COAT

Writing to clarify, engage and persuade

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Gina Frampton
Writing Comes Alive

gina.frampton@writingcomesalive.com

0413 585 111

1. Use plain words

See George Orwell's essay, *"Politics and the English Language"*, 1946.

1.1 Avoid clichés and jargon

✗ Jargonised expression	✔ Plain language alternative
a win-win situation	the best outcome for everyone
establish a level playing field	make things fair
a steep learning curve	learning a lot quickly
key learning areas	important lessons
leveraging	using or making better use of
escalate	increase
going forward	in the future
blue sky thinking	limitless thinking
incentivise	encourage

1.2 Prefer short words and phrases over long ones

✗ Long	✔ Short
advantageous	helpful, useful
at a later date	later
at this point in time	now
commencement	beginning
consequence	result
erroneous	wrong
inception	start, beginning
majority of	most
numerous	many
optimum	best
selection	choice
sufficient	enough

1.3 Use simple prepositions not wordy compound prepositional phrases

✗ Fat phrases	✔ Polished prepositions
as a consequence of	because of
by means of	by
for the reason that	because
in accordance with	by, under, following
in excess of	more than, exceeding
in favour of	for

in order to	to
in terms of	in
in the event that	if
notwithstanding the fact that	although
prior to	before
provided that	if, however
pursuant to	under
subsequent to	after
the means by which	how
until such time as	until
with respect to	on, about, for, in, with, to

1.4   Leave out any unnecessary words

~~At a~~ later ~~date~~	~~Basic~~ fundamentals
~~Brief~~ respite	By ~~means of~~
~~Calculated as~~ the sum of	~~Closely~~ scrutinise
Consensus ~~of opinion~~	~~Entirely~~ eliminate
He repeated the question ~~again~~	~~Future~~ prospects or plans
Interact ~~with each other~~	Is ~~in~~ close ~~proximity~~ to
~~Past~~ experience	Pause ~~for a moment~~
Red ~~in colour~~	Refer ~~back~~
Return ~~back~~ to	Still ~~continues to~~
The ~~said~~ witness claimed	The site is ~~located~~ 5km away

1.5   Prefer the active to the passive voice

Active	Passive
A repayment plan was agreed on [**BY** the bank and the borrowers.]	The bank and the borrowers agreed on a repayment plan.

Tip: to spot the passive voice, listen for the word **"by"**. It may be implied as in: Trespassers will be prosecuted [by park rangers].

1.6   Where possible, use a verb rather than a noun

✘ Noun — heavy	✔ Verb — light
agreement	agree
make allegations	allege
provide a means for	allow for
perform an analysis	analyse
submit an application	apply

is of the opinion that	believes
make an election	choose
make a complaint	complain
take into consideration	consider
make a decision	decide
dependence	depend
provide guidance	guide
make a payment	pay
have a preference for	prefer
provide protection to	protect
produce a report on	report on
bear a resemblance	resemble
provide responses	respond
perform a search	search
make use of	use
is in violation of	violates

1.7   Use 'you's more than 'we's — write from your reader's perspective, not yours as writer.

If you write using more 'you' [second person] words than 'I' or 'we' [first person] words, you will be thinking from your reader's perspective. That makes you more likely to use vocabulary and to order your ideas to suit your reader.

And your reader will be more engaged in your story — because it will be focused on them.

•   Aim for at least 2 **yous** for every **I** or **we** in your writing.
•   Watch out for I-disease, especially in emails where every paragraph might
         begin with an 'I'.

2. Structuring documents, paragraphs, sentences

2.1 Order your material to suit your reader

Always adapt your structure to suit your audience and your purpose. Generally:
- place the most important information at the start — **prioritise**

- ensure the details flow logically — **order**

- put related information together — **bunch**

- if appropriate, cut any information that just detracts from the focus of your key message — **delete**.

2.2 Use headings generously

Use lots of headings — perhaps even one every paragraph. They provide visual relief to dense text, are easy to scan and offer an overview of your text.

2.3 Structure your paragraphs thoughtfully

a. Put your key information or questions first in a topic sentence.

b. Start a new paragraph every time you start a new theme or sub-theme.

c. Bunch related material together.

d. Perhaps number your paragraphs to reflect their relationship to each other.

e. Use signpost words to link paragraphs so your reader can follow the flow of your ideas.

2.4 Structure your sentences to make them as persuasive as possible

To ensure that your sentences are clear, direct and powerful:

a. Aim for an average sentence length of 15 to 20 words across your document.

b. Include only one idea in a sentence to give the idea its full persuasive impact.

c. Keep your subject, verb and object close together.

d. Leave unnecessary words out.

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e. Link your sentences so that they flow and so that the relationship between the ideas shows.

f. Use the 'hot spot' at the end of a sentence to emphasise your main point.

g. Use the active voice where possible.

h. Include people where appropriate.

2.5 And link your ideas with signpost or transition words

Supporting words:

Also	In particular
In addition	For instance
As well as	Similarly
And	Again

Indicate cause and effect:

Therefore	Because
For this reason	First, second
This means that	Accordingly
So	Thus

Provide contrast or comparison:

Instead	However
Alternatively	Although
On the one hand	On the other hand
But	However

Show sequence:

At first	To begin with
Meanwhile	Next
Then	In conclusion

For restatement:

In other words	Namely
In essence	That is

3.   A writing model — The Betty Flowers Paradigm

Your drafting will be more efficient if you:

*   delay writing to think about what you want to say and what the reader needs to know, and
*   avoid editing while you compose your first draft.

Break your writing process down into separate 'energies':

1. Madman

What you want to say

*   unpacking the purpose of your communication
*   gathering ideas, brainstorming, researching, talking to stakeholders

2. Architect

How best to communicate your message

*   considering the best vehicle for your message — email or attachment to an email, telephone call, text or diagram etc
*   structuring your document to suit your reader
*   deciding what to include and what to exclude

3. Carpenter

Writing so that the message you send is the message received

*   writing clearly
*   writing from the reader's perspective
*   being clear, accurate, engaging, persuasive with your words

4. Judge

Finessing your document

*   proofreading
*   editing—checking the madman's, the architect's and the carpenter's handiwork.

For more detail on this writing model, see Bryan Garner's article at:
www.lawprose.org/bryan_garner/articles_by_bryan_a_garner.php
Using the Flowers Paradigm to Write More Efficiently, Trial, May 1997, pp. 79–80.

4.   Email etiquette and efficiency

Courtesy works particularly well in cyberspace. Here are some tips to make you an effective communicator and to make your 'cyber silhouette' as attractive as possible for a busy reader.

Do:

Address fields
1.   List names in your address fields in a considered order — alphabetical or hierarchical perhaps.

2.   Blind copy addresses when it is not appropriate to disclose them to other readers.

Subject lines
3.   Use a useful subject line — it may be the most useful line in your message.

4.   Change at least part of your subject line every time you send an email — to reflect the shift in the story.

Salutations
5.   Use appropriate and respectful greetings — both opening and closing.

6.   Include your reader's name, even when emails are flying about like instant messages without an opening greeting: *Thanks for your suggestion, Jemima.*

Structure
7.   Structure your message with the most important information — particularly any action required — at the top.

8.   Add a roadmap or summary at the top of emails that address several issues.

9.   Use headings to break up your text and to give your reader an overview of the content.

10.   Use numbers to clearly list tasks you would like your reader to attend to.

11.   Prefer bulleted or numbered vertical lists to 'Ikea' flat-packed text.

12.   Use white space to make your message as easy to read as possible.

Attachments and threads
13.   Change the name of an attachment to one that is meaningful for your reader.

14.   Describe the length and content of an attachment within your text if your reader might receive your message on a smartphone.

15.   Thread previous messages based on what is useful for your reader and what is appropriate if the message were to be forwarded to a third party.

Considerations
16.   Consider ending with a question that enables a client reader to return the

matter to your inbox, rather than hovering in theirs.

17. Acknowledge an email in the same time you would a telephone call — avoid 'virtual silence'.

18. Include information in your signature block that might be useful to readers, such as what days you work, if you're a part-timer.

Don't:
   Address fields

1. Don't "Reply all" or cc more than is really necessary.

2. Don't bcc unless all readers know why you are doing so

   Subject lines

3. Don't leave your subject line unchanged for a string of messages.

   Salutations

4. Don't use title case in farewell salutations: write — "Kind regards" not "Kind Regards"

5. Don't sign off with your signature block — insert a farewell and your name above your signature block.

   Content

6. Don't necessarily thank people for doing their normal duties.

7. Don't write emotional emails — keep your tone professional yet warm.

8. Don't rely on emoticons to soften your tone.   ;)

9. Don't always write from your own perspective — write from your reader's perspective, focussing on "you" not "I" or "we".

   Formatting

10. Don't use tabs — unless you are certain the formatting will hold in another email system.

   Checking

11. And most importantly, don't hit "send" before checking your message.