

# 100 WAYS TO IMPROVE YOUR WRITING

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A MENTOR BOOK

*excerpt from* **CHAPTER FIVE**

Ways to Develop Style

## 1. Think About Style

In any discussion of writing, the word style means the way in which an idea is expressed, not the idea itself. Style is form, not content. A reader usually picks up a story because of content but too often puts it down because of style.

There is no subject that cannot be made fascinating by a well-informed and competent writer. And there is no subject that cannot be quickly turned into a literary sleeping pill by an incompetent writer.

You probably would not buy Ray Bradbury's book *Dandelion Wine* (Doubleday) if while browsing in the bookstore you turned to the version on the left (A). Contrast it with the version on the right (B), Bradbury's actual opening paragraph. You will see that while both paragraphs contain the same information, the version on the right has style, and that makes all the difference.

### A

*There wasn't any noise at six A.M., and nobody was up yet. The wind was about the way you'd want it, and everything was pretty much okay. If you got up and took a look out the window, you could tell that summer was beginning.*

### B

*It was a quiet morning, the town covered over with darkness and at ease in bed. Summer gathered in the weather, the wind had the proper touch, the breathing of the world was long and warm and slow. You had only to rise, lean from your window, and know that this indeed was the first real time of freedom and living, this was the first morning of summer.*

## 2. Listen to What You Write

Writing is not a visual art any more than composing music is a visual art.

To write is to create music. The words you write make sounds, and when those sounds are in harmony, the writing will work.

So think of your writing as music. Your story might sound like the *Hungarian Rhapsody No. 2*, or it might sound like “Satisfaction.” You decide. But give it unity. It should not sound like a musical battle between the Cleveland Symphony Orchestra and the Rolling Stones.

Read aloud what you write and listen to its music. Listen for dissonance. Listen for the beat. Listen for gaps where the music leaps from sound to sound instead of flowing as it should. Listen for sour notes. Is this word a little sharp, is that one a bit flat? Listen for instruments that don’t blend well. Is there an electric guitar shrieking amid the whispers of flutes and violins? Imagine the sound of each word as an object falling onto the eardrum. Does it make a soft landing like the word *ripple*, or does it land hard and dig in like *inexorable*? Does it cut off all sound for an instant, like *brutal*, or does it massage the reader’s ear, like *melodious*?

There are no good sounds or bad sounds, just as there are no good notes or bad notes in music. It is the way in which you combine them that can make the writing succeed or fail. It’s the music that matters.

### **3. Mimic Spoken Language**

Writing should be conversational. That does not mean that your writing should be an exact duplicate of speech; it should not. Your writing should convey to the reader a sense of conversation. It should furnish the immediacy and the warmth of a personal conversation.

Most real conversations, if committed to paper, would dull the senses. Conversations stumble, they stray, they repeat; they are bloated with meaningless words, and they are often cut short by intrusions. But what they have going for them is human contact, the sound of a human voice. And if you can put that quality into your writing, you will get the reader's attention.

So mimic spoken language in the variety of its music, in the simplicity of its words, in the directness of its expression. But do not forfeit the enormous advantages of the written word. Writing provides time for contemplation. Use it well.

In conversation the perfect word is not always there. In writing we can try out fifteen different words before we are satisfied.

In conversation we spread our thoughts thin. In writing we can compress.

So strive to make your writing sound like a conversation, but don't make it an ordinary conversation. Make it a good one.

## 4. Vary Sentence Length

This sentence has five words. Here are five more words. Five-word sentences are fine. But several together become monotonous. Listen to what is happening. The writing is getting boring. The sound of it drones. It's like a stuck record. The ear demands some variety. Now listen. I vary the sentence length, and I create music. Music. The writing sings. It has a pleasant rhythm, a lilt, a harmony. I use short sentences. And I use sentences of medium length. And sometimes when I am certain the reader is rested, I will engage him with a sentence of considerable length, a sentence that bums with energy and builds with all the impetus of a crescendo, the roll of the drums, the crash of the cymbals—sounds that say listen to this, it is important.

So write with a combination of short, medium, and long sentences. Create a sound that pleases the reader's ear. Don't just write words. Write music.

## 5. Vary Sentence Construction

Most sentences have a subject, a predicate, and an object, and early in life we were taught to present them in that order. The dog ate the bone. Dick and Jane jumped into the river. A man walked down the street. Et cetera.

But identical sentence constructions bore readers. Certainly you should strive for clarity and not arrange your sentences in a way that strangles their logic. But you should also keep the primary elements of the sentence dancing so that they will create their own music.

Below are two paragraphs in which all the sentences are constructed the same way. They all begin with the subject, move on to the predicate, and end with an object if there is one. What conclusion about the writer do you draw after reading them?

*The Welcome Wagon Lady twinkled her eyes and teeth at Joanna. She was sixty if she was a day. She had ginger hair, red lips, and a sunshine-yellow dress. She said, "You're really going to like it here! It's a nice town with nice people! You couldn't have made a better choice!" Her brown leather shoulder bag was enormous. It was old and scuffed. She dealt Joanna packets of powdered breakfast drink from it. There was soup mix. There was a toy-size box of non-pollutant detergent. There was a booklet of discount slips that were good at twenty-two local shops. There were two cakes of soap. There was a folder of deodorant pads.*

*Joanna stood in the doorway. Both hands were full. She said, "Enough, enough. Hold. Halt. Thank you."*

The sentences are all simple constructions—grade school concoctions. One of the marks of an inexperienced writer is his or her inability to move beyond these basic sentence constructions. If Ira Levin’s best-selling novel had opened with those sentences, odds are good it would have been a worst-selling novel. But, it didn’t. The actual opening of Ira Levin’s *Stepford Wives* (Random House) follows. As you read it, take note of the variety of sentence constructions.

*The Welcome Wagon Lady, sixty if she was a day but working at youth and vivacity (ginger hair, red lips, a sunshine-yellow dress), twinkled her eyes and teeth at Joanna and said, “You’re really going to like it here! It’s a nice town with nice people! You couldn’t have made a better choice!” Her brown leather shoulder bag was enormous, old and scuffed; from it she dealt Joanna packets of powdered breakfast drink and soup mix, a toy-size box of non-pollutant detergent, a booklet of discount slips good at twenty-two local shops, two cakes of soap, a folder of deodorant pads—*

*“Enough, enough,” Joanna said, standing in the doorway with both hands full. “Hold. Halt. Thank you.”*



## 9. Use Parallel Construction

Though several consecutive sentences constructed the same way can bore the reader, there are times when you should deliberately arrange words and sounds in similar fashion in order to show the reader the similarity of information contained in the sentences. Just as the steady beat of a drum can often enrich a melody, the repetition of a sound can often improve the music of your writing. This is called parallel construction.

Listen to the difference parallel construction makes in the following examples.

### Not Parallel

*I drove to the construction site to see what I could find out from the workers. I talked to the foreman. The electricians and I had a discussion. This was followed by a talk with the carpenters. Also, the plumbers told me what they thought. The same view was held by everybody. The project would have to be started over.*

*Fish gotta swim, and flying is something that birds must do.*

*First I came. Then I saw. Conquering came next.*

*When one has been seen by you, you've seen them all.*

### Parallel

*I drove to the construction site to see what I could find out from the workers. I talked to the foreman and electricians. I talked to the carpenters and plumbers. They all said the same thing. The project would have to be started over.*

*Fish gotta swim, birds gotta fly.*

*I came. I saw. I conquered.*

*When you've seen one, you've seen them all.*

*excerpt from* **CHAPTER SIX**

Ways to Give Your Words Power

## 2. Use Dense Words

A dense word is a word that crowds a lot of meaning into a small space. The fewer words you use to express an idea, the more impact that idea will have. When you revise, look for opportunities to cross out several words and insert one. *Once a month is monthly; something new is novel; people they didn't know are strangers; and something impossible to imagine is inconceivable.*

## 4. Use Active Verbs

Active verbs *do* something. Inactive verbs *are* something. You will gain power over readers if you change verbs of being such as *is*, *was*, and *will be* to verbs of motion and action.

### Bad

*A grandfather clock was in one corner, and three books were on top of it.*

*As Samson enters the police station, a burly sergeant is behind the desk, and three rookies are around the corner talking shop, ignoring the murder suspect who is near the open window at the back of the room.*

### Better

*A grandfather clock towered in one corner, and three books lay on top of it.*

*As Samson enters the police station, a burly sergeant stands behind the front desk, and three rookies hang around the water cooler talking shop, ignoring the murder suspect who edges near the open window at the back of the room.*

## 5. Use Strong Verbs

Verbs, words of action, are the primary source of energy in your sentences. They are the executives; they should be in charge. All other parts of speech are valuable assistants, but if your verbs are weak, all the modifiers in the world won't save your story from dullness.

Generally speaking, verbs are weak when they are not specific, not active, or are unnecessarily dependent on adverbs for their meaning.

If you choose strong verbs and choose them wisely, they will work harder for you than any other part of speech. Strong verbs will reduce the number of words in your sentences by eliminating many adverbs. And, more important, strong verbs will pack your paragraphs with the energy, the excitement, and the sense of motion that readers crave.

Sharpen a verb's meaning by being precise. Turn *look* into *stare*, *gaze*, *peer*, *peek*, or *gawk*, Turn *throw* into *toss*, *flip*, or *hurl*.

Inspect adverbs carefully and always be suspicious. What are those little buggers up to? Are they trying to cover up for a lazy verb? Most adverbs are just adjectives with 'ly' tacked on the end, and the majority of them should be shoveled into a truck and hauled off to the junkyard. Did your character really walk nervously, or did he pace? Did his wife eat quickly, or did she *wolf* down her supper?

#### Version A

*I stood on the stairs and watched as he got back a bit and forcefully pushed his foot against the door. The door opened up with a screechy metallic sound. Currie went inside. I went quickly down to the doorway to see what would happen. The old lady was on the other side of her kitchen dialing the phone and staring angrily into the air. She pointed the phone receiver at Currie, as if she could shoot him with it.*

#### Version B

*I stood on the stairs and watched as he reared back and slammed his foot against the door. The door flew open with the screech of wrenching metal hinges. Currie rushed inside. I ran down to the doorway to see what would happen. The old lady was on the other side of her kitchen dialing the phone and scowling at the air. She aimed the phone receiver at Currie, as if she could shoot him with it.*

## 7. Use the Active Voice ... Most of the Time

When a verb is in the active voice, the subject of the sentence is also the doer of the action.

The sentence “John picked up the bag” is in the active voice because the subject, John, is also the thing or person doing the action of “picking up.”

The sentence “The bag was picked up by John” is in the passive voice because the subject of the sentence, bag, is the passive receiver of the action.

Generally the active voice makes for more interesting reading, and it is the active voice that you should cultivate as your normal writing habit. The active voice strikes more directly at the thought you want to express, it is generally shorter, and it holds the reader closer to what you write because it creates a stronger sense that “something is happening.”

Listen to how the following passive voice sentences are improved when they are turned into the active voice.

Passive	Active
<i>Dutch drawings and prints are what this book is about.</i>	<i>This book is about Dutch drawings and prints.</i>
<i>The light bulb was screwed in crookedly by the electrical engineer.</i>	<i>The electrical engineer screwed in the light bulb crookedly.</i>
<i>Blank cassettes and recordings of actual drownings are what's contained in this box.</i>	<i>This box contains blank cassettes and recordings of actual drownings.</i>
<i>An even break should never be given to a sucker.</i>	<i>Never give a sucker an even break.</i>

Try to use the active voice. But realize that there are times when you will need to use the passive. If the object of the action is the important thing, then you will want to emphasize it by mentioning it first. When that's the case, you will use the passive voice.

Let's say, for example, that you want to tell the reader about some strange things that happened to your car. In the active voice it would look like this:

*Three strong women turned my car upside down on Tuesday. Vandals painted my car yellow and turquoise on Wednesday. The National Aeronautics and Space Administration launched my car into orbit around the moon on Thursday.*

The example shown above is not wrong, but it sounds choppy. To give the story a flow, you would want to use the passive voice, keeping the emphasis on your car:

*On Tuesday my car was turned upside down by three strong women. On Wednesday my car was painted yellow and turquoise by vandals. On Thursday my car was launched into orbit around the moon by the National Aeronautics and Space Administration.*

In the passive voice, the car is given emphasis, and the story about what happened to it has a flow and rhythm lacking in the first example.



*excerpt from* **CHAPTER EIGHT**

Ways to Avoid Grammatical Errors

## 2. Do Not Change Tenses

If you begin to write in one tense, you should not switch to another.

### **Bad**

*We were going over to Tad's house to see his daughter, Riley. When we arrived, Molly says, "The baby just fell asleep, so you can't see her."*

*Each day, John rose from bed and brushed his teeth. Today is different. Today, John doesn't rise from bed at all. The reason? He's dead.*

*You have been late for work; your work is of poor quality; and you don't seem to care about this company.*

### **Better**

*We were going over to Tad's house to see his daughter, Riley. When we arrived, Molly said, "The baby just fell asleep, so you can't see her."*

*Each day, John rose from bed and brushed his teeth. Today was different. Today, John didn't rise from bed at all. The reason? He was dead.*

*You are late for work; your work is of poor quality; and you don't seem to care about the company.*

## 6. Avoid Shifts in Pronoun Forms

Be consistent in your use of a pronoun. Do not switch from singular forms to plural ones.

### **Inconsistent**

*After one has written a paper, they should take a break.*

### **Consistent**

*After one has written a paper, one should take a break.*

*excerpt from* **CHAPTER ELEVEN**

Ways to Edit Yourself

## 1. Read Your Work Out Loud

Before you turn in anything you have written—whether to a teacher or an editor—read aloud every word.

Often when you write and rewrite and constantly rearrange information, your ear for the sound of the writing becomes corrupted. Reading out loud will return to you the true sound of your story. You will hear the sour note of the word that’s “just not right,” and the drastic changes in tone will cry out to you for editing. You’ll notice that you are breathless at the end of one long sentence, and you will know that you must break it up into two or three. Listen for the music, variety, and emphasis of your sentences. You will discover that some of them are confusing and need a word added or removed for clarity’s sake. And you will see that a sentence like “Who knew that Lou cued Sue, too?” might not *look* funny, but it sure makes a funny and distracting noise in the reader’s head.

## **4. Ask Yourself These Questions**

Before typing a final draft, ask these questions:

1. Is it clear from the beginning what the paper is about?
2. Does each paragraph advance the subject?
3. Do the important ideas stand out clearly?
4. Are more details, examples, or anecdotes needed?
5. Is the information sufficiently clear?
6. Are there sweeping statements that need to be supported?
7. Do any technical terms need explanation?
8. Is there needless repetition?
9. Is the tone consistent?
10. Are any of the sentences too involved to follow with ease?
11. Are any of the words vague?
12. Are there grammatical errors?
13. Are there punctuation errors?