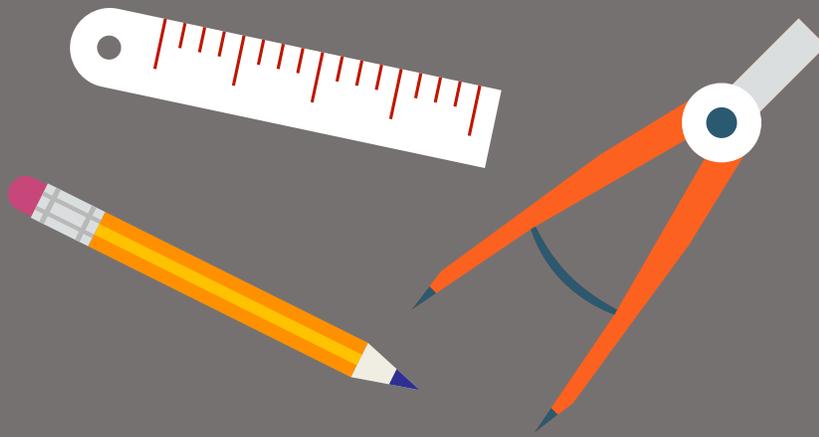


Writing Lean: 10 Ways to Sharpen Your Messages



PRACTICAL TOOLS

Writing Lean: 10 Ways to Sharpen Your Messages



If you've ever had the awful experience of writing the perfect memo or report only to have your computer malfunction (and you forgot to save!), you know the feeling of Having to Start Over.

You frantically remember what you said in the first draft and manage to get it all down. Surprisingly, though, your rewrite sounds better than your first draft.

Why?

Odds are because in the second go-round you likely left a lot out. You said what you needed to say, but this time more concisely. The result: A better written and effective memo or report.

10 tips to help you get straight to the point

1. Choose strong verbs

The less wishy-washy you are, the more succinct you'll be. Take advantage of strong verbs when you can. This doesn't mean \$100 words, just ones that convey strength, force and emphasis.

One way to recognize a strong verb is to make it stand alone. Leave out any forms of "to be" or weaker verbs such as am, is, was, were, has, had and others.

For example:

- Weak: *Theresa Miller is the chairman of our committee.*
- Strong: *Theresa Miller **chairs** our committee.*
- Weak: *The company had fallen on hard times.*
- Strong: *The company **fell** on hard times.*

Avoid “small” verbs that lack emphasis or force, such as make, go, get, come.

2. Eliminate who, which and that

They’re short words, but they take up a lot of space. Most of the time, you’re able to remove them without changing the meaning of your sentence. Leaving them out makes your message clearer.

For example:

- Instead of: *Michael Bartholomew, who is our new CEO, will address our stakeholder meeting next week.*
- Write: *Michael Bartholomew, our new CEO, will address our stakeholder meeting next week.*
- Even better: *New CEO Michael Bartholomew will address our stakeholder meeting next week.*

3. Keep your voice active

Active voice not only helps keep your writing lean. It also makes you sound more decisive as a manager. Passive voice takes the direction out of your message and makes it sound less motivating or important.

Using passive voice occasionally is fine, but it should be kept to a minimum.

For active voice, make sure the **subject** (the thing doing the action) of the sentence is placed before the **verb** (action) of the sentence.

For example:

- Passive: *The division **was told by** the operations manager to change its production system.*

Active: *The operations manager **told the division** to change its production system.*

- Passive: *A survey of our clients' most frequent requests was taken by our marketing staff.*

Active: *Our marketing staff **took a survey** of our clients' most frequent requests.*

4. Steer clear of wordy phrases

We use them because we think they make us sound smarter. But they just make our writing sound like legalese.

Most of them, when read aloud, sound wordy enough that we can instantly think of ways to say the same thing in a more pointed way.

A few of the biggest culprits are:

- Instead of: *Take under advisement*

Use: *Consider*

- Instead of: *We've made an agreement*

Use: *We decided*

- Instead of: *The question as to whether or not*

Use: *Whether*

- Instead of: *To summarize the above*
Use: *In summary*
- Instead of: *Under no circumstances*
Use: *Never*
- Instead of: *We think it is/deem it advisable*
Use: *We suggest*
- Instead of: *With a view to*
Use: *To*
- Instead of: *With regard to*
Use: *About or Regarding*
- Instead of: *With this in mind*
Use: *Therefore*
- Instead of: *Attached you will find*
Use: *Here is*
- Instead of: *In lieu of*
Use: *Instead or Rather than*

5. Choose shorter words

Now that you chopped the wordy phrases consider which words you use to explain or describe something and see if a shorter word would work just as well.

Shorter words help you stick to the point. This increases the chance your reader won't stop reading halfway in, and they'll understand your message to take any necessary action. A cursory glance at each paragraph can help you see where to shorten words.

Consider this example:

- Instead of: *Our board has looked at several viable alternatives that will facilitate our move to optimizing our health benefits packages.* (19 words)

Write: *Our board considered options to help improve our health benefits packages.* (11 words)

Weed these overly long words out of your writing to keep it brief:

- Accommodate (use serve)
- Advise (use tell)
- Affirmative (use yes)
- Alternatives (use ways)
- Approximately (use about or almost)
- Cognizant (use know)
- Concerning (use about)
- Endeavor (use try)
- Expedite (use rush or move)
- Facilitate (use help)
- Generate (use make or create)
- Indicate (use say)
- Numerous (use many)
- Observe (use see)
- Originated (use began or started)
- Personnel (use people)
- Precipitated (use caused)
- Pursuant to (use under)
- Remunerate (use pay)

- Require (use need)
- Retain (use keep)
- Solicit (use ask)
- Sufficient (use enough)
- Transpire (use happen)
- Utilize (use “use”)

6. Avoid modifiers

When you’re looking for unnecessary words to cut from your writing, overused modifiers should be the first to go. They don’t add to your message and tend to sound dramatic.

Here are the top offenders:

- Very
- Mostly
- Basically
- Quite
- Really
- Somewhat
- Obviously
- Extremely
- Slightly

7. Eliminate repetitive expressions

After you eliminate the junk words, search for repetitive expressions like “regulatory rules” or “invested interests.” Also look for repetitive ideas. Eliminate sentences that make the same point and can be deleted without affecting what you want to communicate.

8. Ditch the clichés

You probably write them without even thinking. Learn to spot and strip your writing of corporate clichés. Your co-workers and employees are bombarded daily with meaningless drivel about “delivering innovative solutions” and “driving a passion for excellence.” Phrases like these just add noise, not value.

9. Limit ideas you include

Don’t work with too many ideas in the same text. Only present your strongest point(s); the meat of your writing should be to make those main points stronger.

Base what you’re writing around one strong idea and save any side information or related tangents for another memo or report.

10. Make it more fun to read

Make short paragraphs, bullet points, headers and subheads. Put headers and subheads to work by making them informative, not blah. Use questions or full sentences for headers to pinpoint the main idea that you won’t need to repeat.

For example: A header like “What we need to do next” adds more value than “Our strategic update.”