

Tips for Writing with Clarity and Simplicity



Use these tips to improve the clarity and simplicity of your writing. How you edit your work can—and should—depend on your kind of content and your target audience for that content. Make sure the meaning of your content doesn't change as you strive for clarity and simplicity.

Use strong verbs.

A verb is the muscle of a sentence. It makes a piece of writing move and breathe. A strong verb will motivate your reader and give your ideas more power.

Look at what you've written and see if you can use stronger verbs.

Weak: The primary focus of this workshop is on recent developments in gut health.

Better: This workshop focuses on recent developments in gut health.

Weak: Sally's report is a most valuable contribution to our understanding of gut health.

Better: Sally's report contributes strongly to our understanding of gut health.

Consider your adverbs.

Adverbs describe verbs, adjectives, or other adverbs. They frequently end in "ly." Often a stronger verb can replace a weaker verb + adverb combination.

Weak: My client walked slowly through the forest.

Better: My client meandered through the forest.

Turn verbs into adjectives.

Add variety to your writing and decrease the number of verbs in a sentence.

Weak: You'll discover new recipes you can create and enjoy.

Better: Discover how much you'll enjoy your newly created recipes.

Avoid changing verbs into nouns.

Nouns created from verbs are harder for the reader to understand and give the sentence an impersonal tone.

Instead of: The requirement of the health food store is that employees work seven and one-half hours a day.

Use: The health food store requires employees to work seven and one-half hours a day.

Present the positive. Don't dwell on the negative.

Often positively worded statements are easier for readers to understand.

Tangled: Not all the clients, but a majority, failed to pay in full before the deadline.

Direct: Less than half the clients paid in full before the deadline.

Weak: You don't want to make these mistakes in your copywriting.

Better: Avoid these mistakes in your copywriting.

Break up long sentences.

Your focus and meaning can get lost in a long sentence. They are okay occasionally, but long sentences should be well constructed.

Short sentences keep the reader alert and prepared for what comes next. They can be more forceful, giving life to the idea.

Take your copy, walk quickly around the room and read it out loud. If you must take a breath in the middle of a sentence, it's too long for your reader—cut it down.

Weak: The instructor asked us to use short sentences because she fears longer sentences will lead to errors in our writing, and she doesn't want us to convey the wrong impression to the reader.

Better: The instructor asked us to use short sentences. She fears longer sentences will lead to errors in our writing. She doesn't want us to convey the wrong impression to the reader.

IN CASE YOU'RE WONDERING

You can start a sentence with "and" or "but."

You're not breaking the rules. Remember that you're using these words to connect two thoughts.

"Contrary to what your high school English teacher told you, there's no reason not to begin a sentence with but or and; in fact, these words often make a sentence more forceful and graceful. They are almost always better than beginning with however or additionally."

— Professor Jack Lynch, Associate Professor of English, Rutgers University, New Jersey

Keep paragraphs focused and short. They should often express just a single idea.

This should help people to stay focused. Readers aren't going to take the time to read large blocks of text. Short content may also be easier to read on smaller screens. Sometimes even a single sentence can form a paragraph. Break up the page so that the eye of the reader can glide through the text without having to concentrate.

Write in a logical order.

Scan your headings. Do they follow a logical progression? If someone was scanning your writing, would it make sense?

Make content easy to scan.

Separate content into small sections. Use lots of white space for easy scanning. Lists and bullets are easy to scan. Ask yourself if the readers could follow the piece logically from beginning to end.

IN CASE YOU'RE WONDERING

Show numbers as numerals. This will boost response.

Use 3 instead of three.

Use transition words when you need them but avoid overusing them.

A transition is a word, phrase, sentence, or paragraph that shows the relationship between two or more parts of your writing. They help your writing move smoothly from idea to idea, sentence to sentence, section to section.

These are some examples of transition words: for instance, but, however, despite x, although, therefore, subsequently, in summary, here's why, that's not all.

Reduce prepositions.

Though prepositions (of, in, to, for, etc.) are helpful little words, they make sentences lengthier because they can't stand alone. Prepositions need lots of friends. Sometimes a prepositional phrase can be replaced with just one more direct word. Or you might cut it completely.

An easy way to cut prepositions is to look for opportunities to make something possessive.

Wordy: All of the clients of the practitioner received an e-book as a bonus.

Concise: All the practitioner's clients received an e-book as a bonus.

Use regular language like you're talking to a friend.

This helps with readability and helps the reader to identify with you.

Use short, familiar words but be careful with the use of slang.

You want readers to be comfortable with your choice of words, but no urban dictionary should be needed to interpret the meaning of your words.

Use words in a context that will be understood by most of your readers. Stay away from jargon that could be confusing.

Weak: This program helps you be more pointed and effective.

Better: This program helps you be more specific and effective.

Use words that sound like you.

You can look at other people's copywriting for ideas, but don't copy their material. And use words that sound like you, not someone else.

JUST THE BASICS

Nor goes with neither.

"Love can neither be bought ~~or~~ sold."

"Love can neither be bought nor sold."

Write for your reader.

Only write for other holistic practitioners if that is your audience; otherwise, don't assume your readers know your industry language (leaky gut, etc.).

IN CASE YOU'RE WONDERING

It's better to avoid brand names unless you specifically want a product.

Tissue instead of Kleenex

Make sure you understand what you want to say.

Sometimes writing lacks clarity because of fuzzy thinking. If you don't know what you mean, then how can you explain it to others? Say the concepts out loud to see if that helps. If it still isn't clear, you may need to do some research or make some changes.

Let's get parallel.

Ever wonder sometimes why your sentences don't sound right? It could be a problem with the parallel structure. [A government website says](#) "A sentence is parallel when each item that it lists shares the same grammatical structure (part of speech). Writers use parallelism to help readers see connections between ideas and to emphasize particular points."

Not parallel: This is the time the body repairs itself—immune system strengthened, replace bone and muscles tissues etc.

Parallel: This is the time the body repairs itself—immune system is strengthened, bone and muscles tissues are replaced, etc.

Not parallel: Turn off the computer, the cell phone, and lower the lights.

Parallel: Turn off the computer, turn off the cell phone, and lower the lights.

Not parallel: Thinking is to blog.

Parallel: To think is to blog.

Not parallel: She ate a fig, pear, and a banana.

Parallel: She ate a fig, a pear, and a banana. OR She ate a fig, pear, and banana.

Practice parallelism with your bullet points. Make sure the grammatical structure of your bullet points is parallel by starting each with the same part of speech. For instance, if you start one point with a verb, start them all with a verb. Make your bullet points consistent, and your writing will flow better.

Not parallel:

- Take a hot bath.
- Lower stress.
- Drinking an herbal tea.

Parallel:

- Take a hot bath.
- Lower stress.
- Drink an herbal tea.

Not parallel:

There are five key strategies to help support the immune system:

- Diet to support the health of the immune system, the gut and to help lower inflammation
- Supplements that help the immune system fight pathogens (notice that this isn't a strategy)
- Exercise
- Stress management
- Forgetting to sleep (notice that this isn't a strategy)

Parallel:

There are five key strategies to help support the immune system:

- Eat a balanced diet to support the health of the immune system and the gut and to help lower inflammation.
- Take supplements that help the immune system fight pathogens.
- Exercise.
- Implement stress management techniques.
- Make sleep a priority.

Hyphenate modifiers.

This rule is not black and white, and there are exceptions. However, we'll just deal with a few basics here.

Whenever you modify a noun with more than one word, you need a hyphen. (Remember that there are exceptions.) There is no need to hyphenate modifiers that end in "ly" (if they're an adverb).

The client was taking some over-the-counter drugs.

The client bought the drugs over the counter. (No hyphen needed here.)

Nutritionally dense foods (no hyphen needed here as nutritionally is an adverb)

JUST THE BASICS

Remember to include this information with your content—who you are; what you'll do; how, when, and where to respond; and how the reader will benefit. Be the hero that solves the problem.

Use contractions.

Contractions sound more personal, conversational and engaging. They make your writer sound friendlier, which makes it easier to connect with readers.

No contraction: You do not feel the material really represents you, but you are afraid to do something different.

Contraction: You don't feel the material represents you, but you're afraid to do something different.

Trim the deadwood. Get rid of the redundancies unless they add value to your content.

REMEMBER THIS

Refrain from using all caps in running text.

In running text there is no need for individual words or phrases to be in all caps. They're especially hard to read and can give the impression that the writer is shouting.

Look at your writing. Are there words or phrases that are redundant or not necessary? Put those in brackets. Go back and see what you can eliminate or reword.

Wordy: Mix the contents of the bowl together.

Concise: Mix the contents of the bowl.

Wordy: The workshop begins at 10:00 a.m. in the morning.

Concise: The workshop begins at 10:00 a.m.

Wordy: Where is the meeting at?

Concise: Where is the meeting?

Wordy: Make it clear that expectations for students

Concise: clearly expect students

Wordy: a decision to buy

Concise: a buying decision

Wordy: the impact of the content

Concise: the content's impact

Other examples of redundancies: return back, separate and distinct, descend down, final outcome, over and over, repeat again, adequate enough, eliminate altogether, past history, advance planning, serious danger, sufficient enough, trained professional, advance warning, close proximity, sudden impulse.

Watch your placement of words to ensure your meaning is clear.

Unclear: Joe spent the next entire year growing his business.

Clear: Joe spent the entire next year growing his business.

Poorly worded: Instagram number of followers

Clear: Number of Instagram followers

Poorly worded: I was at my friend's house sipping mushroom tea overlooking Chocolate Lake.

Clear: I was at my friend's house overlooking Chocolate Lake sipping mushroom tea.

IN CASE YOU'RE WONDERING

When "or" joins one singular and one plural subject, the verb agrees with the nearer subject. If the sentence sounds awkward, just reword.

The mother or the kids prepare the food journal.

The kids or the mother prepares the food journal.

IN CASE YOU'RE WONDERING

A pair of singular nouns joined by "or" almost always takes a singular verb.

Eating dairy or fat is not forbidden.

Try "really" hard and "very" often to notice your use of "really" and "very."

Notice if these words "really" add anything to the conversation. If they don't, just remove.

Write lean sentences.

Wordy: There wasn't anyone I could go and ask for help from.

Concise: There wasn't anyone I could ask for help.

Check out [Common Redundancies](#) for further information on redundancies.

Avoid “currently” if it doesn’t add anything to the conversation.

Wordy: I am currently a holistic nutrition professional.

Concise: I am a holistic nutrition professional.

Speak direct.

| WORDY | CONCISE |
|-------------------------------|--------------|
| a large proportion of | Many |
| Are in possession of | Have |
| As of now | Now |
| As of yet | Yet |
| At present | Now |
| For the time being | Now |
| In this day and age | Now |
| In spite of the fact that | Although |
| In the not too distant future | soon |
| Made a statement saying | Stated, said |
| Provide a description of | Describe |
| Put in an appearance | Appear |
| Take into consideration | consider |

YOU CAN LOOSEN THE RULES

When you’re writing engaging content (such as a sales page), you can loosen the grammar and punctuation rules.

Use dashes, ellipses (informally known as dot dot dot), one-word sentences, etc. All these can impact the flow of your page.

Eliminate some of “there is” or “there are” at the start of sentences.

There are lots of better, more interesting ways to start sentences. (See how easy it is to do this.) This construction pushes information away from the reader. Start with the true subject. Try turning the phrase around to include a verb, or start with you. Change this sentence to read, “Start your sentences in a more interesting way.”

If your copy includes a lot of phrases that begin with “there is” or “there are,” take time to rewrite some of them.

Wordy: There is one topic the holistic nutritionist didn’t cover: gut health.

Concise: The holistic nutritionist didn’t cover one topic: gut health.

Be aware of those words you tend to overuse.

You know what they are—words like “so,” “basically,” “however,” etc. You can use Control F to search for any overused words.