

6 easy ways to improve your writing in 15 minutes, guaranteed

Spear Communications

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Use these six simple tips, and you'll find that over time they become habit

We all know that writing is tough work.

Crafting prose that grabs and holds the reader's attention is even tougher.

Making someone do something as a result of your words?

Wow, that's the toughest task of all.

I should know.

I've studied the mechanics of language for decades.

Teacher, journalist, ghost writer, editorialist, communications pro—I've done it all.

But turning out powerful, compelling work never gets easier for me.

The good news is that there are things you can do to make your writing more effective.

You don't have to go back to school or spend money on books and workshops.

You do have to exercise discipline, however.

Use the tips below on your next blog post, essay or press release, and I guarantee you'll improve your writing.

1. Trim the fat

Alexander Pope was right. "Words are like Leaves; and where they most abound, Much Fruit of Sense beneath is rarely found."

Early drafts are flabby, up to 20% fat. Take it out. Start with the adverbs and adjectives you ~~basically~~ don't ~~really~~ need.

When the fat is gone, your prose will be more clear and muscular.

"How do I know when I'm done trimming?" you ask.

When you have pared your work to the bones of your message.

Avoid the temptation to include all that can be said on your topic.

Your mission is to remove all that you can, thereby liberating your message.

2. Trim some more

One last go-through will add shine.

3. Replace the driftwood

These are the dead phrases the ocean of your mind tosses to the shore.

You know them well. We all do, because for many they are default expressions.

Having said this, in terms of, at the end of the day.

Find other words. Or, better yet, don't. Often you can remove the driftwood and lose nothing.

4. Experiment with word order

Don't settle for the first wording that comes to mind. Try three or four variations, choosing the one that is most clear and elegant.

There is more than one way to state an idea.

5. Know what words mean by forming a mental picture

Powerful language appeals to our senses. Can you see that abstract, multi-syllable word in your

mind? Or is it looking foggy in there? Is there a simple English word that will do?

When possible, use an object from everyday life.

Abstract language will creep like a slug across the page. You want your words to be vital as a millipede.

To write lively prose, knowing the definitions of words is not enough.

Consult a dictionary to discover the metaphor.

Ostracize refers to potsherds, clue to a ball of string. Panic is what you feel when stumbling upon the god Pan in the woods.

To know what words mean is to populate your prose with the living objects of our world, rather than with terminology.

You want to move, shock, awaken and persuade the reader, not put her into a coma.

6. Give some thought to the architecture of your prose

Have an opening statement, a middle section, and an ending.

This doesn't have to be complicated.

It can be as simple as stating your topic, building on it with a few supporting points, and closing with a summary observation.

Think of these as your foundation, walls and roof.

This isn't only good argumentation, it's aesthetically pleasing.

And the goal of all writing is to give pleasure—the pleasure of learning, of surprise, of insight, of practical guidance.



Use these six simple tips, and you'll find that over time they become habit.

The fruits of this small, added attention will be abundant.



- Wayne K. Spear is the Founder and President of Spear Communications. This article is part of his ongoing series called "Thought Bombs."

