

The Top Seven Writing Mistakes Smart People Make

A Special Report
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You're smart. You're an expert in your field and you know what you're talking about. You seem like the natural person to write an article, report, brochure, webpage or even a book to share your knowledge, persuade people of the value of your product or service, or influence others.

Before you start, though, you might want to review this list of common errors – based on my 25 years of work with some very intelligent experts working in medicine, law, social work and academia. It's not always as easy as you'd hope to convey what you know. Keep these mistakes in mind and you'll produce a document that you'll be proud of – and, more importantly, that will be effective in achieving your goals.

1. Not clearly defining the theme, scope and purpose of the piece.

Let's say the company you are working for has asked you to create a brochure about a product you've been working on. Or perhaps you're putting together a speech for an upcoming conference. You know your topic – so you're ready to start writing, correct? No, not even close. But it's a common mistake.

Before you start to write, you need to ask a lot of questions. You may need to discuss this with the person who assigned you the work, or you may have decided to write it yourself and just want to clarify some points in your own mind before you begin.

You want to know:

- What is the purpose of this particular piece of writing? Is my goal to persuade people to buy something I'm selling? To encourage them to change their behaviour (eating more nutritious food, reporting child abuse when they see it, ensuring their wills are updated)? To share information with people who will use it in their own work? When my reader comes to the end of the document, what step do I hope he or she will take next?

Knowing the answer to this question will also help you figure out who your audience is. Are you writing for potential customers, potential donors, colleagues, new parents, newspaper readers, or an audience who will hear your words over the radio or as delivered by your company spokesperson? You want to know as much as possible about your future readers.

- What's the scope of this work? Exactly what aspects of the topic are you intending to cover? Knowing the planned format will help you determine the answer. If you've been asked to create a brochure for customers, there clearly will not be room to describe the research process that went into creating the product, or the background of the company. But you need to know more than that. Is your goal to give an overview of the topic, or to focus in on one specific aspect? Try to write a one-sentence summary that describes the parameters of the project. Make sure this really can be covered within the allotted word count.
- What tone and theme do you want in this document or webpage? The tone you choose describes the approach you take to the topic. It may be light-hearted, playful, warm, authoritarian, or concerned, among many other options. If you're writing policies and procedures, for example, there isn't much room for humour – but beyond that, the tone can vary quite a bit. Some organizations may want policies written with a stern tone, others may prefer them to be composed in a style that emphasizes collaboration and professionalism.

Your theme connects you back to the purpose you identified at the beginning and is the underlying message – often not stated in words – that you are trying to convey. Let's say you are writing a speech to be given to a group of potential donors for your charity. Your theme could be “you are successful people in our community and we're offering you an opportunity to give back.” Or it might be “the need is urgent and your donation now will save lives.” Choosing the right theme will make your writing powerful, cohesive and effective.

Too many smart writers skip these important planning steps and jump right into creating the document. The result is often a piece that meanders and misses the mark, requiring extensive editing to make it useful. Yes, it may take a little time to get good answers to these questions – but a few hours invested now can save you days of work down the road.

2. Not gearing the writing to the specific audience’s reading level, knowledge and vocabulary.

You don’t talk to a five-year-old using the same vocabulary and examples that you’d use in talking to a colleague. That’s obvious. But many people seem to forget that adults can also vary widely in their language skills and knowledge about a specific area. This is particularly true today, when many people have learned English as a second language and can be especially puzzled by jargon and idiom.

How can you be sure your words will be understood by your reader?

- Find out all you can about the reading level of your audience. For example, the average newspaper is written at a grade nine level. If you are composing a news release, that’s the level you should aim for. If you don’t know much about your potential readers – for example, if you are writing a brochure that will be widely distributed and may have readers who don’t speak English well, make the language as simple as possible. Use shorter words and shorter sentences.

Think you can’t write well while writing at a lower reading level? Mark Twain’s *Huckleberry Finn* tests at a grade five reading level. John Grisham’s novels are written at a grade seven reading level. You can write with style and sophistication yet still be accessible to a broad audience.

- Identify the connection points between the information you hope to convey and what your readers know already. Brain researchers have demonstrated that learning depends on being able to connect new information to previous knowledge; your readers won’t be able to grasp your explanation unless you give them a way to tie it into what they already know. If you are writing for other experts in your field, this may be easy, but writing for other audiences usually means providing either some background or some analogies that will help them integrate new information.
- Eliminate jargon, abbreviations, acronyms and idioms as much as possible, unless you are certain that these will be clear and useful to your readers. Within your field, this language provides useful shortcuts, and shows readers that you have insider status. But audiences who aren’t on the inside will find the jargon annoying and frustrating.

Of course, you’ll only know the appropriate reading level and “jargon-level” to aim for in your writing if you’ve taken the time to define and understand your audience.

3. Making mental leaps that leave the reader behind.

Several years ago I worked on a speech to be given by the executive director of a social service agency to a group including politicians and local donors. In his rough draft of the talk, he talked about the current challenges in the community: higher unemployment due to the closing of a local factory, a shift in the population yielding a higher percentage of younger children and more immigrants, and the expansion of the local casino. He then went straight into a plea for increased funding to provide the additional services that would be needed for abused and neglected children.

To the executive director, the connection between the community's challenges and an inevitable increase in the number of children experiencing abuse and neglect was obvious. He'd seen the research showing the links. In fact, most people, given a chance to think it over, would probably expect to see a link between situations that increase stress and mistreatment of children.

But the connection isn't immediately apparent, and to the average listener the speech seemed to jump from one set of facts to an unsubstantiated conclusion. This kind of writing error often happens because the writer is capable of jumping ahead in his or her thinking and skipping the steps in between. Unfortunately, you often lose the reader along the way. When writing, think of yourself as a tour guide leading the reader through the maze of ideas you hope to present. You'll need to direct your reader along the path and over the hidden footbridge; standing on the far side of the river and waving at your audience to urge them to catch up won't always work.

- Look for ways to structure your article, talk or brochure that will automatically set up a route for the reader to follow. You may want to explicitly say that you will first outline the symptoms of a particular disease, then discuss the research on current treatments, and finally give your recommendations for further research, for example. This will help the reader feel that the article is still on track when you switch from discussing symptoms to describing treatments. Using bullet points to list points, or headings to define sections or other formatting techniques can also help to show the readers where you are taking them next.
- Worried that you'll end up explaining too much and irritate more knowledgeable readers? You can use phrases such as "As you may know" or "Experts in this field know" to introduce some of your explanatory sections.
- Pay attention to transitions between paragraphs. Back in elementary school, most of us were taught that each paragraph should be a complete idea. What those grade five teachers missed, though, was that in an article or longer piece of writing, each paragraph must also connect to the previous one and the one to follow. Look for ways to make that connection clear. If your previous paragraph ended with "most dogs can happily adapt to a vegetarian diet" and you now want to discuss dogs who have problems eating that way, you could start your next paragraph with: "While meat-free meals work just fine for the majority, some dog breeders find that..." That little bit of repetition acts like a bridge for the reader.
- When you are guiding the reader through a complex series of ideas or seeking to persuade him or her to agree with your perspective on an issue, you need to "block off the side trails" by anticipating your reader's questions and responding to them. You may want to simply say that you will deal with those issues later in the article or that they are beyond the scope of this piece, or give a short explanation of why they are not being addressed. For example: "I'm often asked about vegetarian diets for cats, the other most popular household pet, but their nutritional needs are quite different from that of dogs."

4. Keeping your distance when you really need to make a connection.

In university papers, the word "I" is often forbidden. Academic writers often use convoluted sentence structures to pretend that they don't exist: "The components were observed to disintegrate over time." When absolutely forced to acknowledge their existence, these writers refer to themselves in an odd form of third person "this researcher had to recalculate the numbers" or "this writer was given new information."

For academic work, this style is expected and appropriate. But when it's used in other written work, the effect is to distance the reader from the writer and the writing, and there are many times when you need that connection. Are you trying to raise funds, encourage people to buy your product or services, or persuade them to change their behaviour? In each case, you need to touch the reader's emotions in order to get the results you are hoping for, and the more formal, academic style simply won't work.

How can you make the connection you need? Try these approaches:

- Avoid anything that suggests an academic style. Don't use references, footnotes, italicized quotes or the passive voice. Try to write the way you talk.
- Use the words "I" and "you" when they are appropriate – and they often are. These let your writing taken on a more conversational tone, as though you are speaking directly to the reader. Be careful, though, that you don't take on a bossy, authoritative tone by telling the reader "you should do A, B and C," or, even worse, "you should feel sad, concerned or moved by what I am telling you."
- Use humour when you can – but make sure it fits the audience and your message, and doesn't hurt or offend anyone. The ideal funny story might be one that is a bit self-deprecating and reveals your own flaws or mistakes, while at the same time making a point about the topic you are covering. You may not need an entire story to add an amusing note to your writing; a well-chosen phrase or sentence can also make the reader smile. Of course, there are also times and topics where humour is not appropriate.
- Vary your sentence length and style to create a more informal feeling. Formal writing tends to consist entirely of long sentences cluttered with phrases and conjunctions. Try taking that 20-word sentence and breaking it into two shorter ones, and see if the thoughts are clearer and easier to follow. Be careful, though, not to go too far in the other direction: an article written in nothing but six-word sentences will be clunky, choppy and hard to follow. You may want to try reading the finished piece out loud to see how it flows.

Many writers have a particular sentence style that they tend to use without realizing it. Some frequently start sentences with a favourite phrase such as "On the other hand;" some overuse passive constructions so that too many sentences start with "It has been said that;" and some inevitably drop in a semi-colon to link two thoughts that might be better expressed in two separate sentences. Your goal should be to use a variety of sentence structures, including questions, simple declarative sentences, and more complex sentences to add interest for the reader and make your points effectively.

5. Focusing on the big picture and not giving enough details, stories or analogies for more concrete thinkers.

Many people are valued in their work for their ability to see the big picture and the long-term perspective. And the truth is that many issues or topics are complicated, so that describing them only in fairly general terms is more accurate. The trouble with writing from this perspective is that you will leave many of your readers behind.

Brain researchers remind us that many people think in more concrete ways. They have some difficulty in grasping the big picture; for them, writing that emphasizes generalities is frustrating and confusing.

But there are strategies that will help even the most concrete thinker understand your message:

- Tell stories. People naturally think in terms of stories, and are more likely to remember events told with a connected beginning, middle and end than a series of facts. A story can provide an introduction or a conclusion, or you may be able to present your main points in the form of a story.
- Use analogies. New ideas and big concepts can be hard to grasp. Look for analogies and comparisons that make them easier for readers to relate to. Here's an excellent one: "Being obsessed with deficit reduction when the economy has suffered its largest setback since the Depression is like being obsessed with water conservation when your house is on fire--an admirable impulse, poorly timed." (Daniel Gross, "A Birder's Guide to D.C." *Newsweek*, Nov. 16, 2009)

- Give examples. Explaining a new theory of business management? Tell your readers how this might look in a small regional office where chronic lateness has become a problem then take them to a larger division of the company to show how the theory might help a sales manager promote a new product.
- Use concrete details. You create a clearer picture in your reader's mind when you mention a 100-year-old brownstone rather than a house or a dark-eyed toddler rather than a child. You don't want to get bogged down in details, but often simply changing a word or two can help: using willow or maple rather than tree, for example.
- Break down the big picture in terms of time, locations or other factors and share the information piece by piece. Perhaps you can describe, again using concrete details, the situation as it exists today in one location, and build on this to describe how the situation is expected to change in the coming months or years. For example: "Today, the small town of Springfield has three stray dogs, one male and two females. The male is a border collie, the females are mutts. None of these dogs are neutered. In three years, there could potentially be 200 black-and-white dogs without owners on Springfield's streets. With forty towns like Springfield in the state, we are looking at 8000 dogs roaming through backyards..."

6. Digressing (even if it's done passionately and enthusiastically)

Intelligent people tend to have strong (even passionate) interests, and a desire to learn about topics in depth. There's a natural tendency when writing to share all the fascinating details you've picked up during your research. There's a good chance that the details are, in fact, fascinating – but unless they have a strong role to play in the piece you are writing, they'll only confuse the reader.

How can you be sure you're staying on track?

- If you've taken the time to clearly define the purpose of your writing project, you can use this to assess each component of your work. Does this story, this sentence or this anecdote actually fit into the purpose you (or the person who gave you the assignment) have defined? If not, it should be eliminated, no matter how interesting it may be.
- Consider creating an outline of your work before you start writing. Not all writers like to do this, but if you suspect you have a tendency to digress this may help keep it in check. There's no need to use the kind of formal outline you learned in school. Just make a list of the points you want to make, organized in a logical sequence. Then if new ideas pop into your head, you can review the outline to see if they'll fit.
- Take advantage of your computer's cut and paste functions to review your article with and without potential digressions. When you're not quite certain about a section, simply delete it and paste it in a blank document. Then go back and read the article again. Is it more coherent with the questionable portion removed? Leave it out. But if you sense some important points are now lost, it's easy to just paste the section back in.

Really think this information is worth adding, even if it wasn't part of the original plan? Perhaps it could fit into a sidebar or textbox. Both of these are formatting tricks that tell the reader they are getting something that doesn't quite fit into the main article or paper. Another advantage is that these boxes – often shaded, set in a different font, or enclosed in a border – can add visual interest to the page.

7. Not having your work reviewed and edited.

You may be an excellent speller who has mastered all the nuances of grammar, so having a proof-reader seems unnecessary. But here's the thing: you KNOW what you want your writing to say. If a sentence isn't clear or a phrase doesn't quite make the point you wanted it to, your brain will fill in the gaps – and you won't notice that there was a gap at all.

Your ideal reviewer is someone who matches the audience the piece is written for – or someone who can effectively put herself in the audience's place. What you want from your reviewer is information about points that were confusing, distracting, boring or unclear. What you want from an editor are solutions to the problems the reviewer has identified. You may be able to find one person who can handle both roles. But having your work carefully revised - by someone who isn't you - is essential.

Think of all the great writers you know. They all had editors, and working with those editors made their stories better. Even Shakespeare's plays were edited and revised by the actors who performed them in response to the audience's reactions. Your work, too, deserves this polishing.

Need a little writing help to avoid these mistakes, or a professional edit to polish your work? Check my website at teresapitman.com or email me at teresa@teresapitman.com to discuss how I can help make all your writing tasks easier.