

Quick Guide to Clear Writing

By Jim Killam

Keep it simple and concise.

Short sentences. One idea per sentence.

No: Smith, who worked as a bursar at the University of Illinois prior to coming to Ministry X, said she welcomes the opportunity to move to Texas with her husband, Stan, and two daughters (ages 4 and 2) and work in a Christian organization.

Yes: Smith was a bursar at the University of Illinois before joining Ministry X. She welcomes the chance to work in a Christian organization. She and her husband, Stan, have two daughters, ages 4 and 2. They'll move soon to the Dallas area.

Maintain S-V-O structure.

Subject, verb, object — in that order. Active voice. Don't delay meaning.

No: The story of Ruth will be told by John Smith.

Yes: John Smith will tell the story of Ruth.

No: The end of the fiscal year and the end of the current project were the two reasons Johnson cited.

Yes: Johnson cited two reasons: the end of the fiscal year and the end of the current project.

Choose the precise word.

Think of every word costing you a dollar.

No: At this point in time, Bob does not have capacity to take on assignments other than the ones already underway.

Yes: Bob doesn't have time for new assignments.

No: The present state of our strategic planning is problematic in its complexity.

Yes: Our planning process is too complicated.

Write it like you'd tell it to a friend.

Avoid jargon and overly formal language. It does not make you sound smarter. To test, read it aloud.

No: I will be reaching out to Gladys to empower her to leverage our OBS program and take all of these moving parts to the next level.

Yes: I will ask Gladys to lead our team that develops oral Bible stories.

No: After the implementation of the new dress code, the wearing of tank tops and shorts will be prohibited. For further information on the dress code's implications, employees may inquire with their immediate supervisor.

Yes: The new dress code will ban tank tops and shorts. Your supervisor can provide more information.

Show, don't tell.

Paint a specific picture for the reader with carefully chosen scenes and details. This is the one instance where it's OK to write more.

No: This project is an amazing example of God's power at work through the Word.

Yes: Thomas first heard the story of Joseph in his heart language that rainy Sunday morning. He realized that he, too, needed to forgive his brothers for rejecting him. So he ran home through the mud and reconciled with his oldest brother.

No: We saw the poverty these people endure, and it broke our hearts.

Yes: Martha wakes up at 4:30 every morning to begin her hour-long walk to the nearest well. After standing in line and filling her 5-gallon jug, she carries the 50-pound load back home. Then she starts her day of cooking, cleaning, sewing and gardening for her family of eight.

Use no more than three numbers in a sentence.

Numbers are clearest when presented in graphic form, such as charts. In writing, minimize them.

No: Worldwide as of 2014, 180 million people, speaking 1,860 languages, still had no Scripture in their heart languages, but that's down 47 percent and 10 percent, respectively, from as recently as 2010 when the numbers stood at 340 million people and 2,078 languages.

Yes: Worldwide in 2014, 180 million people still had no Scripture. That's 1,860 heart languages. But in 2010 those numbers stood at 340 million people and 2,078 languages.

Minimize prepositions.

Simple sentences. Watch out for phrases starting with *in, of, on, for*, etc.

No: Ministry X staff attending the dedication of our new offices on Valley Drive also will be served lunch from noon to 1 p.m. on Friday in the main conference room of the current Ministry X office at 20468 Joomers Road.

Yes: Friday's Valley Drive office dedication includes lunch at our old office. All are invited. Time: noon to 1 p.m. Place: Main Conference Room.

Avoid cliché, churchy language.

What may sound OK in speech can read badly.

No: We are blessed to have Tuesday as our speaker a longtime servant in translating God's Word for the Bibleless, Swen Johnson. Swen and his bride, Gerta, have served our gracious Lord

with their whole hearts for 35 years in the white fields of Madagascar.

Yes: Our Tuesday speaker is veteran Bible translator Swen Johnson. Swen and his wife, Gerta, have served 35 years in Madagascar.

Recommended Resources

App: Hemingwayapp.com. Get instant analysis by pasting a piece of writing into the app, which resides on your computer desktop. Great way to identify and eliminate long, complex sentences and passive construction. The app costs about \$10.

Book: ["The Elements of Style"](#) by William Strunk Jr. and E.B. White. An inexpensive, short read and valuable desk reference. No other book on writing offers such quick, direct and useful advice.

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