

A Simple Guide to Better Writing

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1. As a general rule, organize sentences so that the subject comes first, followed by the verb, then the object. Vary this cadence sparingly and for effect.*
2. As a general rule, favor shorter sentences over long ones. "There's not much to be said about the period except that most writers don't reach it soon enough."‡
3. When dealing with a troublesome phrase, sentence, or paragraph, ask yourself whether you need it at all. Consider the quickest fix — *get rid of it*.‡
4. Favor stronger, specific, robust action verbs (scrutinize, dissect, recount, capture) over weak, vague, lazy ones (have, do, show).†
5. Use active verbs unless there is no comfortable way to get around using a passive verb.‡
6. Limit your use of be-verbs (is, am, was, were, etc.).†
7. Anchor abstract ideas in concrete language and images and illustrate abstract concepts using real life examples.†
8. Limit use of abstract nouns, especially nominalizations (nouns that have been formed from verbs, adjectives, or other nouns).†
9. Avoid using three prepositional phrases in a row (e.g., *in a letter to the author of a book about birds*) unless you do so to achieve a specific rhetorical effect.†
10. Prune out small qualifier words (e.g., a bit, sort of, very, too, rather, in a sense, etc.). These dilute your style and your persuasiveness.‡
11. Vary your prepositions.†
12. As a general rule, don't allow a noun and accompanying verb to become separated by more than twelve words.†
13. Employ adjectives and adverbs only when they contribute new information to a sentence. Most of the time these words can — and should — be edited out.†
14. Avoid overuse of 'academic ad-words,' especially those with the following suffixes: able, ac, al, an, ary, ent, ful, ible, ous.†
15. Use *it* and *this* only when you can state exactly which noun each word refers to.†
16. Avoid using *that* more than once in a single sentence or three times in a paragraph, unless you do so to achieve a specific rhetorical effect.†
17. Beware of sweeping generalizations that begin with *there*.†

Works cited

* = Verlin Klinkenborg, [*Several short sentences about writing*](#) (New York: Vintage, 2013).

‡ = William Zinsser, [*On writing well*](#) (New York: HarperCollins, 2006).

† = Helen Sword, [*The writer's diet: A guide to fit prose*](#) (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016).