

Tricks of the Writer's Trade

The following transcript is based on material in *Write it Right*, by John Peck and Martin Coyle.

The secret to writing a great sentence is keeping it simple. Many people imagine that good writers use words in a complicated way, but the tricks of the trade are all about making your writing easy to read. This audio explores some straightforward methods of constructing your writing in a clear, engaging manner and conveying your meaning as directly possible.

The best writers start paragraphs snappily. It is a good idea to begin your piece of writing with a simple, one-statement sentence to emphasise the substance of what you are trying to say. If you can think of a provocative or unusual proposal, it will grab the reader's attention to open your piece with this idea. You should always start your sentence with its subject to make the maximum impact on your reader. Consider these two examples:

'A deeply conservative attitude has always been characteristic of the Labour party.'

'The Labour party has always been deeply conservative.'

Many students might opt for the first sentence thinking that it sounds more mature, but its structure is back to front. The second sentence makes its point much more quickly and succinctly. You might want to vary the beginning of your sentences with an opening clause, but generally speaking, you can and should put your subject first throughout your paragraph.

Keeping your sentence untangled can be a nightmare, especially if your thinking is muddled in the first place. Try dividing your thoughts into separate 'capsules' of single ideas, restricting yourself to one idea capsule per sentence. When your sentence becomes too long, it is sensible to break it up into more sentences with fewer clauses. No sentence should contain more than three clauses, since

asides distract the reader from the original point. Single-clause sentences are the most effective at focussing attention.

You could consider it unfair on your reader if he or she has to search for meaning in your writing. Communication with the reader will be at its best if your style is unhindered by complicated structure and vocabulary. There is a rule of proximity that advises writers to keep each clause next to the subject to which it refers.

Consider this confusing sentence:

'Fast bikes are an obsession of many men, some with speeds exceeding two hundred miles per hour.'

You might be forgiven for wondering whether the bikes are racing this fast or the men can run at super-human speed. The sentence is made clearer by moving the clause next to its subject, the bikes.

'Fast bikes, some with speeds exceeding two hundred miles per hour, are an obsession of many men.'

Most readers will guess what the writer of the first sentence is trying to say, but the clarity of the second sentence means that the reader will not have to make this judgement call.

It might seem a little eccentric, but reviewing your work by reading it aloud can help to identify the woolliest areas. This works best if you perform your reading in a theatrical way, pausing at the commas and ends of sentences. If you run out of breath during a sentence, it is probably too long. You ought to be able to convert your writing into a speech in this way – if it sounds too stilted and convoluted, perhaps you could rework these parts until they sound fluid.

Cutting back the number of words in your sentence can also make it more comprehensible. Think about the value of every word in this sentence:

'It should be appreciated that Charles Dickens was not actually a Londoner by birth.'

After removing the beginning and the word 'actually', the same information is conveyed by the shorter sentence:

'Charles Dickens was not a Londoner by birth.'

Remember that words should earn their keep, so make sure that each one has a purpose. This should make your writing tighter and easier to read.

It's unlikely that your reader will be fooled by the idea that long words make you sound clever. Cluttering a sentence with too many complicated words can prevent its meaning from being understood at all. A short word is always preferable to a long one. Why should anyone choose the word 'erroneous' over the word 'wrong' in an essay? Usually writers who employ more obscure words are trying to sound impressive, but can appear pretentious. Direct words enable you to control what you are saying, and are not necessarily babyish, but the most appropriate ones for the job.

When you read your writing aloud, you will notice that the key stress comes at the end of your sentence. It is therefore most effective to end with a short and emphatic word to secure your point. Try to resist the impulse to waffle at the end of your sentence by trailing off into qualifying clauses. It might be worth relocating the clause to the beginning of the sentence or losing it altogether if you feel that it adds little to its meaning.

Your sentences might be the most grammatically perfect in the world, but still cause your writing to sound wrong if you have misjudged its tone. A colloquial style, which uses slang and exclamations, is an inappropriately chatty tone for an essay. However, style can be equally jarring if your vocabulary is too formal or ambitious for its context. It is much more impressive to make complicated points using simple language and grammar.

Although these ways of organising your thoughts into writing are straightforward, if you don't get it right first time, then work on your piece. It is often the act of

juggling and tidying that really transforms writing. Starting with the subject, using direct words and keeping sentences short are the most compelling way of writing. The confident writer is someone who remembers how simple these tricks can be.

We hope this basic introduction to writing techniques has been useful. If you want to develop your skills further, ask your bookseller for a copy of *Write it Right* by John Peck and Martin Coyle, published by Palgrave Macmillan.