

# Twelve Writing Tips

The suggestions below (do treat them lightly) apply to all kinds of non-fiction writing, from letters, to reports, to articles, to posters, to books.

*Begin with the end in mind*

Stephen R. Covey

1. Every time you write something you should have a purpose and a reader in mind. What is your purpose and who is your reader? The clearer you are about both, the more effective your writing is likely to be.
2. Any piece of writing of a few lines or more should have a clear beginning, middle and an end. Plan them.
3. When writing for a purpose, for a reader or in a format that is unfamiliar, plan your document using SPACE:

**S (self).** Who am I when writing this? What is my role? Examples are guide, informer, persuader, comforter, and so on, rather than secretary, manager, or lecturer.

**P (purpose).** What will the reader be able to do, how will they be changed or better informed, as a result of reading my document?

**A (audience).** Who is my reader? Is there a primary readership and a secondary readership? Is it appropriate to write one document for both? Or is it better to write two documents? What will the reader do with your document?

**C (code).** Knowing your role, the purpose of your document, and its audience, what is the most appropriate style of writing, and structure and format, for your document?

**E (experience).** What experience of the content of your document, or the process of creating it, do you already have? More to the point, what gaps in your knowledge of the content or process of creating the document do you have? From where and how will you acquire the knowledge or skills to create the document?

Reviewing using SPACE takes only a few minutes. It can save you hours later.

4. **Vocabulary.** You can extend your vocabulary quite rapidly by learning one new word and its meaning each day. How about 'abacist' for starters? You could go to <http://www.oed.com/cgi/display/wotd> to register and have the Oxford English Dictionary e-mail you their 'word of the day' everyday.
5. **Punctuation.** Among the three most frequent sources of punctuation error are the incorrect use of apostrophes, colons and semi-colons. Go to [www.economist.com/research/StyleGuide/](http://www.economist.com/research/StyleGuide/) to confirm the most common correct usages.
6. **Grammar.** Using the active voice is often preferable to using the passive. The passive voice emphasises the recipient of the action e.g. *The university is attended by more than 10,000 students.* (Word order: object + verb + subject) The active voice emphasises the person or thing that engages in the action e.g. *More than 10,000 students attend the university.* (Word order: subject + verb + object) Deciding whether to use passive or active constructions depends upon where you wish to place emphasis. Passive construction is useful where you do not wish to highlight who is performing the action (or you wish to leave them out entirely) e.g. *The photocopier was damaged at the office party.* However, excessive use of passive construction makes for dry, ponderous reading. To make a passive construction into an active one ask yourself '*Who or what did the action in question?*' and put that person or thing near the beginning of the sentence. Less than 3% of the sentences in this document have passive constructions.

7. People read more effectively by reflected light (bouncing off paper) than transmitted light (emitted from a screen). If you are writing something important, print off a draft, edit it on paper, insert the changes on screen and print again. Even professional writers rarely get it right first time.
8. Before you submit an important piece of work, print it and read it out loud (preferably with no one else around). You might be amazed to discover missing or misspelled words, punctuation errors, awkward sentence constructions, and repetitions. You might never have discovered them otherwise.
9. Do use the power of Microsoft Word® (or other word-processing software) to help you. Use spelling, grammar, dictionary and thesaurus functions critically. Try using readability scores (these are based on average sentence length, average word length, use of passive constructions and/or average number of syllables per word). You can set up Microsoft Word® to calculate the Flesch-Kincaid readability level when you do a spelling and grammar check. A score of 12 means that your work is readable by an average reader with 12 years of schooling – a 17 year old. Other factors aside, the lower the readability score the easier your work is to read. The document you are reading has a Flesch-Kincaid score of about 8 – close to the score for ‘middle-brow’ newspapers.
10. In your writing consider how you might use visual imagery to get your point across e.g. inflate or ballooning to indicate rapid expansion. Use language to nurture sensory representations in your reader’s mind. What words or phrases will encourage the reader to see pictures in their mind’s eye, to hear sounds or evoke feelings? Be inspired by this extract from a letter by Douglas Adams (of *The Hitchhiker’s Guide to the Galaxy* fame) to an executive at Walt Disney Pictures:

*It seems to me that we can either slip into the traditional stereotypes – you’re the studio executive who has a million real-world problems to worry about, and I’m the writer who only cares about seeing his vision realised and hang the cost and consequences – or we can recognise that we both share the same goal, which is to make the most successful movie we possibly can. The fact that we have different perspectives on how this can best be achieved should be a fertile source of debate and iterative problem solving. It’s not clear to me that a one-way traffic of written ‘notes’ interspersed with long, dreadful silences is a good substitute for this.*

Douglas Adams (2003). *The Salmon of Doubt*. Pan Books. Pages 168-169

11. Plenty of helpful writing resources exist on the web. They include:

Economist Style Guide [www.economist.com/research/StyleGuide/](http://www.economist.com/research/StyleGuide/)  
Online English Grammar (Basic Guide) [www.edufind.com/english/grammar/](http://www.edufind.com/english/grammar/)  
Plain English Guides [www.plainenglish.co.uk/guides.htm](http://www.plainenglish.co.uk/guides.htm)  
William Strunk Jr.'s original *The Elements of Style* <http://www.bartleby.com/141/>  
Yale’s Web Style Guide [www.webstyleguide.com/index.html](http://www.webstyleguide.com/index.html)

12. Finally, keep it simple. Use as few words as possible.

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