

Get better results from your writing

by

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The single biggest problem with business writing today is management-speak.

Win/win scenario; scaleable client service platform; blue skies thinking; get our ducks in a row; brain dump; realign for parallel delivery; going forwards....to name but a few.

Clichés, jargon, buzz-words and MBA-itis puff up writing but obscure its meaning. It's a death sentence to communication, especially if your reader is not a specialist in the field. Management-speak is so over-used that it has lost its meaning. The reader's eyes glaze over and move onto the next document, or the next activity. The writer has lost them, perhaps forever.

A recent survey of the impact of management jargon on British industry by Investors in People condemned this type of language. The poll found that it betrayed a lack of confidence and made those surveyed feel inadequate, while others said that managers who used it were untrustworthy or were trying to cover something up.

So what's the answer? Write plain English. Tell it like it is. Writing like this is a fantastic opportunity to steal a march on your competitors, most of whom write management-speak. By using direct, everyday language, your writing will stand out.

What is plain English?

The Penguin Guide to Plain English puts it succinctly: *'Plain English is never wasteful of words. If a thing can be said briefly, then so it should be'*. It's about using short, simple words, in short sentences, carried in short paragraphs. It's about omitting needless words, in the same way that a drawing should have no unnecessary lines or a machine no unnecessary parts. In writing, what doesn't add, detracts.

My favourite example is what I once saw on the side of a Lambeth dustcart: *Soliciting of gratuities by refuse collectors is expressly forbidden*. In other words, *Dustmen mustn't ask for tips*. Long, complicated sentences full of polysyllabic words may flatter your reader's intellect but require more processing power. Why make your reader work harder than they need to get your meaning?

Short sentences are the single biggest contributor to clear writing. Which is why the most important punctuation mark in your writer's toolkit is the humble full-stop. Use it with abandon (grammatically, of course).

In a study of writing comprehension, US psychologist Rudolf Flesch plotted understandability (on one reading) against the average length of a sentence in number of words. He discovered that, regardless of the topic, a piece of writing with an ASL (Average Sentence Length) of 32 words scored 0% comprehension; an ASL of 24 words scored 20%; an ASL of 16 scored 60%, and an ASL of 8 scored 100%. By keeping your ASL to about 16 words, you'll be writing clear, comprehensible English (see below for an easy way to find out your ASL).

Writing plain English not only clarifies our meaning for the stressed, busy reader: it also adds power. There are five techniques that, if you don't already use them, will empower your writing overnight:

1: Use power words for emotional kick. *'This will impact negatively on our bottom-line'* is a weaker way of saying *'This will hurt / wound / damage / slash / decimate our bottom-line'*. So, depending on the context, *remuneration* becomes *pay* or *cash*, *optimal* becomes *best* or *ideal*, and *risk-adjusted* becomes *safer*.

2: Use personal words to sound human. Good writing connects with the reader, which won't happen if you hide behind phrases like *our organisation* or *the team* or *it is estimated that*. Remember the magic rule of 3:1. Use *you/your* three times as often as *I/me/us/we*. That will force you to talk more about the reader than yourself (we call this being reader-centric).

3: Use verbs, not nouns. Verbs are *doing* words, nouns are *naming* words. So if you want to invigorate your writing, use more verbs (good writing is not rocket-science). Many writers suffer

from an affliction called 'Nounitis', where nouns clog up the arteries of their writing. The cure? Turn the nouns into verbs. So rather than saying *Our specialism is the provision of business solutions* (four nouns, no verbs plus that weasel-word *provision*), try *We specialise in solving your business problems* (two verbs, two nouns, no *provision*).

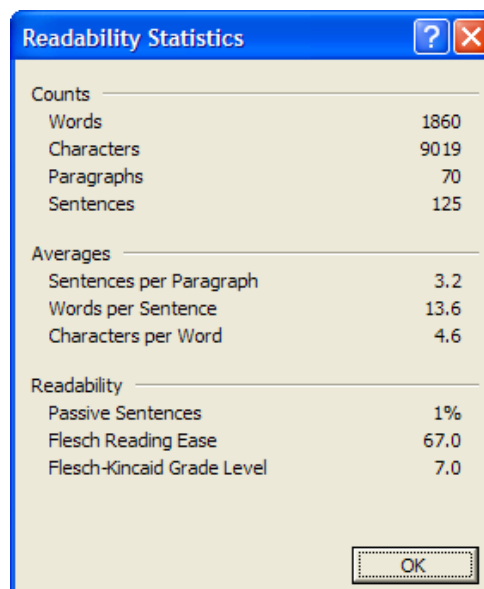
4: Use the active voice whenever you can, rather than the passive. *John gave Mary a memo* is six words and very clear. *A memo was given to Mary by John* is eight words (33% longer) and more complex syntax, making the reader work harder. So a document of six pages in the active voice grows to eight in the passive, with no added content, information, meaning or value.

5: Use Anglo-Saxon, not Latin- or Greek-based words. What's the difference in meaning between *send* and *transmit*? None, so use *send*. *Build* vs *construct*? Same thing. There are hundreds of examples but here are a few:

Latin/Greek	Anglo-Saxon
Bellicose	War-like
Permit	Allow, let
Desist, cease	Stop
Prior to	Before
Subsequent to	After
Gratuity	Tip
Attain	Reach
Identify	Spot
Prima facie	At first sight

Once we've drafted, how do we check our readability?

A function in Word lets you score your writing (and anyone else's you get electronically), including the ASL (Average Sentence Length). Go to *Tools*, then *Options*; click on the *Spelling & Grammar* tab and tick the *Show readability statistics* option bottom left, click OK. Go back to *Tools, Spelling & Grammar* and run through all the suggested changes. When asked 'Do you want to check the remainder of the document?' click 'No' and the Readability Statistics box magically appears:



Focus on three killer ratios: in the Averages section, Words per Sentence — this is your ASL and should be about 16; in the Readability section, Passive Sentences — this should be as close to 0% as possible — and the Flesch Reading Ease — this is a percentage, so the higher the better (plain English starts at 60%).

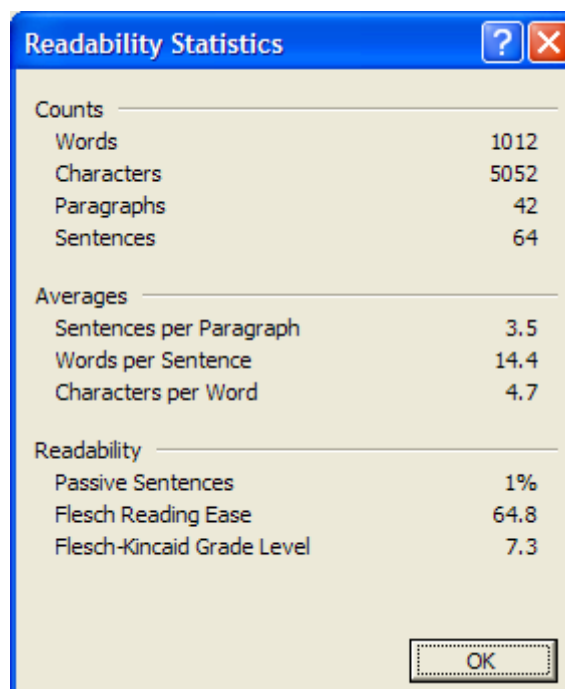
To close, plain English doesn't have to be dull. Good writing should be strong, not long. Consider what a nutritionist wrote about the growing problem of obese kids in the UK:

'With a knife and fork, these children are digging their own graves'.

Now that's great writing.

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Readability stats on this article:



Readability Statistics	
Counts	
Words	1012
Characters	5052
Paragraphs	42
Sentences	64
Averages	
Sentences per Paragraph	3.5
Words per Sentence	14.4
Characters per Word	4.7
Readability	
Passive Sentences	1%
Flesch Reading Ease	64.8
Flesch-Kincaid Grade Level	7.3
OK	