



## MARKETING INSIGHTS

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# THE WORDS OF BUSINESS, THE BUSINESS OF WORDS

## Part 1 – Keep it Simple

### Communication lets us Down

Everyone appreciates originality and poignancy, and we love a good yarn, but even the best joke falls flat when its delivery is flawed or careless. A joke tells a story, so does a TV ad. The way the story is told determines whether we listen or tune out.

This applies to any kind of story, whether joke, magazine article or novel. If the story strays too far from the subject, or takes too long to get to the point, we lose interest. If an article is hard work to read, if the sentences are convoluted or the prose is laden with clichés like a Greek playboy is with gold chains, we're inclined to stop listening.

Business communications pose extra challenges for the writer because business people are bombarded with information and have little time to read it. In addition, business material tends to be dull by nature but that doesn't absolve the writer from her duty to write well. The writer's duty is no different from that of the speaker: both have an audience who's given up its time, and both have to show respect for their audience by presenting their material in its best light.

Sadly, most business communications are longwinded and stuffed full of adjectives that are as empty as the houses of a wild West town on a Hollywood movie set. *Powerful*, *advanced* and *innovative* are favourites with the tech set, *potential*, *position* and renovator's delight are the stock words of real estate.

Getting your message across in today's crowded markets isn't easy. Your website may feature fancy graphics and attract plenty of visitors, but how many of them will be overwhelmed by the density of words on the page, rendered in a 7.5 Arial font to allow for maximum information to be squeezed in?

Why do writers want to fit so many words on a page? Because they can't express their key messages in fewer words. Mark Twain famously apologized to a friend for writing him a long letter, explaining that he didn't have the time to craft a short one. At 300 words, Lincoln's Gettysburg address stands out as one of the shortest speeches in history, and one of the most compelling.

At Technoledge, we don't have the wit of Mark Twain or the command of words Lincoln possessed, but we help many clients make their messages clearer and their stories more compelling. Here we'd like to share the basic rules, which are pretty simple. The only puzzle is why so many who write for a living write so badly.

### It's Elementary, Dear Watson

When we attended a conference at Broadbeach with one of our clients recently, we found a lavish Gold Cost Lifestyle magazine in our hotel room that promised to introduce us to *Luxe Living*, whatever that is. Okay, it wasn't *Vogue* but we wondered how lines like these could get printed without the glossy paper cringing with embarrassment: 'The ideas of the lifelong partner, the soul mate has always rang true in our society but as generations have passed so to has the traditional social structures that have acted as the foundation of society.'

This was the opening line of a piece, yet the number of errors in grammar, spelling and punctuation must be some kind of record for a single sentence. Further on, we're told that 'for those desperately searching for love in 2008, romance is a whole

new ballgame.’ A curious way to describe romance, but then the restaurant reviewer tells us that a new chef ‘is now in charge of the kitchen with a new kitchen brigade at his helm. Jay has plenty of clout when it comes to the food side of things.’

The Gold Coast is renowned for its langour, not its linguists, but technical writing in Sydney and Melbourne doesn’t tend to be a whole lot better.

## Clarity

It’s the first principle of all communication. Information or advice delivered in an unintelligible form might as well be offered in a foreign language. Here’s an example from a professional IT journalist: ‘The way in which search engines (particularly Google, which continues to dominate this market) assess page relevance is constantly updated ... One major challenge with SEO is that remaining the top-ranked link for any search is a difficult attempt to shoot a moving target.’

The clarity of copy in pharmaceutical reports is no better: ‘While Alcon will not come cheap, the acquisition represents a positive, long-term strategy by Novartis which reinforces its aim of diversification across the healthcare sector and reduced reliance on the branded prescription pharmaceuticals market.

Journalists like opening sentences with hanging clauses but the smart ones know to keep them short. This one’s far too long and the reader will skip parts of it looking for the bit that matters: ‘Should you read the regular photography press or look at the titles of digital photography tutorial books in your local bookstore, you’d be excused for thinking that all the important things in the photography world happen with Canon, Nikon and Adobe Photoshop.’

The next sentence is much shorter yet it manages to sow confusion and combine it with gross errors: ‘Bizarrely, the camera can even appear to refocus even when it indicates that focus has been achieved and the shutter having been depressed.’ Even if ‘bizarre’ made a legitimate adverb, I wouldn’t use it as it sticks out like a sore thumb with a red bandage tied to it.

## Give Me a Break

Punctuation was designed as an aid to clarity, and those little symbols can be a great help to readers confronted with long and dense sentences. It’s a shame that some copywriters don’t avail themselves of these little helpers, or don’t use them the right way.

In this example, one comma would have given us the essential separator between the two sentences, and given us time to take a breath: ‘Piramed’s oncology and immunology and inflammation programs will add to Roche’s already strong portfolio in these therapy areas and the move is in line with the company’s strategy of pursuing these two fastest growing therapeutic segments.’

The next example has a comma where none is needed: ‘TLC Data Security - an Australian supplier of information security services to businesses and government organisations - has signed up to become a platinum partner for security software vendor, Sophos.

In this example from a glossy photo magazine, it seems that the writer simply gave up on punctuation. ‘The advantage of CF is that due to their [memory cards’] higher capacity and fast transfer rate the cost per megabyte is low.’ Punctuation can be tricky but here we have a nested statement that definitely needs commas (think of them as brackets): ‘... is that, due to their higher capacity and fast transfer rate, the cost per megabyte ...’

In the next sentence, the author shows that he’s familiar with the comma but still doesn’t see that his sentence construction puts roadblocks into the reader’s path. ‘Comparatively, the benefit of SD is that although it can’t offer equal capacity to CF, it can hold an adequate quantity of pictures whilst offering a fast transfer rate and a write-protect switch.’

Conjunctions like ‘that, due to ...’ and ‘that, although ...’ are clunky and best avoided, as are their many variations. That also goes for ‘that what’: ‘While my inner geek thought that what the

company had going was interesting', and this mishap: 'But either way, Microsoft has announced partnerships with ...' The 'But' is superfluous since 'either way' refers to previously raised ifs and buts. Either the 'but' or the 'either way' is superfluous.

## The KISS Principle

Simplicity is Clarity's best friend. Simple sentence structures make the reader's journey easier. Sadly, many copywriters think their job is to cram as much into one sentence as possible. Our friend from the photo magazine proves to be one of them as he continues to explain digital camera memory card formats:

'xD cards were introduced in 2002 and are available in two subdivisions: Type M, which is available in sizes from 256 to 2GB but suffers from slow read-write speeds; and type H, which was launched in 2005, delivering higher data rates, but in capacities of between 512MB and 1GB.'

This time, our author used up his entire quota of commas in a single sentence and had to reach for a semi-colon to help out. The result is unreadable. What's the answer? In this case, a table with half a dozen headings covering dates, capacities and speeds would be a simpler way of summarizing the information.

Camera experts aren't the only ones having trouble with clarity—even reputable lens makers do. 'Now, introducing the D700 also containing Nikon's renowned FX format as well as many of the D3's legendary qualities, but built into a compact and agile body.' (from a full-page Nikon ad).

You get the picture. A blogger at one of the top-ranking PC technology websites writes: 'Also, when it comes to operating system reliability problems that look like they are down to the OS are usually down to something else - a bad driver or a rogue application, for example.'

It's a strong performance but one of his colleagues leaves him eating dust: 'But the main - and seemingly incredibly ridiculous - problem is that some of the driver issues that plagued and delayed SP1's release back in February, from the official RTM date of February 4th 2008, to March 18th 2008 - are still causing issues, meaning the wait for SP1 grinds on for some, if not actually very many indeed.'

He wins the gold medal for the cross-country event hands down - I challenge you to read that sentence out loud and not run out of breath before reaching the end! Not content with his medal, our champ goes for the triathlon as well as he leaps over two consecutive adverbs - 'seemingly incredibly' - and then attempts the double backwards summersault over the final hurdle: 'if not actually very many indeed'. With these final clumsy words, he manages to pull the rug out from under himself by admitting that the problem he is so hot under collar about is isolated to a few users with (we suspect) highly unusual PC configurations.

## Economy

Big savings await those who adhere to the principles of clarity and simplicity. The reward is more room on the page for key messages or pictures or bigger fonts or more open space that's easier on the reader's eyes.

Let's see what we can do with this example of a long and winding sentence stacked with superfluous words: 'For example, while it is still widely assumed that the most important factor in getting a high Google ranking is having links from other sites, Google itself says there are more than 200 factors that influence ranking decisions and it's not going out of its way to explain what they are.'

He could've said: 'Links from other sites are still said to be essential for a high SE ranking, but these links are just one of 200 factors that Google won't disclose.' That's a 50% saving and the sentence takes half the time to read.

The writer of our last example is clearly undecided whether to use the singular or plural form of the verb for the action of a company. Using the plural is a common mistake: 'Corel Australia are proud to announce a number of great offers across our award-winning Digital Image range of products.' Jumping from third person to first person in the same sentence adds further confusion.

Another example: 'Micro Linux laptop maker, ASUS, have released an open source software developer's kit.' Here the writer uses the plural of the verb 'have' despite describing Asus as a laptop maker in the same breath. That's what a company is: an entity that develops, produces, announces or sells products and services. A company, even a cooperative or association, is a singular entity.

Back to our subject: economy. Superfluous words are the unsightly litter on the reader's road. 'The SDK is **actually not a single application but is an entire environment with a** rich suite of development applications and tools.' Another 50% saving. Often it's just single words as in the sign that Windows pops up when you delete a bunch of files: 'currently deleting x,y,z ...'

'One of the things that has always distinguished PagePlus is the way **that** it incorporates a full range of publishing design tools.' Here the 'that' is more than superfluous, it's annoying. 'Intel told us Monday afternoon that this new processor **in fact** is not the X9100, but **rather** a "special" SKU of the 45 nm Penryn processor for the company's Santa Rosa platform.'

## Summing Up

Some of the technical writing we see is just plain shoddy: 'For those not operating on a bloated corporate budget, however, there are plenty of other 22-inch LCDs that cost a fraction of the cost. What are we to make of that?'

There is no excuse. Other writers put in more effort but still come unstuck: 'Wubi's goals are to assist a Windows user unacquainted with Linux in trying Ubuntu out without risking any loss of information, because although the hard disk will be written to there is no disk partitioning or formatting involved.'

He changes the sentence structure in mid-sentence, is careless with his punctuation, uses an impossible conjunction - because although - and manages to make very little sense. Quite a feat!

Our advice is to focus on giving your audience a good experience: they may be smart enough to plough through dense writing of the convoluted kind but they'd really prefer not to. Like most of us, they're likely to spend more time reading website pages, articles, brochures or newsletters that are better-laid out, written with more care and show some sign of respect for the reader's time.

As we said at the beginning, bad writing shows a lack of respect for your readers or website visitors. It shows that you don't care enough about them to try harder or to employ someone who will. It shows that you don't care about saving your readers time and effort, and it shows that you haven't thought about the impact of your carelessness.

To sum up, the basic rules of good writing are these:

- Be brief and to the point
- Use simple words
- strive for clarity of meaning
- Avoid complex sentence structures
- Use specific terms that are highly descriptive
- Show respect for your readers

In a future chapter, we'll look at how to add life to dull subjects by adding analogies, touches of colour and humour.