

Writing Tip: Use Short Sentences

Adapted from *Writing to Get Things Done*® seminar

A Guideline for Sentence Length

Make your business writing easy to read by using short sentences:

- In letters, memos and e-mails, use an average sentence length of 12 to 15 words.
- In formal reports and technical documents, keep the average sentence length to about 20.



Stan Berry

Short sentences usually contain one main idea that readers can quickly grasp and easily remember. In contrast, long sentences, with multiple ideas, can be difficult to understand and remember.

Writers sometimes feel that sentence length should vary according to the educational level of the reader. Not so. When giving information or explaining a procedure, the writer's only task is to express the ideas clearly and concisely. The goal is not to impress the reader with complicated sentences.

Three Simple Ways to Shorter Sentences

You can use three simple techniques to shorten your sentences:

- Separate independent clauses joined by *and* or *but*.
- Make new sentences out of *which* clauses
- Delete unnecessary words

Let's look at one example of a long sentence that we can shorten by using these three techniques:

The sentence —

To assist in addressing the ongoing problem of employees in buildings A and B arriving late to work, the company has purchased several electric carts to transport those who work in building A from the parking structure to their building every five minutes, and those in building B will be transported by a bus, which is scheduled to leave the parking structure at 7:30 a.m., 7:45 a.m., and 8:00 a.m.

— can easily be broken into several sentences

We have found a solution to the ongoing problem of employees in buildings A and B arriving late to work. For those who work in building A, you will be transported from the parking structure by electric carts. The carts run every five minutes. Those in building B will be transported by bus. Buses will leave the parking structure at 7:30 a.m., 7:45 a.m., and 8:00 a.m.

As you can see, using short sentences lets the reader focus on one thing at a time. Each idea can be understood in sequence. The eye moves much faster through short, simple sentences. As a result, there's no need to skim back to follow the train of thought.

Before You Hit the Send Button

Look at the average length of your sentences. If they surpass the preceding guidelines for easy reading, use our simple techniques to shorten them.



Stan Berry has devoted the past 34 years to improving the writing skills of over 55,000 business and government professionals. After completing his Master's degree from Yale University, he co-authored five books on writing that he uses in his seminars. He's been a member of the American Society for Training and Development (ASTD) since 1975 when he served as the newsletter editor and on the Board of Directors for the Twin Cities Chapter. Stan can be reached at www.BerryWritingGroup.com or 612-578-1487.



Stu Tanquist has presented at four American Society for Training and Development (ASTD) National Leadership and TechKnowledge conferences, and written two best selling ASTD Info-Lines. With over 20 years in the learning and development field, Stu's expertise has ranged from working as a professional trainer to serving as a strategic-level director for training and development. He holds three degrees including a Masters in management. Stu can be reached at www.BerryWritingGroup.com or 612-799-1686.



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