

4<sup>TH</sup>  
EDITION

# THE WRITE STUFF

SEVEN STEPS TO WRITTEN EXCELLENCE



Published by:  
Emphasis  
130 Queen's Road  
Brighton  
BN1 3WB UK  
Tel: +44 (0)1273 732888  
Email: [info@writing-skills.com](mailto:info@writing-skills.com)  
[www.writing-skills.com](http://www.writing-skills.com)

First edition December 2008  
Second edition August 2010  
Third edition November 2012  
Fourth edition December 2015

© 2015 Emphasis Training Ltd  
ISBN 978-0-9564810-2-3  
All rights reserved.

Written by Kathy Gemmell  
Additional material for Chapters 2, 3 and 6 by Jacob Funnell  
Edited by Cathy Relf and Rob Ashton

Designed by Puree Design | [www.pureedesign.com](http://www.pureedesign.com)

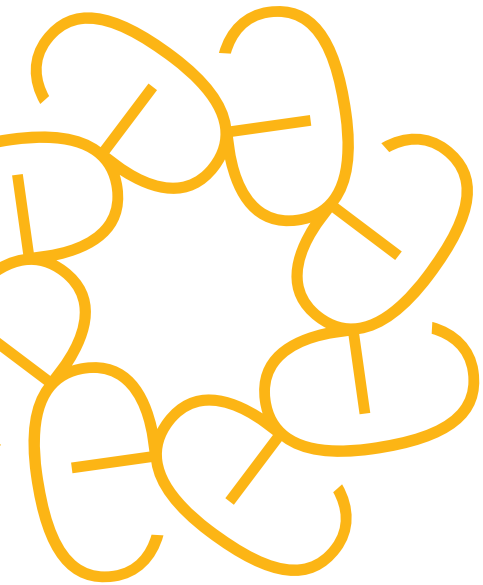
---

## Contents

---

	Introduction	p3
1	Tips for clear writing	p5
2	Writing for the web	p15
3	Writing email	p25
4	Jargon buster	p30
5	Writing for a global audience	p33
6	Emphasis house style	p39
7	Problem words	p57
	Index	p63

---



## Introduction

We first came up with the concept for this book way back in 2007. My colleague Tom and I were returning from visiting some clients. It was obvious to us that their staff desperately needed a clear guide to the company's approach to written communication.

The trouble was, we knew the clients would never produce one. It was simply too big a task for them, just as it was for all the other clients we'd floated the idea with. We decided we'd better produce our own universal guide. And so *The Write Stuff* was born.

Back then, we never dreamt just how popular it would become. It's now in its fourth reprint and some 40,000 copies are in use around the globe. It's become the go-to guide to better writing for a huge number of organisations.

This edition contains the same solid advice as previous versions and a full section aimed at settling arguments about contentious spellings and points of grammar. But we've also fully updated it, including extra material on writing email, house style and the all-important writing for the web.

As always, we'd love your feedback on how you're using this guide and to hear about the particular challenges you face when writing in the workplace. We're here to help.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads 'Rob Ashton'. The signature is written in a cursive, slightly slanted style.

**Rob Ashton**

Emphasis founder and CEO



Faced with a looming deadline, doing anything other than diving straight in can feel like a waste of precious time. In fact, many people get quite self-conscious about planning, as they're afraid their colleagues or line manager will think they're not working. (Delegates often tell us this on our courses.)

But, as the saying goes, to fail to plan is to plan to fail. Never think of the time you spend planning as wasted: it is a vital part of the process.

## Know your reader

We are all prone to becoming trapped in our own little world of 'getting the document done'. Yet writing that doesn't consider the reader is unlikely to succeed in its objectives, or even be read at all.

To ensure you get your message across, ask yourself why you're writing, what you're trying to say and to whom you're saying it. Make sure you are clear about what action you want your readers to take once they've read the document. In this way, you'll tell them what they need to know, not what you've found out.

## Know what you want to say

You need to put your important messages at the start, so make sure you know what they are before you begin writing. Test them out loud before you commit them to paper: if you can't make sense of them, how will your readers?

We waste a lot of time crafting sentences only to cut them (or have them cut) at the final edit. So it makes sense to sort out your thinking at the planning, not the writing, stage. Marshal your material in a way that is logical and transparent to your reader. And use subheads to show readers at a glance how your themes develop.

## Reader-centred writing

Ask yourself:

---

1 Why am I writing this?

---

2 Who is it for?

---

3 What am I trying to say?

---

## How to say what you mean

It is what you say, not the way that you say it (and that's what gets results). In business, good writing is invisible. You have failed if you force your reader to concentrate on the words rather than the message.

There are specific ways in which you can hone your writing style to highlight what you're saying rather than how you say it.

**The central readability principles are:**

- be direct
- use the active voice
- keep it short and simple (KISS)
- stick to one sentence, one idea
- proof it.

The following pages examine each of these principles in turn, and give before and after examples showing the pitfalls in context.

---

## Be direct

Be direct by addressing your readers as 'you' and referring to yourself, the writer, as 'we' or 'I' wherever possible. For example, in place of: 'The writers of this sentence advise readers to adopt this technique,' write: 'We advise you to adopt this technique.' This will make your writing – and its relevance – easier to understand. 'You' and especially 'we' also make writing sound more confident, more transparent and more personal.

Make sure, too, that you write about what concerns your readers rather than about your organisation's internal processes.

---

### Before

Delegates are instructed to send in examples of their writing before training courses. The office manager receives the samples and sends them to the trainers, who analyse them to get a better idea of where delegates' strengths and weaknesses lie.

### ☆ After

Please send us an example of your writing before the course. We will analyse it so that we can give you an idea of where your strengths and weaknesses lie.

## Use the active voice

Using the active voice more often is the single biggest thing that will give your writing a bit of oomph. If a piece of writing seems unspeakably dull, it's probably because the writer has overused the passive voice.

Consider this sentence:

*Allowances were made by the trainer for late arrivals.*

This sentence is in the passive voice. The person or thing doing the action ('the trainer') follows the action ('were made').

The active voice puts the 'doer' – in grammar terms, the *agent* – first.

This makes the sense clearer and the wording less clumsy:

*The trainer made allowances for late arrivals.*

Or

*The trainer allowed for late arrivals.*

You could also write the passive sentence like this:

*Allowances were made for late arrivals.*

This sentence doesn't tell you who took the action it describes (there is no agent). This is because, unlike the active voice, the passive allows you to remove the agent. So if a sentence leaves you asking: 'By whom?', it's passive. This is why the passive produces very opaque text. Using the active voice forces you to be more specific and, again, more confident.

**Before**

It was assumed by management that the changes to working practices had been implemented.

☆ **After**

Managers assumed that staff had implemented the changes to working practices.

☆ **Or**

Managers assumed staff had changed their working practices.

## Keep it short and simple (KISS)

Make sure you write what you mean by saying it aloud. As far as possible, use everyday language – the kind of language you use when you talk – to get your message across to your reader.

Be rigorous in your editing. Are you using the best word for the job? What do you mean? Is there a simpler way to say it? When you think you've finished, try cutting the content by a third.

Using jargon is fine for an internal or expert readership, provided you're certain they'll understand it. But avoid it when writing for external or non-expert readers. Keep abbreviations and acronyms to a minimum. And explain them when they do crop up.

Use verbs (which express actions) rather than nouns (which refer to things, people and places): it's the verbs that make language dynamic. Be especially vigilant for those heavy nouns ending in -tion or -sion, eg recommendation.

Such *nominalisations* (nouns created from verbs) can make your writing clunky and boring to read, as they attract redundant words. (This is why at Emphasis we call these words 'waffle magnets'.) See the table below for some examples.

And use concrete terms rather than abstract (or meaningless) generalities: 'Help with giving up smoking' rather than 'Strategies for smoking cessation' (the title of a leaflet we found in a local pharmacy).

	Verb		Nominalisation
<i>Use</i>	implement/do	<i>not</i>	undertake the implementation of
	consider/think about	<i>not</i>	give consideration to
	complete	<i>not</i>	achieve completion of
	decide	<i>not</i>	reach a decision
	recommend	<i>not</i>	make a recommendation to

**Before**

The aim of this document is to provide an outline of systemic operations to facilitate the implementation of methodology that will assist the team in the avoidance of inconsistency in the wording used in training materials.

☆ **After**

This document outlines how we can be consistent with the wording we use in training materials.

[Use the Jargon buster on page 30 to make sure you don't slip into management-speak or woolly wording.](#)

## One sentence, one idea

Keep your sentences short. Your reader will find it easier to understand what you're saying if you stick to one idea per sentence. If you write a long sentence, with many asides and qualifying clauses (like this one), your reader will find it hard to catch and then follow your drift and will probably have to return to the beginning of the sentence in order to make sense of it and in turn – and perhaps most importantly – act on it.

Aim for an average of 17 words per sentence; use a maximum of 35. But varying your rhythm is key: try inserting the odd two- or three-word sentence for impact. It's easy. And it may well keep your reader awake.

### Before

Whilst the organisation currently relies on sponsorship from small enterprises and individuals, the cooperation of large corporate bodies, without whose funding we will not be able to provide the services our clients require, is now essential if we are to campaign successfully for legislative changes that will improve the lives of many sectors of the population.

### ★ After

We need funding to lobby for legislative changes that will improve people's lives. At the moment, we rely on sponsorship from small enterprises and individuals. But this is not enough. Financial support from large corporate bodies is now essential if we are to provide the services our clients require and successfully campaign for change.

Keep an eye on paragraph length, too. Try to stick to one main point per paragraph. If you can't sum up that point in a few words in the margin, you've probably tried to cram in too much information.

## Proof it!

Proofreading isn't an optional extra: make time for it. Try to create some distance between writing the document and proofing it. Print it out and come back to it when you're fresh. And try to proofread away from your desk – this will help you read as a reader, not as the writer. Use a ruler to guide you, and a pencil to point to each word individually. This will stop your brain reading what it expects to see rather than what's actually there.

## Ten top tips for writing well

1. **Know your reader.**
2. **Know what you want to say.**
3. **Be direct.**
4. **Use the active voice.**
5. **Keep it short and simple (KISS).**
6. **Stick to one sentence, one idea.**
7. **Keep paragraphs short.**
8. **Use subheads that summarise the content.**
9. **Edit, then edit again.**
10. **Proofread on hard copy, and when you're fresh.**



# END OF FREE SAMPLE CHAPTER

To request the full 66-page style guide, contact us on:

[info@writing-skills.com](mailto:info@writing-skills.com)  
+44 (0)1273 732 888

You'll also get a free hard copy when you attend one of our in-person courses.

Find out more:  
[www.writing-skills.com](http://www.writing-skills.com)

## Who are we?

At Emphasis, we know that business writing is something that, worldwide, millions of people struggle with. So we've made it our mission to help them.

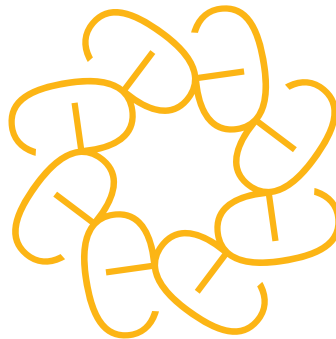
Since 1998, we've helped more than 30,000 people write better documents, email and web content – mainly through the 3,000 courses that we've run for organisations across the globe.

Because we're specialists, we can create bespoke in-company courses in any area of written communication, from how to reply to a complaint email through to how to write a bid for a national rail franchise. Our in-house team of experts includes specialists in report writing, preparing speeches for senior executives and writing English for speakers of other languages.

We work with a huge range of organisations in the public and private sectors. These include government departments and

agencies, such as the Home Office, the Cabinet Office, HMRC, the Environment Agency, Natural England and Dstl; household names, including M&S, Nestlé, Coca-Cola, Royal Mail and Warner Bros; and major professional-services firms, such as EY, PwC, KPMG, Deloitte, Grant Thornton, Accenture, Slaughter and May, and Linklaters. We also work with much smaller organisations – and with individuals, through our regular public courses.

To find out more, go to **[www.writing-skills.com](http://www.writing-skills.com)**, where you can get more advice on how to improve your writing at work.



## Making words work

Writing is one of the most time-consuming tasks we perform at work. It's also one of the most critical. Meetings come and go. Phone calls are forgotten. But documents and emails last. Yet most of us receive little guidance on how to write effectively. And much of what we do receive is misguided or just plain wrong. This short guide gives you the very essence of how to write well at work. Read it, keep it by your computer and use it to create documents and emails that do you justice.



[www.writing-skills.com](http://www.writing-skills.com) | +44 (0)1273 732888 | [info@writing-skills.com](mailto:info@writing-skills.com)



\$29 US / €24 / £19