

Chapter 6 Basic Writing Skills, Techniques and Editing

by Kathy Collard Miller

The more the words, the less the meaning, and how does that profit anyone?—Ecclesiastes 6:11

As you plan your book or article, or anything you write, you'll need basic writing skills and techniques. Let's talk now about those elements so that our writing will be powerful and effective.

Use Forceful Verbs

Look at this sentence. "Susan walked up the street, talking under her breath as she thought about what Jake had just told her." It's pretty plain, isn't it? Let's see if we can jazz it up.

Editing possibilities by looking up words in a *Synonym Finder* or *Thesaurus*:

"walk" to: stomp, stumble, step, stride, pace, tread, stretch one's legs, stroll, ramble, saunter, promenade.

"talking under her breath" to: mutter, mumble, murmur, grumble, complain, whine.

"as she thought" to: mulled, evaluated, chewed on, reviewed, considered, wondered about, brooded, dwelled on.

"what Jake had just told her" to: revealed, reported, recounted, described, explained, disclosed, announced.

By choosing more powerful words from those possibilities, we have the final result: "Susan stomped up the street, muttering, as she brooded about what Jake had just revealed."

Verbal Word Pictures

Paint verbal word pictures with writing tools. For instance,

- Metaphors compare two different things. "Susan had a heart of stone when it came to Jake."
- Similes also express comparisons but use the words "like" or "as." "The sidewalk under Susan reflected like glass in the sun"
- Onomatopoeia uses words that imitate the sounds of the object. "The buzz of the saw..." or words like "hiss," "hum," "cuckoo," or "pop."
- Alliteration is a technique of using repetition in the first sound of each word. "Susan stumbled along the sidewalk" or "Susan sang sweetly."

Avoid Ambiguity And The Obvious

As we think of writing effectively, we need to avoid ambiguity and what is obvious. For instance, how would you rewrite these ambiguous statements?

"This afternoon there will be meetings in the south and north ends of the church. Children will be baptized at both ends."

CORRECTED "This afternoon there will be meetings in the south and north ends of the church where children will be baptized."

"This being Easter Sunday, we will ask Mrs. Brown to come forward and lay an egg on the altar."

CORRECTED "This being Easter Sunday, we will ask Mrs. Brown to come forward and place an egg on the altar."

"The ladies of the church have cast off clothing of every kind and they can be seen in the church basement on Friday afternoon."

CORRECTED "The ladies of the church have used clothing of every kind and the clothing can be seen in the church basement on Friday afternoon."

"On Sunday, a special collection will be taken up to defray the expense of a new carpet. Will those wishing to do something on the carpet please come forward and get a piece of paper?"

CORRECTED "On Sunday, a special collection will be taken up to defray the expense of a new carpet. Will those wishing to contribute money for the carpet please come forward and get a piece of paper to make their pledge?"

A sign in a laundry: "We don't tear your laundry in our machines, we do it by hand."

CORRECTED A sign in a laundry: "We don't tear your laundry in our machines because we launder it by hand."

In our writing, we want to make sure that unclear, ambiguous sentences are not making our readers wrinkle their foreheads and scratch their heads wondering what we really mean.

Don't Use the Obvious

In our everyday language we use words and phrases that are common but aren't necessary. Look at the following.

"Baby puppies:" Are puppies anything but young? Omit "baby."

"Young child:" Is a child old? Omit "young" or be very specific with the age.

"Raining drops of water:" What else would it rain? Just say "rain."

"Snow falling to the earth:" Were you expecting it to fall upward? Just say "snowing."

"The plane fell to the earth below:" Is the earth going to be up in the sky? Just say, "the plane plummeted to the earth."

Unfortunately, we can write those kinds of phrases and they sound perfectly all right. We need to be looking for them all the time or have someone critique our work for us.

Incorrectly Placed Pronouns

Another common mistake is incorrectly placed pronouns.

Rewrite these:

"The policeman tried to shoot the criminal as he raced around the corner."

CORRECTED "The policeman tried to shoot the criminal as the criminal raced around the corner."

"Shortly after giving birth to my only child the doctor informed me he was having some breathing problems."

CORRECTED "Shortly after giving birth to my only child the doctor informed me my son was having breathing difficulties."

Avoid Wordiness and Rabbit Trails

Author and editor Susan Titus Osborn says (with tongue in cheek): "Avoid repetition since repeating yourself or saying something in several different ways, so that you go over the same thing again and again, may possibly tend to frustrate, anger, and/or irritate your reader or listening audience." She advises: "eliminate unnecessary words."

Sidney Smith said, "In composing, as a general rule, run a pen through every other word you've written. You have no idea what vigor it will give your style."

In order to avoid repetition and rambling, write out the one theme or purpose of your article or chapter and post it in front of you. Make sure everything you write refers to that theme and purpose.

Sentence Variety and Length

Another aspect of good writing is using variety. We should aim for sixth grade comprehension which means shorter sentence length. Here are some guidelines for sentence length evaluation from Rudolf Flesch in his book, *How to Write, Speak and Think More Effectively*.

Average sentence length in words:

Very easy: 8 or less

Easy: 11

Fairly easy: 14

Standard: 17

Fairly difficult: 21

Difficult: 25

Very difficult: 29 or more.

If you have too many short sentences, join some together with "and" or "but" or other conjunctions. If you have too many long sentences, break them into smaller sentences. The rule of thumb, though: shorter is better.

Gustave Flaubert said, "When you can shorten a sentence, do. The best sentence? The shortest."

Active Verbs

Our next challenge is choosing active verbs rather than passive ones. Unfortunately, writing in the passive voice is the easiest way to write and is most often the way we talk. Choosing active verbs is more difficult and requires more thought.

Which sentence stands out as being more powerful?

"The typewriter was being used by Jill" or "Jill pounded away on the typewriter."

"Jeff was struggling to ride the bike up the hill" or "Jeff struggled to ride the bike up the hill."

Passive verbs are weak but active verbs sprinkle your writing with power. Passive verbs are those using words like, "was," "were," "is," "had," "become," and other forms of the verb "to be."

Another indication of passive verbs is when you see the word "by" along with "was."

"Show," Don't "Tell"

We've talked about this in other chapters but here's more on this concept. We can never talk about it enough.

Here's an example of telling, which is what I could have written for an article about how God delivered me from being a child abuser:

Many years ago, I abused my daughter Darcy. I remember one day that I was out of control. Darcy had wet her training pants and I was angry. She made me mad all the time and I had had enough. I spanked her on her bare bottom over and over again. I didn't want to be a mother anymore.

In contrast, here's an example of the same material in "showing" mode:

Darcy's training pants were wet again. Again!

Marching over to my two-year-old daughter, I directed her into the bathroom. As I struggled to pull down the soaking pants, I felt a rush of frustration and a sense of failure.

"Darcy, you're supposed to come in the bathroom and go in the potty chair. Why can't you learn?" I continued to berate her. As I began spanking her with my hand, my tension and tiredness found an outlet. Spanking changed to hitting.

Darcy's uncontrollable screaming brought me back to reason. Seeing the red blister on her bottom, I dropped to my knees.

"How can I act like this?" I sobbed. "I love Jesus. I don't really want to hurt my child."

I'm sure you're not surprised to learn that I used the second example in that article that has sold several times.

Techniques For "Showing"

1. Use the five senses. Use a description that will help the reader see, smell, hear, touch, and taste what is happening.

Rewrite this "telling" sentence as a "showing" sentence:

"The two-year-old knew how to wave but when her granny waved goodbye, the toddler refused."

CORRECTED Grandma waved at little Jessie trying to coax her into responding. "Jessie, I know you can wave at Grandma. See, I'm waving at you." Jessie clung to her mother's skirts, hiding her face.

2. Use dialogue. Let us hear the words spoken.

Rewrite: Dan told Susan he didn't want to date her anymore.

CORRECTED "I'm so sorry, Susan, but..." he paused, searching for the right word, the right word that wouldn't hurt Susan's feelings. He knew there weren't such words but he agonized over saying them anyway. Frustrated, he blurted out, "I don't want to date you anymore."

3. *Use emotion.* Use powerful words that will let us know how the subject of your story is feeling during that time.

4. *Use concrete and active words:*

"marching" instead of "walking"

"soaking pants" instead of "wet pants"

"uncontrollable screaming" rather than "crying"

"red blister" rather than "mark"

"I sobbed" instead of "I cried"

Rewrite this paragraph using all the techniques I indicated:

"Sally sat at the table in front of me telling me she wanted to be a Christian. I couldn't have been more thrilled. I prayed silently for the right words."

CORRECTED "Kathy," my friend, Sally, began. "You've been telling me about Jesus for so long. Do you really think He wants to come into my life? It just seems too wonderful."

My heart beat faster as I realized God was finally answering my prayers. My palms felt sweaty as I thought, "Kathy, don't blow it now. Oh, Lord, give me the right words to say."

Transitions

Once we've put those tools into action, we need to make our writing sound smooth. There are two ways to use transitions to do that.

1. *Refer to the idea or significant word from the previous paragraph to begin the new paragraph.* For instance, write, "All those missionaries..." The word "missionaries" refers to the missionaries named in the previous paragraph.

2. *Use transitional sounding words like:*

Besides

Today

Meanwhile

Later

On the other hand

Eventually

Again

Finally

For example

Consequently

Still

To illustrate

But

Actually

Smooth writing uses transitions to create bridges between thoughts, paragraphs and ideas. If we don't use transitions, our writing sounds choppy and identifies us as lazy writers.

Be Specific Rather Than General

Another way we can be a lazy writer (did you notice that transition?) is to write in general terms. Instead, we can be specific rather than general in the use of our words.

For instance:

"food" is general. "salad" is more specific but... (drum roll) "Chinese cashew salad" is superior.

Now It's Your Turn!

Using all the techniques you've learned in this chapter and all the book, rewrite:

"Let's try to plan what we need to be doing." CORRECTED: Let's plan.

"We're glad to have you joining us." CORRECTED: Welcome

"What can stop you in your tracks a few days, weeks or months into your new program is slipping into the old patterns, attitudes and mistakes you made before?" CORRECTED: Your old patterns will try to prevent you from going forward in your thinking.

We covered a lot, didn't we? In our next chapter, we'll talk about how to market all the wonderful things you've written. See you then!

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