



16 Ways to Sharpen Your Writing

“Just when you think you know something, you have to look at it in another way, even though it may seem silly or wrong. You must try. You must strive to find your own voice, because the longer you wait to begin, the less likely you are to find it at all.”

Robin Williams, as Professor John Keating,
speaking to his students in “Dead Poets Society”

1. **Keep your reader in mind.** An organization has many audiences. Each audience has its special interests and information needs. Employees, customers, clients, shareholders, volunteers, suppliers, and the public at large all may be interested in the same firm, but for varying reasons. Clearly define and keep in mind the particular audience you are addressing. Picture an individual representative of that audience and write to that person. This helps you keep special interests in mind so you don’t wander into irrelevant areas.

2. **Determine your purpose.** “Why am I writing this copy? What’s the main message, the main impression I want the reader to carry away? Am I writing to inform, persuade, motivate or entertain?” These are important questions for you to answer. If you are vague in your own mind, your writing will lack clarity. A clear sense of purpose indicates the best approach, proper tone, and the right choice of words.

3. **Focus your idea.** “Productivity” is a subject, not an article. What do you want to say about it? If you cover the subject too broadly, the reader can easily miss the main point. Refine your idea. Narrow it down to a single facet and avoid information overload. Focus is your guide to what facts to include and what to leave out.

4. **Write from the readers’ point of view.** Demonstrate that you truly are your readers’ agent and you have their interests in mind. When you write from your readers’ point of view, your writing is far more convincing and the reader is far more accepting of whatever thoughts you want to get across.

5. **Be natural in the way you write.** Follow the advice of novelist Bari Wood: “People who really want to write generally can if they forget the formalistic thing and concentrate on their thoughts. It’s just like writing business letters. I used to have a terrible time with them because I was caught up in the idea of what it was to write a business letter, which was all the wherefores and heretofores. But once I got past that it was no longer a problem. It was simply a matter of concentrating on what I wanted to say.”

6. **Get to the point.** Let the reader know from the start what a piece is about. Scrap the warm-up material that served you well in getting started but that just lead up to what you really want to say. Edit it out and get to the point. Warm-up material irritates and strains the reader’s interest. The best tip-off to warm-up material is if it doesn’t tell the readers any more than they already know.

7. **Disdain jargon.** Jargon is code words. Jargon is cliches. As Linda Ellerbee says, jargon is group-speak that hides more than it reveals. The writer should not use it unless it’s the only path through wordiness or to establish a linking with the audience. Even then, be sure all readers understand the meaning. Don’t cloud your writing with “matrix,” “interface,” “modality,” and the rest of that ilk. And shun the vogue words. It’s time to put “state of the art” out to pasture and “the cutting edge” is getting dull.

8. **Express, don't impress.** Beware of pretentious words and wordy expressions. They sound pompous. In his book "On Writing Well," William Zinsser uses the example of the dentist who asks the patient, "Are you experiencing any difficulty?" But when the dentist's child is in the chair, the question is, "Does it hurt?" Go with "now" not "at this point in time"; "except", instead of "with the exception of."

9. **Avoid long stretches.** Short sentences set a pace that moves the reader along. They make it easier to absorb and retain information, especially when the subject matter is technical or complicated. Keep paragraphs short. Visually they make a piece more inviting to read. A brief lead invites the reader to nibble at and taste a piece of copy. A long gray block that runs on and on looks like work and discourages reading.

10. **Prune excess words.** Every word you use should be doing a job and be needed. If it isn't, get rid of it. Unnecessary words clutter writing and slow the reader down. Ruthlessly trim away the verbiage that muffles your message and takes the punch out of writing. It's called clutter for good reason. Chop redundancies such as the adjectives in "qualified experts," "excess verbiage," "foreign imports," and "future possibilities." There's no other kind.

11. **Be concrete and specific.** Details win out over generalities because they generate vivid images. They give your writing substance. Use the Thesaurus and choose specific words with exact meanings. An editor wrote that a nurse "put" a probe on a patient's finger. Asked if the nurse "wrapped" it or "tied" it, the editor answered that she "clipped" it. That's the word to use. Look, too, for concrete examples to illustrate abstract ideas. The reader will better grasp the concept.

12. **Involve your readers.** Pull your readers into your writing and there's a better chance they'll stay. An article on safe driving begins: "Quick. How much time did you spend driving yesterday?" The question leads to a mental involvement. Another, about stretch fabrics, opens: "Put your arm straight out. Now bend it." It's almost a physical involvement. You also involve readers with anecdotal examples to which they can relate. Consider this lead from a piece on time management: "It's Sunday evening. Two nights ago you started the weekend determined to tackle the household chores you've been meaning to get to for weeks. Well, next weekend. For sure."

13. **Write with conviction.** The reader looks to you for facts. Present them with a sound of certainty. The speaker who begins, "I would like to welcome you this evening" invites the query, "Then why don't you?" Conditionals and qualifiers fill writing. Would, could, should, probably, almost, somewhat, seems, appears. The culprits that cause their wide use are timidity, political side-stepping, uncertainty about the facts, and the carry-over of poor speaking habits. The result is writing so weak, hesitant, uncertain, and evasive it disintegrates. We can't expect readers to accept the facts if we seem not to fully accept them ourselves.

14. **Add color.** Vivid, lively words make for vivid, lively reading. Use words with texture that appeal to the senses and involve more than intellect. Thrust readers into a scene and give them a sense of being there. Let them see, hear, feel what's going on. As Mark Twain advised, "Don't say the lady screamed. Bring her on and let her scream." When there's nothing to describe, use a metaphor or simile. Benjamin Stein, writing in the Wall Street Journal about how his high hopes for a lucrative free-lance career didn't pan out quickly, tells us, "There has been a great freight train of disappointment regularly running through my home." By letting us sense the enormity of it, he locks it more firmly in our minds.

15. Use the active voice. The passive voice saps writing of vitality. It's the lazy writer's verb form. It lets the writer tell what happened without having to find out who did it – "A new program has been introduced." It also dehumanizes writing, because it eliminates people. In some contexts, it has the feeling of withholding or hiding information. The passive voice is legitimate to vary sentence structure or to add emphasis to a key word by taking what would have been the object of an active verb and making it the subject of the passive verb. Misused and overused, it weakens writing and the whole piece becomes passive.

16. Choose and use words carefully. Effective writers are strongly aware of words and how they affect people. They know some words are better or worse than others. It's like the difference between the person who asks, "Do you understand what I'm trying to tell you?" and the one who says "Am I explaining myself clearly?" The one offends. The other invites support.

Finally... Break any rule, but have a reason. There are times to use the passive voice – for variety or emphasis. There are times to use excess words – for rhythm, meter and flow. There are times to split an infinitive – because it sounds less awkward. Break the rigid rules, but know why. Sometimes the only reason is that it just seems to work better. If anyone tells you that you never should begin a sentence with "It is," ask them to give you the first line of "A Tale of Two Cities." The last line, too.

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