

**Seven suggestions for effective writing.**  
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**SUGGESTION #1: Let loose first, then edit.**

Separate the *creator* from the *editor* and the  *censor*.

“In exploring and clarifying one’s own thinking, one has the sense that the mind of the species is also clarified.”

—Paul Robinson, “Why Write”  
*The New Republic*, March 31, 1979

**SUGGESTION #2: Watch your language.**

*Diction*—i.e. word choice—matters. One word can make a world of difference—as it did, for example, in a May 2006 United States Supreme Court decision.

As reported in the September, 2006 issue of *Sierra Magazine*, this case involved the federal Clean Water Act, which stipulates that states may review for approval any project affecting discharge into navigable waters. The State of Maine invoked this law to put constraints on the operator of a number of hydroelectric dams that were drying up fish habitat on Maine rivers. The dam operator appealed the case, claiming that the Clean Water Act didn’t apply in this case because only water, not “discharge,” was affected by the dams.

When the case came before the Supreme Court, the Justices simply consulted a dictionary. “Discharge,” they affirmed, is anything that “flows or issues”—including water. And so the dam operator lost the appeal, and had to heed the directives of Maine’s environmental agency to release more water into the rivers.

*Syntax* (how you string words together) also matters—and this, like diction, must adapt to different audiences and situations.

One person's "jargon" is another's plain talk.

Here's an example of a particular kind of diction and syntax from a UCSC seminar announcement:

"Tropical forests are being heavily defaunated due to anthropogenic impacts."

For an audience of fellow scientists, this might be perfectly legitimate wording and phrasing. How might you translate the sentence, though, to communicate the same information accurately and effectively to a friend who's never taken a biology class?

Some prose is hard for *any* reader to understand—a matter not of technical language but of plain bad writing. There's no excuse in published writing for wordiness, unnecessary jargon, overly long sentences, imprecise diction, and other such barriers to communication. How might you improve the following passage?

From the *Federal Register*, November 22, 1991:

"Bank stabilization activities in excess of 500 feet in length or greater than an average of one cubic yard per running foot may be authorized if permittee notifies the district engineer in accordance with the "Notification" general condition and the district engineer determines the activity complies with the other terms and conditions of the nationwide permit and the adverse environmental impacts are minimal both individually and cumulatively."

### **SUGGESTION #3:**

#### **Write to be read and understood, not to be admired.**

The point is not to be flashy or draw attention to the writing itself, but to get your point across so that the words become a channel for the ideas.

Below are quotations from three famous particle physicists about the importance of communicating even the most abstruse ideas in plain language. These guys worked on notoriously complex, arcane, difficult

concepts. If *they* believed in the necessity of clear, accessible explanations, then the rest of us have no excuse.

1. "If you cannot—in the long run—tell everyone what you have been doing, your doing has been worthless."

—Erwin Schrodinger

2. "Even for the physicist the description in plain language will be a criterion of the degree of understanding that has been reached."

—Werner Heisenberg

3. "Most of the fundamental ideas of science are essentially simple, and may, as a rule, be expressed in a language comprehensible to everyone."

—Albert Einstein

#### **SUGGESTION #4: Cultivate a community of writers.**

Writing well usually involves not only putting in the lonely hours in the library and the field and at the computer, but also leaning on friends and colleagues to listen as we formulate ideas and arguments, and to critique or edit our drafts.

#### **SUGGESTION #5: Be true to what you know and honest about what you don't know.**

Don't get stuck in dogma.

Don't gloss over the data that don't fit.

Listen carefully to inconvenient, uncomfortable contradictions and to the arguments of those who disagree with you.

The difficult, contentious gray areas are usually where you have to go if you're really going to tell the truth and make a difference.

Let these ideas in: they will enrich what you have to say.

### **SUGGESTION #6: Pay attention.**

Strong writing reflects attentive engagement with the world around you.

“If there is poetry in my book about the sea, it is not because I deliberately put it there, but because no one could write truthfully about the sea and leave out the poetry.”

—Rachel Carson

### **SUGGESTION #7: Read.**

Read to deepen your insights and expand your understanding.

Read to absorb other voices and enrich your own.

Read to re-connect with your motivations for doing this challenging work.

### **IN PARTING**

“Words on a page do not accomplish anything by themselves; but words taken to heart, words carried in mind, may lead to action... We must work to transform the terms of public discussion about our way of life, about our home places, about the fate of the earth, and about our membership in the great living community that contains us all.”

—Alison Hawthorne Deming, Richard Nelson, Scott Russell Sanders