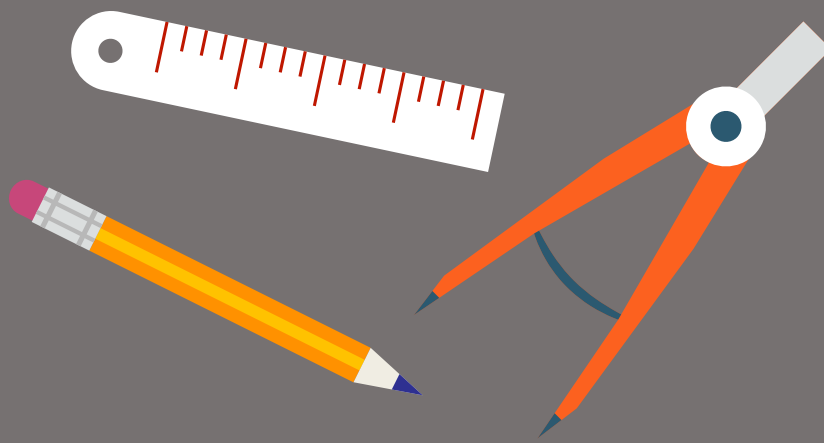


Top 10 Ways to Increase Your Writing's Readability



PRACTICAL TOOLS

Top 10 Ways to Increase Your Writing's Readability



In a time when texting, email and video chatting are the norms for most of us doing business, reading something that's typed on paper holds little appeal.

You don't want people who read your writing to feel like they're plodding through a dull textbook.

With some visual styling and formatting guidelines, business writing can be made more appealing.

Stick to these 10 tips to boost readability, and your writing will never be boring.

1. Break up big blocks of text

Big blocks of text hinder the ability to go from one main thought to another. Writing with no spaces or headers to break words up forces the reader to blend ideas, making them harder to digest.

Follow the old rule: Include in one paragraph only sentences that relate to each other. When you start a new point or idea, begin a new paragraph. Of these two written passages, which is more readable?

According to a recent business poll, only 20% of current managers demonstrate a high level of being able to coach younger employees, while another 20% show a medium level of skill in teaching their employees. The study's authors said, "Bad managerial coaching costs businesses billions of dollars each year and can ruin a company's chances for future growth. The only defense against this problem is a good offense, because when companies let skill sets drop, nothing can fix it." Businesses that do coaching right and hire managers who know how to train good workers will see them thrive, and their companies will gain a competitive advantage. It means that 20% of managers effectively coach every single employee, develop the skills in them to drive outcomes, create a culture of learning and accountability, foster relationships that build trust, and enable them to make decisions based on what they learned.

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Foster a culture of coaching

Businesses that do coaching right and hire managers who know how to train good workers will see them thrive, and their companies will gain a competitive advantage. It means that 20% of managers:

- effectively coach every single employee
- develop the skills in them to drive outcomes
- create a culture of learning and accountability
- foster relationships that build trust, and
- enable them to make decisions based on what they learned.

2. Use short paragraphs

Paragraphs should be two to three sentences at most. This rule helps you stick to the “less-is-more” rule. Weed out the excess, and your graphs will pack more punch. Also, even putting a line of space between sentences makes whole passages more reader-friendly. For example:

There are two ways we could resolve this problem. On the one hand, we can let customers know that, despite the delays, they're still receiving the same great service our business is known for. On the other hand, we can double-up service calls to eliminate delays, but this would cut down on the quality of time spent with each customer. Considering the amount of complaints, the second option could make more sense at this time.

There's no need to shorten the information. Instead, break it up so the statements have more impact:

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3. Use headings and subheadings

Headers and subheads do two things: They break up the “gray” space on the page by drawing attention to key concepts you want to make, and they compartmentalize those concepts where the reader can easily access them.

This is especially important for reports on broad topics that will be read by people interested in different parts. If needed, those readers can skip right to the parts of your report or memo to get the information that pertains to them quickly. For example:

- Instead of: **Committee’s report on renovations** (too general, gives no who-what-where-when)

Write: **North Wing renovations that start next month** (gives reader a what-where idea)

- Instead of: **Changes to company policy** (which company policy?)

Write: **HR/onboarding policy changes** (gets specific for the reader)

4. Use bullets and numbered lists

Lists that are bulleted or numbered help make details stand out. By enumerating points, you give a visual idea of a whole being the sum of its parts. For example, which paragraph is more visually appealing:

We invite our 401(k) participants to an update meeting scheduled for Wednesday, March 10, at 11 a.m. in our southwest conference room. Scott Harrison of Mortimer Funds, who is our investment advisor, and Evelyn Struck of Compass Financial Group, who is our plan administrator and 401(k) education specialist, will join us. At the meeting, we will cover review of our fund performance (which has done quite well this past year), review of our recently launched "age-based" Goal Manager feature, an overview of our 401(k) program and why it is important to start early and stay with it, and a group Q&A session. Both Scott and Evelyn will be happy to stay after the meeting in case you have questions.

You've got all the needed information in there, but your readers most likely won't get past sentence two because it's all lumped together. They'll focus on the date and time of the meeting but not the details you'll want them thinking about. Now consider this paragraph:

We invite our 401(k) participants to an update meeting scheduled for Wednesday, March 10, at 11 a.m. in our southwest conference room. Scott Harrison of Mortimer Funds, our investment advisor, and Evelyn Struck of Compass Financial Group, our plan administrator and 401(k) education specialist, will join us. At the meeting, we will:

- 1) Review our fund performance (which has done well this past year),
- 2) Review our recently launched "age-based" Goal Manager feature,
- 3) Do an overview of our 401(k) program and why it's important to start early and stay with it, and
- 4) Do a group Q&A session.

Both Scott and Evelyn will be happy to stay after the meeting in case you have questions.

The numbered list gives readers an idea of exactly what will be discussed.

5. Use boldface, underlines or italics for emphasis

It's leaner and more readable to use boldface, underlining or italicizing for words or sentences you need to emphasize. These tools are more visually stimulating, and they help eliminate excess adjectives and phrases you'd otherwise use to make the point.

One caveat: Depending on what you're writing, be mindful of overdoing these tools in any one document. Also, stay consistent. Using all three at different points creates unnecessary "noise" in your writing and can confuse readers.

6. Use numbers instead of words when possible

Spell out numbers from zero to nine, but from 10 on use the numbers themselves rather than words. They're both easier to read and identify, especially if what you're writing is numbers-focused.

For example:

- Instead of: *The CEO said his success was ten percent luck and ninety percent persistence.*
- Write: *The CEO said his success was 10% luck and 90% persistence.*

One caveat: when writing large numbers, rather than a bunch of zeros, the written-out version is easier to digest.

For example:

- Instead of: *The company posted a \$5,000,000.00 annual profit.*
- Write: *The company posted a \$5 million annual profit.*

7. Use shorter verbs where possible

This is a common rule, but it applies especially to business writing. Most business writing already contains complicated subject matter, so sticking with shorter, to-the-point verbs is essential to boosting readability.

For example, what makes a more readable sentence:

- *In order to facilitate the termination of our agreement, the company has agreed to specify what avenues it intends to pursue and to inform our parent organization in a timely manner.*

OR

- *To end the contract, the company agrees to let our parent organization know what our plans are immediately.*

Both sentences say the same thing. But when you get bogged down in \$10 verbs and modifiers, what starts as a one-page memo could run into a three-page report. The second sentence also sounds more definite; it doesn't leave the reader guessing.

8. Keep sentences short

Sentences between seven and 10 words are easier to read. Unless some details require explanations you can't avoid, aim for briefer sentences by writing in the most specific terms. Most of the time, you can do this easily by turning passive-voice sentences into active ones.

For example:

- Instead of: *It's been determined that, due to a delay in production, the rest of the product line will be put on hold.*
- Write: *The rest of the product line will be stalled due to a production delay.*

In addition, rewrite how you use modifiers to keep sentences brief. You can still use them, just eliminate any excess connectors. For example:

- Instead of: *He previously worked as a consultant for a company in the South called XYZ Industries.*
- Write: *He had consulted for XYZ Industries, based in Atlanta.*

9. Use acronyms with caution

Acronyms are more and more an integral part of our communication culture, even becoming new words such as "ASAP" (as soon as possible). How frequently you use acronyms in business writing depends on the field of work you're writing for and who your audience is.

Some professions such as medical or engineering use acronyms regularly while others less so. When using acronyms:

1. Make sure your audience will know what they stand for, and
2. Spell out the acronym on the first reference just in case.

Even if acronyms are needed, flooding the zone with them can make writing more confusing to read. For example:

- Instead of: *The company is considering replacing its ICS with a more modern TIO, but is concerned that our ICD wouldn't easily transfer to the new OS.*
- Try this: *The company is considering replacing its internal communications system with a more modern touch interface operator, but is concerned that the internal communication data wouldn't easily transfer to the new operating system.*

In cases like this, if your audience wouldn't readily understand what the acronyms stand for, it's best to use some acronyms while spelling out others:

- *The company is considering replacing its ICS with a more modern touch IO, but is concerned that the internal communication data wouldn't easily transfer to the new operating system.*

10. Use visual tools to clarify text

Tables, charts, pictures and graphs add readability to any document. But they only help if they have context.

Make sure all your visual information is properly labeled as to what it represents. Group related chart information together and explain what the numbers or graphics refer to.

Otherwise, readers will get confused trying to match the written information with the visuals.