

MODULE 4

Words and Sentences

WHILE different people define *plain English* in different ways, most writers agree that two key aspects are the use of plain, everyday words and short sentences, preferably in normal subject-verb-object order.

In business writing you're usually trying to communicate and not to impress, so you should avoid the more complicated words and sentence structures that are available in English. Back in high school, you may have been encouraged to demonstrate your growing vocabulary and mastery of sentence syntax in your writing.

Doing this correctly would usually improve your mark, and maybe your final grade. In business writing, however, your goal is almost always to communicate quickly and clearly to a broad range of readers—and sometimes to people whose first language is not English.

In this module, you'll learn about the importance of word choice and sentence length to communicating clearly. You'll also learn about the fog index, a formula that you can use to measure the clarity of a sample of writing based solely on word choice and sentence length.

What's the fog index?

The fog index was developed years ago as a way to quickly evaluate the clarity of a sample of writing. While it only measures word choice and sentence length, the results are worth considering because these two aspects of writing are widely considered to be good indicators of writing quality.

One of the reasons for the popularity of this formula is that the resulting number equates to the minimum grade-school reading level required to

read the writing easily. In other words, if the result is 12, it means that you have to be reading at a grade 12 level to read it easily.

Some people believe strongly in the fog index and have used it to measure the clarity of different types of documents, including popular magazines. One comprehensive study tried the formula on a variety of popular magazines (see results below).

Fog index of various magazines		
Fog Index	Reading Level	Magazine
17	Graduate studies	Very few popular magazines are this difficult
16	Fourth-year university	
15	Third-year university	
14	Second-year university	
13	First-year university	
12	Grade 12	<i>Atlantic, Harper, Fortune</i>
11	Grade 11	
10	General public is considered to read in this range	<i>Time, Newsweek</i>
9		<i>Reader's Digest</i>
8		Tabloids

Fog index calculation

Here's the formula for calculating the fog index for a sample of writing. It can be used on any sample of writing of any length. A few typical paragraphs are usually enough. Review the formula, then try it on the writing samples.

1. Divide the total number of words by the total number of sentences to determine the average number of words in a sentence.
2. Calculate the percentage of words with three or more syllables (the *hard* words). Don't count:
 - capitalized words
 - combinations of small words
 - verb forms, such as “created”
 - technical words

3. Add the average number of words in a sentence to the percentage of hard words. Treat the percentage as a whole number (for example, if it's 14%, add 14).

4. Multiply by 0.4.

Formula

$$(A + P) \times 0.4 = \text{fog index}$$

A = Average words in a sentence

P = Percentage of hard words

A: ___ Average number of words in a sentence

P: + ___ Percentage of hard words

= ___

x 0.4

= ___

Exercise 9: Calculate the fog index

Sample 1

During the study, information on the Pops Rivet operation and certain aspects of the fastener market was gathered and processed with a view of giving detailed consideration to those aspects most closely related to the needs of a sales compensation plan. The company sales pattern (both historically and current) was analyzed and summarized. A field survey relating to blind rivet application, company policies and personnel, including some general observations, was then conducted. Statistics on the total fastener market were collected. A study was made of the industry compensation scale for salesmen comparable in abilities and background to present Pops salesmen.

(100 words)

Sample 2

During our study, we considered the needs of a sales compensation plan at Pops Rivets. We studied both the Company and the total fastener market. Within the Company, we examined policies, personnel, and sales patterns—both past and present. We surveyed the fastener market, gathered statistics and looked into the application of blind rivets. We also inquired into compensation scales in companies comparable to the Pops operation.

(67 words)

Writing points of view

You can choose from three different points of view in your writing: first person, second person, and third person.

First person (“I” and “we”)

Write reports and correspondence in either first person singular (“I”) or plural (“we”). Maybe you were told at some point to avoid using yourself as the subject—that this wasn’t objective. Much routine business writing is now written in the first person. It’s straightforward, shorter, and lets the reader know who performed the action. Don’t avoid first-person writing.

Example

The situation has been reviewed and the following problems have been found. (**Passive, longer**)

I have reviewed the situation and found the following problems. (**First person, shorter**)

Second person (“you”)

Write instructions in the second person (“you”). Many people avoid addressing the reader as *you*. Particularly outside North America, it’s sometimes considered to be too direct, too personal. The alternative, however, is usually either passive (with no subject) or third person (“he,” “they,” or worse, “one”).

Addressing the reader as *you* is not only commonplace now, but almost universal in instructional writing—anywhere you want to tell your reader to do something. It’s concise and makes clear what actions the reader needs to take. Don’t avoid second-person writing. This book is written in the second person.

Example

More information can be found in the appendix. (**Passive**)

You’ll find more information in the appendix. (**Second person**)

The imperative style is written in the second person but without using “you.” It’s direct and concise. Each sentence normally begins with a verb, such as “type” or “complete.” Imperative is typically used in procedure writing, when addressing the reader as “you” would be repetitive.

Example

To join the society, complete the application form and send a copy to national headquarters. Attach a cheque for your first year’s fees. (**Imperative**)

Try one: Rewrite in the imperative

In order to see a list of assigned access codes, it is necessary that you type FIL at the command line.

Third person (“he” and “they”)

Write in the third person when neither you nor the reader are involved in the action. For example, use the third person if you are writing to one person and discussing another person. But never write in the third person when you’re talking about the reader—it’s impersonal and bureaucratic.

Example

Clerks must process contractor invoices within 30 days. If they have any questions, they should contact the cost centre manager.

Exercise 10: Put “I” and “we” in your writing

Rewrite the following sentences using either “I” or “we” as the subject:

1. Errors were made in processing the payroll.

2. The report had to be edited and converted to HTML before it could go on the intranet.

3. The arbitration was not going well so the best negotiator was called in.

Exercise 11: Put “you” in your writing

Rewrite the following sentences addressing the reader as “you” (and make them plain English):

1. Prior to the completion of the report, it is important to check the cross-references for accuracy.

2. In the solicitation of review comments, it is necessary to allocate an appropriate period of time.

3. Modifications to the annual report are not easy to facilitate once it has been printed.

4. Analysis of the information requirements of staff could conceivably impact the current methodology of technical manual distribution.

Sentence length

Long sentences are tough to read. Most readers prefer short sentences, particularly skimmers and scanners—typical business readers. Some writers use a rule of 25 to 30 words. Others simply avoid joining independent clauses (complete sentences) together, usually with a conjunction. Instead, they create two sentences.

Avoid using semicolons to join related independent clauses. In business writing, they're seldom needed. And most of your readers will not understand the meaning of a semicolon. Use two sentences instead.

Types of sentences

Avoid complicated sentence structures when a simple one will do. The simplest sentences are the easiest to read.

Simple sentences

Simple sentences consist of a subject, a verb, and an object.

Example

I fired him.
(**Subject-verb-object**)

Complex sentences

Complex sentences consist of a main clause (independent clause) and a subordinate clause (dependent clause).

Example

Because I hired him, I had to fire him.

Compound sentences

Compound sentences consist of at least two independent clauses, often joined by a conjunction.

Example

I fired 28 employees this year, and next year I hope to fire even more employees.

Compound-complex sentences

Compound-complex sentences consist of at least two independent clauses and at least one dependent clause.

Example

I fired 28 employees this year (**independent clause**), and next year I hope to fire even more employees (**independent clause**) because that's part of my job (**dependent clause**).

Exercise 12: Shorten long sentences

Divide the following sentences into two or more shorter sentences:

We are prepared to cooperate with your consultants in the preparation of a schedule, but we insist on maintaining complete control of the work as outlined in Article 12 of the General Conditions of the Contract and any such schedule must be prepared in a manner and form suitable to use as a tool and guide to management for all construction operations on the site.

The facts clearly indicate that motor cars with faulty brakes are being driven on our streets and highways yet government officials have not taken action to protect the responsible motorist and the general public.

The shipping clerk may have only a vague notion of what happens to the four copies of the bill of lading forwarded to the sales order and billing departments; however, this will not affect the clerk's ability to assess a proposed recommendation about internal control.

We find the division of business into accounting systems a convenient structure for evaluating internal control, although management may view its business differently, perhaps in terms of areas of functional responsibilities.

Exercise 13: Break up very long sentences

Rewrite the following 62-word sentence into several shorter sentences:

Our proposal, while indicative of the general approach we would take if we were awarded the contract to write and produce the annual report, does not specifically address the time and costs that would be required to complete the project because not enough substantive information was provided in the request for proposal, which was sent to us by registered mail on January 2.

Word choice

Word choice is critical to reader friendliness, and is one of the two aspects of writing measured by the fog index. If you use the same everyday words that you use in normal conversation, you'll be writing in plain English.

The English language has a large vocabulary—the *Canadian Oxford Dictionary* defines 120,000 words. Yet, so many of these words are not in day-to-day use. For every common word, there are usually a half dozen or more synonyms with essentially the same meaning.

Avoid words that are:

- not used regularly in conversation (“obfuscate”)
- legal sounding (“pursuant to”)
- too big for the job (“contemporaneous”)
- clichés (“despite the fact that”)
- from foreign languages (“ipso facto”)

Instead of...	Use...
approximately	about
compensate	pay
disseminate	send, distribute
pertaining to	of, about
prior to	before
shall	will
subsequent	after
under the provisions of	under
utilize	use
verbose	wordy

Technical terminology

When choosing words, carefully consider the needs of new employees and those using English as their second language.

Before using a technical term, consider your readers. Will they understand it? Technical terminology has its place—it speeds communication between people who share the same technical background and expertise. For others, however, technical terms are just meaningless words. The more expert you become at a subject, the more likely you'll be tempted to use technical terms.

Here are some technical terms from different areas:

Legal	Medical
real property conveyance plaintiff licensee	contusion haemorrhage radius infarction
Computer	Accounting
window RAM interface user ID	accrual trial balance debit/credit ledger

Even if your readers will likely know a term, define it the first time you use it. It doesn't have to be a formal definition.

Example of informal definition of technical term

“The *radius*, the thicker and shorter of the two bones in the forearm, is...”

Notice in the above example that the word *radius* is in italics. This is the normal way to indicate that you are discussing or defining a word and not using it.

Longer technical publications also benefit from a *glossary*, a dictionary-like listing of technical terms and their definitions. Even if your readers don't see the definition in the text, they can always turn to the glossary.

Acronyms

Acronyms consist of the initial letters of compound terms (like DOS, for Disk Operating System). Avoid them when

you're not sure that all of your readers will know what they stand for. The only exception would be when the acronym is more commonly used than the full term (such as “scuba”) or is so widely used that everyone will know what it stands for (such as “USA”). Never create acronyms for your own convenience.

When you do use acronyms, spell them out the first time with the acronym in parentheses following, then use the acronym after that.

Example

This heating ventilating and air conditioning (HVAC) distributor has designed a software program for its HVAC engineers.



Signs and Notices From Around the World:

Budapest Zoo

Please do not feed the animals. If you have any suitable food, give it to the guard on duty.

Czechoslovak Tourist Agency

Take one of our horse-driven city tours — we guarantee no miscarriages.



Frank Lingua, the nation's leading purveyor of buzzwords and catch phrases, interviewed by Business Finance contributing editor Dan Danbom.

Danbom: Is being a cliché expert a full-time job?

Lingua: Bottom line is I have a full plate 24/7.

Danbom: Is it hard to keep up with the seemingly endless supply of clichés that spew from business?

Lingua: Some days, I don't have the bandwidth.

Danbom: So it's difficult?

Lingua: Harder than nailing Jell-O to the wall. That's why I have to circle back to partner and expose the key learnings.

Danbom: Give us a new buzzword that we'll be hearing.

Lingua: "Enronitis" could be a next-generation player. I also like "criticality."

Danbom: Do people understand your role as a cliché expert?

Lingua: No, they can't get their arms around that. But they aren't incented to.

Danbom: Did incomprehensibility come naturally to you?

Lingua: I wasn't wired that way, but it became mission-critical as I strategically focused on my go-forward plan.

Danbom: How do you stay ahead of others in the buzzword industry?

Lingua: Net-net, my value proposition is based on maximizing synergies and being first to market with a leveraged, value-added deliverable.

Danbom: Do you read "Dilbert" in the newspaper?

Lingua: My knowledge base is deselective of fiber media.

Danbom: Does that mean "no"?

Lingua: Negative.

Danbom: DOES THAT MEAN "NO"?

Lingua: Our research shows your consumer mindset is tilting on a negative axis. Let's circle back and discuss this offline.

Danbom: I hate you.

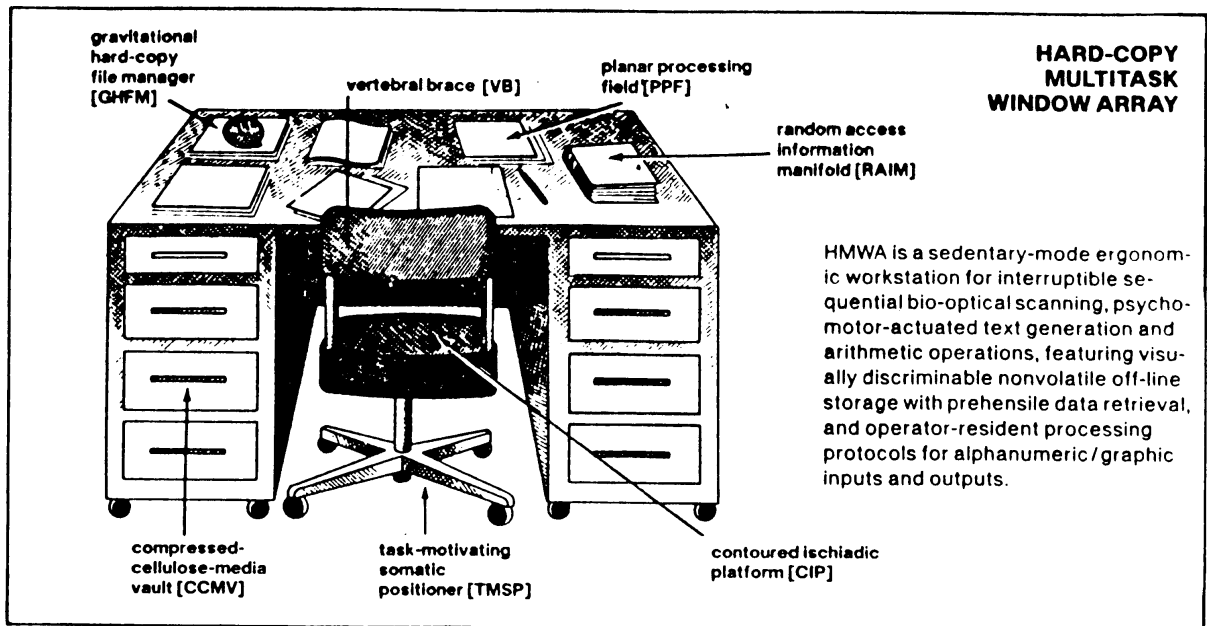
Lingua: Take it and run with it.

Buzzword generator

This popular buzzword generator can create thousands of meaningless terms. Be careful that your writing doesn't sound like it came from one.

To use, choose a word from column A, another word from column B, and a final word from column C.

Column A	Column B	Column C
integrated	management	options
total	organizational	communication
structured	monitored	security
parallel	reciprocal	mobility
functional	digital	programming
responsive	logical	software
optional	transitional	time-phase
synchronized	5 th generation	projection
compatible	incremental	hardware
balanced	analog	firmware



Exercise 14: Use everyday words

Replace the underlined words with simple, everyday words:

the commencement date is August 1

we will have to remunerate you

the methodology is under review

they utilized the photocopier

she obtained the proper forms

they ascertained that

he was cognizant of the fact that

subsequent to our meeting

she replied in the affirmative

the expenditure was approximately \$50



If Dr. Seuss Wrote Technical Manuals for Computers

If a packet hits a pocket on a socket on a port, and the bus is interrupted as a very last resort, and the address of the memory makes your floppy disk abort, then the socket packet pocket has an error to report.

If your cursor finds a menu item followed by a dash, and the double-clicking icon puts your window in the trash, and your data is corrupted 'cause the index doesn't hash, then your situation's hopeless and your system's gonna crash.

If the label on the cable on the table at your house says the network is connected to the button on your mouse, but your packets want to tunnel on another protocol, that's repeatedly rejected by the printer down the hall, and your screen is all distorted by the side effects of gauss, so the icons in the window are as wavy as a souse, then you may as well reboot and go out with a bang, 'cause as sure as I'm a poet, the sucker's gonna hang.

When the copy of your floppy's getting sloppy on the disk and the macrocode instructions cause unnecessary risk, then you have to flash your memory and you'll want to RAM your ROM, quickly turn off the computer and be sure to tell your mom!

Sentence order

Subject-verb-object sentence order works best because it:

- is easiest to understand (subject first, action second, and object of the verb last)
- minimizes the number of words
- uses active verbs

Example

Consultants appreciate respect.
(**Subject-verb-object**)

Respect is appreciated by consultants.
(**Object-verb-subject**)

While subject-verb-object is the preferred sentence order, all sentences should not be forced into this order. Some variation is normal and depends on:

- the information you have to convey
- the order of the previous sentences (sometimes you'll want to use the same order, other times you'll want to vary it)
- how well established the subject is (you may not want to continually repeat the subject)
- whether your focus is the subject, the verb (the action), or the object

Active and passive verbs

Active sentences are ones that include a subject (the doer of the action), and the subject is placed before the verb. Passive sentences either have no subject, or the subject is placed after the verb.

Active sentences	Passive sentences
They hold a patent. (4 words)	A patent is held by them. (6 words)
The GST has complicated accounting. (5 words)	Complications in accounting have been caused by the GST. (9 words)
The partners decided to pay consultants more money. (8 words)	A decision was made by the partners to pay consultants more money. (12 words)

Reasons to use active sentences:

- easiest to understand (subject first, action second, and object of the verb last)
- clear and direct
- minimizes the number of words
- avoids weak passive verbs (“is held” instead of “hold”)

So what’s wrong with passive?

Nothing, unless all of your sentences are passive, in which case, your writing will be weaker and wordier than it needs to be. While most good writers prefer active sentences, they will naturally alternate back and forth between active and passive sentences.

Reasons to use passive sentences:

- the subject is already well established
- you don’t want to point the finger of blame at someone
- you want to focus on the action, not who did it

Example

A serious accounting error was made.
(Appropriate use of passive)

Notice in the above example that the writer has not named the person who made the accounting error. This might be very prudent!

Exercise 15: Use active verbs

Rewrite the following sentences in the active voice:

No option has been selected by the committee.

Error messages are found in the appendix.

Omissions were discovered during the word processing of the report.

The transition is intended to produce no disruption of service.

Use strong verbs

Strong verbs are usually weakened when they are made into nouns. In most cases, you can strengthen the sentence, and cut out unnecessary words, by simply letting the original verb function as the verb.

Exercise 16: Avoid weak verbs

Instead of...**Use...**

give an answer to

reach a conclusion

do an inspection

raise an objection

send an invitation to

provide a solution

form a plan

conduct an analysis

make a distinction

have knowledge of

make a proposal

hold a meeting

Verb tenses

These are the basic verb tenses:

Verb tense	Example
past	I wrote
present	I write
future	I will write
past perfect	I had written
present perfect	I have written
future perfect	I will have written

Use past tense for:

- investigative reports (“We found that...”)
- performance reviews (“Joe performed his job well...”)
- results of tests and experiments (“The questionnaire showed that...”)
- references to other documents (“The annual report documented...”)
- other backward-looking documents

Use present tense for:

- policies (“Applicants are evaluated...”)
- procedures and instructions (“The clerks process the form...”)
- most letters, memos, and emails (“I’m happy to tell you that...”)

- scientific facts and other truths (“Water freezes at 0°C.”)
- data within a report (“The frequency increases with education.”)

Use future tense for:

- plans (“The company will open two new branches...”)
- other forward-looking documents

Most business writing uses either past, present, or future tense. The perfect tenses are used less frequently. You may have been told in school not to mix verb tenses. Actually, you can as long as you use tenses consistently and they reflect the actual time relationships.

Examples

The executive stayed (**past**) in the office while the staff picket (**present**).
(**No, inconsistent**)

The executive stayed (**past**) in the office while the staff picketed (**past**).
(**Yes, consistent**)

It is (**present**) our policy that once you have received (**past perfect**) the report, you will be able to (**future**) submit review comments.
(**Yes, because it reflects actual time relationships**)



Examples of unclear writing

These sentences are actual examples taken from letters received by a welfare department.

“I am forwarding my marriage certificate and six children. I have seven, but one was baptized on a half sheet of paper.”

“Mrs. Jones has not had any clothes for a year and has been visited by the clergy regularly.”

“I cannot get sick pay, I have six children. Can you tell me why?”

“I am glad to report that my husband who was missing is dead.”

“This is my eighth child. What are you going to do about it?”

“In answer to your letter, I have given birth to a boy weighing ten pounds. I hope this is satisfactory.”

“I want my money as quick as I can get it, I’ve been to bed with the doctor for two weeks and he doesn’t do me any good. If things don’t improve I will have to send for another doctor.”

“I am forwarding my marriage certificate and three children, one of which is a mistake as you can see.”

“My husband got his project cut off two weeks ago and I haven’t had any relief since.”

“Unless I get some money soon, I will be forced to lead an immortal life.”

“You have changed my little boy to a girl. Will this make any difference?”

“I have no children yet as my husband is a truck driver and works day and night.”

“In accordance with your instructions, I have given birth to twins in the enclosed envelope.”

“I am very much annoyed to find you have branded my son illiterate. This is a dirty lie as I was married a week before he was born.”

“Please find for certain if my husband is dead. The man I am now living with can’t eat or do anything until he knows.”