

Rules to Write By A Random Collection - By No Means Comprehensive

Writing is a conversation. If you view it this way, common sense will tell you the most important rules by which to write.

In the conversation of writing, your reader is your partner. In an oral conversation, your partner has a chance to talk back, to ask for more explanation or trade an idea. Not so in something written; you must play both sides. So you must know who your readers are; you must anticipate their reactions. Your readers' needs should guide how you write.

In addition, every piece of writing is a search for - and sometimes a discovery of - your own "voice." When you are writing, don't be afraid to let your idiosyncratic voice sound forth from the page. Having a "voice" means having conviction, and having conviction means you are more likely to get your reader's attention. Nevertheless, having voice and stating your opinion boldly do not equate with "shouting" at your reader or airily dismissing points of view other than your own. Speak in civil tones, dare to write gently as well as firmly; for if you offend your readers, they will stop reading, and you will not have a chance to make your point at all.

I. Thinking, writing, organizing

Think of a 10-page paper like a 5-minute speech. You must engage your audience - your readers - immediately. You must convince them that you have a point, keep them listening, and then convince them to believe what you say - in five minutes. You don't have time to stray from your topic; you don't have time for a single extra word or sentence.

The paper as a whole should have an "aha!" - a point, an opinion - and it should be stated boldly and directly. Each paragraph should also have an "aha" that supports the main one. Every sentence in each paragraph should relate to the paragraph "aha" and add something that the reader must know to understand it. Every sentence in a paragraph must relate to the others around it.

The biggest single problem with most professional writing is poor organization. Unfortunately for readers, the deadlines that drive editors, academics, administrators, and business people all too often result in writing that is published long before it is clear - in other words, long before it actually says what it was intended to say.

Different professions have different formulas for how to organize articles, memos, op-eds, legal briefs, new articles, and so on. But everything written has the following components:

Beginnings:

- *Getting launched*: What is the issue? Why should readers care?
- *Context*: What do readers *need* to know to understand the issue?
- The first one to four paragraphs should be especially clear, concise, and engaging. You have only the beginning to get the reader's attention and tell her/him where you are going. If you fail here, you have lost him/her. Make your point now.

Middles:

- *Plan of attack*: The middle of a written document is where you support your point and attempt to convince your readers. The middle is where you revisit the reasoning and evidence that led *you* to draw the conclusions you have. Who your audience is, and whether it shares your perspectives or your expertise in your subject, determines the tactical decisions you make about how to present your arguments - the order you present them, the language you use.
- *Argument*: Arrange the evidence to suit your audience. What does the evidence say? How are different logical arguments or empirical observations related? Build your case, one argument at a time.

Endings:

- It is a peculiarity of the English language that the end - of sentences, paragraphs, and whole pieces - is what sticks in readers' minds. So you must package your endings as carefully as a spider packages her egg sac. If your ending is clear, your reader will take away your message; if not, s/he will take away nothing, or worse, a fuzzy image of you.
- Make no new points in the conclusion. If you find yourself "discovering" a lot of new "ahas" in the conclusion, move those ideas to the beginning and look at your whole paper again. Sometimes it takes until the end to figure out what you want to say. Don't be discouraged if this happens to you: rather, rejoice, for you may just have discovered how to organize whole sections that had so far eluded you.
- Savor words. See if you can refresh your main point for the reader by saying it in a new or different way.
- Tie together what has gone before. Writers often liken good conclusions to a snake swallowing its own tail -- tie the end somehow to the beginning.

II. Rewriting for the Reader's Needs

- Read it (aloud) and write it again.
- Your eraser (or delete key) should get equal time with your pencil.
- Rewriting is a craft; you are the craftsperson. Apply the model of a carpenter to rewriting: "If a door does not hang straight, the carpenter does not say, 'I will not change that door; it is an expression of my individuality; who cares if it does not close?'" (Patricia Limerick, *New York Times*). The carpenter takes down the door and works on it until it fits. Work on your writing until it communicates.

III. Some Biases and Bugaboos

- Stamp out nouns. Use verbs instead, and use them in the active voice whenever possible. Search for strong, downright surprising words: compare, "the bleached

locutions that scientists deploy" and "the dull phrases that scientists use."

- Commas are not decoration; they show pauses in thought and, properly and sparingly applied, can direct a reader as a bridle directs a horse.
- Commas and periods *always* go inside quotation marks; semicolons and colons always go outside; question marks and exclamation points may go inside or outside depending on the sentence.
- Avoid overused phrases and cliches like "skyrocketing costs"; be creative.
- Phrases such as "as previously discussed" or "an important issue to be addressed" are the equivalent of saying "ummm" when you are speaking. The reader isn't fooled. Erase them.
- Pronouns (it, this, that, etc.) must be close to the nouns they represent. The reader needs to know what the noun is. A "this" or "that" referring vaguely to a whole preceding sentence often signals the reader that you don't quite know what you mean. This what? That what?
- In a list like this one, all items should be parallel. That is, they should all be nouns or noun phrases, verbs or verb phrases, complete sentences, or sentence fragments.
- You cannot minimize and maximize at the same time. Thus, "achieving the highest quality care at the lowest possible cost" is impossible. You can strive for the highest quality care for a *given* cost, or the lowest cost for a *given* level of quality, but trying to get the highest quality for the lowest cost simple makes you a politician.
- Speaking of politicians, ever hear one style himself as "one of the most unique candidates to come along in a long while"? Not possible. *Unique* means "one of a kind," period. "Rather unique," "most unique," are simple nonsensical. Being "rather unique" is like being "a little pregnant."
- "Comprise" means to embrace, encompass, or include, and it is always an active verb. "Comprised of" is always wrong. Nine members do not comprise a committee; the committee comprises nine members; it is never comprised of nine members.

- The word "data" is plural. So "the data are available." Sound weird? Sorry.
- "Hopefully" is an adverb, which means it needs a verb to modify. "She looks forward hopefully to the end of this quarter." In short, don't use it at the beginning of the sentence to mean "I hope that.." ("Hopefully, it won't rain.")
- "Fewer" means not as many countable items; "less" means not as much measurable volume. You can't have "less people," only "fewer people"; you can have "less noise," "fewer chances," and "less opportunity."
- Avoid "however" and "there is/there are" at the beginning of sentences. If you are using "however" to mean "but," say "but" (yes, at the beginning of a sentence); if you are using it to mean "nevertheless," say "nevertheless." Try to replace "there is" with a more active verb phrase.
- The word "preventative" arrived in the dictionary only after Webster quit. The real word is "preventive."
- When you are writing in the present tense, you rarely need to use the word "currently." So don't.
- Use a dictionary. A computer spell-checker can't match Webster or careful proofreading. Style guides are useful too.
- Learn the rules so that you may break them often - on purpose.

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