

How to Write Well: The World's Simplest Formula

By Michael Masterson

My income is based almost entirely on writing. And it has given me a very rich life – rich in every sense of the word. It can do the same for you.

I spend half of my working time coaching writers on how to write better. I spend the other half writing memos.

My memos are almost entirely persuasive: their object is to encourage my clients to make business and marketing decisions that will make them more profitable. If I fail to persuade them then my ideas don't get tested. If they don't get tested, then I can't help them make money. If I can't help them make money, they will stop paying me. To date I have never lost a client. (Knock on wood.) I attribute my track record to the persuasiveness of my memos.

Over the 30 odd years I've been doing this, I've developed many complicated theories about what good writing is. But now I've jettisoned them all in favor of a very brief, straightforward definition.

My definition of good writing applies to every sort of non-fiction writing that I can think of. It applies to writing books, magazine articles, and direct-mail sales letters. It applies to business correspondence, telemarketing scripts, and speeches.

Here it is:

That's it.

**Good writing is the skill of expressing
compelling thoughts clearly.**

When I say this to writers, I get incredulous looks. "How could it be that simple?" I can hear them thinking.

And then I explain. And re-explain. And eventually some of them get it. And when they do, their writing gets much, much better. And their income gets better too.

Let's go over that definition in detail. It has two parts:

Compelling Thoughts and Clear Expression

By compelling thoughts I mean ideas that make the reader think, "Boy, that's interesting!" Or, "I never thought of that before!" Or, "I've got to remember this!"



Good writing, then, has nothing to do with **correctness**. It doesn't matter if the idea you are expressing is well reasoned or even factual. What does matter is that your writing engages your readers intellectually and emotionally and then motivates them to do or think what you want them to do or think.

Notice I said **intellectually** as well as emotionally. I have Don Hauptman, a living legend in the advertising business, to thank for that additional word.

After a speech I made once to a group of 300 writers, he wrote me to say that I had reiterated a common phrase he objected to: *that people buy for emotional reasons*.

"This lie," he says, "just invites all the leftist critics of advertising and capitalism to charge that everyone is 'manipulated' by evildoers who exploit our emotions and irrationality. So we're cutting our own throats if we perpetuate the 'it's all emotion' fallacy. I know you don't want to encourage that, any more than I do.

"FYI, there's an old adage that expresses the point of your article another way: 'Write the way you talk, if you could edit what you say.' DM agency panjandrum Emily Soell once said something like: 'Write it square, then add the flair.' I've found these tips useful throughout my career."

Don is absolutely correct. Not including the intellect in this discussion is incorrect and potentially harmful. It invites critics of advertising to accuse persuasive writers of pandering. And it encourages writers to believe that if they pander, they are writing well.

The most successful marketers and copywriters know that good writing requires that we engage our readers on both plains simultaneously. Ezra Pound had the same theory about writing poetic images. He called them **"emotional and intellectual complexes in an instant of time."**

Creating the Ah-Ha! Effect

And that is what I mean by a compelling thought: an emotionally and intellectually engaging idea expressed clearly and succinctly so that the reader can apprehend it in a moment of time. That is what provides the **ah-ha! effect**.

Malcolm Gladwell is an expert at this. And that is why he has become a multimillionaire writing books about arcane and academic subjects. His critics naively knock him because they argue that some of his ideas are incorrect. I made that point before: the correctness of the idea is not what makes for good writing. It is the effect it has on the intellect and the heart of the reader.

If you want to be a wealthy marketer, copywriter or businessperson, you must be able to come up with compelling thoughts. You must be able to recognize ideas that are intellectually and emotionally engaging, ideas that arrest and charge up your readers and make them think, "That's good! I never thought of that before!"

How do you find intellectually and emotionally compelling ideas?

In all the years I've been struggling to answer this question, I've found only one answer: you must read.

Successful writers are all voracious readers. Their ideas don't spring fully formed from the thigh of Zeus, they come from hours of reading – reading vertically and horizontally about the subject at hand. They read and read until they come across something that gives them the **ah-ha! experience**.

I'd like to tell you there was an easier way. There are some well-known copywriting gurus who will tell you that you can steal good ideas from swipe files taken from successful advertisements past or present. This is horseshit, plain and simple. Stolen ideas are like luxury cars. They lose 40% of their value the moment you take them out of the showroom.

The reason that my number one client is the dominant publisher in the information publishing industry is precisely because their 100+ writers have had this definition of good writing drummed into their heads. They know that they can't expect to write blockbuster promotions consistently without compelling ideas. And they know how to find those ideas.

Ask any of them how they come up with all their great ideas and he or she will tell you: "I read and read until I find one."

Where to Place the Compelling Thought

The compelling thought must be placed in the lead. It cannot be lingering on page three or thirty-three. It must be up front so the reader can have his ah-ha! moment before he tosses the copy away.

It is the same for writing essays or memos. Put your most compelling idea very early and your readers (prospects, clients, whatever) will be excited. If they are excited, they will read on with enthusiasm. If not, you will lose them *toute suite*.

If you have the good fortune to discover several compelling ideas, put the best one first and let the others follow as soon as you can. Don't make the mistake of "leaving the best for last." You don't have the liberty to do that. Hit 'em quick and hit hard with your best stuff and spend the rest of the advertisement/essay/memo proving your points.

After you have put your compelling thoughts out there, then it's time to make supporting claims and promises and prove that each one of them is valid.

You must do this because your reader is naturally skeptical. His intelligence requires him to weed out most of the advice and information he receives. If it weren't that way we could never get anything done. We'd be eternally lost jumping from one idea to another. Our brains are hard wired to be skeptical of ideas – and that goes for compelling thoughts as well. The reader's subconscious tells him: "You have just been seduced by an intellectually and emotionally compelling thought. Before you act on it, make sure it makes sense."

So this is where the good writer elaborates on his compelling thought by providing **compelling proof** of it. He knows he must support his ideas rationally by providing proof that they are "true."

Truth, of course, comes in many shapes and sizes. And so does proof.

The Three Faces of Proof

There is factual proof. There is anecdotal proof. And there is social proof.

- **Factual proof** is easy to come by if your idea has been well researched. Anyone with an Internet connection can find all the factual proof he needs on most any topic if he knows how to do online research. And if you don't know how to do it, don't worry. AWAI is developing a product that will teach you.
- **Anecdotal proof** includes stories — factual and non-factual — that support an idea by "showing it" instead of "telling it." Anecdotal proof is very powerful, because it appeals so immediately to the emotions. People are not critical when they are reading a story. Their purpose is to be entertained. This gives you, as the writer, a strong advantage.
- **Social proof** refers to the influence that other people have on our opinions and behavior. As a writer, a good way to support your ideas with social proof is to use testimonials and expert endorsements.

So that's how you incorporate "good thinking" into your writing. Now let's talk about the second part of my definition of good writing: clarity of expression.

Clarity of Expression

By that I mean the ease with which your readers can "get" your compelling thought and the proof that follows. This is a very important part of the definition. It is just as important as the compelling thought.

Memorize the following sentence: **The easier it is to comprehend, the more likely it is that your reader will find it to be true.**

There is a new science called **Cognitive Fluency** that supports this assertion. Among other things, it studies the effect of simple language on readers. What researchers have found is that a simpler statement has more credibility than a more complex one — even if they both mean the same thing. It appears, the scientists say, that our brains are hardwired to trust simpler (and familiar) things.

New writers don't understand this. They operate on the theory that good writing is pretty or impressive. They strive to make their copy intellectually and emotionally **impressive** or even **intimidating**. They have been mis-educated into believe that complexity is a sign of good thinking. And so they complicate their writing with complex sentences and arcane diction.

This is a big mistake — a mistake that is obviously foolish if you think about it for a moment. After all, if you have gone to the trouble of coming up with a really good idea, why would you want to hide it from them with obscure words and references?

The best tool I have found to help writers keep their language clear and uncomplicated is the **Flesch-Kincaid Readability Test**. The FK (as it is known) looks at the length of your sentences, how many syllables there are in each word, and other data. The result is a score that indicates how easy the text is to read. At Early to Rise, our policy is to keep the FK under 7.5 — which means the average seventh-grader should be able to read and understand it easily.

Let me give you an example of what I've been talking about here. What follows is a paragraph by a seasoned financial writer. I had asked him for a brief summary of the "big idea" for his next essay. Here's what he sent me:

"Simon Properties is making good on its promise to swallow up the minnows. It's buying mall owner Prime Properties for \$2.3 billion and not even using up all the cash it's been hoarding to take advantage of opportunities in the marketplace. Simon is big and flush with cash. And it's doing what big bad companies should be doing ... beating up their little brothers, grabbing the best deals out there ... getting bigger ... and capturing market share from other companies."

I e-mailed back, telling him that I could see, by reading between the lines, that he had a good idea in his mind. But he had failed to identify the core of it. He had failed to turn it into a "big idea" that he could base his essay on. Here's what I said in my e-mail:

"You say that Simon Properties is a good buy because it is buying up smaller, cash-starved businesses. This is a sound proposition, but it's not a compelling idea. It's really just an assertion. To make it emotionally compelling, you have to make it both more universal and more unique. You have to find the idea behind your idea.

"In short, you have to find something that would make your reader sit up and take notice. You have to give him an idea — preferably in a single phrase — that he could repeat that night at a dinner party, something that would launch an interesting discussion.

"For example, you might have said, 'There are companies — I call them Sharks — that outperform the market by three to one by eating up good profitable companies that are small and easy to 'eat.'

"That is an engaging idea. The reader gets it immediately. He wants to know more.

"But to make this work, you would need to prove to your reader that, in today's market, Sharks are good investments. Only after you have done that will he be interested in your assertion about Simon Properties."

To help writers understand what I mean by a compelling ideas I ask them to write their compelling idea on top, above their copy. What I often get in reply is a full paragraph that explains the idea. When I see an entire paragraph above the copy, I know — without even reading it — that the writer hasn't identified a truly compelling idea. And if that paragraph contains long, complex sentences, then I know he's off base.

Since recognizing the two key components of good writing — a "big idea" and clarity of expression — I've insisted that all essays or promotions given to me for review have at the top of the page a one-sentence explanation of the main idea and the FK score.

If that one-sentence idea doesn't impress me, I send the piece back without reading it. I know the writing that I'm being asked to review is muddled. And muddled writing is never good.

If the one-sentence idea is good, then I look to another signal that I insist on: that the FK rating is posted just below the one-sentence idea. And if the FK score is above 7.5, it gets rejected too.

I reject it because I have found over many years that essays and advertisements that have high FK scores don't get results. I used to think that was because they don't get read. That is certainly part of the reason. But now I understand from learning about Congnative Fluency, that it is also because they don't get ***believed***.

So that is the definition: Good writing is the skill of expressing compelling thoughts clearly. To come up with compelling thoughts you must read until you experience an **ah-ah! moment**. And then you must prove your promises and claims with clean, simple language — language that scores 7.5 or below on the FK score.

This discipline has saved me lots of time and has accelerated the learning curve of every writer who has worked under my direction. I recommend it to you.

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22 Responses to "How to Write Well: The World's Simplest Formula"

Concise and informative, practicing what he preaches. The examples are meaningful as well. But then I expect that from Michael.

Clara Mae – over a year ago

I found this to be a very good read and a must for anyone that wants to shave time off getting results quickly.

There is some really good information here that you need to put in your swipe file to help you succeed in your writing business.

Thanks for sharing Michael

Stephen Hickey – over a year ago

I find the 7.5 FK score is hard to attain in reports and journalism. The style differs from one type to another. In reports, sentences and paragraphs tend to be longer than in sales letters. I was told in the copywriting course to keep the FK below 8.5. How can I keep a conversational tone at 7.5? Do I write, for example, he is instead of he's, etc? Are there any guidelines or suggestions that could help me improve my writing style? I would really appreciate it. Thank you Michael.

Aida Hidayah

Aida – over a year ago

Hi Aida!

Sorry for the delay in getting a response to you - I wanted to make sure we got the best information we could to you. :)

Michael has written a great essay on this topic that should help you in this area - you can check it out here:

<http://www.awaionline.com/2007/12/clarity-of-your-writing/>

Please let me know if you need anything else - and best of luck hitting the FK score you're aiming for!

Angela

Angela Bickford - AWA – over a year ago

I use the FK scoring in all my writing, except technical writing. The level I use is 8.5.

A very informative article. Thank you Catherine

Catherine – over a year ago

I like this information. Thank you.

fpathe13 – over a year ago

I thought that this message was thought provoking. It is true that your idea must be clear and focussed in order to pass it on to others. Thanks for the inspiration!

Valerie – over a year ago

A very informative article. It reminds me of what I have been doing all along: I first "paint the picture" and then discuss it.

Guest (CharlesLindberg Ogle) – over a year ago

I was completely engaged--and will print this article to keep on my idea wall. I'd heard the "stolen ideas" concept and it didn't sit well with me. But I'd not heard of the FK score. I learned something essential today. Too bad this doesn't have spellcheck...Zues is Zeus.

(Former magazine editors like me are a pain, right? Haha!)

Fantastic teaching tool! Thanks so much.

Barbie Eslin AWAI COS Member

Barbie Eslin – over a year ago

The article is an excellent one and provides deeper insight to writing. This will certainly help all budding writers to understand the concepts of proper writing and conveying messages to the target segments.

Thanks, ANURAG MOHANTY

Guest (ANURAG MOHANTY) – over a year ago

What an amassing article Michael, it was an ah-ah moment for me. What you say feels intuitively so true and to see the science of it through Cognitive Fluency is great, thank you!

Guest (Steve Wilkes) – over a year ago

I like finding the big idea and putting it at the top of the page. Light bulbs flashed inside my brain after reading this article. I've been practicing FK on client's blogs using the Yoast SEO plugin. It's definitely helped me to write less complex sentences. I remember my psychology teacher once commented on an essay with extra long sentences. Her way of putting it was that most people are not that sophisticated. What she really meant, was my writing was confusing!

writeyoureality – over a year ago

Steve:

Your proof reading is impeccable !

& Amassing !

Michael

Guest (Michael) – over a year ago

Excellent piece. Writing just comes naturally for me and I do "Write the way I talk and edit what I say" ! Wish it were as easy in day to day communication. No editing feature on the tongue... Thank you for the insights...will be sharing and inspiring other writers with it online.

Jeanete

Jeanetteonthenet – over a year ago

Fantastic article! This echoes a lot of the advice I've been receiving in fiction workshops. If your readers are confused, it doesn't matter how beautiful your language is.

Kate F – over a year ago

Good morning Michael, Your article is wonderful!

It helps me to focus in compelling thoughts and clear expression.

To be honest with you, I just get involved in this business. I consider myself like a BABY . I would love to follow the experienced leaders.Actually, I am writing a grant for a non-profit organization.It is my first project.

Please wish me luck! I am scared because English is my third language.Thank you. God Bless. Jennie

jennie – over a year ago

This article is terribly good. My writing isn't good enough and I've missed the whole point.

The reason is simple. Six inches. Six inches between my ears called my brains. I'd better improve it today. The FK tool is a measurement tool. What gets measured, gets improved.

Like this re-write. Sharks rule with no fear, lurking below, calculating their next move. Like Simon Properties. They see high ROI business opportunities. The result? High returns in commercial real estate when nobody's looking. Who's your shark?

Thank you for this ah-ah! moment and razor sharp clarity.

Guest (Myles Saulibio) – over a year ago

Excellent article. I am going to learn to keep my FK score to 7.5. I notice when I speak to groups that sometimes I have the group on the edge of their seats with my ideas. Then I lose them--from explaining. I see their faces glaze over and if I watch for this, can catch myself and bring myself back and therefore, them. My writing at times does the same thing. Thanks so much for your expertise.

Ninarose – over a year ago

I love the ease of reading and understanding the message. I have written many instructions and maintenance manuals in the 27 years I spent in the U.S.Military and wish I knew what is presented in this article. I don't know what FK score I would have achieved, but am sure it would have been above 7.5. Thanks for the direction.

Retired and hopeful – over a year ago

Very well written article. You sum up how to find the big idea. Support it with proof. And wrap it up with an example. Thanks for the template and knowledge!

"Good writing is expressing thoughts clearly."

Sal – over a year ago

Truth, of course, comes in many shapes and sizes.

Hi Mike, Would you agree that the statement above somehow militates against the definition of truth... something which can only be singular and standalone, and not corrupted by different shapes and sizes.

teejay – over a year ago

I am a naturally gifted writer, who has slowed down on reading. But recently I wrote a blog post and it garnered so much likes online. I see it's simplicity and reported facts as the elements that played up. Again the clear statement of purpose in the very first line did the magic too. Now I can relate those to your article. Thanks!

Efiong-Nigeria – over a year ago

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