Basic Principles of Effective Written Communication

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Basic Principles of Effective Written Communication

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Principle 1: Write coherent sentences

Make sure each sentence is complete and devoted to one topic. Do not include information that is not related to the main topic of the sentence.

> **Example:**
>
> Incorrect: *I like reading, horse riding, and I also work as a security guard.*
>
> The sentence above is about one's hobbies. Yet, the last part, "I also work as a security guard", seems to be related to one's occupation (and not hobbies). Therefore, this last part does not belong to this sentence. A new sentence should be created to discuss one's occupation.
>
> Correct: *I work as a security guard. In my spare time I like reading and horse riding.*

Principle 2: Write coherent paragraphs

One paragraph is one unit of thought. Do not include sentences that are not related to the main thought into the paragraph.

> **Example:**
>
> Incorrect: *My hobbies are reading and horse riding. I like reading novels and science fiction. I read at least one book every month. Riding horses is another hobby that I enjoy. Every weekend I jump on my horse and steer it into the desert. The desert in Arizona is quite different from the desert in New Mexico.*

The paragraph above discusses one's hobbies. This is the main topic or theme of the paragraph. The last sentence ("The desert in Arizona is quite different from the desert in New Mexico") deviates from this main topic. This sentence has to be removed from the paragraph.

Principle 3: Use short sentences

Using short sentences makes it easier for the reader to understand the intended message. Every long sentence can be broken down into several short, simple sentences.

Example:

Incorrect: *I like riding horses since horses are very energetic yet, at the same time, caring animals.*

While the sentence above is quite simple, it can be made even simpler and easier to understand by splitting it into shorter sentences.

Correct: *I like riding horses. They are very energetic animals. Horses are also very caring.*

Principle 4: Be specific

If one mentions something in writing, the reader needs to know exactly what is being discussed. Otherwise, do not mention this at all. Being specific does not mean increasing the length of the writing by adding many details. It is more about using precise terms and being factual.

Example:

Incorrect: *Several organizational units are currently facing certain issues with respect to the new managerial approaches implemented by the new leadership.*

There is much ambiguity in this message. The sentence above should be rewritten to include specific details.

Correct: *The new President decreased budgets for the IT and Marketing departments. As a result, both departments laid off people and cancelled all new projects.*

Principle 5: Omit redundant words

Delete words that do not convey any valuable information. It is very easy to "bury" the intended message in the clutter of words and expressions that are not necessary for transmitting the message. Declutter writing to reduce its length and make it easier for a reader to understand the message.

Example:

Incorrect: *Based on what I have read in the book and my understanding of the material, I think it can be recommended that ABC Corporation should consider acquiring and implementing a new enterprise system.*

Correct: *ABC Corporation should implement an enterprise resource planning system.*

Principle 6: Keep it simple

If one wants to make his or her message easy to understand, then simple sentence structures and simple vocabulary should be used.

Example:

Incorrect: *This system is designed with the aim of helping improve the efficiency and effectiveness with which people find parking spots in the central business district of Chicago.*

Correct: *This system will make parking in Chicago downtown easier.*

Principle 7: Use active voice

Use active voice to make the message simple and direct.

Example:

Incorrect: *Active voice should be used in sentences.*

Correct: *Use active voice in sentences.*

Note that the second sentence is shorter and has a simpler grammatical construction.

Principle 8: Avoid jargon, idioms, acronyms, and cultural references

Avoid jargon, idioms, acronyms, and cultural references to make the intended message easy to understand for a broader audience. In some situations, jargon, idioms, and cultural references can make the message easier to understand. They can also make the message more vivid and memorable. All this happens under the condition that the writer and his or her audience share a common professional, linguistic, and cultural background.

Principle 9: Structure the writing

Any written message should have a simple and clear logical structure. A well-structured message has a "built-in" roadmap for the reader to follow. This roadmap has enough signs and clues that help a reader to travel from start (no understanding of writer's ideas) to finish (complete understanding of the writer's ideas).

One should always put some thought into the structure of a paragraph or a report.

Example:

Question: Why do you like living in Murray?

Answer:

Thesis Statement: *I like living in Murray because of (sub-point 1) great weather and (sub-point 2) wonderful people*

Explain the thesis statement by breaking it down into two sub points and discussing each of the sub points in more detail. For each of the sub-points, you can provide additional details to make your sub-points more understandable.

Explanation of sub-point 1:

It is (1.1) sunny and (1.2) warm in Murray all year around.

Murray has clear skies 300 days a year. Murray's average annual temperature is 20 degrees Celsius

Explanation of sub-point 2:

People are (2.1) friendly and (2.2) helpful in Murray.

People smile at me whenever I go out. People in Murray are always ready to help if I get lost in the city.
Conclusion:

Weather and people make Murray a perfect place to live in

I like living in Murray because of (1) great weather and (2) wonderful people. First of all, the weather is great in Murray. It is (1.1) sunny and (1.2) warm in Murray all year around. Murray has clear skies 300 days a year. Murray's average annual temperature is 20 degrees Celsius. Secondly, people are (2.1) friendly and (2.2) helpful in Murray. Strangers on the street smile at me whenever we make an eye contact. When I get lost, people on the street are always willing to give me directions. Weather and people make Murray a perfect place to live in. Everyone should visit Murray.

Principle 10: Put important things first

The essence of the message should be stated upfront. The first part of the message should contain not only the main idea, but also a brief justification as to why the message is important. Clearly articulating the importance of the message can motivate the readers to understand and remember the message. All the details, clarifications and examples should follow the main message, not precede it.

Example:

Incorrect: *It is easy to "bury" the main message among the numerous details. A reader may not have time or may not be patient enough to cut through a lengthy introduction. Thus, the main message will never be delivered. That is why the essence of the message should be provided upfront.*

This paragraph should be revised so that the central message ("put the essence of the message upfront") and the motivation behind this central message ("otherwise the message will never be delivered") should be moved to the beginning of the paragraph.

Correct: *The essence of the message should be provided upfront. Otherwise, the main message may never be delivered. It is easy to "bury" the main message among the numerous details. A reader may not have time or may not be patient enough to cut through a lengthy introduction.*

Principle 11: Avoid strong claims and hype

Avoid strong claims and hype in formal writing. Any kind of extreme position is usually wrong by definition. Moreover, hype language may make the reader doubt whether the message can be trusted. Give the reader facts and let him or her decide whether this is "without any doubt the most effective solution."

Example:

Incorrect: *Customer Relationship Management (CRM) systems are, without any doubt, the most effective solution for improving customer service.*

"Without any doubt" and "the most effective solutions" are very strong claims that need to be backed up by strong evidence. In the absence of such evidence, these claims should be removed from the sentence.

<u>Correct</u>: *Customer Relationship Management (CRM) systems can improve customer service.*

Principle 12: Be factual

In order for writing to be effective in transmitting useful information, one needs to concentrate on facts. Try to separate facts from emotions and interpretations of those facts.

Example:

<u>Incorrect</u>: *Being the wise man he is, Warren Buffet quickly bought the stock of Goldman Sachs.*

In this sentence, only the fact that Warren Buffet bought stock of Goldman Sachs is a real-world fact. Whether he bought stock quickly (as opposed to putting a lot of thought into this) and whether he is a wise man are both personal judgements or interpretations. Judgements and interpretations are often subject to debate. Therefore, unless expressing personal opinion is the goal, try to avoid them in formal writing, especially if there are no data or convincing arguments to support the opinion. Thus, this sentence can be modified as follows:

<u>Correct</u>: *Warren Buffet bought the stock of Goldman Sachs.*

Principle 13: Pay attention to spelling

Spelling mistakes can lead to two problems. First, it makes a literate reader "stumble": the reader pauses for a moment to register a misspelled word and figure out the correct spelling of the intended word. Second, spelling errors also make it less likely that the reader will take the written message seriously or

remember it. Why should anyone pay attention to a message from someone who does not know correct spelling of the words he is using or simply does not care enough to proofread his or her text?

Principle 14: Pay attention to grammar

It is important to master some of the most important rules of grammar. These rules are useful conventions that aid in delivering a message. Violating these conventions may not constitute a fatal flaw, yet may seriously distort the intended message or simply distract the reader from understanding the intended message.

Capitalization

Capitalization is meant to show that a particular word or a group of words is special. Typically, capitalization is used to show that certain words are proper nouns or adjectives derived from those proper nouns. Proper nouns are *names* of people, places, concepts, and phenomena. Proper nouns refer to a specific entity rather than a general category of people or things.

For example, if one says, "I'm having dinner with Michael today," the word Michael is capitalized. It is capitalized because it is a name of a person. This sentence refers to a specific person with this name.

But if one says, "I'm having dinner with a friend of mine today," the word friend is not capitalized. The reason it is not capitalized is that it does not refer to a specific friend. It is implied that the person has many friends and he or she is having dinner with one of them. The person does not want to be specific as to who the person is.

Definite and indefinite articles: "the" and "a/an"

An article is like an adjective that gives additional information about the noun it precedes. English language has two articles: "the" and "a/an". "The" is the so-called *definite* article. "A/an" is the *indefinite* article.

"The" is used to indicate a specific member of a group. For example, "On Monday I went to the zoo to see the giraffe." This is what this statement is implying. First of all, because "the" is in front of the word "zoo", one is talking about a specific zoo (out of all zoos that exist in the world). Perhaps, the writer is talking about the

zoo that is located in the city where the writer lives (and there is only one zoo in the city or the intended recipient of this message which zoo the writer is referring to). Also, the writer is talking about a specific giraffe. Perhaps somebody mentioned this giraffe before to the writer, and now the writer is reporting that he or she went there and saw the giraffe. Or, perhaps, there is only one animal in the city zoo. That is why one uses "the" – to show reference to that specific animal.

"A/an" is used to refer to a non-specific entity within a group. If one writes, "In order to see a giraffe, one needs to visit a zoo," the implied meaning of the two words (zoo and giraffe) is different due to the indefinite article "a" being in front of both words. This is the meaning of this sentence: if one wants to see a giraffe (meaning any giraffe of the many giraffes that exist on Earth, with no preference as to which specific animal to see), one needs to go to any zoo (meaning any zoo out of the many zoos that exist in the world, with no indication as to which specific zoo needs to be visited). In other words, no definite elephant or zoo is implied by this sentence.

Grammatical parallelism

When listing things (e.g. using sentences in a paragraph or bullet points), the items in the list are expressed in the same grammatical forms. For example, all items in a list need to be nouns (or noun phrases) or verbs (or verb phrases). Nouns or noun phrases should not be used in a list where most items are verbs or verb phrases.

Example:

Incorrect: *I like lakes, mountains and I like to ride horses.*
The problem with the sentence above is that the last item in the list, "I like to ride horses," is expressed in a way that is not grammatically parallel to the first two items: "lakes" and "mountains". The last item is a verb phrase while the first two items are nouns. Because of that, the sentence needs to be revised:

Correct: *I like swimming in lakes, hiking in mountains and riding on horses.*

Singular vs. plural

In English, nouns can be classified into two groups: *countable* and *non-countable*. Countable nouns are the ones that can be counted. Examples of countable nouns include:

Dog, airplane, house, dish

Countable nouns can have a singular (one item) and plural (more than one item). The plural form of count nouns is formed by adding an *s* or *es* to the end of the word. Add *es* (instead of *s*) when words end with *-s*, *-sh*, *-ch*, *-x*, or *-z*. Thus, the plural forms of countable nouns are expressed as follows:

Dogs, airplanes, houses, dishes

Please note that there are some irregular plurals:

Singular	Plural
man	men
woman	women
tooth	teeth
mouse	mice
child	children

Non-countable nouns represent entities that cannot be counted (e.g. a substance such as milk). Thus, nouns that cannot be counted do not have a plural form:

Research, milk, happiness (and not researches, milks, happiness's).

If in doubt, check a dictionary for a plural form of a particular word.

Tense

One should use present tense when describing things (e.g. writing a literature review or explaining how a particular software algorithm works). This makes text sound more current and, perhaps, makes it easier to understand:

Example:

<u>Incorrect</u>: *In this article I will demonstrate how to use genetic algorithms for finding solutions to profit maximizations problems. Genetic algorithms were used by both researchers and practitioners to find an approximate solution to an optimization problem. This article extends genetic algorithms to the economics context.*

Note the first sentence contains future tense. The second one is in the past tense. And the third one is in the present tense. All sentences need to be converted to present tense.

<u>Correct</u>: *This article demonstrates how to use genetic algorithms for finding solutions to profit maximizations problems. Genetic algorithms are used by both researchers and practitioners to find an approximate solution to an optimization problem. This article extends genetic algorithms to the economics context.*

Principle 15: Use proper punctuation

Proper punctuation divides the written message into meaningful parts or shows the relationships among those parts. This makes it easier for a reader to understand the message.

Correct usage of a comma

The rules below explain when commas should be used.

Rule 1: When three or more items are listed.

Example: *He ate a sandwich, a bag of chips, and a banana.*

Rule 2: When two adjectives are used in front of a noun and the order of these adjectives is not important.

Example: *He was a shrewd, experienced businessman.*

Rule 3: When two independent clauses are connected by a connector word, such as "and", "but", etc.

Example: *Joan did not know why the numbers in her tax returns did not add up, and she blamed her accountant for that.*

But please note that if a subject does not appear in the second clause, then it is not necessary to use a comma.

Example: *Joan did not know why the numbers in her tax returns did not add up and could not come up with any reasonable explanation.*

Rule 4: When a sentence starts with a dependent clause or an introductory sentence, put a comma after it to separate it from the independent clause.

Example: If you are not sure about your future career plans, then do not declare your major in the first year.

When an introductory sentence is short, it is not necessary to put a comma after it.

Example: *When you are ready we can go and shop for a good used car.*

It is usually not necessary to have comma after a dependent clause when it follows the independent clause:

Example: *Do not invest your money into stock if you cannot afford to lose it.*

Rule 5: Use commas to separate the so-called nonessential words. These words are typically used for clarifying things within a sentence.

Example: *John, who was an experienced accountant, knew that creative accounting could lead to the downfall of the entire company.*

Rule 6: Use commas after short words that introduce a sentence. These words include *well, yes, hello, why, yet*, etc.

Example: *Hey, but you knew what you were getting into when you signed the contract!*
Example: *Well, this is a totally different story.*

Rule 7: Use commas around expressions that interrupt the flow of a sentence. These words include *by the way*, *after all*, *however*, *nevertheless*, etc.

Example: *This is, by the way, one of our best football players.*

Rule 8: Use commas to set off a phrase that addresses or references a person.

Example: *Yes, my friend, you are also invited.*

Example: *I can assure you, Mom, that this will not happened again.*

Example: *And you, John, should have produced much better results by now.*

Rule 9: A comma should be used to separate the day of the month from the year.

Example: *He visited Cuba on June 5, 2005.*

Please note that there is no comma if only month and year are used.

Example: *He visited Cuba in June 2005.*

Rule 10: A comma should be used to separate a question from a statement.

Example: *This is a nice town, isn't it?*

Rule 11: A comma should be used to separate two parts of sentence that are contrasted.

Example: *These nachos are mine, not yours!*

Rule 12: Use commas to set off certain introductory words, such as for instance, that is, i.e., e.g., namely, when these words are followed by a list of items.

Example: *His backpack contained several essential items, namely, a bottle of water, a pack of chewing gum, and a cellphone.*

Rule 13: A comma should be used before "etc."

> Example: *Examples of healthy snacks include carrots, nuts, yoghurt, bananas, etc.*

A comma should also be used after etc. when the word is used in the middle of a sentence.

> Example: *Please bring bananas, apples, grapes, etc., to keep your carbs level up between the races.*

Correct usage of a semicolon

If one writes using short, simple sentences, then semicolons are not needed. In fact, semicolons often play a role identical to that of a period: to separate two sentences. The only difference is that a semicolon is used to show that the two sentences are closely related.

> Example: *Martha worked very hard on her golf swing; the results were immediate and impressive.*

Yet, it can be argued that the same effect can be achieved by separating the two sentences with a period and then indicating that the sentences are closely related using the wording within those sentences to link them.

> Example: *Martha worked very hard on her golf swing. Her hard word produced immediate and impressive results.*

Principle 16: Use text formatting to aid understanding

Font type

Different fonts can be used to separate visually different text sections. For example, subheadings may use font type and size different from the main text. Similarly, tables and mini-cases may use a smaller font. Conservative uses of different font types can be a great way to improve visual separation within the text and to make it easier for the reader to understand what type of text he or she is reading.

Unless the goal is to decorate a promotional brochure or a flyer, one should stick to one or two commonly used fonts for the text. These fonts should be familiar to the reader and easy to read. Once the number of fonts is greater than three, the text may look cluttered. This may diminish the aesthetic appeal of the text and may distract the reader.

Emphasis in-text

One may use in-text formatting to emphasize certain words or phrases within a sentence. Using *italics* instead of **bold** is preferable. Italics can be easily spotted by the reader, yet it does not look as intrusive as bold font. The use of bold font should be limited to titles only. Regardless of whether choosing italics or bold for emphasis, try to use emphasis as little as possible. A text with a lot of emphasis is irritating to the eye and hard to read.

Spacing

Use spacing to provide a visual structure to the written message. For example, one should leave a space (after a period) between two sentences. Also, use spacing to separate paragraphs. This is usually done either by indenting the first line of each paragraph or by leaving a blank line between two paragraphs.

Principle 17: Use tables and figures to aid understanding

Tables and Figures are very valuable for organizing and communicating data in a way that makes it easy for a reader to understand, analyze and interpret. Both tables and figures should be accompanied by text that introduces a table or a figure and provides analysis. Analysis should not duplicate the information provided by a table or a figure. For example, if a table lists annual sales data of a company for the last five years, it will be redundant to list those sales figures in a paragraph as well. Instead, the related paragraph should be used to provide some highlights, point to trends or patterns, and provide interpretations for those patterns.