

Drayton Bird

Make your writing - not your readers - do the work



Do you have too much to read? Memos, reports, letters, e-mails, leaflets, newspapers, magazines, catalogues, direct mail? And are they breeding like wire coat hangers?

Well, in a survey some years ago, US business leaders were asked what change they would most like to see in business. They didn't talk about accounting or strategy. The majority pleaded: "Teach people to write better."

They just had too much written garbage to plough through. We all do. If you read most stuff put out nowadays it is appalling. Badly written, dull - and often downright incomprehensible.

Yet bad writing is not necessary if you can just count.

This was discovered by Rudolph Flesch, an American, who spent years in the 1940's researching what makes for easy reading. As a result he formulated some very easy rules.

The simplest is, make your sentences short. The easiest sentence to take in is only eight words long. A sensible average is 16 words. Any sentence of more than 32 words is hard to take in.

That's because most people tend to forget what happened at the beginning of the sentence by the time they get to the end. You must

make it easy for people.

And the same applies to paragraphs. Vary them, but keep them short, containing only one or two thoughts - especially the first one. A long opening paragraph is daunting.

And happily Microsoft Word has a tool partly based on Flesch which will help you. Just go to Tools/Option/Spelling & Grammar/Show readability statistics. If you use that option it automatically tells you how readable your stuff is.

Oh - and whatever you do, ignore their grammar suggestions - they're 100% useless.

Good examples

Read any popular novel, newspaper or magazine. They are written for people who are not clever, or not concentrating. Words, sentences and paragraphs are very short. And here are some other suggestions.

1. A heading must make the reader want to find out more, and not reveal so much they might not feel they need to read it.
2. Try to avoid 'we' instead of 'I' - the writing most likely to be read is me to you. People don't relate to organisations.
3. Count the number of "you" words - yours and your - versus "me" words - I, us, our, ours and we. The ratio should be at least 2:1, preferably 3:1.

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4. Use "carrier" words and phrases at the beginnings of sentences to keep people reading. Such as Moreover, That is why, In addition, What's more, On top of that, Also and And. These tell your reader there is more to come. And forget what your teacher told you: "And" is often used to start sentences in The Bible.

5. You can also use questions at the ends of sentences or paragraphs. Why is this?

6. Because then you have to read on to get the answers (and if you notice, the end of point 5 and start of this point demonstrate what I mean).

George Orwell's "1984" and "Animal Farm" were gripping parables about the nightmare of totalitarianism. In an essay he gave six rules for better writing.

1. Never use a metaphor, simile or other figure of speech which you are used to seeing in print. People get used to them and they fail to take them in. Say something fresh or different. Don't say "at the end of the day" - say "in the end"; don't say "put it to the acid test" - say "test thoroughly". "Cutting edge" or "state of the art" mean "newest"

2. Never use a long word where a short one will do.

Complimentary - Free
 Anticipate - Expect
 Expectation - Hope
 Authored - Wrote
 Transportation - Car
 Purchase - Buy
 Ameliorate - Improve
 Lifestyle - Life
 Marketplace - Market

3. If you can cut a word out, always do so.

"Miss out on" should be "miss"
 "Male personnel" is "men"
 "For free" is "free"
 "Crisis situation" is "crisis"
 "Meal solution" is "meal" or "recipe"
 "Research process" is usually "research"
 "Station stop" is "station" or "stop"

4. Never use the passive where you can use the active.

Active is always shorter. A biblical example is "Abel was slain by Cain" - better as "Cain slew Abel".

5. Never use a foreign phrase, a scientific word, or a jargon word if you can think of an everyday English equivalent.

"Interface" works better as "talk with"
 "Core competencies" means "what we do best"
 "Easy to use" beats "user-friendly"
 "Mission statement" is "our aim"
 "This is a non-smoking environment" is "No smoking"

6. Break any of these rules sooner than say anything outright barbarous.

I have two suggestions besides making sure you write as simply as possible.

Before you start, write a simple, logical structure for what you want to say. Then draft - and revise until you're 100% sure anyone can understand it.

A friend once gave me a recipe for this which delighted me. "Show it to an idiot," he instructed, "Get them to read it, and ask if they understand".

I don't show my writing to an idiot. I show it to someone with common sense, but not as interested in the subject as I am. This is often my PA., but could be anyone who happens

to be around.

I always say, "Can you read this, please? What do you think? Is it clear?"

Just remember - as Dr. Johnson remarked over 200 years ago - "That which is written to please the writer rarely pleases the reader." You're not writing for yourself but for others. Make it easy for them! And if you want to make it easy for yourself get an excellent and mercifully short book written by two of my former colleagues called "Writing that Works - How to Improve Your Memos, Letters, Reports, Speeches, Resumes, Plans, and Other Business Papers By Kenneth Roman and Joel Raphaelson"

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About the Author

In 2003, the Chartered Institute of Marketing named Drayton Bird one of 50 living individuals who have shaped today's marketing. He has spoken in 53 countries for many organisations, and much of what he discusses derive from his work with many of the world's greatest brands. These include American Express, Audi, Bentley, British Airways, Cisco, Deutsche Post, Ford, IBM, McKinsey, Mercedes, Microsoft, Nestle, Philips, Procter & Gamble, Toyota, Unilever, Visa and Volkswagen. In various capacities - mostly as a writer - Drayton has helped sell everything from Airbus planes to Peppa Pig. His book, *Commonsense Direct and Digital Marketing*, out in 17 languages, has been the UK's best seller on the subject every year since 1982.

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