

# A Few Potentially Helpful Guidelines for Impactful Writing

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## **General**

Remember: **You are writing FOR THE READER.** Your objective is to convince. Put yourself in the reader's position as you review your draft. Is there a clear story line that can engage? Or not? Confusing presentations may leave the reader lost. If so, then no matter how brilliant your thinking, your presentation may fall on deaf ears. Confusing presentations will not convince.

**Link each paragraph to the one before and the one after.** This is necessary for telling an engaging story, whether it's a novel or a scientific piece.

**Write only when fresh.** A clear story cannot easily emerge when your brain operates at anything less than full bore.

**Keep everything as short as possible.** Extraneous information may confuse the reader, who may then encounter difficulty following the main thread. This principle applies to sentences, to paragraphs, to sections, and to documents. Short and sweet!

Nevertheless, do **mention the most critical points more than once.** Repetition is critical for learning. I'm not suggesting that you use the same words each time, or that you repeat in successive sentences. Sprinkle the repeats naturally through the text; and use different verbiage each time. Some suggest three repeats, each one presented in a different way.

**Avoid ambiguity.** Can a word, or sentence, or paragraph be interpreted in multiple ways? Ambiguity will deaden your presentation, which may result in losing your reader.

**Avoid abbreviations as much as possible.** Even when you've taken the trouble to define them, the reader will often need to return to your definition, a time-consuming activity that can provoke irritation.

A helpful practice for those who may feel organizationally compromised: After writing your piece for the first time, **construct an outline of what you have just written.** Then look at the outline's logical progression. Continuity issues should be easy to spot. Now, revise your outline to improve continuity. Then, *use that revised outline to reconstruct your essay.* This practice requires self-discipline; but in the end, you'll save time, and your points will be clearer.

## ***Your Words***

**Choose *exactly* the right word.** Otherwise, the reader may misinterpret what you mean. Mark Twain once said: “The difference between the almost right word and the right word is really a large matter. ’Tis [it is] the difference between the lightning bug and the lightning.” For selecting the right word, a thesaurus can be helpful.

**Avoid using the same descriptive word twice in the same paragraph.** “Exquisite” may best describe the woman you’re discussing; but using that word three times in the same paragraph will blunt its impact. Varying the description by using “stunning,” “striking,” or “beautiful” can add color. Again, check your thesaurus for suitable variants. Sprinkling those variants throughout the text can help engage the reader.

**Words beginning with consonants tend to make more memorable impressions than those beginning with vowels.** Example: “Only a handful came close to guessing the colossal force magnitudes, whose revelation left them consistently astonished.” The word “astonished” is powerful, even though it starts with a vowel. But, compare it to an alternative: “..., whose revelation left them consistently flabbergasted.” “Flabbergasted” packs more punch. Unusual consonants, like “x” and “z” work still better, even if they appear in the second letter. Consider “exotic.”

**Prefer nouns over pronouns.** “Dorothy opened the casket” reads more memorably than “She opened it.” As writers, we may be intimately familiar with Dorothy; she’s definitely on our radar. But readers may need reminding. A helpful practice: review your paragraph to ask whether the reader might need a reminder that it’s Dorothy, not Frances or some other random person, who is the paragraph’s focus. Otherwise, the reader may lose the thread. That’s a capital crime in the institution of clarity.

**Avoid the word “is” because it conveys no action.** Compare: “*The temperature is higher in regions that are closer to the equator.*” with “*Regions closer to the equator exhibit higher temperatures.*” Which one better captures your attention?

## ***Your Sentences***

**Short sentences make your piece more readable.** Alternating those short sentences with longer ones allows the reader to take “breaths” between those oft-complicated, lengthy, scientific sentences that we all tend to write. Like spurts of fresh oxygen, those breaths can prevent zoning out.

**Use commas to avoid confusion.** Example: “The three things I like most are eating my family and not using commas.” The comma following “eating” is obviously necessary (unless extreme hunger prevails). An additional non-obligatory comma after “family” also helps keep matters

clearest. For that latter reason, I suggest always including that final (so-called “Oxford”) comma. Thus, “The three things I like most are eating, my family, and not using commas.” From the ludicrous to the sensible.

**Excessive use of the passive voice can send the reader off daydreaming.** Compare: “*Typical absorption spectra for three types of water were obtained.*” to “*We obtained absorption spectra for three types of water.*” The more active the voice, the higher the sense of immediacy, and the greater the likelihood of engaging the reader.

**Maintain concept order.** If you wish to convey  $a \rightarrow b \rightarrow c$ , then stating them in that order usually works best. It’s linear. Writers will sometimes reserve  $a$  for the end, e.g., “*The water boiled and created steam because of the heat, which originated from the stove.*” Easier to follow: “The stove provided heat, which boiled the water and created steam.” Reserving  $a$  for the end of the string taxes the reader, forcing him/her to keep  $b$  and  $c$  in mind while waiting to hear about  $a$ , the main motivator. That requirement may be enough to lose your reader.

**Avoid excessive use of prepositions.** “Tube type” saves words compared to “type of tube.” So does “tube geometry” instead of “geometry of the tube.” Sentences with too many prepositions can become cumbersome enough to provoke yawns.

**Word order in sentences:** This can be unexpectedly critical. The reader will generally take the last word in the sentence as the most important one to remember. Example: “On its even more remarkable return flight, the bird flies nonstop for eight days.” The implicit take-home message: Eight days. Wow! A long time, indeed. But, if “nonstop” is really the key word – if your main point is that the bird never stops during that long period – then the following arrangement would better convey that point: “On its even more remarkable return flight, the bird flies for eight days nonstop.” The reader leaves the page remembering what you had intended: “nonstop.”

Another word-order example: “A distinctive feature of the residue was the tightly packed and segmented rings at the outer edges inside the vial, visible only under higher lighting (Figure 6a).” The take-home message: you can see more with better lighting. But, if instead, you wish to emphasize what that better lighting had divulged, then the following version outshines the first: “Under higher lighting, it became clear that the tightly packed rings near the outer edges of the vial were segmented (Figure 6a).” Here, the take-home message is what you probably had intended — the structural revelation, “segmented.”

Be sure, therefore, to make last word in the sentence count. Ending with weak words, like “it” or “that” will not drive home your message as profoundly as “tragic,” or “blowout,” or even “segmented.”

**Avoid long runs.** We may wish to state, “ $A$ ,  $b$ , and  $c$  may cause death.” Any such multiplicity of listings can create a nebulous fuzz; it demands that the reader recall all members of the list,

which may be challenging for the exhausted reader who has been struggling with content. Better to treat “a,” “b,” and “c” separately. Or, provide readers some reinforcement with: “Death may be caused by three factors: *a*, *b*, and *c*.” The colon prepares the reader for the itemized list to come, facilitating digestion.

## ***Your Paragraphs***

Ideally, **each paragraph should convey a single idea**, not several. Otherwise, you may lose the reader, who may miss the paragraph’s “take-home” message. One idea per paragraph, please.

**Each paragraph should have an opening sentence**, leading into what you’re about to say. **It should also have a closing sentence**, stating (in different words) what you have just said. For best reader retention, the paragraph should be structured like a sandwich, with the “meat” in the middle.

When the material is complex, **it’s often useful to emphasize a point using different words**. Simple illustrative example: “Here are red, yellow, and blue boxes.” Better retention could come from: “Here are three boxes, each with a different color: red, yellow, and blue” By prefacing with the statement of three boxes of different color, the reader can more easily retain the message. Yet, you’re not boring the reader with repetition.

**Ending paragraphs with short sentences can be powerful**. Example: “Simmelweis declined rapidly in an asylum, cursing his detractors, and in the course of his erratic behaviors acquiring a wound that (in a sad bit of irony) festered gangrenous and brought about his death. Hand washing survived, Semmelweis not.” The final, short, survival sentence summarizes the rather lengthy message, offering easy retention.

**Rewrite entire paragraphs from scratch**. Finding yourself unable to present your logic in just the right way even after multiple attempts can be frustrating. You modify words, revise sentences, change order, etc. and still the paragraph fails to convey what you wish to transmit. Rewriting the entire paragraph from the beginning can help. It stirs your brain to re-think the logic from the first word onward. Inevitably, that helps to get it right.

## ***Your Essay***

**Edit your own material, multiple times**. Setting your piece down for a few days and returning to it later can bring fresh eyes. Following this procedure multiple times really helps. I myself will commonly practice this routine, sometimes five to ten times in a significant piece before showing it to anyone. Each round of review sharpens the presentation. E.B. White, who wrote “Charlotte’s Web,” perhaps the most famous English-language children’s book ever, practiced this procedure. Following his death, a search of his attic revealed nine earlier drafts of that

amazing book. If gifted writers like E.B. White feel the need to follow this re-write procedure, then what about mere mortals like us?