

The Proof Angel

Guide to Plain English

Think about your format

- Think about the purpose of your piece. How the reader will use it?
- Try different layouts.
 - Use the introduction to tell your readers what it is about and why the information is important to them.
 - Prioritise the information. Do not bury the most important points.
 - Present your points in a logical order, so that it is easy for your readers to acquire your message.
 - Keep paragraphs short.
 - Use headings and lists to make things clearer.
 - Leave space between paragraphs and columns to guide the eye.
- Think about how you would talk to the reader. Now write it down.
- Use examples, anecdotes, tables and images.
- If you use a question and answer format, make sure each question only covers one point.
- Think about who will read your work. Make sure you put in enough background for your readers to follow what you are saying.
 - Remember to explain any jargon, possibly in a glossary.



The Proof Angel is the trading name of Sarah Perkins, freelance editor and proofreader.

www.the-proof-angel.co.uk © Sarah Perkins 2013

Think about your words

- Use simple words when you can. Longer words slow the pace of your writing, so try to use words shorter than 4 syllables. Call a spade a spade.
- Use the simple form of each word. There is often an easy alternative.
 - Buy is better than purchase.
 - Extra is better than additional.

A civil servant once asked if he could buy a book and was told he had been “authorised to acquire the work in question by purchase through the ordinary channels.”

- Choose a suitable word and let it speak for itself. There is no need to add modifying words such as:
 - lonely hermit
 - very unique
 - basic fundamentals
 - cease and desist.
- In creative writing, it is good to vary your words to add life to the piece. In more everyday writing, it is better to use the same standard term each time you refer to something. This will avoid confusing the reader.
- Avoid prefixes and suffixes like pre-, re-, de-, anti-, -isation, -ousness, -ation, -ality. Some people refer to this as using Anglo Saxon words.
- Avoid too many prepositions together in a phrase:
 - ❌ We need to face **up to** our problems.
 - ✅ We need to face our problems.
- Avoid putting a series of nouns together. It is better to use a short name and explain the rest of the message separately:
 - ❌ We have a **corporate partner strategic marketing plan**.
 - ✅ We have a corporate plan. It covers...

- Here is a bad example, with 4 nouns in a row (including an abstract one) and no personal pronouns: “Attention! This is an elevator outage customer notification!”

- Watch out for strings of words that don’t add anything to the sense, such as:

- in favour of
- in connection with
- for the purposes of
- in order to
- in the field of

- Be positive. Avoiding "not" usually makes things clearer, even if the message is negative:

 The plan did not succeed.

 The plan failed.

 We did not pay any attention to Mary's suggestion.

 We ignored Mary's suggestion.

- Avoid using a double negative:

 It is **un**likely that I will **not** come on Tuesday.

 I will probably come on Tuesday.

- Avoid nouns formed from verbs (abstract nouns) which tend to have the following endings:

-ment	-ancy	-ance	-ant
-ion	-ency	-ence	-ent

- Use complete rather than completion.
- Use arrange rather than arrangement.

- Abstract nouns have two results:

- They take life out of writing by removing people.

 Action was taken.

 I acted.

- They clutter the sentence.

 I took action.

 I acted.

Often this clutter takes the form of the weak verb “to be” and an adjective:

 His bowling was poor.

 He bowled badly.

- Keep your verbs simple by avoiding “smothered verbs”:

 We will make a decision soon.

 We will decide soon.

- One way to do this is to use active verbs. Passive verbs need more words to support them, so the sentence is longer.

 It was decided by the group that...

 The group decided that...

- Passive verbs leave questions unanswered. If you write “It is feared that...” we do not know who fears. This can be useful in several situations:

- To avoid taking responsibility. Compare these two sentences:

It is thought that you are incompetent. (Passive)

I think you are incompetent. (Active)

- To be less direct, eg:

Your wall was knocked down by a speeding car. (Passive)

A speeding car knocked down your wall. (Active)

- To show a view is general or uncertain, eg:

It is thought that...

- Try to write in the present tense. The other tenses can be slower and more confusing.

 Those who were eligible during the stated period will be given an opportunity to file a claim.

 You can file a claim if you were eligible in this period.

- Try to use the pronouns you and we. This helps the readers to feel that you are talking to them.

Think about your sentences

- Put who or what the sentence is about close to the beginning. Do not give your reader time to wonder what you are talking about. In the first example, the reader might think "it" is the subject. The revised version makes it clear that the subject is "I".

 It has been twice now that I have had to speak to you about this.

 I have spoken to you about this before.

 There are two factors in the rise in prices: wages and fuel costs.

 The rise in prices is due to higher wages and fuel costs.

- Aim for 15 to 20 words in a long sentence.
- Have one idea in each sentence.
- A subordinate clause makes a sentence longer, but sometimes it is clearer than a string of shorter sentences. Don't just join short sentences together with and, but, so etc.. Be very careful that these longer sentences don't cover too many ideas.
- Try not to begin with a participle (the part of the verb ending -ing). It is the weakest part of the verb, and often leads to a long introductory clause.
 - Referring to the plan made before Christmas...
- Using "there is" or "there was" and similar verbs tends to give weak sentences.

 There were a lot of people on the beach today.

 The beach was crowded today.

- Be careful with reported speech, which always causes wordiness.

✘ He said that he was going to play cricket on Sunday.
(Reported)

✔ He said, "I will play cricket on Sunday." (Direct)

It can be difficult to get the true meaning and spirit, the tone and ideas into reported speech.

- Varying the shape of your sentences can help to make the writing more interesting. On the other hand repeating a form can add emphasis. Churchill could have said, "We will fight them everywhere." It would have been simpler, but not as memorable as "We will fight them on the beaches..."
- If you are inserting links to other parts of the document or other web pages:
 - Highlighted text is more difficult to read, so the link should be as short as possible. Highlight words or phrases rather than entire sentences.
 - Make sure it is clear where the link will lead.
 - Avoid generic link wording like "Click here" or "More."

Checking your work

- Try to make sure every word needs to be there.
- Look at your work with a fresh pair of eyes. Take a break, or ask someone else to check it.
- Read your work aloud. If it sounds boring or singsong, try to vary the sentence length.
- Look at your introduction:
 - Make sure it isn't a dull list of what is to come.
 - If your introduction mentions a range of topics, the body of the text must cover all of them.
- Check you have reached a conclusion rather than just stopping.