

# How To Write Clearly

a short guide on getting  
your point across,  
without losing your  
reader's attention



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WriteClear-1

Based on the principles of *Infogineering*<sup>TM</sup>

[www.infogineering.net](http://www.infogineering.net)

# Introduction

This short guide will explain how to make your writing clearer.

Most people in the western world are defined as literate. This means that they are able to read and write.

Being able to write *clearly* is something entirely different. It involves you **being clear about what you want** to achieve, then using a simple set of principles to achieve this effectively.

## Why Write Clearly?

There are several very good reasons why you should learn to write more clearly.

### **Get What You Want**

Often, people don't do what you ask them... because you never directly ask them! Learning how to state clearly what you want will get you the things you need... and much faster.

### **Globalisation**

As more and more companies work across international boundaries, it becomes increasingly likely that you will be working with people who speak English as a second, third.. or even fifth language. As a result, you need to make sure they still understand your writing.

### **Time-Starvation**

More and more people are time-starved. People's e-mail inboxes are bulging, and don't have the time to try to

comprehend what it is you want. If you are not clear, your message will get put on hold.

## **Fewer problems to clean up**

When people misunderstand what you asked of them, you end up spending a lot of time correcting their mistakes.

## **Attention Deficit**

The Web has created a generation that are not used to reading in a linear fashion. They don't start at the headline, and continue reading to the end of your text. Instead, they jump across a piece of text grabbing a few words here and there and only read sentences that grab their attention.

It might sound counter-intuitive, but writing something that is short and clear can take a lot more time and effort than writing something that is long and complicated.

You have to think about how your message will be received, and make it easy for them to read and understand it. This takes thought and energy, and most people aren't willing to do this.

However, by learning some simple concepts and techniques, you should find your writing improves quite considerably without too much effort.

# Arranging Your Sentences

By rearranging the way you form your sentences, you can be a lot clearer.

## Person – Action – Subject

Many people put the person they are talking about at the end of the sentence. By putting the person at the start, then following with the action and then the subject, you can make the sentence clearer.

✓ I will investigate the problem

Not

✗ The problem will be investigated by me

✓ Peter was watching the television

Not

✗ The television was being watched by Peter

If you are giving instructions to a single person, just leave out the person and put *Action* then *Subject*.

✓ Reset the server

Not

✗ The server should be reset

# Making A Point

We often write to people to request some sort of action, or to justify a decision we have made. In this kind of writing, we are arguing a case... often using “**deductive**” reasoning.

Most deductive reasoning takes a classic structure. You make two or more **supporting statements (A and B)**, then draw (or, deduce) **a conclusion (C)** from these.

*Statement (A):* Harry was born in London

*Statement (B):* London is part of the UK

*Conclusion (C):* Harry was born in the UK

In normal written text, this example would be written in this form...

```
Harry was born in London. London is part of the
UK. Therefore, Harry was born in the UK.
```

While this format is fine if the person has the time to read and understand what you have written, these days the person's concentration may not last to your conclusion.

We are frequently interrupted, and rarely read everything from beginning to end. If they get cut-off half way through, they never actually hear your main point.

So, instead of putting your conclusion last, **put your conclusion (or main point) first.**

That way, even if they get distracted halfway through reading your message, they still get your main point.

### A-B-C Format

Harry was born in London. London is part of the UK. *Therefore*, Harry was born in the UK.

### C-A-B Format

Harry was born in the UK. This is *because* Harry was born in London, and London is part of the UK.

Notice that the word *therefore* was used with A-B-C format, and *because* was used with the C-A-B format.

When writing an e-mail, you can write the conclusion (or main point) in the first line, then use the rest of the message to justify it. You can still repeat your main point at the end.

Tom,

I've decided to end our relationship with Higgens & Co.

Here's why...

Firstly, the products they have been purchasing recently from us were all sold a cost price. *Therefore*, we are getting little (if any) revenue from them. This doesn't look like changing any time soon.

Secondly, the number of customer service calls we have been having from them have risen sharply. They have lost a few of their key staff who were very knowledgeable, and now they are passing the load onto our staff to explain how to assemble things.

Finally, our prices are not the cheapest on the market. If they were to switch to Adamson Plastics, they would get a better deal.

So, I don't think they will be too upset if we explain to them that we will no longer be able to help them in future, providing we do it politely.

Thanks,  
**Bill**

## Personalise Things

If your writing is directed at one particular person or audience, don't be afraid to talk about "you."

Interviewees should arrive at least 15 minutes early

Should be

You should arrive 15 minutes early.

Equally, don't hide behind organisations or groups. Say "we" and "I".

It is the policy of XYZ corporation not to refund items returned over the 30-day limit.

Should be

We do not refund items returned after the 30-day limit.

## Niche Language

Depending upon the field you are working in, you'll have your own set of language and terms that outsiders may not understand. It is a good idea to use acronyms if you believe the reader will understand them, because it saves time.

If you are writing for multiple readers – some of whom will understand an acronym, while others won't – make sure you expand the acronym first, followed by the abbreviation in brackets. From that point on, you can just use the acronym.

```
The Domain Name Server (DNS) failed last night,  
and we were unable to reach the site. This is  
the second time we've had problems with the DNS  
this month.
```

## Offering More Information

If you are writing an e-mail message, or for the web, you can use hyperlinks to offer people more information.

```
We'll be using the principles behind the  
Stirling Engine to get much higher  
efficiencies.
```

Alternatively, you can follow a word or phrase with a question mark in brackets, which is linked to more information.

We'll be using the principles behind the Stirling Engine(?) to get much higher efficiencies.

This allows people who are less knowledgeable about a subject to find out more, without forcing others to read explanations for things they already understand.

## Being Brief

A simple way to become clearer is to reduce the lengths of words, sentences and paragraphs. This means you get to the point faster, and leaves less confusion for your reader.

### Words

The English language is written in a very efficient way. The words we use more often tend to be shorter. And the words we tend to use less often tend to be much longer.

The ten most common *written* words are: *the, of, and, a, to, in, is, you, that, it*. (Note: when conversations are analysed, the most frequent word tends to be *I*)

Whenever we learn a new language, it is the shorter words that we learn first – because we need to use them often.

If you want to be clearer, simply **change your longer words for shorter equivalents**. Don't say "approximately 5 people" say "about 5 people."

You don't want to go too far, and make your text too simple. We have long words for a reason – they allow us to be precise in what we mean.

Around 10-20% of your words should be over 8 characters in length.

## Sentences

The number of words in a sentence is also important. A sentence is designed to be read out loud, without taking a breath. People's attention tends to trail off towards the end of longer sentences.

If you have a long sentence with several commas, consider splitting it into several sentences. Ideally your average sentence length should be around 15 words long.

The actual length of the sentences should vary quite a lot. Don't be afraid to use very short sentences if this is all you need to make your point. This keeps your reader's attention.

## Paragraphs

You should aim to keep your paragraphs short. Ideally, they should be 2-4 sentences.

Just as with the length of sentences, your reader's attention will drop the longer they are.

## Infogineering Clarity Rating

The *Infogineering Clarity Rating* uses word, sentence and paragraph length to tell you how clear your writing is.

Visit the free tool at [www.infogineering.net/clarity-rating/](http://www.infogineering.net/clarity-rating/) where you can paste in a block of your text and get your clarity rating.

# Formatting Techniques

Many of the main writing principles used today were developed in an era when typewriters were the normal way to produce text. The only way to format with these was to use CAPITAL LETTERS and underline.

Therefore, these principles often miss out on the benefits of the main formatting tools available today.

However, it is important to understand how to use these tools to best effect.

## Bold

Use bold to **emphasise key points**. A good way to think about bold is this: if the person were *only* to read what you place in bold, would they still understand what it is you are trying to say?

However, remember to apply the *Under 10 Rule for Bold* to ensure you don't use it too much.

For example, you should never bold entire paragraphs. Instead, you could start with "**Attention:**" or "**Warning:**" in bold at the beginning of the paragraph, then proceed with normal text. For example...

**Important Note:** Next week's meeting will be cancelled. Please submit your reports in writing before Close of Business on Wednesday

## Under 10 Rule For Bold

Never bold more than **10 percent** of your total text, or more than **10 words** in row.

Anything more, and it loses its ability to make your main points stand out.

## **Italics**

These should be used when you are stating the name of something (e.g. book, film, place, etc). For example:

In his book *How to Win Friends and Influence People*, Carnegie talks about the importance of this

Alternatively, use italics when indicating that a particular word should be emphasised when read aloud. For example:

I told her quite clearly *not* to go there.

## **Underlining**

In the days of the Internet, underlining is associated with hyperlinks. People expect to go somewhere if they click on it. If they see it on a printed page, they believe that they are missing out on a link to some website.

Therefore, **avoid underlining** normal text (even in printed documents) as it can confuse people.

## **Red Text**

This can be very effective at attracting attention, but only use it very sparingly or it will lose its impact very quickly.

It should be used to either emphasise **very important points**, to highlight that **something is wrong** or to **issue a warning**.

Just as with the *Under 10 Rule for Bold*, don't colour a whole paragraph in red.

## Bullet Points

If you have a short series of items, rather than using commas in a long sentence, just list them in bullet-point format. If they must be read in a particular order, use numbers.

## Formatting in E-mail Messages

Some e-mail programs still use "plain text." Although now in a tiny minority, you should still be aware that your bold, italics and colours will be stripped out for some of your recipients.

Therefore, make sure your message still makes sense when the formatting is removed.

## Numbers

Write out numbers in their digit format. It is easier to read 456 than *four hundred and fifty-six*.

Some people recommend that the numbers 0-9 nine should be written in word form (zero to nine) then use digits for 10 and over. However, you will probably find that it easier to stick with digits all the time, rather than switching to words depending upon their size.

## Headlines

Headlines and sub-headlines allow larger amounts of text to be split up, and for people to quickly find what they need to know.

Remember to use descriptive headlines, rather than attention-grabbing ones (e.g. "Important" and "Read This")

# Infogineering

The principles in this guide come from *Infogineering: the Process of Information Alchemy*.

This is a system that teaches you how to make the information you create and use in your daily work and life better.

For more information, visit the official website at [www.infogineering.net](http://www.infogineering.net)