

Writing Tip: Use Short, Simple Words

Adapted from *Writing to Get Things Done*® seminar

Readers are likely to stop reading at the first point of confusion—and this is true whether the writer is a CEO or an intern. So, to keep readers on-message, use short, simple words to make your meaning clear.



Stan Berry

Remember the Purpose of Business Writing

Business professionals are neither reading at leisure nor reading for pleasure. And they're certainly not reading by choice.

Instead, they're reading to get things done. They read to find out how your document affects them: what they need to do, why/ how and when. The true mark of a well-written document is measured by how quickly readers can answer these questions.

Use the Power of Short Words

So, put away that thesaurus! A ten-dollar synonym for a one-dollar word is not worth two cents to the business reader. Additionally, those ten-dollar words produce a stilted, unnatural style.

Long words make for difficult reading

Maintaining non-technical vocabulary simplification is not always a facile principle to pursue. Some writers are more concerned with demonstrating their erudition than they are with presenting straightforward information. Calamitously, these writers fail to become mindful of their users.

Short, simple words make for easy reading

Keeping non-technical words simple is not always an easy thing to do. Some writers are more concerned with showing their intelligence than they are with presenting straightforward information. Unfortunately, these writers forget their readers.

Long words by themselves are not difficult to understand. But, as our example shows, when buried under an avalanche of long words, the message gets lost in a whiteout. Replacing long words with short words makes this message clear and natural. To increase clarity, consider these replacements:

Rather than:

*maintaining
vocabulary
simplification
facile*

Use:

*keeping
words
simple
easy*

Rather than:	Use:
<i>principle</i>	<i>thing</i>
<i>pursue</i>	<i>do</i>
<i>demonstrating</i>	<i>showing</i>
<i>erudition</i>	<i>intelligence</i>
<i>calamitously</i>	<i>unfortunately</i>

Make Your Document Readable

High readability allows readers to read with speed, comprehension, and retention. Which of the following examples, which have been around since the 1960's (author unknown), are more readable?

Aqueous fluids exhibiting non-agitated surfaces generally extend downward to a considerable depth.

Still waters run deep

Individuals of similar propensities tend to congregate in groups.

Birds of a feather flock together

It is impossible for one adequately to assess the worth of a volume merely by examining the covering.

You can't judge a book by its cover.

Before You Hit the Send Button

Use short, simple words to make your purpose clear. Your readers can then read to get things done with speed, comprehension, and retention.



Stan Berry has devoted the past 34 years to improving the writing skills of over 55,000 business and government professionals. After completing his Master's degree from Yale University, he co-authored five books on writing that he uses in his seminars. He's been a member of the American Society for Training and Development (ASTD) since 1975 when he served as the newsletter editor and on the Board of Directors for the Twin Cities Chapter. Stan can be reached at www.BerryWritingGroup.com or 612-578-1487.

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