

PUBLIC SALE!

By virtue of a decree from the Orphans' Court of Baltimore

THE ART OF PLAIN WRITING

How to write damn, simple copy
that will get you more readers
and better conversion rates

About This Report

As advertised, this report is about the art of plain writing – or how to write to be read.

Poorly written copy does produce sales. Poorly written copy does not communicate. It confuses. And confused readers do not buy. In fact, once your reader becomes confused or distracted, chances are he or she will simply stop reading your copy – no matter how many features and benefits you've been able to pack into it.

This report is unlike any other report I have seen because it won't teach you how to write killer sales letters, lead capture pages, or emails. Rather, it is about writing in general – how to write to be read by your customers and prospects. It is about the art of plain writing or how to write text that is clear and easily understood. The simple fact is, the easier your copy is to read, the more it will get read. And the more it gets read, the more it will help you land sales.

Why this report

I have been a professional writer for more than 35 years. I began as an advertising agency copywriter, progressed to creative director and then VP of creative services. I have been a senior marketing manager for one of the nation's leading providers of technical information, and supervisor of technical publications for one of America's largest pay TV companies.

What I have learned over the years is the importance of writing *to be read*. And to do this successfully, it is first necessary to understand the reading grade level of your average reader. For example, I learned early on – and this may

surprise you – that electronic engineers read to about an 8th grade level. And subscribers to satellite television read to about a 6th grade level.

Also, I have been involved in Internet marketing for a number of years and this has taught me another valuable lesson – most of the copy I have read is complex, poorly written, and practically impossible to read. For that matter, much of it is unwieldy, poorly structured and full of grammatical errors. In fact, it can be said that the Internet has spawned more poor writing than the invention of the Gutenberg press.

The Art of Plain Writing

This report is loosely based on excerpts from one of the best books I read as a cub copywriter – *The Art of Plain Talk* by Rudolph Flesch. Despite its name, this book was really about plain writing or how to write clean, clear copy that can be read by nearly anyone, regardless of their level of education.

Learning how to write clear, simple copy is fairly easy. As you'll see, this 39 page report is divided into 11 short sections. Each of these sections focuses on a single component in plain writing. You will find tests at the end of some sections that will help you determine how clear and simple your writing is. I have also included a half dozen exercises – that if you are willing to take the time and effort – will help you put the principles taught in this report to use.

I hope you find this report of value. If you do, I would certainly appreciate your feedback. If you don't, let me know and I will refund your purchase price.

Douglas Hanna

dfhanna@gmail.com

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Why These Ads?

As you work your way through this report, you will find the copy sprinkled with ads – some that date back as far as the 1920s.

Why, you might ask, have I chosen to use ads to break up sections of this report?

It's for two reasons. First, ad copy is about as scientific as writing can get. You run an ad and you either sell goods or you don't. If the ad results in sales – or an increased number of sales – you know the ad is a winner. Conversely, if you run an ad and nothing happens, you know it's a loser and needs to be replaced by one that will work.

Secondly, print advertising forces copywriters to be “minimalists: – they have to learn how to craft a persuasive sales message into a very finite amount of space. Years ago, I was creative director of an advertising agency where our largest client was a camera manufacturer. Every other month, it was our job to create a 6-page spread for photo magazines. And boy! It was a problem. That was just

too much space to fill for writers and art directors who were used to working in one page and one-half page formats.

Today's gurus often write 10-, 12- and even 15-page long sales letters. I know they are incredibly successful and if they have determined that sales letters should be this long, who am I to argue? However, in the back of my mind lurks this small, still thought that they might write even better copy if that had to distill all that information into one or two pages.

For that matter, which sales letters or emails do you best remember? My guess is that they weren't 10 or 15 pages long. They were short, clear, powerful and interesting.



The Art of Plain Writing

The importance of plain writing is that it teaches something even more important - the art of plain thinking.

In other words, to write clear, readable copy you need to first learn to think clearly.

Consider the author of the ad shown above. Clear thinking got him to the simple question, "Do You Want a Wheel?"

Take a lesson from the Chinese

People use to make fun of how the Chinese spoke English.

"Man bite dog." or "Sun shines."

We thought of this form of English as childish or as pidgin English.

In point of fact, the Chinese are ahead of us in language because it is the world's oldest spoken language. As such, it has been simplified to the point where all complexities and abstractions have been eliminated.

Go back to “man bite dog.” One of our newspaper writers might have headlined the story, “Tramp's Dental Attack on Denver Terrier Reported.”

But if you reduce this sentence to its barest necessities, you end up with, “man bites dog.”

Not only that but in Chinese, you always have to have a subject and a predicate, otherwise the words make no sense. And, in Chinese, there is no passive voice. This means that, in Chinese, you have to say who clearly did what. You cannot construct sentences like *It is reported by reliable authorities that ...*

Instead, you must say, *I was told by reliable authorities that ...*

Because the Chinese cannot use words like *institutionalize* or *antiprogresivism*, they have formed the habit of expressing ideas by metaphors, similes and allegories – in short, using every known device for making a thing plain by comparing it with something else.

To give you an idea of what this means, Chinese is full of things like *He who raises himself on tiptoe cannot stand firm*, or *He who stretches his legs wide apart cannot walk* or *Do not wish to be rare like jade, or common like stone*.



Listen to how people talk

One of the best ways to learn how to write plain copy is to listen to how people talk as most folks speak in clear, simple statements.

I grew up just as the golder age of radio was dying. But I heard enough broadcasts – with stars like Bob Hope - to learn that people don't write the way they speak.

Here's one example of dialog that is clearly based on the way people talk:

"Oh, Heavens, no," cried Amanda. "Shirley Abbott just gave her whole life to that man. It was Jack this and Jack that every minute. I simply can't understand it. If there was one earthly reason – if they ever fought, or if Jack drank, or anything like that. But they got along so beautifully together – why, it just seems as if they must have been crazy to go and do a thing like this. Well, I can't begin to tell you how blue it's made me. It seems so awful!

"Yes, Mrs. Fellowes said, "it certainly is too bad."

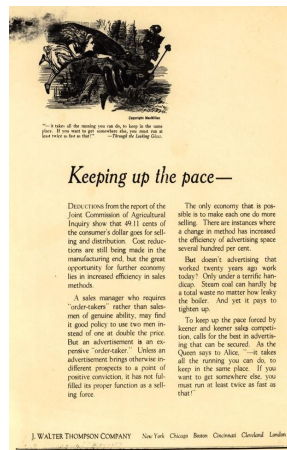
If you read this conversation carefully, you will notice how the two women made themselves understood. Some of the phrases, "it was Jack this and Jack that," have almost a Chinese simplicity while others are slow moving sentences but broken into pieces, "If there was one earthly reason – if they ever fought or if Jack drank, or anything like that. But they got along so beautifully together .."

Exercise #1: See if you can translate the following passage into conversational talk, as if it were spoken across the dinner table. Be sure to use all the ideas you find in this passage but provide space between them and do not add any ideas of your own.

Perhaps the toughest job of thinking we have to do in the matter of an Iraqi reconstruction is to realize that it can be achieved through nonpolitical instrumentalities. It will not be politics; it will be engineering.

It will be possible to operate Iraq's primary economic plan directly, not through political controls. It is possible to make bargains with Iraqi leaders, with tribes and professional societies, without sending a single letter through a Foreign Ministry or amend a memorandum to a Department of the Interior.

Why you will often have to deal directly with nonpolitical bodies should be fairly clear. Unless a totalitarian police power is to administer everything (and it is unthinkable that our army should provide and subsidize such forces) there can be no more chaotic parts of Iraq, no responsible and effective national political authority for a long time



It All Starts With Sentences

All writing – good or bad – begins with sentences.

Is the headline shown above, *Keeping the pace* a sentence?

Fowler's Dictionary of Modern English Usage defines a sentence as "A sentence means a set of words complete in itself, having either expressed or understood in

a subject and predicate, and conveying a statement or question or exclamation.”

Go back to “man bites dog” and you will see that this is a complete sentence, even though it is only three words long.

Writing clear, easy to understand copy begins with an understanding of what a complete sentence is and its length.

Test #1 Sentence length

Sentence length is determined by number of words. And while there is no hard and fast rule about sentence length, we do know what average Americans read with ease and what sentence length will find an audience with a given reading skill as shown by this table:

Average Sentence Length in Words

Very Easy	8 or fewer
Easy	11
Fairly easy	14
Standard	17
Fairly difficult	21
Difficult	25
Very difficult	29 or more

To write to be read by people who are just about average, measure your sentences against the 17 word standard. If you find your sentences are longer, look for places where you can break them into smaller pieces until they are of the right average length.

Plain and simple

Now you know how long your sentences should be, the next question is what should they contain.

Fowler says in his *Dictionary or Modern English Usage* that “Any one who wishes to become a good writer should endeavor, before he allows himself to be

tempted by the more showy qualities, to be direct, simple, brief and vigorous, and lucid."

A less complicated way to say this would be:

- Choose the familiar word over the far-fetched
- Choose the concrete word over the abstract
- Choose the single word over the circumlocution
- Choose the short word over the long
- Choose the Saxon word over the Romance

What would be a good example of this?

With a tip of the hat to Michael Campbell, here's an excerpt from one of his recent emails to me.

Here's a new tip for you. You can start using it right away. Got comments or questions? Click reply to this email and I'll do what I can to help you out.

Fast RiskFree Traffic and Commissions

Thousands of people like you have discovered (name of product). It's the fastest way to generate affiliate revenue.

All it takes is basic hosting, a Wordpress blog and 30 minutes per day of your time. So why not turn on the TV a half hour later, and do something useful instead?

Be warned though, it's not only lucrative, it's highly addictive, easy and fun. Get (name of product). The fast, fun and easy way to get riskfree traffic and start earning affiliate revenues.

Notice a couple of things about Michael's writing.

First, word count. His longest sentence is 17 words and many are 8 words or fewer. Notice, also, he writes in complete sentences, "All it takes is basic hosting,

a Wordpress blog and 30 minutes per day of your time” ... “The fast, fun and easy way to get riskfree traffic and start earning affiliate revenues.”

Also, notice how his words are short, direct, concrete, simple and familiar. Yet, he makes a strong case for the product he's selling.

Exercise#2: In comparison with the clear, simple Michael Campbell copy, here is a passage from Marcel Proust. See if you can break it into easy 11-word sentences.

But now, like a confirmed invalid, whom, all of a sudden, a change of air and surroundings, or a new course of treatment, or as sometimes happens an organic change in himself, spontaneous and are accountable, seems to have so far recovered from his malady that he begins to envisage the possibility hitherto beyond all hope, starting to lead – and better late than never – a wholly different life, Swan found in himself, in the memory of the phrase that he had heard, in certain other sonatas that he had made people play over to him, to see whether he might not, perhaps, discover his phrase among them, the presence of one of those invisible realities in which he had ceased to believe.

Important Tip: Don't be blocky

A mistake I see many writers make is to create copy with paragraph after paragraph of text that has about the same number of lines. To the eye, these tend to look like block after block of blackness or grayness – not at all appealing. Here's an example of what I mean.

I have a PLR eBook listed on the Internet - and it's one of my own books that I had people asking me if I was going to sell the PLR rights to it. Okay, I will. And I'll give you a discounted price, as well!

It's my (name of product), minus my own special introduction about what I call my own story. But I've sprinkled some sort of personalized story in there. So, when you review it, make sure you use your stories and not mine - OR, as long as you don't change the story in any way, you can put it as a quote coming from Bob Tucker – that's fine, too.

The 9,121-word eBook helps separate truth from myth from truth regarding how it really is to work from home. The book can be used to promote a whole bunch of marketing or multi-level-marketing products. The eBook has a title page

and then goes right into the content, which includes these sections (each with images already embedded into it):

If you just glance at this copy, it doesn't look very inviting, does it? Now imagine a 15 page sales letter with blocks of copy like those shown here. Can you understand why people tend to skim copy like this rather than actually reading it?

So be sure your paragraphs are of different lengths. I like to break up 3- or 4-line (or longer) paragraphs with a one sentence 'paragraph'. After you finish writing your copy, step back, squint your eyes and try to see your paragraphs as text blocks. If you see too many that look to have the same number of lines, fix it. In other words, keep those paragraph ragged and not uniform.

Important Tip: Use subheads and bullets

In addition to breaking up your copy with short, one-sentence paragraphs, you should be using subheads and bullets to help pull the reader through your writing.

Here is an example of how subheads can help guide the reader.

When it comes to selecting a dog, this can be a tough decision as there are pros and cons to both male and female dogs.

For example, some dog owners believe that male dogs can be more aggressive and even more destructive if left alone in a small space.

Other dog owners feel that female dogs are easier to train and can be more affectionate.

These are sort of stereotypes and maybe true or not, depending on the breed of dog.

Spay or breed?

The downside of choosing a female dog is that you must either have it spayed or put up with the dog being in heat. If you fail to get the dog neutered, it can mean an ongoing need to find homes for litters of puppies.

Did you know that female dogs do not go through menopause? This means they can have puppies clear through their entire lives. You end up having to spend weeks every year, trying to guard that female dog from males who can catch her scent from blocks away.

On the up side, if you have a purebred dog that you want to breed, this can mean

many extra dollars through the life of the dog.

Male dogs want to mark their territory

Take it from me that male dogs have to mark their territory. It may do this in your house or around the yard. And once the dog urinates on a spot, it will come back time and time again.

AffixesYou may be able to train your male dog to not mark its territory but it's tough because you're going against the dog's natural instincts.

Also, if you have another male dog in the house, expect some battles over whose in charge, especially if both are alpha males. Even a smaller alpha male will fight a larger male - just to prove who's in charge.

As a general rule, dogs of opposite genders get along better than dogs of the same gender. And while female dogs are not usually as vicious with one another as male dogs, some females just don't want to share their space.

Which is easier to train?

Many trainers say that female dogs are easier to house train than male dogs although, again, this can vary from breed to breed.

On the other hand, male dogs tend to be livelier and more active, though in some breeds, both males and females tend to be high maintenance - think Jack Russell Terriers.

Keep in mind that female dogs tend to be more temperamental than males. For this reason, breeders tend to favor male dogs as an easier pet to manage. However, gender isn't the only predictor (or even a perfect predictor) of how a dog will behave.

Match your personality

The important thing is to find a breed that is known to be calm and tolerant, whether male or female - think Golden Retrievers.

In short, before selecting either a male or female dog, do your homework. Read about the various breeds and try to select one that matches your personality and lifestyle.

This is an article I wrote to drive traffic to one of my websites. Notice how many of my paragraphs are very short. Note, also how the subheads break up this 560-word article into short, easy chunks. Since most readers scan more than they read, this use of subheads also lets them skip to that part of the article that most interests them – without losing their attention entirely.

Bullets are also a powerful way to break up copy and keep your reader reading. Here is an excerpt from another article I wrote last year.

- Anxiety attacks are no fun

If you suffer from anxiety attacks, I don't have to tell you how badly they can affect your life. While most of your attacks probably last 15 minutes or less, those 15 minutes can be pure hell. You may experience sweating, hot and cold flashes, stomach problems, dizziness, shortness of breath and even chest pain. Worse of all, you may feel that your mind has suddenly gone blank and you stand there just paralyzed.

- See your health care provider

Naturally, if you are suffering from severe attacks, you should see a physician who will most likely advise a combination of therapy and prescription drugs.

- Make a list

However, if your attacks are mild or moderate, one way to anxiety attack coping suggested by many experts is to make lists.

- Accept what's happening

- Use coping statements

In line with this, you can use statements for anxiety attack coping - where you talk to yourself and repeat statements such as

- - No one has ever died from an anxiety attack
- - I will let my body do its thing. This will pass
- - I can be anxious and still deal with this situation
- - This does not feel great, but I can deal with it

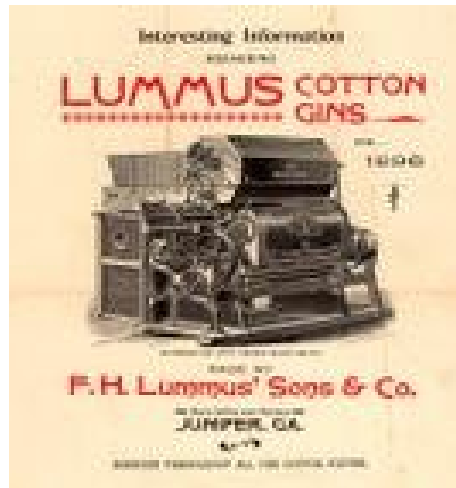
- Take care of yourself

A balanced and healthy life style can play a big role in anxiety attack coping. For example, one thing you can do is adopt healthy eating habits. Begin your day right with a good breakfast and continue with small meals frequently though the day.

- Limit your intake of sugar and caffeine

Another good thing you can do in anxiety attack controlling is to stop drinking or cut back on caffeinated beverages, including tea, coffee and soda. Caffeine can definitely cause anxiety, interfere with your sleep and even cause a panic attack.

You can see how this breaks up the copy and gives it a light, airy look that is more inviting than paragraph after paragraph of blocky text.



What 's An Affix And Why Should You Care

Test #2: Affixes

Every time you add an affix (prefix or suffix) to a word, you make it tougher for your reader. For that matter, writing that is difficult, complex, and abstract is usually all cluttered up with affixes like “dis.” This is because every affix burdens the reader's mind with two jobs. First, he or she must split up the word into its parts and, second, he or she has to rebuild the sentence from these parts.

Common prefixes include ad, after, auto, ad, be, contra, de, dis, e, en, em, in, inter, mega, post, pre, pro and re.

Suffixes you will see most often are nt, ble, ent, er, ess, est, ful, ing, less, ling, ness, ology, or an es.

Take 100 words of you copy and count the number of prefixes and suffixes in your copy with the exception of -s at the end of a word, -en in children, oxen, etc., and -d or -t in could, did, had, might, ought, should, went, would, etc.

Watch for those words that have two affixes such as dis-ap-prove or three like

dis-ap-proving-ing.

Now, measure the results against this scale.

Number of Affixes Per 100 Words

Very easy	22 or fewer
Easy	26
Fairly easy	31
Standard	37
Fairly difficult	42
Difficult	46
Very difficult	51 or more

Exercise#3 : Translate the following passage into fairly easy English – 30 affixes per 100 words

All government arises because men move in opposed ways to their objectives; no one but an anarchist would deny that its existence is, under any circumstances we can foresee, a necessary condition of peaceful social relations. But the argument that, especially in the economic sphere, we are over-governed, is not one with which it is easy to have patience. Less government only means more liberty in a society about the foundations of which men are agreed and in which adequate economic security is general; in a society where there is grave diversions of view about those foundations.



Get Personal

Test #3: Personal pronouns

Sometimes, we can actually learn lessons from copywriters that worked in the '20s and '30s.

For example, the headline on this ad uses the personal pronoun “his.”

Good writers use a lot of personal pronouns in their writing because, again, this makes the copy easier to read.

Here's an excerpt from one of Ernest Hemingway's most famous short stories, *The Short Happy Life of Francis Macomber*:

It was now lunch time and **they** were all sitting under the double green fly of the dining tent pretending that nothing had happened.

“Will **you** have lime juice or lemon squash?” **Macomber** asked.

“**I'll** have a gimlet,” **Robert Wilson** told **him**.

“**I'll** have a gimlet too. **I** need something,” **Macomber's wife** said.

“ **I** suppose it's the thing to do,” **Macomber** agreed. Tell **him** to make three gimlets.”

The **mess boy** had started them already, lifting the bottles out of the canvas cooling bags that sweated wet in the wind that blew through the trees that shaded the tents.

The bold face words are personal pronouns. And look how many Hemingway used -- 11 of them in 74 words of text.

As you can see, Hemingway was the master of plain writing as well as a great story teller.

So, here's test #3. Go back to your 100 words of copy, count the number of personal pronouns and compare the results to this table. And remember, this is based on actual research and not just my own opinion.

Number of Personal Pronouns Per 100 Words

Very easy	19 or more
Easy	14
Fairly easy	10
Standard	6
Fairly difficult	4
Difficult	3
Very difficult	2 or fewer

Important tip: Tell a story

We all love stories. I think that for most of us, it started with the stories we were told (or read to) as children. Or maybe it goes way, way back to when our ancient ancestors sat around in caves and told stories about their day's adventures.

No matter which, one of the best ways to communicate in plain talk is by telling stories. Naturally, not everything you will write about will lend itself to story telling. But this can be very effective, especially in emails. Here's an example.

Do you have trouble getting your dog to heel?

Let me tell you a story about one of our dogs.

We were walking both our dogs a few days ago. The largest is a Wheaton Terrier we rescued from the city pound. I think it cost just \$75 to get her hair trimmed and to get her out of the pound -- and we've probably spent \$700 since then trying to get her socialized.

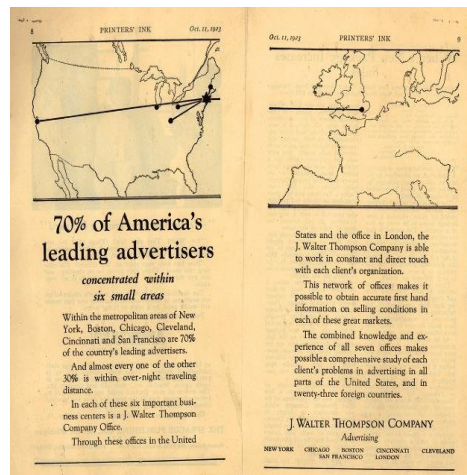
So here we were walking down the street, both dogs behaving beautifully when out of nowhere came a big, black Lab – no leash or anything.

Now, don't you want to read on – to see what happened with our dog and the black Lab? Of course you do. This is how story telling can help drag your reader through to the very end of your copy.

Also, notice how short my paragraphs are. Don't they look inviting and easy to read? Lastly, notice the use of personal pronouns – 20 or more. All this works together to help make sure the copy gets read.

Exercise #4: See if you can rewrite this copy about impregnated wood to the human interest standard of about eight personal references per 100 words.

The product developed from research begun by the U. S. Forest products laboratory. The impregnating material, called methylolurea is made principally from two cheap, plentiful chemicals – urea and formaldehyde – which are synthesized from coal, air and water. In the impregnating process, wood is pressed and soaked in a methylolurea solution, which is converted by the woods' acids into hard insoluble resins. The wood becomes brittle, but this disadvantage can be partly offset by impregnating only the outer part of the wood, leaving a resilient core.



A Simple Yardstick

Test #4: Your Overall score

Now that you have graded your writing on the three tests of plain writing, here's how to give yourself an overall score.

For a quick rule of thumb yardstick without having to do much figuring, just take your average number of affixes per 100 words, subtract the average number of personal references in those 100 words and divide by two. Then, add the average number of words per sentence.

You can check your results against this table.

Very easy	Up to 13
Easy	13 to 20
Fairly easy	20 to 29
Standard	29 to 36
Fairly difficult	29-36
Difficult	43 to 52
Very difficult	52 or more

By now, you should know all of the recipe for plain writing -- talk about people in short sentences and use many root words.

Another trick in plain writing is to use what are known as "live" verbs.

For example, we can say ship a book or book a ship; spot the cover or cover the spot. In these examples there is no question that each of these sentences contains a verb and no question which is the verb.

What we're talking about here are only those words that are used first in a sentence. Grammarians call them "finite active verb forms." They are the only form of verbs that really have life in them.

The verbs you want to use in your copy are those that are in the active business of doing the work. On the other hand, if you use a verb in the passive voice or make it into a participle or noun, you have lost the most valuable part of the process. In fact, it's kind of like cooking vegetables and throwing away the water with all the vitamins in it.

Go through a newspaper or magazine and look for active verbs in the sentences. Chances are that you will see that a lack of well used verbs is the main trouble with modern English writing. In fact, almost all nonfiction today is written in a kind of pale, colorless mix of passives and infinitives, and is as flat as paper. Here's an example

"In over-simplified technical terms we come up with inflation is caused by the existence, at any given time in an economic system, of an aggregate of defective purchasing power greater than the aggregate of the goods and services for sale."

Well, what a definition! Inflation is caused by the existence of an aggregate that is greater than another aggregate. This shows how impossible it is to describe a process -- something happening -- without using a single active verb.

Apparently the writer realized this himself or herself because here is the next sentence:

"We add up all the amounts of cash and credit of all kinds at the disposal of everybody who is ready to buy something, and find that the sum is larger than the sum of all things to be brought an existing prices, then the prices are likely to go up."

Now, all verbs are in their proper places and everything becomes crystal clear.

First, we add something, then we find something that is larger than something else, and then prices will go up.

Found!

10,000,000 new buyers
for an old product

"National Headquarters W.J.R.C.,
Gentlemen:
"I have a young son nine years old, who has
purchased one of your .22 caliber repeating
rifles and is anxious to start a Winchester
Junior Rifle Corps Unit. Will you please
send me details as to how to form this Unit,
and your rules and regulations.
"Yours very truly,
"J. D. NICKLES".

For two years the national advertising cam-
paigns of the Winchester Junior Rifle Corps
have been bringing in letters like this from
every state in the Union.
Penrod is coming into his own. Boys in the
city and in the country are getting a chance
to become expert riflemen.

The Winchester Junior Rifle Corps is receiv-
ing young America's historic skill in mark-
smanship.
6000 medals have already been awarded.
Units of the corps have been organized
throughout the United States and in foreign
countries.
In two years, advertising has created a new
force for developing better sportsmen and bet-
ter citizens. At the same time a new market
10,000,000 strong has been opened up for
Winchester Rifles.
The Boy Campaigns of the Winchester Re-
peating Arms Company are a sales and adver-
tising success in which we are proud to have
co-operated.

J. WALTER THOMPSON COMPANY
New York
Chicago - Boston - Detroit - Cincinnati

5/16/19

Do You Know What People Like to Read?

Test #5: Personal References

Do you know what people like to read about more than anything else?

They like to read about other people.

In fact, there is no doubt about one thing and that is human interest makes for easier reading. In fact there are scientific tests showing that people are better at reading about other people than about anything else.

If you look closely at the ad above, you will see that the copywriter knew his stuff. He builds his pitch around buyers and incorporates an illustration of people.

Why is human interest so fascinating?

It's probably because our thinking and our language started out as simple talk

about what the people around us were doing, and primitive man had no doubt that there was a person behind every event and behind every tree and mountain.

Our modern language has gone away from this towards abstraction. However, it is still naturally easier to read and understand *Bob drinks vodka* than *vodka contains alcohol*.

What this means is that after you have shortened your sentences and thrown out those bothersome affixes, you have to do one more thing to make yourself well understood -- you need to keep talking about people.

This is not easy because many of the things we have to write about just don't have any human interest. For example, you cannot write about today's stimulus package by telling stories about two Irishmen. The human touch in plain writing is not a question of language. It is a question of subject matter

Here is an example of a biographical profile, skillfully created out of little anecdotes:

All his life Jack Rhodes, 59, had never felt any need to see the non-Australian world. Years ago, Robert Wilson Hall, an Australian now living in London, visited Jack in Perth. "I'm on my way to England," Hall said. "Australia is in the backwash. It's back of beyond or even the fringe of things that matter. I want to be where history is written.

Jack reached for his well-worn hat, suggested a "walk about." They walked all afternoon, coming to the Esplanade beside the leisurely, looping Swan River at sunset. Said a thoughtful Jack, "Robert, you should have said where past history is written. This is where history is going to be written. Why don't you stay and help write it? Australia's big, Robert, not England. There's room to be big here, to grow, to live."

As you can see, the writer of this biographical profile knew how to use human interest to make his copy plain and easy to understand.

So how can you take a piece of impersonal writing and make it humanly interesting?

Go through your text sentence by sentence and look for the logical -- not the grammatical -- subject. You'll discover that the logical subject is almost always a

person and that every sentence can be written so that a person is mentioned.

Take this example ...

"DuPont this week announced a new product as highly potential as its nylon. It is wood impregnated with chemicals which transform it into a hard, polished material.

"The treatment makes pine as hard as oak, oak as hard as ebony. Wood so treated does not warp, split, swell or shrink appreciably. It resists fire, writing and termites, can be made as strong as many metals.

Now, look at these sentences. "DuPont this week announced a new product as highly potential as its nylon."

DuPont? The corporation? Certainly not -- the announcing was done by Mr. so-and-so, DuPont's public-relations man. So how about "the DuPont people announced?" Next, "it is impregnated with chemicals which transform it into a hard, polished material." What impregnated the wood? The DuPont people. Therefore, "they had impregnated the wood with chemicals."

"Wood so treated does not warp , split, swell or shrink appreciably." If you want to find a logical subject in this sentence, you have to ask, how do you know? By testing. Every such statement can be reduced to a test somebody made at some time. So let's rewrite: "their tests show that wood so treated does not warp," et cetera.

By now you probably get the idea. It's possible to add some human interest to even the most impersonal subject.

To check your copy, count all names of people. If the name consists of several words, count them as one – "assistant vice president Jonathan Lubick."

Now, count all personal pronouns except those that refer to things and not to people. Then count the human interest words on this list:

Man, woman, boy, child, girl, gentlemen, baby, lady, Mr., Mrs., guy, kid.

Father, daughter, son, mother, sister, brother, husband, wife, uncle, aunt, cousin, niece, nephew, parent, family, dad, mom.

people, folks, fellow, friend.

Count also combinations of these words with grand, great grand, - step -- and - in-law, and familiar forms of these words like grandpa.

Next, count the number of these names and add all the human interest words per 100 words of your copy. You can check the degree of human interest in your copy against this table:

Number of personal references per 100 words

Very easy	19 or more
Easy	14
Fairly easy	10
Standard	6
Fairly difficult	4
Difficult	3
Very difficult	2 or fewer

Exercise #5: revise this information on upgrade it to the human-interest standard of about eight personal references per 100 words.

Impregnated wood is so cheap and versatile that DuPont claims it will compete with the much more expensive plastics and light metals. Moreover, the process will make usable vast resources of little-used soft woods – maples, poplars, gums, etc. The impregnation process simplifies the making of the veneers and plywoods, because pressed and impregnated layers of would need no glue.

Important Tip: Stay focused

Another important ingredient in plain writing is to understand what your main point is and do not deviate from it. And it is acceptable to be redundant.

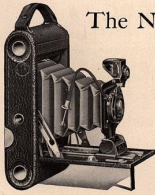
A good way to begin anything – a sales letter, email, report, or web page is to make an outline. It doesn't have to be terribly complex. In fact, in most cases it won't be longer than six or seven lines. But outlining a subject forces you to think clearly and logically and to stay focused.

Here's an example of an outline for an article on dog health.

1. Introduction – define the problem that every year thousands of dogs die needlessly.
2. Offer solution to car accidents and dog fights
3. Offer solution to dog disobedience
4. Offer solution to accidental poisoning
5. Offer solution to lost dog
6. Wrap up summary paragraph and lead to web site

An outline like this not only helps you organize your thoughts in a clear, cohesive way, it can keep you focused – in this case on solutions to common dog health problems. Without this outline, a person could begin writing about dog health issues and end up writing about lost dogs.

If it isn't an Eastman, it isn't a Kodak.



**The No. 1 Autographic
KODAK, Junior**

Now fitted with the new Kodak Anastigmat Lens, *f*. 7.7 and the Kodak Ball Bearing Shutter.

Price, \$15.00

Here are efficiency and economy.

THE LENS. The Kodak Anastigmat *f*. 7.7 lenses are slightly faster than the best Rapid Rectilinear. But their marked superiority lies in the perfect definition (sharpness) which they give up to the very corners of the picture. They are not as fast as the most expensive anastigmats, but they are fast enough for the usual hand camera work and no lens gives sharper results. Made exclusively for use on hand cameras, they meet the hand camera requirements.

THE SHUTTER. The No. 1 Kodak Ball Bearing Shutter furnished with the anastigmat equipped No. 1 Autographic Kodak, Junior, has variable speeds of $1/41$, $1/50$ and $1/100$ of a second, and the usual time and "bulb" settings. It is accurate, reliable and remarkably free from jerk or jar.

AUTOGRAPHIC. It is "autographic" of course. All the folding Kodaks now are. You can date and tell the negative easily and permanently at the time you make the exposure.

A BIT OF DETAIL. The No. 1 Autographic Kodak, Jr. makes pictures $2\frac{1}{4} \times 3\frac{1}{4}$ inches. It measures $7\frac{1}{2} \times 5\frac{1}{8} \times 5\frac{1}{8}$ inches. Has brilliant, reversible, collapsible finder, tripod sockets for both vertical and horizontal exposures; covered with fine seal grain leather and is well made in every detail. Simple to use, efficient in its work and economical to operate.

THE PRICE.

No. 1 Autographic Kodak, Junior, with No. 1 Kodak Ball Bearing shutter and Kodak Anastigmat lens, <i>f</i> . 7.7	\$15.00
Do. with No. 2 Kodak Ball Bearing shutter and Rapid Rectilinear lens	10.00
Do. with nonpareil anastigmatic lens	8.00
Autographic Film Cartridge, 6 exposures, $2\frac{1}{4} \times 3\frac{1}{4}$	20

All Kodak dealers.

EASTMAN KODAK CO., ROCHESTER, N. Y., The Kodak City.

Don't Crowd Those Words

Check out the over-line on this ad -- "If it isn't an Eastman, it isn't a Kodak."

The writer of this line could have written, "If it isn't a genuine Eastman

camera, it isn't a reliable, dependable Kodak camera."

You see, another barrier to plain writing is the temptation to crowd too many words into a sentence. For example, adjectives can be helpful as in the following phrase: "a math teacher."

In this case, the adjective math helps to define what kind of a teacher the person is.

However, when you change the sentence to read "a ravishing math teacher," you have stuffed the sentence with two kinds of adjectives -- commenting and defining. A defining adjective such as math belongs with the noun. On the other hand, the commenting adjective, ravishing, is hostile to and basically kills the noun teacher.

Here is an example of where a writer managed to stuff too many words into what could have been a simple statement.

"Jackson, bespectacled, was born 38 years ago in Fayetteville, Arkansas."

Sorting this out, the sentence could have been "Jackson was born 38 years ago in Fayetteville, Arkansas. He wears glasses."

So, if you want to give descriptive detail in plain writing, describe what you see, even use adjectives if you must. But don't stuff descriptions down your readers throat, whether he or she wants them or not.

Here is a sentence I read recently in a magazine devoted to computers. "

"User account control requires you to confirm certain actions, such as modifying systems settings or managing user account privileges, reducing the chance that a Trojan horse program will modify your PC settings on the side."

Whew!

This sentence is so stuffed with words that by the time you reach the problem, Trojan Horse programs, you may well have forgotten that you started with user account control.

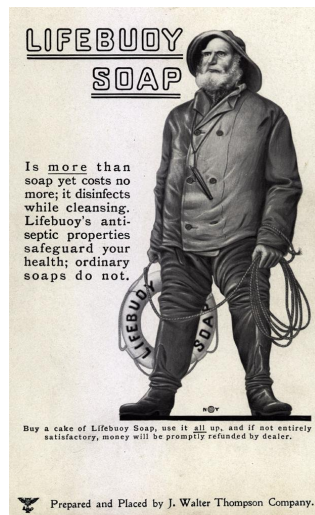
Another danger in the use of commenting adjectives is that some words are overly potent. We tend to read a few words at a time, so that those words that are especially effective or colorful tend to blot out the others. The result is that our reader gets a wrong impression or, at least, reads an emphasis into your copy that isn't there.

For example, "the generously endowed, carefully coiffed headmistress had reported that there were still a few vacancies available to under-privileged children."

In this example, "generously endowed" is overly potent and may overpower the real story which is that there are some vacancies available to under-privileged children.

Exercise #6: Rewrite this passage and eliminate all commenting words.

The two sisters, island aristocrats, whose lifelong fate was sealed when they saw one morning in St. Pierre a handsome boy of 13 whose father, an untidy but a heart-of-gold physician, had just returned as a widower to his native town. Marguerite, the younger of the sisters, a happy, blue-eyed, blond girl, wins his love; Marianne dark, passionate, self-willed, determinedly molds his life until he leaves the island, a lieutenant in the Marine Corps, bound for Afghanistan. The young ladies sit behind and wait for more than two months to hear from him.



Punctuation Is Your Friend

Can you spot the important use of punctuation in the first sentence of this ad?

It is the use of a semi-colon to stitch two different thoughts together into a coherent sentence – the soap costs no more and disinfects while cleaning.

For many of you, punctuation probably seems to be a set of arbitrary and and silly rules that are found only in old-fashioned style books.

Few people realize that punctuation is one of the most important single devices for making copy clearer and easier to read.

When we talk, we don't use punctuation marks. What we use instead is a system of shorter or longer pauses between words to join or separate our ideas. Or we use words such as *like*, *but*, *and* and *you know* to separate our ideas. We can also raise or lower our voices to help make things sound either emphatic or casual. To put this another way, we try to make ourselves understood not only by words but also by pauses, and by stress or pitch.

While we cannot add pitch to our plain writing, we can use punctuation for pauses and stress. It's fairly simple to get the hang of this, too:

Between words**Between sentences**

Normal pause	White space	Period
Shorter pause	Hyphen	Semicolon or colon)
Longer pause	Dash	Paragraph
Normal stress		Normal type
Unstressed		Parentheses (or two dashes)
Stressed	I	Italics or underlining

To explain this a bit, as long we use normal pauses and normal stress in talking, we don't use anything but periods and commas in our writing.

When you run two or more words together with practically no pause between them, hyphenate them. When you want a longer pause -- watch out for the next word! -- make a dash. Same with sentences: If you run two or more sentences together, use a semicolon or, if the first sentence introduces the second, a colon. When you need a longer pause, make a paragraph. And don't forget to use parentheses or italics for emphasis or casual mention.

For plain writing, punctuation marks are especially important as are hyphens and semicolons. Why is this? The more you rely on word order, the more important it is for you to show which words belong closely together. You do this by using hyphens.

The semi-colon also has its special uses since it can weld several facts into a single event. For example ...

"I saw him in Chicago the first day I spent in Illinois; saw him 100 miles up the road talking to friends; the next day; and the day after that his car suddenly pulled up 100 yards from my car approximately 30 miles to the east."

So, punctuation marks are handy gadgets in plain writing.

Our New Economy Set.



10 Pieces OF OUR IMPROVED PATENT
FIRE BOTTOM TINWARE,
WARRANTED NOT TO LEAK.

TO RETAIL AT THE ASTONISHING LOW PRICE OF \$1.00.

A complete Kitchen Outfit, combining the most useful and every day Articles. Warranted not to leak and made from Special Tin Plate imported for our use.

HAS NO EQUAL FOR THE MONEY.

Will please your Customers, and if sold in the regular way you will realize
\$1.50 A SET OR \$18.00 A CASE.

Order one Case and convince yourself of the great Bargains.

READ WHAT THE CASE CONTAINS:

12 Sets of 10 pieces to the Set of Fire-proof Bottom Ware.
One Set contains the following articles, which can be sold for \$1.00 per Set.

- 1 12-quart Patent Bottom Dish Pan,
- 1 10-quart Patent Bottom Open or Flaring Water or Milk Bucket.
- 1 2-quart Patent Fire-proof Whistle Coffee Pot,
- 1 1-quart Patent Graduating Measure, new style,
- 1 Metal Handle Picnic Mug,
- 1 Stamped 11 1/2 inch Wash Bowl,
- 1 2-quart Milk Pan,
- 1 Kitchen Grater, Large,
- 1 Britannia shaped Kettimed Wood Handled Dipper,
- 1 2-quart Improved Covered Bucket.

10 PIECES EACH SET. Price, Dozen Sets, \$9.00.

The above has no equal, and if compared with the cheap sets sold, will at once notice the improvements we have made.

One of the novelties of the Case is the Coffee Pot, when ready for table use
is to the Case; 1 in each Set of 10 pieces.

H. S. BREWINGTON & CO.
Cor. Sharp and West Streets, Baltimore, Md.

Shun Empty Words

The headline, "Our New Economy Set" is a great example of simplicity in writing. And the following sentence, "10 Pieces of our improved patent fine bottom tinware" is pretty good, too.

You see, the final thing to look for in judging the plainest of your writing is the use of empty words -- or words I call "grammatical gadgets."

The examples of these gadgets are what are known as compound prepositions and conjunctions.

In his dictionary of modern English usage, Fowler says: "they are almost the worst element in modern English, stuffing up the newspaper columns with a compost of nouny abstractions. To young writer, the discovery of these forms of speech, which are used very little in talk and very much in print, brings an expansive sense of increased power.

Important tip: Write as if you were talking to a foreigner

One simple way to determine if your writing is clear and plain is to read it out loud and pretend that English is your second language.

For example, try to think of yourself as talking to a German who has been speaking English for only three or four years.

Would you say, *Assuming that the first quarter results are what we had expected, we can then move on to stabilize all foreign shipping?*

Or would you say, *We are assuming good first quarter results. If this is true, we will be able to stabilize all shipping to other countries?*

Practice this kind of plain speaking for a few weeks and I'm sure your writing will become clearer and simpler.

Exercise #7: Rewrite these tax instructions using as few and as simple empty words as possible.

Section 730 (a) provides that in the case of any taxpayer computing income from installment sales under the method provided by section 44 (a), if such taxpayer establishes, in accordance with regulations prescribed by the commissioner with the approval of the Secretary, that the average volume of credit extended to purchasers on the installment plan in May for taxable years preceding the first taxable year beginning after December 31, with more than 125% of the volume of such credit extended to such purchases in the taxable year, or the average outstanding installment accounts receivable at the end of the four taxable years preceding the first taxable year beginning after December 31, with more than 125% of the amount of such accounts receivable at the end of the taxable year.

Here is a little list of these grammatical gadgets to avoid in plain writing:

Along the lines of	Instead of	Like
for the reason that	"	About
For the purpose of	"	For
For the reason that	"	Since
From the point of view of	"	For
In so much as	"	Since
In favor of	"	For
In order to	"	To
In accordance with	"	By
In the case of	"	If
In the event that	"	If
In the nature of	"	Like
In terms of	"	In
On the basis of	"	By
With a view to	"	To
With reference to	"	About
With regard to	"	About
With the result that	"	So that

Here is a set of connectives – one that is used in every day speech; the other almost exclusively in print.

Plain Talk

And
Besides, also
No, next
Then
But
However
In other words
For example
In fact
Of course
So
And so
Therefore

Bookish

Likewise
In addition
Moreover
Furthermore
Nevertheless
Rather
That is to say
More specifically
Indeed
To be sure
For this reason
Accordingly, consequently
Hence, thus

It is clear that this does not represent a complete analysis of empty words, but

it should give you a good idea of those words to avoid when you are plain writing.

Important Tip: Stay Connected

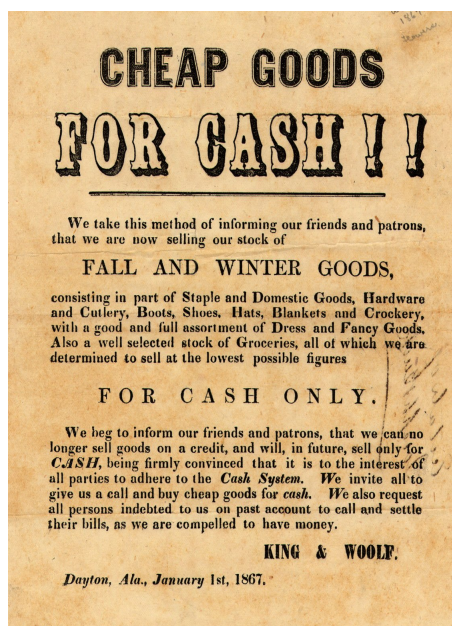
The right use of connectives is important because you can use them to drag your reader through your copy to the end. Here's an example:

If you have brown spots -- or liver spots -- it is most likely because of the time you've spent in the sun. These ugly brown spots are actually the result of your skin trying to defend itself against over-exposure to the sun.

So, if you spend a long time in the sun -- with your skin unprotected -- pigments in your skin "pool" to various spots to protect your skin which leaves an uneven brown patch.

Of course, liver spots are also called age spots Lentigos and Senile Lentigines.

In fact, liver spots are dark pigment clusters that most often happen after the age of 40. They tend to occur on the backs of hands, on your forearms, face, forehead and shoulders.



How People Read

When I showed you the yardstick formula, you may have wondered how this was worked out. Briefly, it is a way of grading material for schoolchildren. So if

you test a piece of your writing and come out with a score of us, say, 3-4 (standard) you can translate this into school grades and say, for example, this is easy for children in the eighth or ninth grade to understand.

Here is the whole table

Very easy	(0-1)	Will be understood in 5 th grade
Easy	(1-2)	Will be understood in 6 th grade
Fairly easy	(2-3)	Will be understood in 7 th grade
Standard	(3-4)	Will be understood in 8 th and 9 th grade
Fairly difficult	(4-5)	Will be understood in 10 th to 12 th grade
Difficult	(5-6)	Will be understood in college
Very difficult	(6 and up)	Will be understood by college graduates

Naturally, what this leads to is the necessity of understanding your audience's level of education in order to know how to write to it.

If you look closely at this table you will see that every literate person can read very easy English and almost everyone can read easy and fairly easy English. And at least $\frac{3}{4}$ of the American people -- those with an average education -- can understand standard English. However, a much smaller percentage of the population can read difficult or very difficult English.

However, given my experience, you cannot use this table to make hard and fast judgments. For example, electronic engineers are college graduates but, based on my experience, read to only about an eighth grade level.



How The Great Copywriters Do It

And if you think all this information about plain writing is a bunch of academic bunk, I invite you to review and analyze the writings of some of today's great Internet marketers, such as Michael Campbell, Brian McElroy, Willie Smith and Travis Sego (Bum Marketing).

Here are a few samples of their copy:

Brian McElroy:

I'm going to offer some no-cost copywriting training this week.

I got such overwhelmingly positive feedback the last time I released copywriting info, I'm going to develop a full-blown product... and give it away to you first.

Here's my list of things that I think will help you improve your own copy right away:

Travis Sego

ROBBED at gunpoint!

Is the subject line for the email copy I have attached to this note for you.

Wrote the copy myself:-)

You are welcome to use it to promote The Magic Of Making Up System.

The copy is designed to be sent out to a list.

But...

If you don't have a list, you can still use the article with a few minor changes.

Okay?

Rich Shefren

Intriguing subject line, isn't it?

But it really gets you thinking: What could you do with an extra \$3000 every month, or \$36,000 a year?

Maybe you'd buy that sweet new sports car you've had your eye on for a while.

Or finally move out of that rental and into a house of your own.

Or maybe you would take that trip to Europe..plan that family vacation you've always dreamed of...or even sock it away in your children's college fund.

Ewen Chia

I strongly suggest you get this now:

=> <http://www.ClickToThis.com/button>

Imagine simply pushing one button to automate your entire Internet business?

You can make even more money While having more time and fun!

Grab this now as you'll love it...

By the way, the special deal on the above link is ending very soon..

Just let me tell you that it's very affordable for what it does :-)

Kevin Wilkie

We are only a couple days away, at 8:00pm Eastern, Wednesday, January 28th, you're going to finally discover the best niche market to build your online business.

Imagine the feeling you're going to have once you lay eyes on that niche that is absolutely perfect for you. And you can go, guns blazin', with your online business.

In this 60 minutes webcast you'll learn:

Willie Crawford

We did this last month and it was overwhelming!

I didn't believe it at first, until my good friend Dr. Mike let me in on a very cool software application that... gets this... finds prospects and leads who are ALREADY LOOKING for your product and service.

You'll have to see it for yourself on Wednesday night's webinar..

There is some incredible technology behind this software, and I'm not kidding when I say this could change the way that you do business on the internet.

Now, did all these masters of copywriting suddenly and unanimously say to themselves, "Man, we've got to do plain writing?"? Probably not.

My guess is that they spent a considerable amount of time writing and rewriting and revising their copy until they could pare it down to its simplest, clearest, easiest to read elements. As you can see, their sentences are short; they use numerous personal pronouns; there are practically no affixes, and no empty words,

I haven't applied the mathematical yardstick I showed you on page 35 to any of this copy but am convinced that all of it would score either Very easy or Easy.

Where To Go From Here

I hope you have worked through some of the exercises and, at the very least, tested your copy against such criteria as sentence length, use of personal pronouns and number of affixes per 100 words.

If you have done this, you should have a good idea as to how readable your copy is – and if it isn't very readable, how to turn it into text that is clear, simple and plain.

Plain writing is not difficult. It just requires some clear thinking and a certain amount of discipline. I really do believe that it's the fastest way to higher conversion rates and, thus, more sales.

And who doesn't want more sales?