How to Write Well

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It's easy to write well, if you take it one step at a time. Any written article is composed of these parts:

- words
- phrases
- sentences
- paragraphs
- document design

Words

Plain language writing emphasizes the use of the clearest words possible to describe the subject. I cannot stress this enough: Use short, simple, familiar, everyday words!

Use simple, familiar words instead of jargon, unfamiliar words, or long, complex words. Some examples follow. Use the second word in each pair, instead of the first one.

- utilize -> use
- accomplish -> do
- endeavor -> try
- locality -> place
- facilitate -> help
- optimum -> best

Sometimes, two or more simple words are better than a single complex word. Replace the complex words in the following list with the simple phrase that means the same thing.

- disseminate -> send out
- expedite -> speed up
- formulate -> work out

Try to avoid technical words. If you must use a technical term, either define it, explain it, or give an example. Here is an example of a technical term that is explained:

This API function returns the coordinates of the Client Area. The Client Area is the space contained within the sizing frame, scrollbars, menubar, or titlebar of a window.

Phrases

Don't include a lot of unncessary words! Keep things simple and short so that your readers can understand them easily. In the following list, replace the wordy phrase with the simple word or phrase that follows.

- with regard to -> about
- by means of -> by
- in the event that -> if
- until such time -> until
- subsequent to -> after
- an adequate number of -> enough
- an excessive number of -> too many

To facilitate optimum results in technical writing, endeavor to utilize uncomplicated phraseology. OOPS! That sentence should be: To help you get the best results in technical writing, try to use simple language.

Sentences

Use clear, simple sentences. Your readers find it easiest to understand simple, declarative sentences. Sentences that are long and contain many phrases and clauses may cause readability problems. Try to keep sentences short -- about 15 words per sentence.

Paragraphs

In general, a paragraph should contain only one idea unless you are linking related points. It is much easier for your readers to understand this way. Large, dense blocks of text are also difficult to understand. The best paragraphs are no more than four or five sentences long.

Document Design

Leave space between paragraphs for the best readability. Divide your documents into sections of related information.

Style

Technical writing can be as formal or informal as you like. A little humor is allowed! Just be sure that your style of writing matches the subject matter. Never, ever talk down to your readers. Treat them as respected colleagues.

Spelling

Spelling counts! Use a spell checker. If you do not have an editor with a built-in spell checker, you can download WordWeb free, here:

http://wordweb.info/free/

Proof-reading

When you think you are finished, put your document aside for a few days. Read it again with fresh eyes.

Does it still make sense? Do any errors jump out at you? Even better, ask another person to read it for you and report back.

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