



DOI 10.2478/sbe-2019-0005

SBE no. 14(1) 2019

AN OVERVIEW OF BUSINESS WRITING: CHALLENGES AND SOLUTIONS

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Abstract:

Bad writing can affect individuals and companies alike. It can cause confusion and misunderstanding, waste important resources of time and money, erode credibility and trust. On the other hand, clear writing will increase productivity, promote goodwill, and cement relations. This article discusses some of the most common problems encountered in business writing, together with their causes and the solutions proposed in the literature. Using too many words, an abstract vocabulary, and passive constructions will obscure the message and tire the reader. Conversely, the elimination of clutter, the use of plain words and personal pronouns, and the construction of sentences with clear subjects and verbs will convey the message clearly and effectively and will make your writing stand out.

Key words: *clear writing, plain language, wordiness, redundancy*

1. The business case for good writing

“Countless careers rise or fall on the ability or the inability of employees to state a set of facts, summarize a meeting or present an idea coherently,” writing expert William Zinsser tells us (2006: 165). The business letter, email, memo, report, or proposal are ways in which you present yourself to your colleagues, superiors, customers, and partners, and your writing influences the way you are perceived. Effective leaders are “clear and consistent in their communication” (Munter, 2003: x), while “vague writing dilutes leadership”, and “fuzzy writing allows fuzzy thinking” (Bernoff 2016a). Moreover, clear writing promotes productivity, as it eliminates the need for corrective communications to clarify meaning and thus saves important resources of time and money (Bernoff 2016a). The importance of writing skills in the workplace leads Garner to claim that those in business should regard themselves as professional writers belonging to “the same club as journalists, ad agencies, and book authors” (2012: xvii).

But writing is not easy, Zinsser warns us in his classic guide on the topic: “A clear sentence is no accident. Very few sentences come out right the first time, or even the third

time” (2006: 9). Consequently, the business world is seeing an increase in bad writing, which affects all layers of the language from grammar to vocabulary, punctuation, and style (Blake & Bly, 1991; Garner, 2012). A survey conducted at the Goizueta Business School in Atlanta on 1,200 business executives who spend two hours per day writing emails shows that poor grammar and punctuation, as well as an abrupt tone, are becoming increasingly common in business writing, mainly as a result of the proliferation of electronic communication (Crainer & Dearlove, 2004).

Similarly, a three-month study conducted by Bernoff (2016a) on 547 businesspeople who spend a considerable time writing and reading for work (two and 25.5 hours respectively) finds that 81 percent of these people believe that a lot of time is wasted as a result of poor writing. This is described as being “frequently ineffective because it’s too long, poorly organized, unclear, filled with jargon, and imprecise.” Based on these results, Bernoff (2016b) estimates that about 6 percent of the wages paid in America (nearly 400 billion dollars) is wasted reading bad prose. Moreover, because of an educational tradition that “rewards length over clarity” (Silverman, 2009), a university degree does not guarantee good writing skills, which means that companies spend additional money to train employees in writing or remedy their existing skills.

2. Common problems in business writing

A business document can be problematic both at a macro level (poor planning, fuzzy progression and linkage between parts, faulty construction of paragraphs and sections) and at a micro level (use of jargon and abstract words, wordiness, faulty or contorted grammar, inappropriate tone). This paper discusses the most common problems that occur in business writing at sentence level, together with their causes and the solutions proposed in the literature.

2.1 Wordiness

“Vigorous writing is concise,” Strunk writes in *The Elements of Style* (2000: 23). “A sentence should contain no unnecessary words, a paragraph no unnecessary sentences, for the same reason that a drawing should have no unnecessary lines and a machine no unnecessary parts”. This does not mean that important information and relevant details should be eliminated, and that ideas should be expressed in childlike terms—length is determined by content first and foremost. It simply requires that “every word tell” (Strunk & White, 2000: 16), and that the reader can easily understand a sentence from beginning to end without having to go back and read it again (Williams, 1990: 25).

Economy of words is an important principle of business writing for at least two reasons. First, some business documents (letters, memos, emails) should not exceed one page by definition, and using more words than necessary will waste your reader’s valuable time (former US president Ronald Reagan, while governor of California, refused to read memos that were longer than one page) (Blake & Bly, 1991: 8). Second, in today’s technological environment most people read on a screen, which reduces attention span and concentration, thus making brevity a “core value” (Bernoff, 2016a).

Zinsser (2006: 16) believes that most first drafts can be reduced by 50 percent without any loss of content or style. A simple way to do this is to eliminate redundancy. Some adjectives are redundant because their meaning is encapsulated in that of the noun they precede—*foreign imports, close proximity, first priority, group meeting, past history, future plan, personal opinion, important essentials, new breakthrough, etc.* Similarly, some adverbs carry the same meaning as the verb they are used with—*repeat again, join together, absolutely perfect, cooperate together, perfectly clear.*

Other adverbs are so vague that they add nothing to the meaning of the sentence in which they occur and weaken their accompanying verbs rather than strengthen them—*overtly, decidedly, conclusively, remotely, considerably, purposefully, admittedly, systematically, needlessly, substantially, completely, basically, actually, undoubtedly.* Referring to the word “decidedly and “all its slippery cousins”, Zinsser writes:

Every day I see in the paper that some situations are decidedly better and others are decidedly worse, but I never know how decided the improvement is, or who did the deciding, just as I never know how eminent a result is that’s eminently fair, or whether to believe a fact that’s arguably true. (2006: 69)

Consequently, the revised sentence on the right-hand side below is better than the original variant.

Admittedly, he was aware of the benefits of the use of purposefully aimed productivity bonuses. He was aware of the benefits of productivity bonuses.

Hollow adverbs and adjectives like these constitute mere padding that dilutes good writing, sapping it of vigour and credibility. Bernoff (2016a) shows how the vague superlatives used by the Yahoo CEO in the email written to the company staff when Verizon bought it (*incredible products, most iconic and universally well-liked, incredibly proud* used twice) weaken the message, making it sound contrived and insincere:

The teams here have not only built incredible products and technologies, but have built Yahoo into one of the most iconic, and universally well-liked companies in the world....I’m incredibly proud of everything that we’ve achieved, and I’m incredibly proud of our team. I love Yahoo, and I believe in all of you.

Other weak words that contribute little to the meaning of the sentence and undermine the writer’s authority are *rather, quite, very, little, pretty, almost, sometimes, only, just, enough, maybe, really, perhaps, probably, still.* These words present the facts in a tentative way and thus create the impression of indecision on the writer’s part. Although hedging, or the use of cautious language, is necessary when presenting opinions, business writing benefits from a clear, evidence-based style that shares objective details, not personal impressions (Garner, 2012: 47). This is why writing experts recommend replacing such all-purpose words with specifics, so that writing becomes “more factual and therefore more persuasive” (Blake & Bly, 1991: 29). For example, the second sentences in the pairs below are better than the first ones because they offer concrete information:

The new price strategy had quite a positive impact on sales in recent months. The 10 percent price reductions increased sales by more than 25 percent in the past six months.

He has been a very good employee Mr. Johnson has performed his responsibilities as assistant sales manager with competence, diligence, and efficiency. He was absent only four days in the six years he worked at our company.

Vague, ambiguous language is used by those who do not want to commit themselves to the truth of what they are saying, either because they are not sure of the validity of their statements or because they want to leave wiggle room and protect themselves in case something goes wrong. Moreover, indecision may reflect lack of proper planning regarding the content of the document and lack of any real information to be communicated (Lamb, 2015: 38). All these will erode the writer's authority and the confidence he inspires. "Readers want a writer who believes in himself and in what he is saying. Don't diminish that belief. Don't be kind of bold. Be bold," Zinsser advises us (2006: 69).

Moreover, Pinker (2014: 45) shows that words like *very*, *highly*, and *extremely* can undermine not only your credibility but also your intended meaning. This is because unmodified nouns and adjectives tend to be interpreted categorically ("an honest man" means "a completely honest man"), whereas by adding a modifier you are placing them on a graduated scale, thus weakening them ("a very honest man" allows an interpretation of honesty in terms of 'more-or-less' rather than 'all-or-nothing'). Consequently, the second sentence below is stronger than the first one.

Tom made it very clear that he thinks we are perfectly capable of solving this extremely complex problem. Tom made it clear that he thinks we are capable of solving this complex problem.

The unnecessary character of many adjectives and adverbs means that good writing uses mostly verbs and nouns. "Write with verbs and nouns, not with adjectives and adverbs" sounds Strunk's classic advice (2000: 71). This advice has been partly confirmed by quantitative studies conducted on large corpora of prose. Thus, in an analysis of the distribution of parts of speech in good and bad writing, Liberman (2015) shows that good fiction writers such as Jane Austen, Charles Dickens, Mark Twain, and Ernest Hemingway, as well as good non-fiction writers, use relatively many nouns and verbs (about 40 percent of the total of words) as compared to adjectives and adverbs (about 14 percent of the total), with slightly more verbs and adverbs than nouns and adjectives (28 and 27 percent respectively).

Bad prose, on the other hand, (winners of the Denis Dutton "Bad Writing" Contest), as well as highly technical writing, contains approximately the same percentage of nouns

and verbs (about 43 percent) and adjectives and adverbs (about 16 percent), but significantly more nouns and adjectives (about 39 percent of the total) than verbs and adverbs (about 20 percent). These findings seem to indicate the fact that verbs are the most important elements of a good sentence, over and above all other parts of speech.

The following example from Garner illustrates this idea. The first sentence contains relatively few verbs (*is, facilitate, engage, maximize, provide*) and many more nouns (*object, enterprise, development, capacities, colleges, organizations, collaboration, provision, services, resources, number, stakeholders, level, communication, prioritization, needs, community*) and adjectives (*greater, non-for-profit, heightened, available, local, educational, particular*). In contrast, the second sentence uses comparatively many verbs (*seeks, help, work*) and fewer nouns and adjectives. Moreover, the verbs used in this sentence are strong verbs that express concrete actions, carrying the full weight of the 'story' presented.

<p>The object of this enterprise is to facilitate the development of greater capacities for community colleges and non-for-profit neighborhood organizations to engage in heightened collaboration in regard to the provision of community services that would maximize the available resources from a number of community stakeholders and to provide a greater level of communication about local prioritization of educational needs with the particular community.</p>	<p>This project seeks to help community colleges and nonprofit neighborhood groups work more efficiently together. (Garner, 2012: 64)</p>
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The prevalence of verbs over nouns in good writing is the result of the fact that verbs are very rarely needless in the sentence. As shown before, wordiness involves the excessive use of adjectives and adverbs, but also of abstract nouns, prepositions, and other parts of speech used in long expressions that have shorter equivalents—*with regard to (regarding, about), in the majority of instances (most), at this point in time (now), after the conclusion of (after), at all times (always), can be in a position to (can), in the event that (if), prior to the time when (before), be of the opinion (believe), in spite of the fact that (although), in the process of being (being), in many instances/cases (often), with the possible exception of (except), due to the fact that (because), until such time as (until), for the purpose of (for), point of view (viewpoint)*. Consequently, the first sentences below are wordy whereas the revised variants are concise and clear.

<p>At the present time we are experiencing a slump in sales.</p>	<p>Sales are falling.</p>
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<p>The state provided funds for the purpose of research.</p>	<p>The state provided funds for research.</p>
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<p>Due to the fact that you have requested an</p>	<p>Because you have requested an extension</p>
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extension of your due date, we are now in a position to make an offer to you for the following plan of payment: \$1,500 by the 15 of the month for the next three consecutive months.

of your due date, we can offer you the following payment plan: \$1,500 by the 15 of the month for the next three months.

Many empty expressions are formed with *nature, character, type, kind*.

Activities of an illegal character have been conducted in the area.

Illegal activities have been conducted in the area.

The manager explained the procedure in a clear manner.

The manager explained the procedure clearly.

When superfluous verbs occur in a sentence, they are usually weak verbs in phrases like *there is, it is important, it is notable, it is interesting to note that, it should be pointed out, before we begin, if I might add, I can assure you that, it is interesting to note, etc.* These phrases slow down the reader and add nothing to the meaning of the sentence, so they should be eliminated.

It is notable that sales increased by more than 10 percent in the third quarter of 2017.

Sales increased by more than 10 percent in the third quarter of 2017.

The weak expressions *there is, it is, this is*, and other variants often combine with relative clauses introduced by *which is, who is, that is*. The relative pronouns merely repeat information introduced earlier in the sentence and can be replaced by noun phrases or simply eliminated.

There is no supplier that can offer these products.

No supplier can offer these products.

This is a product which can increase our sales.

This product can increase our sales.

2.2 Romance words

English contains a large stock of Romance words borrowed from French and Latin after the Norman Conquest and during the Renaissance. This component of the language has contributed to a "stylistic inflation", as many writers believed that using Latinate words would make them sound "learned and authoritative" (Williams, 1990: 5). Although a varied vocabulary and the occasional use of an unusual word are important elements of good prose (Pinker, 2014: 22), most writing experts recommend the use of simple rather than pretentious words (Strunk & White, 2000; Zinsser, 2006; Munter, 2003). "Do not be tempted by a twenty-dollar word when there is a ten-center handy, ready and able,"

sounds Strunk and White's (2000: 77) famous edict, while Zinsser (2006: 14) advises us, "Don't dialogue with someone you can talk to. Don't interface with anybody."

In the context of the emergence of English as the lingua franca of the modern world, with more non-native than native speakers, unusual words can put up barriers to communication and cause big financial losses. This is why business writing benefits from the use of simple, every-day words that are more common and easily understood than their "learned" and usually longer equivalents: *help* (*assistance*), *many* (*numerous*), *first* (*initial*), *do* (*implement*), *try* (*attempt*), *called* (*referred to*), *enough* (*sufficient*), *rest* (*remainder*), *use* (*utilize*), *pay* (*remunerate*), *rank* (*prioritize*), *end* (*terminate*), *find out* (*ascertain*), *start* (*commence*), *guess* (*conjecture*), *complete*, *finish* (*finalize*), *possible* (*feasible*), *best* (*optimum*), *copy* (*duplicate*), etc. (Blake and Bly, 1991: 40).

Similarly, long phrases that contain big words should be replaced with shorter and more common expressions: *at your earlier convenience* (*as soon as you can*), *we are in receipt of* (*we've received*), *as per our telephone conversation* (*as we discussed*), *pursuant to your instructions* (*as you asked*), etc. (Garner, 2012: 62). Consequently, the sentences in the first column below are preferred to those in the second one.

Upon receipt of your check, we will dispatch your order.

When we receive your check, we'll send your order.

Pursuant to our discussion, I am forwarding a duplicate of our price list.

As we discussed, I'm sending you a copy of our price list.

Prior to the meeting, we attempted to finalize the report.

Before the meeting, we tried to finish the report.

2.3 Nominalization

Nominalizations are abstract nouns formed from verbs by adding a suffix like *-ation*, *-ment*, *-ing*, *-ance*, e.g., *recommendation* (*recommend*), *intention* (*intend*), *decision* (*decide*), *application* (*apply*), *implementation* (*implement*), *agreement* (*agree*), etc. By replacing concrete verbs with abstract nouns, writing based on nominalization allows the writer to eliminate the agent of the action described and is therefore impersonal and vague. For example, the first sentences in the pairs below do not specify who does the action and are therefore opaque and difficult to read as the reader is forced to reassemble them mentally in order to make sense of them. The second sentences, on the other hand, use strong verbs and their logical subjects and are thus specific, direct, and easy to read (Williams, 1990: 24).

There has been an affirmative decision for program termination.

The director decided to terminate the program.

An evaluation of the program will allow greater efficiency in service to clients.

We will evaluate the program so that we can serve clients better.

Williams (1990: 20) explains this contrast in terms of a fundamental form of human behavior – storytelling. Storytelling is the most effective way to communicate information “quickly and persuasively.” It is built around characters and their actions, and in clear writing these characters, or the psychological subjects, are also the grammatical subjects of the sentence, while the actions performed by these characters are expressed by verbs. Williams shows that these two central components of a story—characters and their actions—can be identified in all types of prose, even in the most abstract, discursive ones. For example, the psychological subjects of the revised sentences above are “the director” and “we”, and their actions are “decided” and “will evaluate”.

Poor writing, on the other hand, does not tell a story with characters and their actions; instead it uses abstract nouns which are the grammatical but not the logical subjects of the sentence, and weak, general-purpose verbs (*be, make, prove, render*) which replace strong verbs, merely acting as “handles” for these nouns— *make a recommendation/distribution/determination/decision* (instead of *recommend, distribute, determine, decide*), *it is our intention, there is an anticipation, we are in agreement* (instead of *we intend, we anticipate, we agree*), etc.

Note how the complex and impersonal sentence below becomes plainspoken and clear when abstract nouns, pretentious words and weak verbs are replaced by concrete, common nouns and strong verbs, and the logical and grammatical subjects are aligned.

<p>No consideration or surrender of Beco Stock will be required of shareholders of Beco in return for the shares of Unis Common Stock issued pursuant to the Distribution.</p>	<p>You will not have to turn in your shares of Beco stock or pay any money to receive your shares of Unis common stock from the spin-off. (<i>Plain English Handbook: 24</i>)</p>
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This example also shows that business writing becomes more direct and appealing when it uses the personal pronouns *I, we, our, you, and your*. These pronouns allow the writer to simulate a “conversation” with the reader and thus “sound like a human being, not a corporation” (Garner, 2012: 65), they force him to use simple words instead of abstract ones and keep sentences short (Plain English Handbook: 22). Moreover, Pinker (2014: 53) argues that first- and second-person pronouns help the reader keep track of the ‘cast of characters’ in the ‘story’ and thus maintain his interest and focus. The following example from Garner shows how personal pronouns can trigger the rearrangement of the sentence in plain, conversational language, by eliminating abstract nouns, passive constructions, and lengthy expressions.

<p>The reduction in monthly assessments which will occur beginning next month has been made fiscally feasible as a result of leveraging our substantial reductions in expenditures.</p>	<p>We’ll be cutting your assessments beginning next month because we’ve saved on expenses. (Garner, 2012: 61)</p>
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However, Insley (2014: 77) warns that the “you” approach is not suitable when writing to a collectivist culture like Japan, where singling out one person is considered inappropriate. In this case, a “we” or “company-oriented” approach is recommended.

Business writing sometimes uses long phrases which consist of several words strung together. Experts recommend that, unless they are established terms, these phrases should be avoided as they make the reader work hard to infer their meaning, the relations between the component words not being always clear (Biber et. al, 2000). Zinsser (2006: 74) illustrates this point with a phrase made up of five words—*communication facilitation skills development intervention* – probably meaning “a program to help students write better”.

2.4 Passive voice

Abstract nouns are often accompanied by the passive voice. The passive voice deletes the agent of the action or places it in the background, and highlights the patient instead. The active voice, on the other hand, uses the agent as the grammatical subject of the sentence and the patient as the direct object of the verb.

The customer bought the product. (active voice)

The product was bought (by the customer). (passive voice)

Although passive constructions are sometimes useful (for example, when the agent of the action is not important or not known, when the writer does not want to take responsibility for an action or wants to avoid blaming the addressee), business writing generally benefits from the use of active sentences. This is because passive sentences allow the doer of the action to remain hidden and can therefore be abused by mistake-makers and responsibility dodgers. Moreover, the gaps in the structure of the sentence results in ambiguity and vagueness. Bernoff (2016a) believes that rewriting a passive sentence in the active voice forces the writer to fill these gaps in his thinking and therefore improves the overall message.

3. Causes of bad writing

Poor writing may come from a “mere habit of wordiness” (Strunk & White, 2000: 42), combined with an educational tradition that “rewards length over clarity” (Silverman, 2009). Lack of proper planning and the inclusion of irrelevant details and unnecessary information are other common causes of wordy prose. As a result, the revision process goes beyond matters of vocabulary and grammar and becomes a way for the writer “to organize and clarify his thoughts” (Pinker, 2014: 37).

This idea is amply illustrated by Swift (1973) with the example of a general manager revising a memo to his staff regarding company policy on copier use. As contradictions, redundancies, and wordiness are eliminated from the document and tone is corrected, a clearer message emerges and the revision of the document turns into a revision of the policy itself. The clear expression of the message goes beyond linguistic competence and becomes “a constant management challenge of major importance.”

In the preface to the Plain English Handbook, Warren Buffett mentions another cause of bad writing: the writer doesn't want the reader to understand the subject, obscuring it under a veil of pompous vocabulary, technical terms, and contorted grammar. The idea of opaque, complex writing used as an instrument to mislead the audience, hide the truth, or dodge responsibility was also formulated by George Orwell in *Politics and the English Language*:

The great enemy of clear language is insincerity. When there is a gap between one's real and one's declared aims, one turns as it were instinctively to long words and exhausted idioms, like a cuttlefish spurting out ink.

Abstract, inflated language becomes thus a euphemism for unpleasant things, which it manages to speak about without forcing the reader to picture mentally. For example, when millions of peasants are "robbed of their farms and sent trudging along the roads with no more than they can carry", this is called *transfer of population* or *rectification of frontiers*, Orwell explains.

This "verbal camouflage" is a strategy used by many companies in their external communications. Zinsser (2006: 14) shows that when the Digital Equipment Corporation cut 3,000 jobs, these were referred to as "involuntary methodologies", not as layoffs; when General Motors closed one of its plants, that was a "volume-related production-schedule adjustment"; companies that go bankrupt have "a negative cash-flow position" or "money problem areas". When Samsung telephones had a problem which caused them to catch fire, the company's statement mentioned "incidents" involving "a "battery cell issue" (Bernoff, 2016b), and companies that are unlikely to meet targets say that they are faced with "a challenging growth strategy" (Fielden, 1982).

But hiding mistakes under a veil of complex, opaque language will erode your credibility as a writer (Garner, 2012; Lamb, 2015). This observation was made as early as Aristotle, who, while maintaining that unusual words can help capture the audience's attention and avoid boredom, also warns that too many elevated and unusual words will obscure the meaning of the speech and cause the audience to become suspicious of the orator and his intentions.

Some writing experts believe that pretentious language can be used as an intimidation tool to preserve power, prestige, and privilege, or from the desire to inflate ideas that sound too simple (Williams, 1990: 11). This, in turn, is a consequence of the generally-held belief that simple writing reflects simplistic thinking. However, a simple style is the result of hard work, and it characterizes clear thinkers, not uneducated people. This tenet is illustrated by Blake and Bly's translation of some famous quotes into complex language (1991: 6) – Franklin Roosevelt's "The only thing we have to fear is fear itself" would become "The potential for fearing the future is actually the greatest deterrent to conquering our apprehension about the economy," while Bernard Baruch's "Buy low and sell high" would turn into "It's advisable to purchase stocks when their prices are depressed and to sell them at the top of the market".

Arguing from the perspective of the cognitive scientist, Pinker (2014: 61) maintains that "The curse of knowledge is the single best explanation (...) why good people write bad prose." The curse of knowledge is a sort of cognitive myopia which causes the writer to assume that the reader knows more about the subject presented than is the case, so he

does not supply all the necessary details and explanations, writing in a way which is loaded with jargon, abbreviations, and abstractions. So using complex language and technical terms is not a symptom of snobbery or dishonesty; it reflects a way of thinking that characterizes those who have become very knowledgeable in a particular field.

Fielden (1982) believes that style, or “the choice of words, sentences, and paragraph format”, can convey important pragmatic information regarding the power relations between the participants in the communication process and the content and purpose of the message. Thus, high-level executives prefer a simple, personal style, while lower-level managers “often find themselves afraid to write so forthrightly” and use a more complex, impersonal style in order to look smart to superiors, or, on the contrary, diffident and unbossy. Fielden also shows that a simple, direct style is appropriate when conveying good news or neutral information, while a passive, impersonal style is used in negative situations, or when the writer is in a lower position than the reader. For example, when writing to reject an invitation, the use of technical and Latinate vocabulary puts a distance between the writer and the reader and thus “removes the tone of personal rejection.” However, a simple, readable, and accessible style, the modern business style, is something that “almost everybody in business likes”, and “most business writing situations call for.”

4. Conclusions

Good writing is based on the simple principle that the writer has something interesting to say and is willing to say it as clearly and honestly as possible. As such, it requires the ability to eliminate everything that would slow down the reader or force him to work too hard in order to make sense of the message, from wordiness to abstract, impersonal language and awkward grammatical constructions. Clear writing is simple without being simplistic, it is concise without being vague or incomplete, and it engages the reader without falling into excessive informality.

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