

100+

Instant Writing Tips ...

**to help you steer clear of wrong turns
and give your readers a smooth ride**

Norm Friedman

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WHAT THIS BOOK IS

Today, most of our written communication is immediate. Whether we're emailing a response to a customer's question three minutes after receiving it or texting a friend we just saw at lunch, the emphasis is on speed. But as we make immediacy our priority, writing standards can suffer.

So has polishing our writing become less important? I say, "No." Taking a few precautions to help ensure correctness enhances our credibility and keeps readers focused on what we're saying—not the errors in the way we said it. Clarity and brevity give readers appreciation of a writer who invests some thought and discipline before pressing *Send*. Vivid language and a pleasing tone increase the chances that our message will make an impact.

Recognizing that we need to do more than just *hope* the pendulum will swing back toward more conscientious writing—and believing that most of us care about the impression we make when we write—I decided to do my part in nudging the pendulum by creating a handbook of quick, practical tips for today's writer. I hope you find it useful.

WHAT THIS BOOK ISN'T

This book is not scientific. I didn't analyze any data or canvass scholars to come up with my top 100 tips. Instead, the pointers are based on years of observing workplace writing, years of writing and editing, and years of conducting writing workshops for various employee groups.

You won't see much about *prepositions* or *participles* in this book, and you won't find *gerund* at all. I did not want this guide to resemble a schoolbook, but once in a while I needed a term like *idiom* to make a point. I apologize.

BON VOYAGE

Before you enter your on-ramp to more error-free and confident writing, I offer four recommendations about your overall approach:

- Be the reader. The more you identify with the reader in deciding what to include and how to express yourself, the better your writing.
- Build an ever-expanding repertoire of favorite words and phrases that enable you to write with precision and polish.
- Build an ever-expanding alarm system to warn you of tricky situations. The following pages should help you set a number of new alarms.
- Know that rewording to avoid a thorny grammar or punctuation issue is not wimpy. It's smart.

Have fun and drive safely.



Two keys to brevity are investing more time in organizing your message and resisting the urge to include marginal information. A third key is expanding your mental catalog of unnecessary words and phrases that lengthen the reader's journey. Here is a starter kit.

Tip #29

Cut the fat by using *because* instead of *due to the fact that*, *to* instead of *for the purpose of*, *about* (or *regarding*) instead of *in regard to*, and *to* instead of *in an effort to* and *in order to*.

Because (not *Due to the fact that*) **three team members were out Friday, the meeting has been reset for Tuesday at 10.**

We are forming a task force to study (not *for the purpose of studying*) **our minority outreach.**

I'd like to see you about (not *in regard to*) **your recycling suggestion.**

We initiated Friday breakfasts to (not *in an effort to*) **build camaraderie.**

You can delete the chart to (not *in order to*) **fit everything on one page.**

Tip #30

Prune redundant pairs like *goals and objectives*, *pleased and delighted*, and *devoted and dedicated*. They may sound grand, but the discriminating reader will see the fat.

Our grant application needs more clearly stated objectives (or *goals*).

We are pleased (or *delighted*) to invite you to serve on this year's Nominating Committee.

Max is an exceptionally devoted (or *dedicated*) volunteer in our after-school program.

Tip #31

Avoid common redundancies like *consensus of opinion*, *past experience*, and *safe haven*.

The consensus is that we should change the date of the seminar.

Do you have experience working with seniors?

Hundreds of flood victims have gratefully found a haven at the community center.

+ Note that phrases like *consensus of opinion* and *safe haven*, in addition to being redundant, dilute the expressive power of great words. *Consensus* and *haven* deserve to stand on their own.

Tip #32

One of the most common redundancies is *period of time*. It's as if the phrase has become a word, but all we need is *period* or *time*, not both.

Nolan served as marketing director for a period (or a *time*) and then became a VP.

+ *Point in time* is similar; use *point* or *time*.

At this point (or *time*) I really can't speculate.

Tip #33

Watch out for redundancies when you use verbs beginning with *re-*.

No: My grandchildren like to hear me reflect back on my childhood.

Yes: My grandchildren like to hear me reflect on my childhood.

No: Let's not revert back to last month's production problems.

Yes: Let's not revert to last month's production problems.

No (unless this will be the third explanation): Please repeat your explanation again.

Yes: Please repeat your explanation.

Tip #34

Sentences that begin with *The reason* do not then need *because* or *why*.

No: The reason I didn't stay for his speech was because I had already heard him on the radio.

Worse: The reason why I didn't stay for his speech was because I had already heard him on the radio.

Fine: The reason I didn't stay for his speech was that I had already heard him on the radio.

+ Note that we are most concise when we just eliminate *The reason* and use *because*.

I didn't stay for his speech because I had already heard him on the radio.

++ In the middle of a sentence, use either *reason* or *why*, not both.

No: I don't understand the reason why my cousin won't lend me money.

Yes: I don't understand the reason my cousin won't lend me money.

Yes: I don't understand why my cousin won't lend me money.