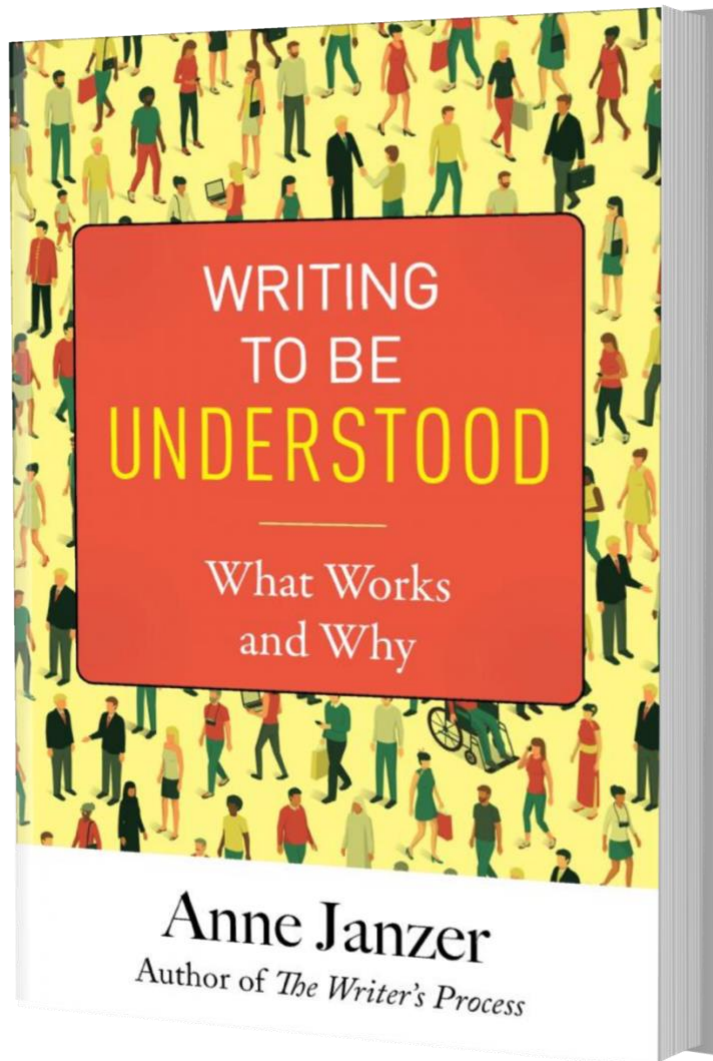


SUMMARY: WRITING METHODS



Welcome

Dear reader or listener,

Whether you've already read or listened to *Writing to Be Understood* or are curious about the subject and considering reading it, I hope you find this short guide helpful in your own writing. These pages summarize the key points and suggested writing methods from each chapter of the book, so you can more easily reference them and share them with others.

Perfecting your writing craft and personal style is an ongoing journey. I hope you find this booklet to be a useful guide.

Yours,

Anne Janzer

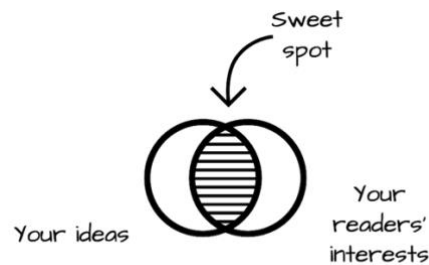


Part One: Understanding Your Readers

The chapters Part One offer methods for understanding the audience needs and context. Because having a knowledge of the audience is a foundation for the other methods in this book, I suggest that you at least skim this section to clarify the context for your writing.

Chapter 1: Who Are Your Readers?

Your objective is to find an overlap between what you want to write and what the reader wants to know.



To do this, you need to understand your reader. So, choose a well-identified audience.

When you have a distinct target audience, you can establish points of connection with that reader, which will make you more effective.

Methods for Writers: Identifying Your Audience

Identify ideal readers

Choose a few “ideal readers” for your work. Come up with specific examples of individuals you would like to reach.

Picturing an individual connects with your innate social instincts, guiding decisions about what to include, what style to adopt, and which stories might resonate.

If you’re not sure of your ideal audience, start by selecting people based on their backgrounds and motivation for reading. Then find real or fictional characters that fit in those categories. When you can envision a specific individual, you can start to call on cognitive empathy.

Look for shared experiences and identities

Once you’ve chosen a target reader or two, make a list of the identities, beliefs, or experiences you may have in common. Particularly when you’re trying to reach people outside your field, or readers with different beliefs, these connection points offer clues as to how to earn and sustain the readers’ attention.

Three rules to remember

1. Your audience is never “everyone.” Writing for everyone pleases no one.

2. Having a specific audience makes your writing better.
3. Personas, demographic classifications, and customer segments aren't people. Write for people.

Chapter 2: The Absent Reader

The best writing connects with multiple levels of the reader's brain, including:

- Reasoning systems
- Sensory systems
- Memories
- Emotional systems

To connect with those various mental systems in your writing, focus on developing cognitive empathy with your target reader.

Terms to Know

Amygdala: The portion of the brain responsible for the fight-or-flight response; the amygdala can activate when a reader feels threatened and is faster than the reasoning systems.

Cognitive empathy: The ability to understand another person's perspective

Methods for Writers: Getting to Know Your Readers

To develop cognitive empathy for your reader, use a two-pronged approach: get in front of real people, and then ponder their needs when they are absent.

Engage in a conversation about your topic

Do whatever it takes to test your message with other people and see how they respond. Do their eyes light up? Are they confused? What specific words do they use when asking questions? What resonates with them?

This tactic only works if you pay attention to the other person. Make yourself pause during your delivery. Take a breath, slow down and watch the other person.

Ask questions about the reader's context

Try answering a few questions about a typical reader you'd like to reach.

- How will they feel about the topic?
- How much will they trust you as a source?
- Will your writing appear within the context of a class?
- Will they encounter this piece of writing as one more thing to do in a busy day? What's their motivation for reading? Do they hope to confirm their own opinions? Satisfy curiosity? Advance their careers?
- Do they need a quick answer? If so, what are their questions?

If you're not sure of the answers, make a guess and move forward. Simply thinking about the reader in depth has already enhanced your cognitive empathy.

Write yourself a letter

Write a letter to yourself from your ideal reader, with all the questions you think they might ask. This forces you to take the other person's perspective.

Rules to remember

- Your success depends on the reader, so understand their needs.
- If possible, talk to people who resemble your ideal readers.
- If your readers aren't available, do the next best thing and imagine their needs and situations.

Chapter Three: How Much Do They Need to Know?

Before writing, you must decide how wide or deep you will go with your topic. The answer depends, in part, on what your audience needs to know.

Simplification is beautiful, but oversimplification of complex topics can mislead people. Find the right balance.

Terms to Know

The Curse of Knowledge: We frequently forget that other people don't know the things (or words) that we know. The more entrenched you are in a field, the harder it is to remember being an outsider.

Methods for Writers: Deciding What to Include

Deciding what to cover and what to leave out challenges everyone.

Get guidance from outsiders

When you're an insider in an industry, seek advice from those who are outsiders. Find the right people to ask.

According to Linda Popky, author and marketing consultant, the key is getting feedback from the right individuals. "You need people who understand the audience and provide the right level of feedback at the right time. Find individuals who can express themselves and identify when something doesn't work for them. They need the honesty to say if something is confusing."

Identify your key points

When writing a relatively short article or blog post, get your ideas across quickly and efficiently, before you lose the reader's attention.

Karen Catlin, co-author of the book *Present! A Techie's Guide to Public Speaking*, offers the following advice for the speakers she coaches: "If the audience will only remember two to three things from your talk, what would they be? Once you know those points, underline and repeat them."

Don't cut—relocate

Most experts want to share too much about the subject they love—more than the reader needs. Cutting your hard work is painful, so reframe the way you think about paring down content. Instead of deleting sections, relocate them.

When editing my book manuscripts, I create a companion file called “Stuff that needs a new home.” Title yours whatever you want. When you decide that certain content doesn’t serve the reader’s interest or interrupts the flow, relocate it to this file.

Now you’ve got a rich source of material for other purposes, such as blog posts, articles, examples, speeches, or lessons. Even if you never end up using the words in this file, having a home for unwanted text reduces the pain of deleting.

Rules to remember

- Decide what you are going to cover, and to what level of detail, based on the needs of the target audience rather than what you want to say.
- In general, increasing the depth of your coverage of a topic will decrease the reach of the audience, as fewer people are willing to dive deep into the weeds with you.

Chapter Four: What do They Already Know?

Before you start writing, you should understand:

- What your reader already knows that is correct
- What they *imagine* they know about your topic
- What they believe that is incorrect or incomplete

Misinformation is a serious problem if you’re writing about a complicated topic. Your readers may have been victims of intentional deception or, more often, carelessness with the facts.

Terms to Know

The illusion of explanatory depth: We think we understand complicated topics until we try to explain them.

Methods for Writers: Surveying Existing Knowledge

To determine what your readers know, get to know your readers. When possible, converse with them in person. If your audience is too broad to survey, here are a few strategies to scope out the extent of misinformation you may face.

Check social media

Because misinformation often proliferates on social media, the online world is a great place to survey people’s opinions. You’ll have to reach beyond your own networks, searching Twitter, if you dare, or conversations in Facebook groups or other places.

Consider using sites like FactCheck.Org and Snopes.Com to find myths and memes that need debunking.

Let Google help you

Start a typing a question about your topic and see the suggested autocomplete searches. The phrases that show up appear often enough to register in Google’s search algorithms.

What unexpected questions might your readers have?

Chapter Five: The Tough Audience

You may encounter readers who resist your message. These include:

- People who have made up their minds and resist changing them
- People who don't want to hear about your topic because they feel threatened
- Readers with deeply held beliefs in conflict with your message.

Terms to Know

Need for closure: A personality trait indicated by a real discomfort with ambiguity, and a corresponding tendency to quick and firm decisions. (See the work by psychologist Arie Kruglanski.) When faced with ambiguous situations, before all the facts are available, people with a strong need for closure often choose a position quickly and then stick to it, unable to see disconfirming evidence.

Moral taste buds: Social psychologist Jonathan Haidt posits that we have moral values analogous to taste buds; different people have varying combinations of these moral values. Understanding your readers' moral taste buds will help you frame messages to reach them.

Methods for Writers: Connecting with People Across Beliefs

Writing about challenging or values-based topics requires a deft touch.

Tactics that *don't* work

When writing about something that challenges or threatens a reader's fundamental beliefs, these strategies won't work:

Data, data, and more data. Data alone rarely makes a lasting impression for people who are emotionally engaged with the subject. Answering emotion with data is like speaking to someone in a language they do not know.

People with a strong need for closure may not see the same things in the data that you do.

Lecturing. Your perspective may be obvious to you, but not to your entire audience. When you fail to acknowledge other possible points of view, you risk disrespecting readers who don't agree with you. Beware of condescension and telling people how to think. Instead, help the reader see through another's eyes.

Insisting on being right. If you worry about defending the correctness of your opinions, then you may be focusing on yourself instead of the thoughts and ideas in the reader's head. To change someone's mind, guide them as they draw their own conclusions.

Survey your own beliefs and emotions

Before you can effectively reach people with different beliefs, first you must understand your own.

Which of the "moral taste buds" are strongest for you? Assess your personal stance by taking the Moral Foundations survey at YourMorals.Org, where Haidt and colleagues continue to gather data.

Fortified with a better understanding of your own biases, you're ready to try to cross the divide.

Reframe the values

Understand and appeal to the various ethical foundations (moral taste buds) of your readers. Anchor the discussion around the beliefs that are important to your audience.

Experiment with presenting your ideas in relation to different values, beyond the ones that seem obvious to you. Are there other angles to your subject that don't matter to you, but might resonate with resistant readers?

Once again, cognitive empathy is your ally. Revisit the methods in Chapter Two for ideas on finding your reader's perspective and apply them to the people you feel will be most difficult to reach.

Rules to remember

Without having any easy answers for how to communicate with a tough audience, this is the best advice I can muster:

1. Understand the moral taste buds you may offend.
2. Observe your own beliefs.
3. Connect with your readers on levels beyond reason and data alone.
4. Don't expect complete success.

Part Two: How to Explain Abstract Ideas

If you're writing about complicated or abstract subjects, pay particular attention to the practices in Part Two. You'll learn methods for making your explanations clearer and more effective.

Chapter Six: Curiosity Is Your Accomplice

To pull people into your subject, invoke their sense of curiosity. Curiosity plays a critical role at the beginning of your writing: in titles and introductions.

Terms to Know

Information gap theory: A theory that curiosity arises from a perceived gap in knowledge or information.

Epistemic curiosity: Curiosity that is motivated by the positive experience of learning something new.

Methods for Writers: Activating the Reader's Curiosity

If you are writing about an abstract and unfamiliar topic, find ways to link it to patterns or subjects familiar to the reader.

To activate curiosity via the information gap, take a page from the BuzzFeed headline writers and explore the following patterns:

- *Novelty*: things the reader has not yet heard or seen—including incomplete stories
- *Unexpectedness*: things that do not follow expected patterns or that conflict with existing evidence
- *Personal relevance*

For particularly knotty and complex subjects, consider breaking explanations into smaller leaps, then enticing the reader through each step.

To appeal to the reader's *epistemic curiosity*, lead with the benefits of what the reader is going to learn. Start with telling them why they want to continue reading.

For most of us, the battle for the reader's attention is won or lost in the following two points: the title and the introduction.

Titles

The most effective titles don't summarize the writing: they spark curiosity or hint at the benefits of reading.

Introductions

Browse through the work of your favorite nonfiction authors and you'll find that they typically deploy one of two strategies in their introductions: leading with a benefit or appealing to curiosity.

You *could* decide to begin with a long discourse about why your topic matters, or the historical background for your subject. Take it from a former marketer—these approaches may alienate or

bore many readers who would otherwise find your topic interesting, if you have a chance to reach them.

Find a good starting point, then bring the reader along with you.

Rules to remember

- Pay particular attention to the reader’s curiosity when you craft introductions and titles.
- Lead with one of the two theories of curiosity: the benefit of learning something new, or the gap of what readers need to know.
- Find angles that are unexpected, apparently contradictory, or relevant to the readers’ lives.

Chapter Seven: Abstractions and Details

Reading about abstract topics forces the reader to rely heavily on the parts of the brain that process with abstractions. Too much of this work is fatiguing. (Read a legal contract and see what I mean.)

When you alternate between abstractions and details, you invite input from other parts of the brain, such as sensory systems and memories. The reader becomes more involved in the text.

Terms to Know

Cognitive load: The amount of mental effort and working memory expended to learn or understand something.

Methods for Writers: Working with Abstractions

You’ll need to find your own unique balance of detail, data, and theory—one that feels right to you and that works for your readers. Make sure the abstract concepts don’t create barriers for readers unfamiliar with your field.

Eliminate the unnecessary

Thanks to the curse of knowledge, you may forget what it’s like not to know and speak in the terminology of your field. The more familiar you become with these terms, the more they creep into your everyday vocabulary.

Notice the abstract terms in your writing. These might include terms or acronyms that are specific to your field alone. Print out your writing, pick up a highlighter, and mark as many as you can find. Eliminate the ones that are not necessary.

Remember, you want the reader to invest their cognitive load on understanding your topic, not decoding the words you use.

Unpack the unfamiliar

For necessary abstractions, determine which ones might be unfamiliar to the reader. If you’re not sure, ask someone who can put themselves in the shoes of the target audience. Make sure this person is not ashamed to say, “I don’t know this” or “I had to stop and think about what this meant.”

Here are a few guidelines for using industry-specific terminology that you deem necessary:

1. Define a term the first time it appears

2. Use the term in a context that reinforces the meaning the first few times
3. Occasionally sprinkle in specific examples to remind the reader

Add concrete examples and data

Because people cannot easily envision or manipulate unfamiliar abstractions in their heads, give them something to work with: concrete examples, details, or data. While you might lead with an abstract idea (furniture), provide a solid, understandable detail (a desk chair). Adding sensory detail (a rickety black desk chair) gives their brains something specific.

Writers who are expert explainers alternate between detail and theory, choosing the right details to support the ongoing discussion.

Tactics

- Alternate between the abstract and concrete details.
- For learning purposes, lead with the abstract (the theory), then introduce the detail. Otherwise, people often gloss over the detail, or may get distracted noticing extraneous patterns.
- Choose interesting or unusual details to capture the reader's interest, particularly if you're writing about topics that are foreign or difficult for the reader.

Chapter Eight: Explanatory Analogies

Analogies serve many purposes in nonfiction, particularly when explaining abstract ideas. They give the readers' brain something concrete and familiar to work with, instead of the unknown abstraction.

Terms to know

Foundational analogies: Comparisons that anchor an entire thesis or book

Explanatory analogies: Metaphors or similes that help you explain a specific idea or topic

Methods for Writers: Choosing Analogies

In choosing an image or comparison, first determine what you're trying to achieve.

What type of analogy do you need?

Are you trying to illustrate a specific point or topic? If so, don't stress about a perfect fit. You only need a comparison strong enough to make the point, and perhaps jog the reader's memory if you refer back to it later.

Are you staking your entire argument and structure on the inferences drawn in the comparison? In this case, you'll have to think it through carefully, assessing the fit.

Search for the right analogy

Finding the right metaphor is an exercise in creativity. For inspiration, survey what others have done in your area. Check out Metamia, an online database of analogies across diverse subjects.

Even as you get inspiration from others, remember that much of the power of an image comes from its novelty. Seek out unexpected associations and patterns, thinking broadly rather than deeply about your topic.

If you're a numbers person rather than a creative type, don't panic. You're probably great at seeing patterns in numbers. Now find patterns in the world around you.

- Brainstorm a bunch of comparisons to your subject. Keep a list of possible topics—even ones that clearly won't work. They may spur other ideas that do fit.
- Let your mind wander on the topic when you're doing other things for a few days and see if better examples percolate. (You'll be using the *incubation effect*, or the brain's tendency to keep background mental processes working on unfinished creative tasks.)
- Be alert for fleeting thoughts and connections and write them down as they occur. By welcoming and encouraging these thoughts, you increase the chances that your brain will continue to chip in ideas when you're doing activities other than writing.

Don't neglect the library or your own bookshelves as a source of inspiration. Your creative contribution might lie in finding and repurposing an analogy in a new or compelling way.

Evaluate and test the analogy

Find people who represent your audience and test out your analogy. Ask for a reaction. Make sure that the comparison makes sense for people other than you. Don't cling obstinately to an analogy that doesn't work.

Also, remember that the images you choose may resonate with readers' memories and emotions in ways that you don't anticipate. Using words or images loaded with negative connotations can backfire.

Rules for testing analogies

When choosing an analogy, ask yourself the following questions:

1. Is the subject of the comparison familiar to the reader?
2. Is it possible the reader has an entirely different experience of the subject? Beware of negative emotional reactions.
3. Does the analogy really fit your topic, or are you stretching it to make it fit?

Chapter Nine: Stories

Stories are exceptionally useful for readers of nonfiction. Stories:

- Illustrate abstract concepts in a meaningful way
- Aid in memory of important concepts
- Support learning, while holding the reader's interest

Terms to Know

The Interpreter. According to psychologist Michael Gazzinaga, who has studied split-brain subjects, this is a region in the left hemisphere of the brain that creates narratives to explain our actions after they happen.

Neural entrainment: The synchronization in brain patterns between someone telling a story and those listening to it

Methods for Writers: Improving Your Storytelling Skills

Stories and anecdotes are essential parts of the nonfiction writer's toolkit, particularly when you deal in abstract or complex topics. If you lack a fiction-writing background or don't consider yourself a storyteller, that's OK. Build your skills gradually, based on your comfort level, topic area, and natural writing voice.

Start small

Don't attempt a three-act play or try to weave a single narrative throughout your longer work if you're not comfortable doing it. Stories usually have a progression, but they can also represent a moment in time, rich in emotional context.

Mine your personal experience

Look for past experiences that illustrate or exemplify a point and try them out on someone. Writing about your own perspective and experience will feel less like fiction writing.

Find the naturally occurring stories

Social psychologists have a rich source of stories at hand, because their research often entails creating scenes for participants to act out, like ready-made plays. Technologists can find anecdotes in the human impact of their work. Policy makers can describe the situations they are attempting to address in human terms when writing about topics on a global scale.

Even hard data can be presented as a story, if you tell the tale behind the research.

Unearth the anecdotes and details to make your writing more memorable and the complex easier to understand.

Practice

As with almost anything in life, you'll improve with intentional practice.

If you're not secure with this writing method, first try crafting short anecdotes in a journal or other private place, without the stress of showing them to others. When that feels comfortable, try one out on a safe audience of friends or family. Then take them further afield. By retelling the account, verbally or in print, you will gain insight into what works and what doesn't, where people get lost, and what they might find interesting.

Use stories judiciously

If a reader is waiting for an important point, don't make them wade through a long digression. Find the level that suits your personal voice as well as audience needs.

Three rules for reticent storytellers

1. Start small; consider crafting a short scene rather than a long tale.
2. Mine your own experiences.
3. Shorter is safer.

Chapter Ten: Effective Repetition

Speakers use repetition all the time. Writers are often afraid to repeat themselves, yet readers rarely internalize something until they have been exposed to it more than once.

Repetition plays a proven role in learning.

Methods for Writers: Repeat with Intention and Value

Heed the advice of great speaking coaches: Repeat the most important points so that they're sure to get through to the reader.

Find the key points

In [*If I Understood You, Would I Have This Look on My Face?*](#) Alan Alda shares his Rule of Three for speaking about complicated topics. It has (appropriately) three parts:

1. Make no more than three points when speaking.
2. Find three different ways to explain a difficult idea.
3. Repeat an important point three times.

Repeat with value

Don't simply revisit; get creative about making repetition a valuable part of the text.

Depending on what you're writing, consider using different structural elements.

- An executive summary at the start of the piece summarizes the key points without seeming repetitive.
- Many readers appreciate quick summaries or lists of key points at the end of chapters.
- Many prescriptive nonfiction books (aka "how-to" books) conclude sections based in theory with advice for taking action. This adds a practical component to a nonfiction book without bogging down the expository text, while also reinforcing the key points.

Part Three: How to Not Be Boring

Even as you explain your topic, you must also hold the reader's attention.

Masterful communicators make esoteric subjects interesting for the rest of us. The chapters in Part Three include advice for enlivening your writing through imagery, tone and style, humility, and humor.

Chapter Eleven: Tone and Style

When writing, we don't have the array of nonverbal cues we have when speaking: timing, inflection, body language, etc. All we have is our words to draw readers in and keep them engaged.

The four stylistic techniques with the greatest impact on tone are:

- Paragraph length
- Sentence structure
- Viewpoint (first-, second- or third-person)
- Vocabulary and word choice

Industry jargon has a large impact on the perceived tone of a piece of writing.

Terms to Know

Voice: Your unique way of thinking and expressing yourself

Tone: The impression or feeling the reader gets from your writing

Style: The writing techniques you use to achieve a desired tone

Methods for Writers: Adjusting Your Tone

If you're accustomed to writing in an academic or industry style, consider manipulating paragraph length, sentence length, point of view, and vocabulary during revision to alter the perceived tone of your words.

Paragraph length

How many facts or insights do you pack into each paragraph? Do the readers have to work through large blocks of uninterrupted text on the page? If the subject matter itself is dense, try lightening up on the visual density.

What would happen if you put a single point in a paragraph?

Paragraph length affects the reader's rhythm. Short paragraphs offer the reader a chance to process what they've been reading. Breaking up long blocks of text may be the fastest way to lighten the tone of your writing.

Sentence length

Higher education traditionally trains people to master elaborate grammatical structures. But once you leave academia, put those skills aside. Briefer sentences communicate more effectively, particularly for people reading online.

Point of view

Simply saying “you and I” instead of “the author” and “consumers” or other abstractions will make your writing more personal, and hence warmer.

Word choice

Vocabulary contributes significantly to the reader’s perception of tone.

Are you choosing words that make the reader feel like an outsider? Return to the discussion about abstractions, and for each piece of industry terminology you use, ask yourself if it is truly necessary.

- If so, define it the first time, and use it in a clear context.
- If not, replace it with a more familiar term or explanation.

Chapter Twelve: Images and Imagery

Figurative language (words with images or concrete analogies) are powerful writing tools. Effective images can

- Make the word more interesting
- Forge a deeper connection with the reader
- Reveal satisfying insights

The power of metaphors and similes to sustain interest derives in part from their novelty. When used frequently, metaphors and similes lose the element of surprise. They evolve into one of the following:

- A commonly accepted shorthand abstraction, often industry jargon
- A cliché that sounds tired and unimaginative
- A figure of speech, or an image that is so ingrained in the language that we hardly notice we’re using it

Images also affect our feelings and emotions about a piece, so be careful about which ones you choose.

Terms to Know

Metaphor: An analogy that appears to claim two things are the same, when literally they are not.

Simile: An analogy made explicit through words such as “like.”

A metaphor may be left to the readers’ interpretation. Unless it’s obvious, you’d better explain a simile.

Methods for Writers: Choosing Effective Images

Metaphors and similes liven up your writing, but take care when selecting images.

Choose familiar images

A metaphor or simile connects with readers only if it is familiar to them already. As always, success depends on the reader.

Watch out for negative or emotionally charged images

Imagery connects to areas of the brain beyond the rational and sensory-processing frontal cortex. It may summon memories with positive or negative emotional associations or prompt the fight-or-flight amygdala response. Something as innocuous as a clown might set off an unexpected reaction from readers with coulrophobia (the deep-seated fear of clowns).

Hidden pictures in idioms and figures of speech

When writing to produce a conversational tone, you may rely on idiomatic expressions, which often add images we don't notice to the words. While idiomatic language sounds natural and unscripted, it can lead you into trouble if the images are problematic.

Negative images: Words related to warfare and weaponry crop up in the strangest places, like a “battle” against illiteracy or “taking aim” at poverty. Ouch. Even common verbs like *trigger* can trigger a reaction. Once analogies or metaphors morph into figures of speech, we lose sight of the cultural or emotional context they bring along with them.

Cultural biases: After the September 11 attacks in 2001, President Bush spoke about mounting a crusade against terrorism. The word crusade most likely held a specific, emotional meaning for him. To people living in the countries of the Middle East, however, the word recalled the historical Crusades, retrieving memories of deadly clashes in the name of religion and a pattern of Western imperialism. Cultural context matters.

Translation troubles: If your audience includes a large number of people who are not reading in their native language, excessive use of idioms can add cognitive load.

Don't become too attached

Clinging to a metaphor for the wrong reasons can inspire ridicule.

More rules for metaphors

- Use metaphors or similes when they support the work and advance your cause.
- Don't assume that an industry-specific metaphor is familiar to a wider audience; either make the meaning clear through usage or define it explicitly.
- Watch out for any unintended cultural connotations or emotional consequences of the images you choose.
- Think beyond the visual. Imagery that involves scent, touch, or movement can be particularly powerful.

Chapter Thirteen: Credibility, Humanity, and Humility

If you want people to believe you (if you want to be *credible*), they must first understand you.

Research by Daniel Oppenheimer demonstrates that trying to sound smart can backfire. (See “Consequences of Erudite Vernacular Utilized Irrespective of Necessity: Problems with Using Long Words Needlessly.”) As it turns out, the easier you make it for readers to understand your topic, the smarter they think *you* are.

Instead of insisting on your own credentials, try explaining with absolute clarity. Respect the reader’s intelligence and show up with humanity (as a human being, rather than an expert).

Terms to Know

The pratfall effect: Displaying vulnerability by making a mistake unrelated to your area of expertise can make you more human, and hence more likeable. (See research by Elliot Aronson.)

Methods for Writers: Humanity and Humility

Treat humanity and humility like spices in cooking: a little goes a long way. Experiment with finding the right balance for your personal voice, your readers’ expectations, and the specific piece you’re writing.

Credibility

You may need to establish your credentials to write about your subject. Beware of methods that establish a tone you do not intend, such as spending a lot of time on your credentials or relying on terminology to signal an “insider” status.

Put your credentials in your author biography, outside of the main flow of the work. Winnow the biographical data to include things relevant to your expertise on this topic. Writing separate biographies is a small price to pay for not annoying your readers.

If possible, let other people talk about your qualifications.

Do a great job of explaining topics so the reader feels smart and informed. This will reflect well on your overall credibility.

Humanity

Offer your readers ways to connect with you personally, and they will be more receptive to what you have to say.

You might include relevant personal stories. If you show up as a fallible and curious human being in your writing, readers are more likely to trust you.

You will have to judge whether it is appropriate to share a personal story, and whether you are comfortable doing so. If you feel reluctant, start small with a short aside, parenthetical comment, or a personal note in the footnotes.

Humility

Humility is about narrowing the distance between yourself and the reader, finding common connections, and admitting imperfections. If you want to be understood, focus on being effective, rather than right. Respect your reader and your topic rather than insisting on respect.

Rules to remember

Humanity and humility in your writing can reinforce, not erode, your credibility and effectiveness. The methods in this chapter support and enhance each other. Balance is the key. Keep these rules in mind.

1. Credibility is granted by the reader, not asserted by the writer. Earn it rather than insisting on it.
2. To connect more deeply with individual readers, give them a glimpse of yourself as a real person.
3. A small amount of vulnerability can help you earn the reader's attention or trust.

Chapter Fourteen: Humor

Humor is often based on analogies and can thus help readers understand important connections. It also humanizes the writing by establishing a shared connection with the reader and alleviates the tension inherent in serious topics.

Terms to Know

Benign violation theory of humor (Peter McGraw): A theory that suggests find things funny when they violate our expectations and are not inherently threatening.

Methods for Writers: Adding Humor to Your Personal Style

Using humor effectively is one of the toughest (and riskiest) writing strategies in this book. Unless your goal is to become a stand-up comic or write a long-running comedy series, it doesn't take much to have an impact on your writing.

Think fun, not funny

When it comes to adding humor to your writing, don't try too hard. To quote author and comedienne Kathy Klotz-Guest, focus on having fun rather than being funny.

Start with short and sweet

As with storytelling, you can start small and gradually expand your expertise and comfort level. Some serious authors bury amusing comments in their footnotes, for those dedicated readers who venture there. Humor in your writing might show up as a simple aside, a play on words, or an entertaining metaphor.

Learn from John Oliver

I've picked up a few strategies by analyzing *Last Week Tonight with John Oliver* and extrapolating lessons for writers.

Timing is critical. Each Last Week Tonight segment is about twenty minutes long, but it's never one uninterrupted diatribe. Camera angles change and Oliver paces his verbal delivery. He keeps the tone light, while breaking the exposition into smaller segments to sustain the attention of the television audience.

Vary perspectives. Guest stars often appear in video clips, creating mini-anecdotes to illustrate the absurdity of a situation. In writing, you can create “guest star” appearances through quotes or stories.

Use an upbeat ending. Oliver frequently ends segments with that most potent ingredient of all—hope. He closes with a suggestion for making the world better. When humor combines with hope, great things can happen.

Humor hints

- Aim for a smile rather than a guffaw.
- Deploy humor in service of the content, not the other way around.
- Focus on the positive; remember the role of humor for signaling that everything is OK.

Chapter 15: Finding Your Personal Style

Every writer has a style, whether or not you choose one intentionally.

Using the topics in this book, you can refine your own writing style to:

- Reach a broader audience of readers, and/or
- Connect more deeply with your readers

Select a few methods from this book and adopt them in your writing. You’re probably already doing most of them, but see what happens when you use these techniques with intention. Experiment.

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