Five Suggestions for Better Writing

Here are five suggestions to enhance your writing. Keep them in mind whenever you’re writing as well as when you get to the final stages of polishing your draft.

1. **Natural-sounding Language**: write the way people think and speak.
2. **Active Voice**: make characters in your writing “act,” or make something happen.
3. **Action Verbs**: use strong verbs to bring your writing to life.
4. **Specific Language**: add a personal touch with details like names and numbers.
5. **Clear, Concise, Simple**: make every word and sentence count.

1. **Natural-sounding Language**

Did you ever hear anyone say, “I can easily tell you what I want to say. I just can’t write it down.” This is actually a common misconception, because writing and speaking are closely linked. So why can it be so difficult to transfer our verbal communication skills to our writing? One explanation is that we are used to reading formal language in textbooks. Many of the textbooks we read in school were copied from earlier textbooks that were copied from even earlier ones. The common language when these books were printed is not the same language we use today. To our ears, it sounds formal and stilted. Since that’s what we read at school, we assume that’s how we’re supposed to write. This expectation blocks our writing process because we’re afraid to write the way we actually think and communicate. To enhance your writing, you want to get rid of this barrier by becoming comfortable using natural-sounding writing.

You can apply this technique to your writing assignments by talking your way through your mind map and recording what comes out. Or, pretend that you’re having a conversation on the topic. How would you tell someone about it in a way they would understand? What would you say to get their attention? How would you move through the discussion to cover all your main points? Call a friend and try it out. Record the conversation or take notes by writing down key words, phrases and ideas. Notice how much clearer your thoughts flow together with words that fit your manner of speaking.

*Example:* The result of the study indicates that a large number of students in the U.S. struggle with academic performance because they are not proficient in basic reading skills.

*Example with natural-sounding language:* The study says many U.S. students would do better in school if they had basic reading skills.

Writing how you speak will help shut out your critic voice and improve your communication. But, sometimes you need to upgrade everyday language to ensure that you get your points across.

2. **Active Voice**

Using an active voice creates momentum in your writing.

In everyday speech you’ll hear people use both active voice and passive voice as they talk. The difference between active and passive voice is the same difference that exists between active and passive people. The passive people you know just let things happen to them. Active people, on the
other hand, make things happen. The same is true in writing. Passive voice delays the action. Active voice, on the other hand, takes charge and creates momentum.

**How to determine whether a sentence is in active or passive voice:**

- Determine the actor in the sentence.
- Decide whether the actor is doing the action (active), or whether the action is being done (passive).

**Passive Example:** The guitar was played by the lead singer.

In this sentence, the actor (the guitar player) has been pushed to the end of the sentence, separating the actor from the action. This separation creates the impression that the action “was done,” which means that the sentence is in passive voice.

Change this sentence from passive to active voice by putting the action with the actor, using the sentence order subject, verb, object.

**Active Example:** The lead singer played the guitar.

Switching this sentence to the active voice accomplishes three important things:

- puts the action back where it belongs: with the actor
- tightens and shortens the sentence with the sentence order of subject, verb, object
- eliminates the weak “to be” verb by replacing it with the strong, active verb “played”

3. **Action Verbs**

Capture your ideas with strong active verbs.

The verb serves as the central word in any sentence—the action, the part of speech that creates movement. But some verbs do this job better than others. A perfect example of a weak verb that can usually be replaced by a stronger one is the verb “to be,” in all its forms: is, am, are, was, were, will be, can and should be.

**Example:**

Compare “Sarah was the leader of the team,” with “Sarah led the team.” Or what about the difference between, “I am sure that you understand my decision,” and, “I trust you understand my decision.”

You can’t totally avoid weak verbs, but using more descriptive verbs, such as those on the next page, will bring your writing to life.

**Action Verb List**

act address apply
adapt analyze assist begin
How do you use the action verb list? When you’re reading your draft, look for weaknesses like this one: “The two inventors came up with a plan to get their new product on a popular television show.” Instead of “came up with” you might substitute the word “devised.” Now it’s stronger and reads like this: “The two inventors devised a plan to get their new product on a popular television show.”

4. **Specific Language**

Have you ever been standing in line for a movie or walking in the mall when someone tries to get your attention by saying, “Hey, do you know what time it is?” They’re probably not trying to sound rude. They just want to know what time it is, and they don’t know your name. There’s no harm in that. But chances are it still strikes you in a negative way. That’s because people usually react better to personalized information. This is especially important to remember in your writing.

If you know someone’s name, use it. Don’t say “they” if you mean Rachel, Daresh and Phoebe. Instead of writing: I sent your poem to the editor of that writing magazine. Write: I sent your poem to Judy Cassidy, the editor of *Young Writers* magazine. Whether it’s names or numbers, be as specific as possible with your descriptions. For example, instead of writing *small fortune*, use the actual amount, like $10,000. It also helps to get rid of other vague qualities like: *generally, to some*
degree, and a number of. Instead of saying several people will be at the book club meeting, find out how many will be there and include the exact number in your announcement.

Using specific language also means that the objective of your writing should be clearly stated, not left for the readers to figure out for themselves.

Remember, you can get what you want out of your writing, but you have to be specific.

5. Keep It Clear, Concise and Simple

This final suggestion helps you make every word and sentence count. It’s best to use sentences that contain twenty words or less. Vary the actual number to keep your writing interesting and fresh. Choose small words over big ones, and keep your paragraphs short and to the point—four to eight sentences is a good range.

You can also tighten up your writing by looking for “wind-up” phrases at the beginning of your sentences and paragraphs. Examples of wind-up phrases are: In the future, for the record, of the opinion. Consider how much clearer the sentence below is without extra wind-up wording.

**Example:**
Contrary to what the article we read for class states, file sharing over the internet improves the music industry.

**Example without wind-up wording:**
File sharing over the internet improves the music industry.

Use these five suggestions to enhance any kind of writing and ensure top-quality written pieces.

*Adapted from the Quantum Upgrade Series book Quantum Writer: Write Easily, Less Stress, Better Results by Bobbi DePorter.*