avoid definitions: Do you have to define something you write? Chances are, you should just choose a less confusing word. The same principle applies on the sentence level. If you have to add an additional sentence to clarify an idea (typically, writers use “in other words”), cut the first sentence altogether.

No: My emotions got the best of me. In other words, I was angry.

Yes: I was angry.

. . .

16 Nix “currently”: “Am,” “are,” and “is” imply “right now,” so using “currently” can make a sentence redundant.

No: I’m currently in a great mood.

Yes: I’m in a great mood.

. . .

17 Skip relative pronouns: Relative pronouns like “that” or “who” modify nouns, which means you can typically swap them out for adjectives.

No: The family searched for houses that had four bedrooms.

Yes: The family searched for four-bedroom houses.

. . .

18 Reconsider “make”: Another common offender in wordiness: “make + adjective,” which writers often use in place of a verb that says the same thing more effectively. Verbs should always convey action.

No: Calcium makes the bones stronger.

Yes: Calcium strengthens the bones.

. . .

Ciotti is right. Thesaurus carpet-bombings and long-winded sentences are just masks; effective writing is lean, clean, and easy to read.

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