

In Praise of Plain Writing

"The ability to simplify means to eliminate the unnecessary so that the necessary may speak." -- Hans Hofman

As someone who has a passion for the written word, I'd like to share my thoughts about how to make your writing more readable, based on years of writing and editing postings for a major corporation.

Good writing invites you in. It makes understanding effortless. It says just what's needed -- no more.

And it's in short supply these days. Too often, I see things like these:

- "Morale and status issues thus inhibited the collaboration that was supposed to occur between managers on the respective axes of the matrix structure...."
- "We are working to move quickly to source the GSR, which is a proof of concept test for BFFC's Proficy application in a wintel HA environment. The MES layer at plants is becoming much more tightly integrated with batch changovers, SAP IDOC's for supply chain, etc..."
- "Synergistically integrate both data and intuition to create robust, actionable business plans that leverage our matrixed skills."

After I've waded through the jargon, the passive voice, the acronyms and the run-on sentences, I'm sometimes unsure what the writer really means.

So -- how do we make sure the message received is the message we intended?

1. **Avoid corporate jargon.** Some of these words are fine when used judiciously:

Leverage	Learnings	Win-win
Deploy	Robust	Synergy
Alignment	Holistic	Game Plan
Utilize	Implement	Key
Maximize	Proactive	Actionable
Matrix	Value-added	Transparent

So what's the problem? We use them **too much!** We over-rely on certain words until what we're saying becomes meaningless.

Look for ways to break through the jargon. Instead of leverage – try build (or



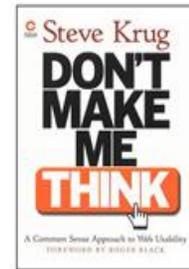
build upon). For utilize – use. Robust? Strong. Or hardy! Alignment? In agreement. And so on.

2. **Be concise.** It's hard to stress this enough: be **ruthlessly** concise.

Readers appreciate brevity. Short words, short sentences, short paragraphs – that's what you're aiming for.

"Get rid of half the words on each page, then get rid of half of what's left."

– Krug's Third Law of Usability



Five Principles of Economy¹

1. Delete words that mean little or nothing: ~~basically~~
 2. Delete words that repeat other words: ~~full and complete~~
 3. Delete words whose meaning your reader can infer from other words: ~~basic fundamentals~~
 4. Replace a phrase with a word: ~~carefully read what you have written~~ – edit
 5. Change unnecessary negatives to affirmatives: ~~not the same~~ – different
3. **Use active rather than passive voice.** Passive voice expresses an action done to a subject (The ball was kicked). In **active voice** the subject of the verb carries out the action (He hit the ball). It gives your writing more punch.

Examples:

Active Voice

"Our scientists excel at making new discoveries; their track records show it."

"We thrive on challenges."

"Our product stands out" or "Our product wins people's hearts."

Passive Voice

"Our scientists have excellent track records when it comes to making new discoveries."

"We are thriving as a result of facing these challenges."

"Our product is among consumer favorites."

¹ Williams, Joseph M. Style: *Ten Lessons in Clarity and Grace*. 4th Ed.

4. **Avoid acronyms.** There is no surer way to lose readers than forcing them to translate alphabet soup: “I’m working with DI&OS Implementation Team in SJSC on a project related to SOX requirements and one of the needs from the P2PS HPO...”

If you must use acronyms, spell them out the first time.

Why Change?

What’s wrong with talking this way if we all do it? Doesn’t it actually simplify our communications?

I don’t think so. For one thing, we’re asking very smart people from many different countries, cultures and business backgrounds to learn a “special” way of communicating when they join the company. For many, English is not their first language; right away, we’re adding complexity to their training.

Second, the quality of our thinking is reflected by the clarity of our communications. The more we clutter up our writing, the less clearly we transmit our ideas. At a time when we must respond rapidly to the changing world around us, it’s more important than ever to get our messages across quickly and clearly.

*“Have something to say, and say it as clearly as you can. That is the only secret.”
-- Matthew Arnold*