

15 Tips for Effective Writing

QUICK HELP

BASIC

EXPANDED

PROFESSIONAL

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Effective writing depends on two things—*what* you say, and *how* you say it. These quick tips will put power in your prose and make your message hit home.



1. ***Be brief.*** Keep content—and titles—as short as possible to catch and hold readers' attention. Use bulleted lists instead of paragraphs when possible.
2. ***Be specific.*** For powerful, precise communication, get right to the point and say just what you mean. Instead of "There was a recent increase in sales," say, "We sold 12% more software last quarter."
3. ***Be accurate.*** Take time to review what you've written to verify that your facts, and references and each part of your message are correct.
4. ***Limit pronouns as sentence subjects.*** Where possible, use nouns as the subjects of sentences. *It* and *they* can be ambiguous. "The dog chased the cat. It ran very fast." Which is the speedy one?
5. ***Be consistent.*** To avoid confusing readers, use a consistent style of wording and a consistent style for formatting of similar elements.
6. ***Use simple sentences.*** Readers get lost in long sentences. To keep your message strong, limit each sentence to a single concept. Instead of connecting new thoughts with words like "however" and "whereas," use a period and start a new sentence.
7. ***Put important content first.*** To catch your readers' attention, lead with your core conclusions, *then* show how you reached them.
8. ***Stick to a single topic.*** Try to discuss just one thing per article, memo, letter, or e-mail. Your point stands out when it stands alone.
9. ***Know and target your audience.*** Tailor your message to the knowledge and needs of your readers. Remember to define terms for those not familiar with them.
10. ***Include a "call to action."*** If you seek a specific result, spell it out. "Please take notes during the next meeting."



11. **Address the reader with “you.”** Involve your readers by speaking to them directly. “When you live with cats, you have constant entertainment.”
12. **Make it active, not passive.** Focus on who’s doing it, not on what’s done. Say “He called her,” not “She was called by him.” You’ll save words and keep your readers awake.
13. **Be respectful.** Take care to avoid unintended insults and slights. Be alert to racial, ethnic, or gender bias in your words. Constructions like “he or she” and “him or her” are here to stay.
14. **Use positives, not negatives.** Tell your readers what they should do, not what they shouldn’t do. Say “Please speak softly,” instead of “Don’t yell.” It’s powerful psychology—one stresses the desired outcome, the other its opposite.
15. **Proofread your work.** To avoid distracting readers with mistakes, double-check your spelling, punctuation, capitalization, and the like. If possible, get someone else to do it, too.

If you liked *15 Tips for Effective Writing*, you might also be interested in *Banishing Business Jargon*, *Words Most Often Confused*, *Words Most Often Misspelled*, and *Writing for the World—A Guide to Globalization*. And for more help in the world of words, see our entire set of easy-to-use [Job Aids for Effective Communication](#) that give you quick, clear guidance as you prepare anything from a memo to a manual to a web page.

