

Engineer's Toolbox

# **Written Communication Skills**

Buddy D. Ratner

## **We will address:**

Wordiness (“loose, baggy sentences”)

Weak verbs / ponderous nouns / strings of prepositional phrases

Tone / meaning

Plain talk

Misplaced modifiers

Structure

Commas

Good writers

Plagiarism

## Wordiness (“loose, baggy sentences”)

“Omit needless words”

*Strunk and White*

“Frankly, I am sick and tired of corporate indifference.”

(either *sick* or *tired* will do)

Think very hard about the use of “very.”

(What is the real difference between “important” and “very important?”)

Take a paragraph you’ve written and cut it the bone.

Which words in a sentence have meaning? Which are the filler?

“As you are an expert in this field, and are no doubt interested in the contents of this paper, may I kindly request that you referee it?”

From a letter received by Buddy Ratner on 4/5/01

## Wordiness

“Omit needless words”

*Strunk and White*

“As you are an expert in this field, and are no doubt interested in the contents of this paper, may I kindly request that you referee it?”

“Please apply your expertise to referee this relevant paper.”

## Weak verbs (lifeless verbs) / ponderous nouns

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He was the winner! (OK)

He won! (better)

The ball went to center field. (OK)

The ball sailed to center field. (better)

action verbs!

She is quick. (OK)

She moves quickly.  
(better)

(OK) Extracellular matrix is generated by endothelial cells.

Endothelial cells generate extracellular matrix.  
(better)

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Nouns ending in tion, ment, ence, etc. are heavy.

The stability and quality of our financial performance will be developed through the profitable execution of our existing business, as well as the acquisition or development of new businesses.

From "Line by Line"

We will improve our financial performance not only by executing our existing business more profitably but by acquiring or developing new businesses.

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## **Tone, meaning**      **Value content over tone.**

“Don’t use that tone with me.”      (instantly conveys tone)

“I believe Bill’s Hamlet is the high point in English literature.  
(too informal)

"Life is pleasant. Death is peaceful. It's the transition that's troublesome."  
- *Isaac Asimov*

(not appropriate at a funeral)

- Adopt the tone appropriate to the occasion.
- Know your audience
- Be sincere (be yourself).
- Engage the audience -- make them care.

## Plain talk (from “The Art of Plain Talk”)

Write things that convey your meaning in plain English.

- Prefer the familiar word to the far-fetched
- Prefer the concrete word to the abstract
- Prefer the single word to the circumlocution
- Prefer the short word to the long
- Prefer the Saxon word to the Romance (Latin)

(these rules in order of merit--the last is the least)

There are  
many  
exceptions  
to these  
“rules”

Language consists of two parts: the things we say and the machinery by which we say them.”

*Rudolf Flesch*

**Circumlocution:** *the use of an unnecessarily large number of words to express an idea*

Webster’s Dictionary

## Misplaced modifiers

For sale. Antique desk suitable for lady with thick legs and large drawers

Fur coats made for ladies from their own skin.

Enraged cow injures farmer with ax.

While touring Africa...

“One morning I shot an elephant in my pajamas. How he got in my pajamas, I’ll never know.”

*Groucho Marx*

Word order is important for meaning.

## Structure

Subject -- verb -- object

The boy bounced the ball.

“People for whom the nuclei of atoms are as real as the bacon and eggs they have for breakfast are exceedingly rare.” (from “Line by Line”)



“People for whom the nuclei of atoms are as real as their breakfast bacon and eggs are exceedingly rare.”

# Commas

*...the most common punctuation mark and the most troublesome.*

Only four places where they're needed (aside from dates, addresses etc)

- Before conjunctions joining independent clauses  
(before “and, but, for, nor, yet, so...”)(links 2 parts of a sentence)
- Between adjacent, important, descriptive, parallel items
- Around parenthetical, but potentially important, elements
- In sequences where you need to prevent misreading

## Good Writers

David Lodge (read “Nice Work” or “Paradise News”)

Issac Asimov

Loren Eiseley (more poetic)

John Prausnitz

## A few of my favorite “tricks”

Intermix short and longer sentences.

Be careful with very long sentences (though sometimes they’re needed).

Revise, revise, revise. Wait a few days and re-read -- you’ll find much to revise.

Say it out loud. Does it sound like you’re in conversation with a friend?

In the right place and time, humor is great. In the wrong place, a disaster!

## **Tips for Better Writing**

**(<http://www.writersresources.com/tips.html>)**

Talk through your topic. Type the way you speak. You can edit and refocus the piece later.

If you think you can't think of anything to write, put your fingers on the keyboard and type the first thing that comes into your head. Keep typing and keep thinking. Once you see a couple of paragraphs on the page, your anxiety will fade.

Don't worry about spelling and grammar when you start out. Fix it later. Get your thoughts down first.

Try to say what you're saying in the simplest way.

Talk to the computer--see how your words sound when you say them out loud. If you were speaking them to your neighbor, would they understand?

If you want to be a better writer, READ. Not just books on writing, but magazines, websites, newspapers, newsletters--everything you can get your hands on written for the industry and topics you're writing about.

Once you get a couple of paragraphs or pages, clean up grammar. Spell check frequently. I find that changing the font on the paragraphs I'm satisfied with gives me a sense of accomplishment as I work through editing my work.

If you always screw up Their and There, or Here and Hear, or Affect and Effect, read Strunk & White and learn the rules by heart. Everyone has a few words they have trouble with. Learn yours and learn to use them the right way.

Practice writing every day.

Check with your local universities and community organizations for workshops on writing.

Proofread your copy even if spell check says there are no errors.

Have someone else read your work, and offer to proof for them too.

Use templates to get you started. Check out our Template Library as a resource.

Scan business writing books and manuals for a format you like, or develop your own, and use it each time you have to write a

<http://www.writersresources.com/tips.html>

Never ever ever ever send an mail when you are angry or tired. You can't unsend them. In my old tech writing group we put up a big sheet of paper on the wall, on which we wrote in big letters [F9 SEND]. (In the old days, F9 sent email from Da'Vinci email.) Whenever we felt like we REALLY wanted to send an email, but knew we should think on it, we'd run over to the wall and hit the [F9 SEND] poster. All of the pleasure with none of the pain.

Keep your emails brief. Most people check out after the first paragraph. Your boss probably checks out after the subject line.

# **Good Writing Techniques** (these are funny, but they make you think!)

by Frank L. Visco

- 1. Avoid alliteration. Always.**
- 2. Prepositions are not words to end sentences with.**
- 3. Avoid cliches like the plague--they're old hat.**
- 4. Employ the vernacular.**
- 5. Eschew ampersands & abbreviations, etc.**
- 6. Parenthetical remarks (however relevant) are unnecessary.**
- 7. It is wrong to ever split an infinitive.**
- 8. Contractions aren't necessary.**
- 9. Foreign words and phrases are not apropos.**
- 10. One should never generalize.**
- 11. Eliminate quotations. As Ralph Waldo Emerson said, "I hate quotations. Tell me what you know."**
- 12. Comparisons are as bad as cliches.**
- 13. Profanity sucks.**
- 14. Don't be redundant; don't use more words than necessary. It's highly superfluous.**
- 15. Be more or less specific.**
- 16. Understatement always is best.**
- 17. Exaggeration is a billion times worse than understatement.**
- 18. One-word sentences? Eliminate.**
- 19. Analogies in writing are like feathers on a snake.**
- 20. The passive voice is to be avoided.**
- 21. Go around the barn at high noon to avoid colloquialisms.**
- 22. Even if a mixed metaphor sings, it should be derailed.**
- 23. Who needs rhetorical questions?**

# Plagiarism

Why is plagiarism so offensive?

- it's illegal
- it robs others
- you gain no real benefit from it

**To avoid plagiarism, you must give credit whenever you use**

another person's idea, opinion, or theory;  
any facts, statistics, graphs, drawings--any pieces of information--  
that are not common knowledge;  
quotations of another person's actual spoken or written words; or  
paraphrase of another person's spoken or written words.

## **A short bibliography:**

“Line by Line” Claire Cook

“The Art of Plain Talk” Rudolf Flesch

“Power language” Jeffrey McQuain

“American Tongue and Cheek” Jim Quinn

“The Elements of Style” Strunk and White