

Proposal Guide here.

Today's topic is **clear writing**. I've seen little correlation between writing ability and formal education, but a strong correlation between thinking ability and writing skill. Clear writing represents clear thinking; muddled writing usually reflects muddled thinking.



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Plain writing and plain talk is persuasive. You win more bids. Flowery, technical, jargon-laden writing makes you sound lame. Who wants to buy from a stuffed shirt?

HOW DOES YOUR PROSPECT PERCEIVE YOUR PROPOSALS?

Are they compelling? New? Innovative? Valuable? Exciting? Or are they boring, clichéd, confusing, complex, typical, or risky? Is your prospect turned off, tuned out, thinking of a way or justification to get rid of you or your proposal?

You might think your industry buzzwords, jargon, and catchy phrases make you look smart. Wrong, Captain Cliché. They hurt your position. They make you look like you just don't get it. When you use worn out words, jargon, redundant words, and gobbledegook in your proposal, your prospect just drops your evaluation score.

Need more evidence? Lincoln's Gettysburg Address, one of the most quoted speeches in history, comprises 278 words—and 203 of them were one syllable.

Persuasive, winning proposals require two elements, a clear message, and clear writing. Developing a clear message is a primary focus of capture planning, and part of preparing a winning strategy. Clear writing is how you communicate your message in sales documents, and clear speaking is how you communicate your message in sales presentations.

Clear writing and speaking is the sum of your style choices. When a prospect is engaged, seeking to buy from you, you have probably made good style choices. A turned off, tuned out prospect suggests poor style choices. You haven't connected.

Today's podcast will suggest ten clear writing guidelines. Could be more, could be less, but I'll try to keep this podcast to ten minutes. So here goes.

1. ELIMINATE NOTICEABLE CLICHÉS

If a phrase roll off your tongue, it's probably a cliché. Clichés are worn-out phrases that have lost their meaning and effectiveness. They suggest lack of thought.

Here's a few from proposals:

We are pleased to present our proposal for..., or,

Thank you for allowing us to submit our proposal for..., often used as opening lines. What a surprise! Is this the most important thing that you have to tell the prospect? Maybe you can sing “Kum Bay Ah” together.

Or, *Please don't hesitate to call*. I'm sure they'll sit around saying, *Should I call; should I not? Should I call; should I not?*

Here's a few more clichés:

- *at the end of the day*
- *best-of-breed* (are we talking about dogs?)
- *food for thought* (exactly what foods are best for thinking?)
- *involving all stakeholders* (picture people standing around holding stakes)
- *moving the goalposts*
- *get everyone on the same page* (that's an odd picture)
- *pushing the envelope* (another odd picture)
- *thinking outside the box* (vs. everyone else who thinks while sitting inside a box)
- *where all players are equal partners* (referring to health care. Doesn't players trivialize the partners?)
- *fertile ground* (when they are not talking about farming)

Delete 'em. Use simple words.

2. MINIMIZE JARGON

Jargon can be 1. familiar language used in unfamiliar ways, 2. technical or specialized language, known among a group or profession, or 3. a combination of both.

In complex, technical proposals, some jargon is needed to be correct and precise. When a carpenter talks about a rafter or a stud, the meaning is precise. However, proposals are filled with unneeded business jargon. Minimize jargon. Define it for non-experts. Replace it with plain English when feasible.

Here are a few examples:

- *No brainer* (meaning, if you don't see it as clearly as I do, then you're not as smart as I am)
- *Value-added* (often used as a synonym for solution,; or anything you can't charge for because the client doesn't value it enough to pay for it; or something that we think is great but we have no idea what it's worth)
- *Core competencies* (as opposed to core incompetencies?)
- *Interface with* (are you going to call them, write them, or kiss them?)
- *On a regular basis, or regularly* (hourly, daily, monthly, or yearly? How do you price this?)
- *Thought leaders* (as opposed to those who lead the unthinking morons? Or is this a psychic exercise?)

- *Leverage*, whether as a verb or a noun (I picture a big pry bar. When applied to experience, it usually means that we think it might be relevant, we might use it, but we don't know how, so you figure it out.)

3. USE THE SHORTEST, CORRECT WORD

Use the correct word, don't utilize it.

Shorter words are easier to spell and type. Prospects are more likely to know what they mean, especially if English is not their first language.

Short words are usually more effective. Look at commercials. Does the car company say it is *designed for maximum maintainability*? Or is it *easy to fix*?

Remember the Batman and Robin TV show? Remember the fights, with the short words in bubbles? *Bam, Pow!* Not, *glancing fist-strike to the head*. No one would watch.

Remember context. *ATM* has different meanings to bankers, the general public, people in telecommunications, and air traffic management professionals.

Don't misuse common words that sound the same, like *ensure* (with an *e* or an *i*), *compliment* (with an *e* or an *i*), or *discreet* (with a *ee* or *ete*).

One last point on correct words; if they might misinterpret a word, use a different word. For example, you say: All work will be billed *bimonthly*.

Bi can mean twice within a time period or every other time period. *Semimonthly* always meant twice per month. You might be correct, but what if the prospect thought you meant something else? Take the simple approach; just say, *twice per month*. Avoid the problem.

4. ELIMINATE REDUNDANT WORDS

Redundant words unnecessarily qualify other words or phrases. Eliminate them. Here are a few examples:

- *actual experience* (experience)
- *past experience* (experience)
- *close proximity* (near)
- *have the ability to* (can)
- *plan in advance* (plan)
- *qualified expert* (expert)

5. SIMPLIFY OR REPLACE WORDY PHRASES

If you can remove words without changing the meaning, do it. Here's a few examples:

- *at a later date in time* (later)
- *be cognizant of* (know)
- *by virtue of the fact that* (because)

- *it is clear that* (clearly)
- *period of time* (period/interval)
- *take appropriate measures* (act)

6. KEEP SENTENCE STRUCTURE SIMPLE.

English sentences can be pretty simple: subject—verb—object. If you mess with the order, then you have to know punctuation.

Aim for an average sentence length of 15–17 words. To keep it from sounding choppy, vary sentence length.

7. USE ACTIVE VOICE, UNLESS YOU HAVE A VALID REASON TO JUSTIFY PASSIVE VOICE

Active voice is more persuasive, decisive, and confident. In active sentences, an actor does something to a recipient. In passive voice sentences, the recipient is acted on by the actor.

For example:

- (Best—Active) *The pilot landed the airplane safely*
- (Poor—Passive) *The airplane was landed safely by the pilot*
- (Worst—passive, not actor) *The airplane landed safely*

So why intentionally use passive:

1. When you don't know or want to mention the actor
2. When you want to give the receiver more emphasis than the actor
3. When you want to clearly link two sentences

Look at the references if you need an example.

8. ANNOUNCE AND THEN FOLLOW YOUR ORGANIZATION

Tell them what you plan to discuss, and then keep your word. If you can't keep your word in a proposal, why should the prospect expect you to keep your word if given the contract.

9. BE CONSISTENT

Whatever you decide to do, be consistent. If you don't you appear careless, perhaps untrustworthy. Don't use a synonym to make your writing seem more interesting. Decide if it's a bicycle, bike, cycle, two-wheeler, velocipede, or an MTB. If you use bicycle in one sentence, and then bike in another, some people think a bike is a motorcycle. Eliminate potential confusion.

Call the customer the same thing. Refer to your company or your team in the same way. Capitalize the same words. Hyphenate the same words. For example, podcast is most commonly spelled as a single word, but many spelling dictionaries spell it as two words. Choose one.

10. DON'T BURY THE LEAD.

Listen to this drivel from a recent statement of work, with a few deletions to disguise the guilty:

The purpose of the Market-based Partnerships for Health project is to build on the experiences of the PAK program and improve the environment for commercial sector engagement in key priority health areas by forging partnerships between the private and the public sectors. Market-based Partnerships for Health, for the purposes of this SOW, is defined as partnerships between the commercial sector and other public or private sector actors in order to tap into and expand distribution, service delivery and information networks to improve health outcomes in selected areas.

Don't bury the key information—put it first. The entire point is in the last line, to improve health outcomes. Now, going back to guideline #2, Eliminate jargon, what are health outcomes? Would you ask your doctor to improve the health outcomes of your child?

So, for one more time, here are the guidelines:

1. Eliminate noticeable clichés
2. Minimize jargon
3. Use the shortest, correct word
4. Eliminate redundant words
5. Simplify or replace wordy phrases
6. Keep sentence structure simple
7. Use active voice, unless you have a valid reason to justify passive voice
8. Announce and then follow your organization
9. Be consistent
10. Don't bury the lead

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That's all. Thanks for listening.

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This is might be the best series of podcasts available about grammar and writing. I admire and endorse every aspect of Ms. Mignon's approach, 99.5% of which can be applied to proposal writing. Download every episode and follow her advice.
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This style guide was the primary inspiration for my book. I commend Dr. Larry Freeman, who should be recognized as the primary author, for this excellent book.
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