

# On Good Writing

by Bonkung J. Handerson

**R**eaders smile when you write well, but frown when you do not. How can you keep readers satisfied? Consider the following characteristics of good writing.

1. *Good writing accomplishes its purpose.* Good writing should answer at least three of the seven basic questions of *who, what, where, when, which, why, and how*. A careful writer tells the whole story.

2. *Good writing says something worth reading.* A good piece of writing is simple, interesting, informative, and even surprising. The reader should discover something new rather than conventional wisdom and commonplace arguments. Good writing helps readers see past the obvious; it provides substantive thought.

3. *Good writing is unified.* It should have a controlling pattern, a master plan that is coherent to keep the reader in control and direction. Signals such as *first, second, finally, then, consequently, nevertheless* and so on, are necessary to alert the reader when an idea begins or ends. These key words let readers know they are on the right track.

4. *Good writing is clear.* When asked what qualities they value most in writing, people who read a great deal put clarity at the top of their list. Clear writing does not necessarily have to be simple, but it should not be any more difficult than warranted by the purpose and subject of the piece. A writer succeeds only when the intended readers can read along at a steady pace and easily grasp the main points.

5. *Good writing is economical.* Writers do not want to waste their readers' time. William Zinsser, author of *On Writing Well*, says "the reader is someone with an attention span of about sixty seconds—a person assailed by forces competing for the minutes that might otherwise be spent on a magazine or a book." He added, "the person snoozing in a chair, holding a magazine or a book, is a person who was given too much unnecessary trouble by the writer." Get rid of all excess words; keep your writing tight and to the point.

6. *Good writing pays attention to detail.* Avoid grammar and spelling errors. Conform to standard usage.

Readers expect writers to demonstrate mastery of the language. Errors cause readers to become irritated and question the worth of the piece. Pay close attention to detail to get your point across to your readers.

7. *Good writing is vigorous.* Lively, descriptive writing enables readers to appreciate a writer's particular style. We all enjoy reading clear, substantive, well-organized articles, where writers get to the point without wasting our time. A skillful writer packages his or her message to reach the intended reader and illuminate the mind and heart. ❖

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## KEEP READERS WORKING

Good writers know that readers do not want all the ideas pre-digested and served up like the mush a mother bird feeds her nestlings. Instead, readers prefer to observe the information provided by the scene and make their own analysis.

So what do skilled writers do? They give readers the information to make their own interpretation. They show their readers the scene, and let them make their own intelligent guesses. Writers call this "showing" rather than "telling." This is not a skill that comes naturally. Here are some examples.

*Telling:* Nalini did not get on with the other girls at work.

*Showing:* Nalini drank her coffee at her desk and said nothing when the other girls came into the room.

*Telling:* Anil felt tired as he went to the bus.

*Showing:* Anil dragged his feet on the way to the bus.

*Telling:* Chandran was an efficient customs officer.

*Showing:* Chandran checked bags quickly, looking for false pockets that could hide heroin.

Telling can be called *The Mistake of the Missing Middle*, because it misses a step. It provides analysis without providing the data to be interpreted.

A good writer should vividly depict a scene, leaving readers to interpret it, as they would in real life. When readers have to interact with the printed page, using their imaginations to take in what is happening, they pay more attention and enjoy the narrative more.

Always use your imagination, and make your readers work hard too. —Beulah Wood, SAIACS Press, Bangalore, INDIA