

## 9 | Developing an Effective Style

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## CHAPTER 9

DEFINING  
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CONDUCTING  
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DRAFTING

REVISING

### WWW

To read additional information, see more examples, and access links related to this chapter's guidelines, go to Chapter 9 at [www.cengage.com/english/anderson7e](http://www.cengage.com/english/anderson7e).

This chapter describes ways to develop a writing style that will succeed at work. It covers three kinds of decisions: which words to choose, how to construct your sentences, and what “voice” to use as you address your readers.

The range of factors that can influence your decisions is large. Of course, you will want to choose words and construct sentences that are easy to understand. But what’s understandable to one reader may not be for another. You will also want to employ a style that is appropriate in the workplace. But no single style is always appropriate. What is suitable for one circumstance can be completely wrong for another. For these and other reasons, choose your style for each communication in the same way you make all your other writing decisions: Take the reader-centered approach of considering your options in light of their impact on the specific persons who will be your readers. This chapter’s guidelines describe strategies that work in the vast majority of cases. Use your creativity, judgment, and knowledge of your readers to decide how—and when—to apply them.

## CREATING YOUR VOICE

While reading something you’ve written, your readers “hear” your voice. Based on what they hear, they draw conclusions about you and your attitudes that can greatly enhance—or detract from—the persuasiveness of your communications. Consequently, the ability to craft and control your voice is an area of expertise essential to your success at writing on the job.

### Guideline 1 | Find out what’s expected

To a large extent, an effective voice is one that matches your readers’ sense of what’s appropriate. When successful employees are asked to identify the major weaknesses in the writing of new employees, they often cite the inability to use a tone and style that are appropriate to their readers.

Here are three questions that can help you match your voice to your readers’ expectations:

- **How formal do your readers think your writing should be?** An informal style sounds like conversation. You use contractions (*can’t*, *won’t*), short words, and colloquial words and phrasing. A formal style sounds more like a lecture or speech, with longer sentences, formal phrasing, and no contractions.
- **How subjective or objective do your readers believe your writing should be?** In a subjective style, you would introduce yourself into your writing by saying such things as “I believe . . .” and “I observed . . .” In an objective style, you would mask your presence by stating your beliefs as facts (“It is true that . . .”)

Questions for determining what your readers expect

and by reporting about your own actions in the third person ("The researcher observed . . .") or the passive voice ("It was observed that . . .").

- **How much "distance" do your readers expect you to establish between them and you?** In a personal style, you appear very close to your readers because you do such things as use personal pronouns (*I, we*) and address your readers directly. In an impersonal style, you distance yourself from your readers—for instance, by avoiding personal pronouns and by talking about yourself and your readers in the third person ("The company agrees to deliver a fully operable model to the customer by October 1").

Here are some major factors that may influence your readers' expectations about style:

- Your professional relationship with your readers (customers? supervisors? subordinates?)
- Your purpose (requesting something? apologizing? advising? ordering?)
- Your subject (routine matter? urgent problem?)
- Type of communication (e-mail? letter? formal report?)
- Your personality
- Your readers' personalities
- Customs in your employer's organization
- Customs in your field, profession, or discipline

To learn what style your readers expect, follow the advice in Chapter 3: Ask people who know (including even your readers) and look for communications similar to the one you are writing.

### What If the Expected Style Is Ineffective?

Note that sometimes the expected style may be less effective than another style you could use. For example, in some organizations the customary and expected style is a widely (and justly) condemned style called *bureaucratese*. Bureaucratese is characterized by wordiness that buries significant ideas and information, weak verbs that disguise action, and abstract vocabulary that detaches meaning from the practical world of people, activities, and objects. Often, such writing features an inflated vocabulary and a general pomposity that slows or completely blocks comprehension. Here's an example:

According to optimal quality-control practices in manufacturing any product, it is important that every component part that is constituent of the product be examined and checked individually after being received from its supplier or other source but before the final, finished product is assembled. (45 words)

Bureaucratese

The writer simply means this:

Effective quality control requires that every component be checked individually before the final product is assembled. (16 words)

Plain English

Here is another pair of examples:

Bureaucratese

Over the most recent monthly period, there has been a large increase in the number of complaints that customers have made about service that has been slow. (27 words)

Plain English

Last month, many more customers complained about slow service. (9 words)

### Try This

Plain English guidelines exist for almost every profession from architecture to statistics. Find some that apply to your major online. If there aren't any for your field, try a closely related one. For example, if you don't find Plain English for "zoology," try "biology."

Bureaucratese is such a serious barrier to understanding that many states in the United States have passed laws *requiring* "Plain English" in government publications and other documents such as insurance policies. This chapter's guidelines will help you avoid bureaucratese. However, some managers and organizations want employees to use that puffed-up style, thinking it sounds impressive. If you are asked to write in bureaucratese, try to explain why a straightforward style is more effective, perhaps sharing this book. If you fail to persuade, be prudent. Use the style that is required. Even within the confines of a generally bureaucratic style, you can probably make improvements. For instance, if your employer expects a wordy, abstract style, you may still be able to use a less inflated vocabulary.

### Guideline 2 | Consider the roles your voice creates for your readers and you

#### Try This

What style do administrators at your college use? Find a letter or notice from one of the offices at your school. Is the style closer to Plain English or bureaucratese? What adjective would you use to describe the writer's voice? Do different offices use different voices? If so, why?

When you choose the voice with which you will address your readers, you define a role for yourself. As manager of a department, for instance, you could adopt the voice of a stern taskmaster or an open-minded leader. The voice you choose also implies a role for your readers. And their response to the role given to them can significantly influence your communication's overall effectiveness. If you choose the voice of a leader who respects your readers, they will probably accept their implied role as valued colleagues. If you choose the voice of a superior, unerring authority, they may resent their implied role as error-prone inferiors—and resist the substance of your message.

By changing your voice in even a single sentence, you can increase your ability to elicit the attitudes and actions you want to inspire. Consider the following statement drafted by a divisional vice president.

In this draft, the vice president uses a domineering voice.

I have scheduled an hour for you to meet with me to discuss your department's failure to meet its production targets last month.

In this sentence, the vice president has chosen the voice of a powerful person who considers the reader to be someone who can be blamed and bossed around, a role the reader probably does not find agreeable. By revising the sentence, the vice president creates a much different pair of roles for herself and her readers.

In this revision, she creates a supportive voice.

Let's meet tomorrow to see if we can figure out why your department had difficulty meeting last month's production targets.

The vice president transformed her voice into that of a supportive person. The reader became someone interested in working with the writer to solve a problem

that stumps them both. As a result of these changes in voice and roles, the meeting is likely to be much more productive.

### **Guideline 3 | Consider how your attitude toward your subject will affect your readers**

In addition to communicating attitudes about yourself and your readers, your voice communicates an attitude toward your subject. Feelings are contagious. If you write about your subject enthusiastically, your readers may catch your enthusiasm. If you seem indifferent, they may adopt the same attitude.

E-mail presents a special temptation to be careless about voice because it encourages spontaneity. As Laura B. Smith (1993) says, "Staring at e-mail can make users feel dangerously bold; they sometimes blast off with emotions that they probably would not use in a face-to-face meeting." Your risk of regretting an e-mail you've written is increased by the ease with which e-mails can be forwarded to readers you didn't intend to see your message. Never include anything in an e-mail that you wouldn't be prepared for a large audience to read. Check carefully for statements that your readers might interpret as having a different tone of voice than the one you intend.

### **Guideline 4 | Say things in your own words**

This guideline urges you to avoid the mistake made by many employees: They puff up their prose with big words and long sentences, believing that this style will make them seem sophisticated, impressive. However, writers who write this way usually come across as pompous and difficult to understand.

Instead, write clear, straightforward sentences containing words you would normally use.

Don't misunderstand this advice. It does *not* mean that you should always use an informal, colloquial style. We all have more than one style. At school, you probably speak differently talking with a professor than when chatting with your friends. Yet, in each case you are able to choose words and express your ideas in ways that feel genuine to you. Similarly, at work choose from among your styles the one that is appropriate to each situation.

To check whether you are using your own voice, try reading your drafts aloud. Where the phrasing seems awkward or the words are difficult for you to speak, you may have adopted someone else's voice—or slipped into bureaucratese, which reflects no one's voice. Reading your drafts aloud can also help you spot other problems with voice—such as sarcasm or condescension.

Despite the advice given in this guideline, it will sometimes be appropriate for you to suppress your own voice. For example, when a report, proposal, or other document is written by several people, the contributors usually strive to achieve a uniform voice so that all the sections will fit together stylistically. Similarly, certain kinds of official documents, such as an organization's policy statements, are usually

Whether you are writing in an informal or formal style, choose words and express your ideas in ways that feel genuine to you.

Sometimes it's appropriate to suppress your own voice.

written in the employer's style, not the individual writer's style. Except in such situations, however, let your own voice speak in your writing.

### *Guideline 5* | **Global Guideline: Adapt your voice to your readers' cultural background**

#### **Learn More**

For more advice about adapting communications to your readers' cultural background, go to Chapter 3, page 79.

From one culture to another, general expectations about voice vary considerably. Understanding the differences between the expectations of your culture and those of your readers in another culture can be especially important because, as Guideline 2 explains, the voice you use tells your readers about the relationship you believe you have with them.

Consider, for instance, the difficulties that may arise if employees in the United States and in Japan write to one another without considering the expectations about voice that are most common in each culture. In the United States and Europe, employees often use an informal voice and address their readers by their first names. In Japan, writers commonly use a formal style and address their readers by their titles and last names. If a U.S. writer used a familiar, informal voice in a letter, memo, or e-mail to Japanese readers, these readers might feel that the writer has not properly respected them. On the other hand, Japanese writers may seem distant and difficult to relate to if they use the formality that is common in their own culture when writing to U.S. readers.

Directness is another aspect of voice. The Japanese write in a more personal voice than do people from the United States, whose direct, blunt style the Japanese find abrupt (Ruch, 1984). Like businesspeople in the United States, the Dutch also use a straightforward voice that causes the French to regard writers from both countries as rude (Mathes & Stevenson, 1991). When writing to people in other cultures, try to learn and to use the voice that is customary there. Library and Internet research provide helpful information about many cultures. You can also learn about the voice used in your readers' culture by studying communications they have written. If possible, ask for advice from people who are from your readers' culture or who are knowledgeable about it.

### *Guideline 6* | **Ethics Guideline: Avoid stereotypes**

Let's begin with a story. A man and a boy are riding together in a car. As they approach a railroad crossing, the boy shouts, "Father, watch out!" But it is too late. The car is hit by a train. The man dies, and the boy is rushed to a hospital. When the boy is wheeled into the operating room, the surgeon looks down at the child and says, "I can't operate on him. He's my son."

When asked to explain why the boy would call the deceased driver "Father" and the living surgeon would say "He's my son," people offer many guesses. Perhaps the driver is a priest or the boy's stepfather or someone who kidnapped the boy as a baby. Few guess that the surgeon must be the boy's mother. Why? Our culture's stereotypes about the roles men and women play are so strong that when people think of a surgeon, many automatically imagine a man.

## Stereotypes, Voice, and Ethics

What do stereotypes have to do with voice and ethics? Stereotypes are very deeply embedded in a culture. Most of us are prone to use them occasionally, especially when conversing informally. As a result, when we use more colloquial and conversational language to develop our distinctive voice for our workplace writing, we may inadvertently employ stereotypes. Unfortunately, even inadvertent uses of stereotypes have serious consequences for individuals and groups. People who are viewed in terms of stereotypes lose their ability to be treated as individual human beings.

Further, if they belong to a group that is unfavorably stereotyped, they may find it nearly impossible to get others to take their talents, ideas, and feelings seriously. The range of groups disadvantaged by stereotyping is quite extensive. People are stereotyped on the basis of their race, religion, age, gender, sexual orientation, weight, physical handicap, and ethnicity. In some workplaces, manual laborers, union members, clerical workers, and others are the victims of stereotyping by people in white-collar positions.

The following suggestions will help you avoid stereotypes.

### AVOIDING STEREOTYPES

- **Avoid describing people in terms of stereotypes.** In your reports, sales presentations, policy statements, and other communications, avoid giving examples that rely upon or reinforce stereotypes. For example, don't make all the decision makers men and all the clerical workers women.
- **Mention a person's gender, race, or other characteristic only when it is relevant.** To determine whether it's relevant to describe someone as a member of a minority group, ask yourself if you would make a parallel statement about a member of the majority group. If you wouldn't say, "This improvement was suggested by Jane, a person without any physical disability," don't say, "This improvement was suggested by Margaret, a person with a handicap." If you wouldn't say, "The Phoenix office is managed by Brent, a hard-working white person," don't say, "The Phoenix office is managed by Terry, a hard-working Mexican-American."
- **Avoid humor that relies on stereotypes.** Humor that relies on a stereotype reinforces the stereotype. Refrain from such humor not only when members of the stereotyped group are present, but at all times.

### Learn More

For a discussion of stereotypes and word choice, see page 281.

## CONSTRUCTING SENTENCES

Researchers who have studied the ways our minds process information have provided us with many valuable insights about ways to write reader-centered sentences. Based primarily on these research findings, the following six guidelines explain ways to construct highly usable, highly persuasive sentences.

## Guideline 1 | Simplify your sentences

The easiest way to increase usability is to simplify your sentences. Reading is *work*. Psychologists say that much of the work is done by short-term memory. It must figure out how the words in each sentence fit together to create a specific meaning. Fewer words mean less work. In addition, research shows that when you express your message concisely, you make it more forceful, memorable, and persuasive (F. Smith, 2004).

### SIMPLIFYING SENTENCES

1. **Eliminate unnecessary words.** Look for places where you can convey your meaning more directly. Consider this sentence:

Wordy

The physical size of the workroom is too small to accommodate this equipment.

With unnecessary words removed in two places, the sentence is just as clear and more emphatic:

Unnecessary words deleted

The workroom is too small for this equipment.

2. **Avoid wordy phrases.** Unnecessary words can also be found in many common phrases. "Due to the fact that" can be shortened to "Because." Similarly, "They do not pay attention to our complaints" can be abbreviated to "They ignore our complaints." "At this point in time" is "Now."
3. **Place modifiers next to the words they modify.** Short-term memory relies on word order to indicate meaning. If you don't keep related words together, your sentence may say something different from what you mean.

Mandy found many undeposited checks in the file cabinets, which were worth over \$41,000.

Technically, this sentence says that the file cabinets were worth over \$41,000. Of course, readers would probably figure out that the writer meant the checks were worth that amount because it is unlikely that the file cabinets were. But readers arrive at the correct meaning only after performing work they would have been saved if the writer had kept related words together by putting *which were worth over \$41,000* after *checks* rather than *file cabinets*.

3. **Combine short sentences.** Often, combining two or more short sentences makes reading easier by reducing the total number of words and helping readers see the relationships among the points presented.

Separate

Water quality in Hawk River declined in March. This decline occurred because of the heavy rainfall that month. All the extra water overloaded Tomlin County's water treatment plant.

Combined

Water quality in Hawk River declined in March because heavy rainfalls overloaded Tomlin County's water treatment plant.

## Guideline 2 | Put the action in your verbs

Most sentences are about action. Sales rise, equipment fails, engineers design, managers approve. Clients praise or complain, and technicians advise. Yet, many people bury the action in nouns, adjectives, and other parts of speech. Consider the following sentence:

Our department accomplished the conversion to the new machinery in two months.	Original
--	----------

It could be energized by putting the action (*converting*) into the verb:

Our department converted to the new machinery in two months.	Revised
--	---------

Not only is the revised version briefer, it is also more emphatic and lively. Furthermore, according to researchers E. B. Coleman and Keith Raynor (1964), when you put action in your verbs, you can make your prose up to 25 percent easier to read.

To create sentences that focus on action, do the following:

### FOCUSING SENTENCES ON ACTION

- **Avoid sentences that use the verb *to be* or its variations (*is, was, will be, and so on*).** The verb *to be* often tells what something is, not what it does.

The sterilization procedure <u>is a protection</u> against reinfection.	Original
The sterilization procedure <u>protects</u> against reinfection.	Revised

- **Avoid sentences that begin with *It is* or *There are*.**

<u>It is</u> because the cost of raw materials has soared that the price of finished goods is rising.	Original
Because the cost of raw materials has soared, the price of finished goods is rising.	Revised
<u>There are</u> several factors causing the engineers to question the dam's strength.	Original
Several factors cause the engineers to question the dam's strength.	Revised

- **Avoid sentences where the action is frozen in a word that ends with one of the following suffixes: *-tion, -ment, -ing, -ion, -ance*.** These words petrify the action that should be in verbs by converting them into nouns.

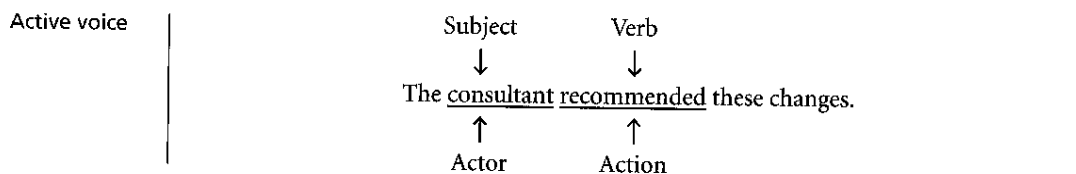
Consequently, I would like to make a <u>recommendation</u> that the department hire two additional programmers.	Original
Consequently, I <u>recommend</u> that the department hire two additional programmers.	Revised

Although most sentences are about action, some aren't. For example, topic and forecasting statements often introduce lists or describe the organization of the discussion that follows.

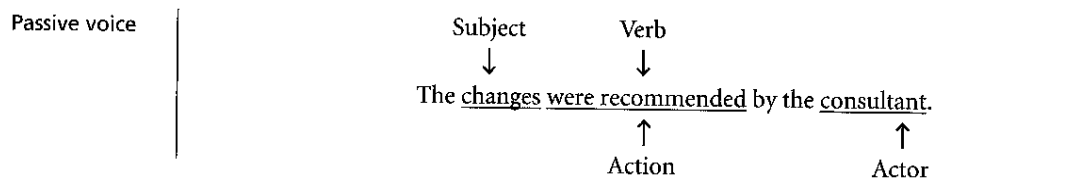
There are three main reasons the company should invest money to improve communication between corporate headquarters and the out-of-state plants.	Topic sentence for which the verb <i>to be</i> is appropriate
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### Guideline 3 | Use the active voice unless you have a good reason to use the passive voice

Another way to focus your sentences on action and actors is to use the *active voice* rather than the *passive voice*. To write in the active voice, place the actor—the person or thing performing the action—in the subject position. Your verb will then describe the actor's action.



In the passive voice, the subject of the sentence and the actor are different. The subject is *acted upon* by the actor.



Here are some additional examples:

Passive voice	The Korean ore was purchased by us.
Active voice	We purchased the Korean ore.

Research shows that readers comprehend active sentences more rapidly than passive ones (Layton & Simpson, 1975). Also, the active voice eliminates the vagueness and ambiguity that often characterize the passive voice. In the passive voice, a sentence can describe an action without telling who did it. For example, "The ball was hit" is a grammatically correct sentence but doesn't tell who or what hit the ball. With the active voice, the writer identifies the actor: "Linda hit the ball."

The following sentence illustrates the importance of ensuring that readers understand who the actor is.

Passive voice	The operating temperatures must be checked daily to protect the motor from damage.
---------------	--

Will the supervisor of the third shift know that he is the person responsible for checking temperatures? In the passive voice, this sentence certainly allows him to imagine that someone else, perhaps a supervisor on another shift, is responsible.

Although the passive voice generally reduces readability, it has some good uses. One occurs when you don't want to identify the actor. The following sentence is from a memorandum in which the writer urges all employees to work harder at

There are some places where the passive voice is appropriate.

saving energy but avoids causing embarrassment and resentment by naming the guilty parties.

The lights on the third floor have been left on all night for the past week, despite the efforts of most employees to help us reduce our energy bills.

Passive voice

Also, consider this sentence:

I have been told that you may be using the company telephone for an excessive number of personal calls.

Passive voice

Perhaps the person who told the writer about the breach of corporate telephone policy did so in confidence. If the writer decided that it would be ethically acceptable to communicate this news to the reader without naming the person who made the report, then she has used the passive voice effectively. (Be careful, however, to avoid using the passive voice to hide an actor's identity when it is unethical to do so—for instance, when trying to avoid accepting responsibility for your employer's actions.)

Another good reason for using the passive voice is discussed in Chapter 8, Guideline 7, page 225.

#### Guideline 4 | Emphasize what's most important

Another way to write clear, forceful sentences is to direct your readers' attention to the most important information you are conveying.

### EMPHASIZING WHAT'S MOST IMPORTANT

1. **Place the key information at the end of the sentence.** As linguist Joseph Williams (2005) points out, you can demonstrate to yourself that the end of the sentence is a place of emphasis by listening to yourself speak. Read the following sentences aloud:

Her powers of concentration are extraordinary.

Last month, he topped his sales quota even though he was sick for an entire week.

As you read these sentences aloud, notice how you naturally stress the final words *extraordinary* and *entire week*.

To position the key information at the end of a sentence, you may sometimes need to rearrange your first draft.

The department's performance has been superb in all areas.

Original

In all areas, the department's performance has been superb.

Revised

2. **Place the key information in the main clause.** If your sentence has more than one clause, use the main clause for the information you want to emphasize. Compare the following versions of the same statement.

Original | Although our productivity was down, our profits were up. |

Revised | Although our profits were up, our productivity was down. |

In the first version, the emphasis is on profits because *profits* is the subject of the main clause. The second version emphasizes productivity because *productivity* is the subject of the main clause. (Notice that in each of these sentences, the emphasized information is not only in the main clause but also at the end of the sentence.)

3. **Emphasize key information typographically.** Use boldface and italics. Be careful, however, to use typographical highlighting sparingly. When many things are emphasized, none stand out.
4. **Tell readers explicitly what the key information is.** You can also emphasize key information by announcing its importance to your readers.

Economists pointed to three important causes of the stock market's decline: uncertainty about the outcome of last month's election, a rise in inventories of durable goods, and—*most important*—signs of rising inflation.

### Guideline 5 | Vary your sentence length and structure

If all the sentences in a sentence group have the same structure, two problems arise: Monotony sets in, and (because all the sentences are basically alike) you lose the ability to emphasize major points and deemphasize minor ones.

You can avoid such monotony and loss of emphasis in two ways:

- **Vary your sentence length.** Longer sentences can be used to show the relationships among ideas. Shorter sentences provide emphasis in the context of longer sentences.

This short sentence receives emphasis because it comes after longer ones.

The final sentence is also emphasized because it is much shorter than the preceding one.

In April, many amateur investors believed that another rally was about to begin. Because exports were increasing rapidly, they predicted that the dollar would strengthen in global monetary markets, bringing foreign investors back to Wall Street. Also, unemployment dropped sharply, which they interpreted as an encouraging sign for the economy. **They were wrong on both counts.** Wall Street interpreted rising exports to mean that goods would cost more at home, and it predicted that falling unemployment would mean a shortage of workers, **hence higher prices for labor.** Where amateur investors saw growth, Wall Street saw inflation.

- **Vary your sentence structure.** For example, the grammatical subject of the sentence does not have to be the sentence's first word. In fact, if it did, the

English language would lose much of its power to emphasize more important information and to deemphasize less important information.

One alternative to beginning a sentence with its grammatical subject is to begin with a clause that indicates a logical relationship.

After we complete our survey, we will know for sure whether the proposed site for our new factory was once a Native American camping ground.

Introductory clause

Because we have thoroughly investigated all the alternatives, we feel confident that a pneumatic drive will work best and provide the most reliable service.

Introductory clause

## Guideline 6 | Global Guideline: Adapt your sentences for readers who are not fluent in your language

The decisions you make about the structure of your sentences can affect the ease with which people who are not fluent in English can understand your message. Companies in several industries, including oil and computers, have developed simplified versions of English for use in communications for readers in other cultures. In addition to limited vocabularies, simplified English has special grammar rules that guide writers to using sentences that will be easy for their readers to understand. Because many readers may not need this degree of simplification, learn as much as possible about your specific readers. Also, remember that simplifying your sentence structure should not involve simplifying your thought.

### GUIDELINES FOR CREATING SENTENCES FOR READERS WHO ARE NOT FLUENT IN ENGLISH

- **Use simple sentence structures.** The more complex your sentences, the more difficult they will be for readers to understand.
- **Keep sentences short.** A long sentence can be hard to follow, even if its structure is simple. Set twenty words as a limit.
- **Use the active voice.** Readers who are not fluent in English can understand the active voice much more easily than they can understand the passive.

### Learn More

For more advice on adapting communications to your readers' cultural background, go to Chapter 3, page 79 and see the other Global Guidelines throughout this book.

### www

For more on simplified versions of English, go to [www.cengage.com/english/anderson7e](http://www.cengage.com/english/anderson7e), Chapter 9.

## SELECTING WORDS

When selecting words, your first goal should be to increase the usability of your writing by enabling readers to grasp your meaning quickly and accurately. Your word choices also affect your readers' attitudes toward you and your subject matter. Select words that will increase your communication's persuasiveness.

## Guideline 1 | Use concrete, specific words

### Try This

Pick a group of words used in your major, hobby, or sport. List words in ranked order, moving from more abstract to more concrete.

Almost anything can be described either in relatively abstract, general words or in relatively concrete, specific ones. You may say that you are writing on a piece of *electronic equipment* or that you are writing on a *laptop computer connected to a color laser printer*. You may say that your employer produces *consumer goods* or that it makes *cell phones*.

When groups of words are ranked according to degree of abstraction, they form *hierarchies*. Figure 9.1 shows such a hierarchy in which the most specific terms identify concrete items that we can perceive with our senses; Figure 9.2 shows a hierarchy in which all the terms are abstract, but some are more specific than others.

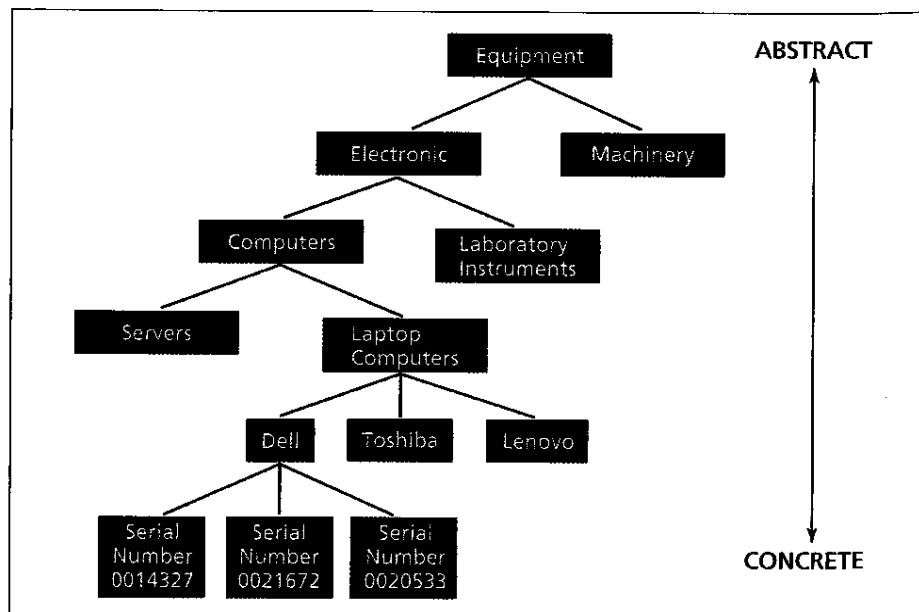
You can increase the clarity, and therefore the usability, of your writing by using concrete, specific words rather than abstract, general ones. Concrete words help your readers understand precisely what you mean. If you say that your company produces television shows for a *younger demographic segment*, they won't know whether you mean *teenagers* or *toddlers*. If you say that you study *natural phenomena*, your readers won't know whether you mean *volcanic eruptions* or the *migration of monarch butterflies*.

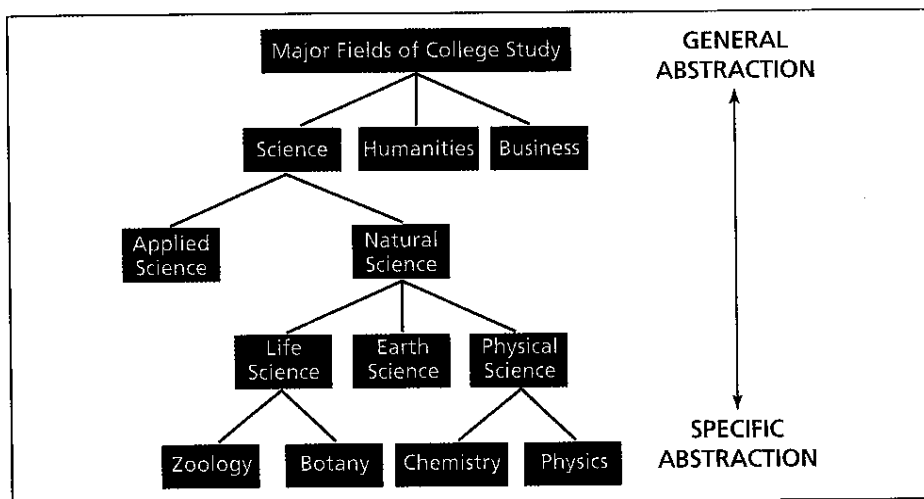
Such vagueness can hinder readers from getting the information they need in order to make decisions and take action. Consider the following sentence from a memo addressed to an upper-level manager who wanted to know why production costs were up:

Original | The cost of one material has risen recently. |

This sentence doesn't give the manager the information she needs to take remedial action. In contrast, the following sentence, using specific words, tells precisely what

**FIGURE 9.1**  
Hierarchy of Related Words That Move from Abstract to Concrete





**FIGURE 9.2**  
Hierarchy of Related  
Words That Move from  
a General to a Specific  
Abstraction

the material is, how much the price has risen, and the period in which the increase took place.

| The cost of the bonding agent has tripled in the past six months. |

Revised

Of course, abstract and general terms do have important uses. For example, in scientific, technical, and other specialized fields, writers often need to make general points, describe the general features of a situation, or provide general guidance for action. Your objective when choosing words is not to avoid abstract, general words altogether, but rather to avoid using them when your readers will want more specific ones.

### **Guideline 2 | Use specialized terms when—and only when—your readers will understand them**

You can increase the usability and persuasiveness of your writing by using wisely the specialized terms of your own profession.

In some situations, specialized terms help you communicate effectively:

- **They convey precise, technical meanings economically.** Many terms have no exact equivalent in everyday speech.
- **They help you establish credibility.** By using the special terms of your field accurately, you show your fellow specialists that you are adept in it.

However, you should avoid using technical terms your readers won't understand. Consider the following sentence:

| The major benefits of this method are smaller in-gate connections, reduced breakage, and minimum knock-out—all leading to great savings. |

Although this sentence would be perfectly clear to any manager who works in a foundry that manufactures parts for automobile engines, it would be unintelligible

to most other people because it includes the specialized terms *in-gate connections* and *knock-out*.

## How to Explain Unfamiliar Terms If You Must Use Them

Sometimes you may need to use specialized terms even though some people in your audience may not understand them. For instance, you may be writing to a group of readers that includes people in your field and others outside of it, or you may be explaining an entirely new subject to your readers. In such cases, there are several ways to define the terms for readers who are not familiar with them.

### DEFINING TERMS YOUR READERS DON'T KNOW

1. **Give a synonym.** Example: On a boat, a rope or cord is called a *line*.
2. **Give a description.** Example: The *exit gate* consists of two arms that hold a jug while it is being painted and then allow it to proceed down the production line.
3. **Make an analogy.** Example: An atom is like a miniature solar system in which the nucleus is the sun and the electrons are the planets that revolve around it.
4. **Give a classical definition.** In a classical definition, you define the term by naming some familiar group of things to which it belongs and then identifying the key distinction between the object being defined and the other members of the group. Examples:

WORD	GROUP	DISTINGUISHING CHARACTERISTIC
A crystal is a	solid	in which the atoms or molecules are arranged in a regularly repeated pattern.
A burrow is a	hole in the ground	dug by an animal for shelter or habitation.

### Guideline 3 | Use words accurately

Whether you use specialized terms or everyday ones and whether you use abstract, general terms or concrete, specific ones, you must use all your words accurately. This point may seem obvious, but inaccurate word choice is all too common in on-the-job writing. For example, people often confuse *imply* (meaning to *suggest* or *hint*, as in “He implied that the operator had been careless”) with *infer* (meaning to draw a *conclusion based upon evidence*, as in “We infer from your report that you do not expect to meet the deadline”). It’s critical that you avoid such errors. They distract your readers from your message by drawing their attention to your problems with word choice, and they may lead your readers to believe that you are not skillful or precise in other areas—such as laboratory techniques or analytical skills.

How can you ensure that you use words accurately? There’s no easy way. Consult a dictionary whenever you are uncertain. Be especially careful when using words that

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are not yet part of your usual vocabulary. Pay attention as well to the way words are used by other people.

#### **Guideline 4 | Choose plain words over fancy ones**

You can also make your writing easy to understand by avoiding using fancy words where plain ones will do. At work, some writers do just the opposite, perhaps thinking that fancy words sound more official or make them sound more knowledgeable. The following list identifies some commonly used fancy words; it includes only verbs but might have included nouns and adjectives as well.

##### **FANCY VERBS**

ascertain  
commence  
compensate  
constitute  
endeavor  
expend  
fabricate  
facilitate  
initiate  
prioritize  
proceed  
terminate  
transmit  
utilize

##### **EQUIVALENT COMMON VERBS**

find out  
begin  
pay  
make up  
try  
spend  
build  
make easier  
begin  
rank  
go  
end  
send  
use

There are two important reasons for preferring plain words over fancy ones:

- **Plain words promote efficient reading.** Research has shown that even if your readers know both the plain word and its fancy synonym, they will still comprehend the plain word more rapidly (F. Smith, 2004).
- **Plain words reduce your risk of creating a bad impression.** If you use words that make for slow, inefficient reading, you may annoy your readers or cause them to conclude that you are behaving pompously, showing off, or trying to hide a lack of ideas and information behind a fog of fancy terms. Consider, for instance, the effect of the following sentence in a job application letter:

I am transmitting the enclosed résumé to facilitate your efforts to determine the pertinence of my work experience to your opening.

Pompous word choices

Don't misunderstand this guideline. It doesn't suggest that you should use only simple language at work. When addressing people with vocabularies comparable to your own, use all the words at your command, provided that you use them accurately and appropriately. This guideline merely cautions you against using needlessly inflated words that bloat your prose and open you to criticism from your readers.

## Guideline 5 | Choose words with appropriate associations

The three previous guidelines for choosing words relate to the literal or dictionary meaning of words. At work, you must also consider the associations your words have for your readers. In particular, be especially sensitive to your words' *connotation* and *register*.

### Connotation

Connotation is the extended or suggested meaning that a word has beyond its literal meaning. For example, according to the dictionary, *flatfoot* and *police detective* are synonyms, but they connote very different things: *flatfoot* suggests a plodding, perhaps not very bright cop, while *police detective* suggests a trained professional.

Verbs, too, have connotations. For instance, to *suggest* that someone has overlooked a key fact is not the same as to *insinuate* that she has. To *devote* your time to working on a client's project is not the same as to *spend* your time on it.

The connotations of your words can shape your audience's perceptions of your subject matter. Researchers Raymond W. Kulhavy and Neil H. Schwartz (1981) demonstrated those effects in a classic experiment for which they created two descriptions of a company that differed in only seven out of 246 words. In one, the seven words suggested stiffness, such as *required* and *must*. In the other, those seven words were replaced by ones that suggested flexibility, such as *asked* and *should*. None of the substitutions changed the facts of the overall passage. Here's a sentence from the first version:

First version | Our sales team is constantly trying to locate new markets for our various product lines. |

In the second version of this sentence, the researchers replaced the flexible word *trying* with the stiff word *driving*.

Second version | Our sales team is constantly driving to locate new markets for our various product lines. |

The researchers found that people who read the flexible version believed that the company would actively commit itself to the welfare and concerns of its employees, voluntarily participate in affirmative action programs for women and minorities, receive relatively few labor grievances, and pay its employees well. People who read that version also said they would recommend the company to a friend as a place to work. People who read the stiff version reported opposite impressions of the company. That readers' impressions of the company could be affected so dramatically by just seven nonsubstantive words highlights the great importance of paying attention to the connotations of the words you use.

### Register

Linguists use the term *register* to identify a second characteristic exhibited by words: their association with certain kinds of communication situations or context. For example, in an ad for a restaurant we might expect to see the claim that it offers

Research on the impact of connotation

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*amazingly* delicious food. However, we would not expect to see a research company boast in a proposal for a government contract that it is capable of conducting *amazingly* good studies. The word *amazingly* is in the register of consumer advertising but not in the register of research proposals.

If you inadvertently choose words with the wrong register, your readers may infer that you don't fully grasp how business is conducted in your field, and your credibility can be lost.

### Guideline 6 | Global Guideline: Consider your readers' cultural background when choosing words

Take special care in your choice of words when writing to readers in other cultures. Some words whose meaning is obvious in your own culture can be misunderstood or completely mystifying to readers from other cultures. This is true whether your communication will go to your readers in English or whether it will be translated for them. In fact, misunderstanding can even occur when you are writing to readers in other cultures where the native language is English. In the United States, people play football with an oblong object which they try to carry over a goal line or kick through uprights. In England, India, and many other parts of the world, football is played with a round object that people are forbidden to carry and attempt to kick into a net.

The following guidelines will help you choose words your readers will understand in the way you intend. Of course, different readers in other cultures have different levels of facility with English, so follow the guidelines only to the extent that your readers require.

#### GUIDELINES FOR CHOOSING WORDS FOR INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATIONS

- **Use simple words.** The more complex your vocabulary, the more difficult it will be for readers not fluent in English to understand you.
- **Use the same word each time you refer to the same thing.** For instance, in instructions, don't use both "dial" and "control" for the part of a test instrument. In context, those two terms may be synonyms in your language, but they will each be translated into a different word in the other language, where the translated words may not be synonyms.
- **Avoid acronyms your readers won't understand.** Most acronyms that are familiar to you will be based on words in *your* language: AI for Artificial Intelligence; ACL for Anterior Cruciate Ligament.
- **Avoid slang words and idioms.** Most will have no meaning for people in other cultures. Instead of "We want a level playing field," say "We want the decision to be made fairly." Instead of saying "We want to run an idea past you," say "We'd like your opinion of our idea."



At work, even small departments often include a rich diversity of employees.

#### Learn More

For more advice on adapting communications to your readers' cultural background, go to Chapter 3, page 79, and see the other Global Guidelines throughout this book.

### Learn More

For another discussion of stereotypes and ethics, see page 268.

### WWW

For additional suggestions about ways to avoid sexist and discriminatory language, go to Chapter 9 at [www.cengage.com/english/anderson7e](http://www.cengage.com/english/anderson7e).

## Guideline 7 | Ethics Guideline: Use inclusive language

When constructing your voice, use language that includes all persons instead of excluding some. For example, avoid sexist language because it supports negative stereotypes. Usually these stereotypes are about women, but they can also adversely affect men in certain professions such as nursing. By supporting negative stereotypes, sexist language can blind readers to the abilities, accomplishments, and potential of very capable people. The same is true of language that insensitively describes people with disabilities, illnesses, or other limitations.

### USING INCLUSIVE LANGUAGE

#### 1. Use nouns and pronouns that are gender-neutral rather than ones containing the word *man*.

Instead of: businessman, workman, mailman, salesman

Use: businessperson, manager, *or* executive; worker; mail carrier; salesperson

Instead of: man-made, man hours, man-sized job

Use: synthetic, working hours, large job

#### 2. Use plural pronouns or *he or she* instead of sex-linked pronouns when referring to people in general.

Instead of: "Our home electronics cater to the affluent shopper. She looks for premium products and appreciates a stylish design."

Use the plural: "Our home electronics cater to affluent shoppers. They look for premium products and appreciate a stylish design."

Instead of: "Before the owner of a new business files the first year's tax returns, he might be wise to seek advice from a certified public accountant."

Use *he or she*: "Before the owner of a new business files the first year's tax returns, he or she might be wise to seek advice from a certified public accountant."

#### 3. Refer to individual men and women in a parallel manner.

Instead of: "Mr. Sundquist and Anna represented us at the trade fair."

Use: "Mr. Sundquist and Ms. Tokagawa represented us at the trade fair" or "Christopher and Anna represented us at the trade fair."

#### 4. Revise salutations that imply the reader of a letter is a man.

Instead of: Dear Sir, Gentlemen

Use: The title of the department or company or the job title of the person you are addressing: Dear Personnel Department, Dear Switzer Plastics Corporation, Dear Director of Research

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5. When writing about people with disabilities, refer to the person first, then the disability.

Instead of: the disabled

Use: people with disabilities

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## CONCLUSION

Your writing style can make a great deal of difference to the success of your writing. The voice you use, the sentence structures you employ, and the words you select affect both your readers' attitudes toward you and your subject matter and also the readability and impact of your writing. This chapter has suggested many things you can do to develop a highly usable, highly persuasive style. Underlying all these suggestions is the advice that you take the reader-centered approach of considering all your stylistic choices from your readers' point of view.

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## USE WHAT YOU'VE LEARNED

For additional exercises, go to [www.cengage.com/english/anderson7e](http://www.cengage.com/english/anderson7e). *Instructors:* The book's website includes suggestions for teaching the exercises.

You can download Expertise Exercises 2 through 5 from Chapter 9 at [www.cengage.com/english/anderson7e](http://www.cengage.com/english/anderson7e).

### EXERCISE YOUR EXPERTISE

1. Imagine that you are the head of the Public Safety Department at your college. Faculty and staff have been parking illegally, sometimes where there aren't parking spots. Sometimes individuals without handicaps are parking in spots reserved for those with handicaps. Write two memos to all college employees announcing that beginning next week, the Public Safety Department will strictly enforce parking rules—something it hasn't been doing. Write the first memo in a friendly voice and the second in a stern voice. Then compare the specific differences in organization, sentence structure, word choice, and other features of writing to create each voice. (Thanks to Don Cunningham, Auburn University, for the idea for this exercise.)
2. Without altering the meaning of the following sentences, reduce the number of words in them.
  - a. After having completed work on the data-entry problem, we turned our thinking toward our next task, which was the processing problem.
  - b. Those who plan federal and state programs for the elderly should take into account the changing demographic characteristics in terms of size and average income of the composition of the elderly population.
  - c. Would you please figure out what we should do and advise us?
  - d. The result of this study will be to make total white-water recycling an economical strategy for meeting federal regulations.
3. Rewrite the following sentences in a way that will keep the related words together.
  - a. This stamping machine, if you fail to clean it twice per shift and add oil of the proper weight, will cease to operate efficiently.
  - b. The plant manager said that he hopes all employees would seek ways to cut waste at the supervisory meeting yesterday.