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"speak up journal"

Richard Keith

Grant Pearson Brown Consulting Ltd.

The Presentation & Business Development Specialists

Advice *squeezed* straight from the experts

The scientific art of writing

Scientific Content Analysis, whilst undeniably valuable in certain ways, has its limitations. Short does not mean simple. We need good lexis, syntax and….

We are rightly proud of our Scientific Content Analysis tool here as it combines all the well-known indices with additional tools to give you a greater overall picture of the readability of a piece of writing. But it's not the whole story.

There are some obvious caveats that should be mentioned. The majority of indices form a correlation between brevity and readability: short words and short sentences equal easier to read. This comes from a sensible place – lots of business writing is overcomplicated and superfluous and we should be on our guard against that.

Nevertheless, there is no direct correlation between 'short' and 'simple'. This is because if a long word is used commonly we are likely to have knowledge of it and so understand it; likewise, if a short word isn't used often then the opposite is true.

To give a simple example, the verb "to pule" is a short word, but not common so likely not to be understood by most readers (kudos to those of you who know its meaning!) The word "Hippopotamus" is significantly longer but quite common so I expect you know what it means. You see? The short word is hard and the long word easy: this is more common than many people think.

Further to this, comprehension of text turns on another key element. Take perhaps the most famous sentence in the English language, one containing words I'm sure you have all heard before. "*To be or not to be, that is the question.*"

Short words? Yes. Short sentence? Sure. Easy to understand? Absolutely not.

For centuries scholars have debated the meaning of this short phrase[1]. Why is this? Because understanding this sentence turns on specific definitions, syntactical context, historical understanding, a fuller comprehension of the wider framework of the text.

From this, one point clearly emerges. There is a need to distinguish between readability (the capacity to recognise and say the words one sees) with comprehension (the capacity to recognise and understand the sense of the words one sees in the context within which they are presented). As Hamlet's quote shows, short sentences and a lack of polysyllabic words may make communication easier to *read*, it does not necessarily make it easier to *understand*.

Source: www.freeimages.co.uk

For comprehension, *precision* of word choice (*lexis*) and syntax (the *sentence architecture*) are key.

[1] For a fuller discussion of this famous phrase in writing see, Stevens, K. T., Stevens, K. C., & Stevens, W. P. (1992). Measuring the readability of business writing: The cloze procedure versus readability formulas. The Journal of Business Communication (1973), 29(4), 367-382.

The scientific art of writing ...continued

Advice *squeezed* straight from the experts

The selection and ordering of the words are the most important conduits of understanding. Analysing how accurate the word choice and how effective the syntax are in conveying a specific meaning is something that content analysis has no way of measuring.

Source: www.freeimages.com

The art of writing

Yet scientific analysis can certainly give us useful 'book-ends' of acceptability within which we should create our text. Within this middle space, we must turn to the art of writing for real impact.

When we advise, we talk regularly of the art of rhetorical tools as an effective way of affecting your reader: a good metaphor or an effective piece of anaphora or litotes can impact your reader in an alluring way. But, there is an overall art to written communication that is often forgotten which I wish to focus on now. Let us call this *sound patterning*.

It is important to remember that we all "read aloud" in our heads even if we are not voicing text. This means we still 'hear' the sounds of the words on the page – we hear and so appreciate the rhythm of the language, the stresses of particular phrases, the resonance of vowels and impact of consonants within the words themselves. This is where sound patterning becomes a potent tool. Linguists tell us: "*Spoken and written language in general, and persuasive language in particular, make substantial use of sound patterning to create and enhance meaning.*"[2] Therein lies the key. Sound patterning "creates and enhances meaning". The

'what you say' isn't just the ideas you want to put down in words, it's the noises and impact of the words themselves. When we talk about the written word you have the added visual dimensions too.

Sound patterning includes figures of speech such as alliteration, onomatopoeia, metaphor – as the name suggests, it taps into the noises that the words make when pronounced, especially when arranged in a particular way to create a certain phrase or sentence (not too dissimilar to arranging musical notes in a phrase to create a certain effect). The human brain is programmed to find and use patterns and so we enjoy the effect they have on our cognitive processes.

For instance, let's take some syntax already presented in this article: "Short words? Yes. Short sentence? Sure. Easy to understand? Absolutely not."

There is a cadence to this phraseology - an artistry to putting the specific emphases and rhythms together that makes it attractive to both read and hear.

There is sibilance (repetition of 's' sound) that helps the sentence flow. Also a movement of vowel sounds up the resonance scale with the rise heightening the sense of expectation. There is the triplet of 'ask and answer' tropes: we recognise this rhythm and enjoy it. The final consonant 't' in "Absolutely not" serves as a hard stop, emphasising the terminal nature of the last two words. This clearly creates and enhances meaning, without a reader really being conscious of it.

The next time you put fingers to keyboard to write something try to think more about the sounds your text can make – you'll find three things happen. Firstly, your text should become more enjoyable to write; secondly, it should become more enjoyable to read; thirdly, by enhancing the impact of the meaning your text will become more persuasive. Which would be wonderful, wouldn't it?

By Richard Keith

[2] Cockcroft, R., & Cockcroft, S., (2014) *Persuading People: an Introduction to Rhetoric,* Palgrave MacMillan: Basingstoke, p.212

The artistic science of writing

Good writing is not an art, nor is it a science. It combines the two in that clarity, efficiency and conciseness should be balanced with an elegance, a simplicity, enjoyment, and even a beauty. We can all use Scientific Content Analysis to improve something already written, and thus to improve your writing more generally.

Ewan Pearson

Too much of what we read in a business setting is boring, too complex or just badly written. Yet it need not be so. And don't get me started on poor punctuation, apostrophes specifically, or grammar. Lynne Truss, the former host of BBC Radio 4's Cutting a Dash programme, wrote a book called "Eats, Shoots & Leaves". In that, she suggests that *"Punctuation is a courtesy designed to help readers to understand a story without stumbling".* We'll do that topic another day….
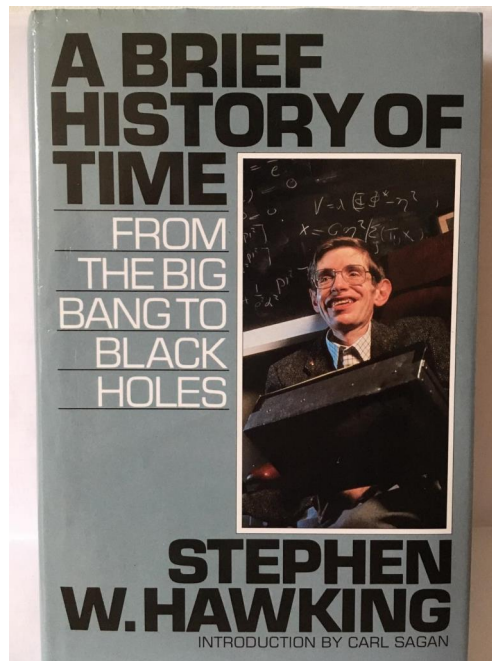
I know some of you will now go through this whole document looking for errors. We all make mistakes, so happy hunting!

There are many basic versions of the full set of scientific measurement tools that are free on the 'net'. You can assess what you have written, find its weaknesses and improve the text before publishing it. MS Word does this, as does Google, and there are readability index tools on various sites. You can for example measure syllables per word, words per sentence, and the number/ratio of polysyllabic words. We have our own Content Analysis that has a more developed set of tools.

Take almost anything written by an economist, physicist or banker and you will see what I mean. It can often be turgid, almost unreadable text, and yet our jobs may require us to wade through muddy pools of the stuff. Lucy Kellaway made a name for herself writing in the FT about poor writing. It's pervasive: Less than a year ago Paul Romer lost his managerial duties over the World Bank's research team following a revolt against his efforts to improve the quality of Bank's writings. Ouch!

I love the idea that so many people say they found it easy to "read" Stephen Hawking's 1998 book, *A Brief History of Time.* According to Wikipedia this became a bestseller, sold more than 10 million copies in 20 years, and was also on *The Sunday Times* bestseller list for more than

five years. It was translated into 35 languages by 2001[1]. The book starts easily enough, but I must be very thick as I started to get a sore head in chapter 2. Smoke started coming out of my ears half way through chapter 3, so I stopped reading. Sorry Professor, before your passing you did great things for science and are rightly greatly admired, but that's not an easy read for the general public.

Hawking: Some light bedtime reading?

Here is something from an economist:

"Europe's economic and demographic patterns may seem uncongenial for private equity investment. There is little doubt that high taxation, uncompetitive wage costs, over-regulation of labour markets and the ageing of the population will constrain economic growth. However, some likely responses to these problems may lead to major structural changes to Europe's economies and capital markets, and these changes will - paradoxically - create major new opportunities for investors in private equity."

Advice *squeezed* **straight from the experts**

The artistic science of writing ...continued

Advice *squeezed* straight from the experts

This text gets the score 'horrendous' on all 6 readability indices that we use, even though there isn't a single acronym or data point.

But why is that? Well, the table of our results for this text are at the bottom of this article, but the key problem measurements are firstly that 19 of the 69 words are polysyllabic (3 or more syllables per word), so the average number of syllables per word is 2.0. It should be about 1.5 to be most easily readable.

Secondly, the average sentence length is 23.0 words. This should be below 18 and nearer 12 would be better still. So it needs shorter words and shorter sentences. This is very do-able as you can see both very easily.

It could also be written so much more simply. If you have the energy, a good exercise is to re-write this in better English. But you have to try to understand what they have written first; good luck with that.

Here is an example of something I got from The Share Centre last week (with our underlining added):

"The site will start to <u>roll out</u> via email invitation to randomly selected customers first and then will gradually move to a <u>phased launch</u> to ensure we stress test our new back office systems. Indeed, a huge part of the work to date has been replacing all our back office systems. This was a necessity to get the new site live,

but will also now provide us with a much improved <u>platform</u> to build on so future developments will be much quicker to <u>build</u> and <u>get released</u>."

"*It's not so bad*" I hear you saying, and you'd be right because the general readability measurements are good. This rather proves the point of Richard's article.

And that's because once you look more closely there are some obvious improvements to reduce the clutter. We could surely shorten and clarify it a bit, and I have underlined the words used to describe their new site, which starts by rolling, then launching, and then it becomes a platform. That must be quite tiring for the poor old thing. I do hope it does not 'crash' too. (There's an excruciating pun for you, if you're into that sort of thing.)

There are a good number of things that we can do to improve the readability and thus digestibility of a piece of business writing. What we find works best is to stick the content first into our content analysis tool, and find out whether it is closer to eloquent expansion or downright drivel. Once the basics are checked or fixed start to work on the higher level items that might actually make what has been written enjoyable to read.

By Ewan Pearson

Footnote: This article (without the examples) has a Flesh reading ease of 65. There were 28 words per sentence originally, but using our tool, I quickly got this down to 18.

Numerical Analysis:	Ideal	Actual
Number of sentences	4-5	3
Number of words	45-60	69
Number of Polysyllabic Words	10-12	19
Average number of syllables per word	1.5	1.98
Average words per sentence	12-18	23.0
Readability Analysis:	**Ideal**	**Actual**
Gunning's Fog index	15	20.21
Coleman-Liau index	8	15.45
Flesch-Kincaid readability index	12	17.75
Automated readability index	13	18.67
SMOG (Simple measure of gobbledygook)	12	17.51
Flesch Reading Ease	100	8.77

Writing for a blog

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Lynda Russell -Whittaker

The Blogging industry has grown immensely over the past 10 years, giving rise to the 'laptop lifestyle' of men such as Yaro Starak, Mark Anastassi and 'virtual CEO' Chris Ducker, and women such as Joanna Martin, a seven figure earner and self-styled 'nomad' (with three kids and a husband in tow!).

Another woman is Michelle Dale, a Virtual Assistant (VA) for many years who now shows others how to replicate her success and offers consultancy services for her high-end clients. However, blogging can also be a valuable tool for larger corporations wishing to increase their exposure to different markets.
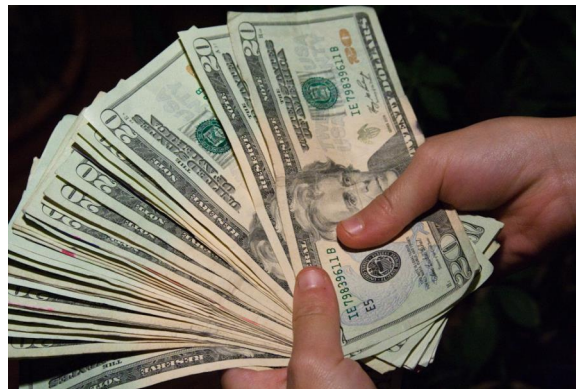

Self-styled 'nomad' Jo Martin[1]

So does blogging differ from other forms of writing?

And what are the pitfalls and challenges peculiar to this medium? Perhaps what's critical to blogging now is a clear focus on what you want to be known for, and therefore how you're found by search engines, especially Google.

This is why it's so crucial that your key search words (your 'content') are directly relevant to your business expertise and subject matter. A search engine is probably the most important marketing tool for anyone wanting to raise their online presence. The engine's crawlers like to find fresh content, which is why blogs often do well in search engine rankings.

Blogs are now often used to drive traffic to a commercial website where there are products or services on offer. A recent survey by Hubspot (2017) revealed that 53% of marketers said blog content creation was their top inbound marketing priority. Another survey, by Social Media Examiner, found that 65% of marketers (in the US) planned to increase their use of blogging in 2017.

USD 10,000[1]

Many blogging websites now include far more than a set of blogs. Many now include video of some kind (vlogs) as well as podcasts and vodcats. Information or usefulness seems to be the key to a blog's popularity. Will someone share it? The fashion bloggers were early to monetise their blogs by allowing ads and then securing lucrative sponsorship deals.

Nowadays, as a result of the proliferation of low-priced (and sometimes free) easy to use software, there has been a boom in the professional blogging sector. You only have to look at the number of sites powered by WordPress[2] to see the growth.

There are blogs to solve acne problems, blogs to teach people how to publish their own books and blogs to teach you how to make in excess of $10,000 per month by blogging! So how does this sort of writing differ from any other form of business writing?

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1. Sources: entrepreneurs-journey.com and freelotto.com
2. Over 74.5m according to *https://managewp.com/blog*

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Writing for a blog...continued

Sam Leith (author of '**You Talking To Me? Rhetoric from Aristotle to Obama'**) knows a thing or two about writing. He's a columnist at the *Financial Times* and the *Evening Standard* as well as literary editor at the *Spectator*.

In his new book, **'Write to the Point. How to be Clear, Correct and Persuasive on the Page'**, Sam Leith offers sound advice to those of us with blog-writing ambitions:

"A blog isn't a single sort of thing. Some blogs are essays; some are diaries; some - if you include in the blogging category profiles on platforms such as Pinterest or Tumblr - might be more like a curated collection of artefacts."

He adds:

"The thing that can be said about all of them in general is that knowing your audience is the key to their success."

and...

"Blogs are personal. What's your selling-point? Is it your particular expertise or authority? Or is it your taste and style and tone of voice? A blog, one way or another, needs a USP."

These last two quotes will strike a familiar chord with GPB clients and regular SpeakUp! readers. The thinking required behind the writing of a blog is not so different to that required to construct a compelling pitch or presentation document.

The main difference - and greatest challenge - in being successful as a blog writer is holding the seemingly gnat-like attention spans of web surfers when they are online.

Competition is fierce out there on the worldwide web. When connected to it via our computers, tablets or mobiles we are faced with an onslaught of multiple shiny, new and potentially interesting content.

Advice *squeezed* **straight from the experts**

So on reflection, perhaps blog writing is not so different from writing for a pitch or presentation.

Some useful blogging icons

If you haven't grabbed your audience's attention with an intriguing headline and sustained it with the subsequent few lines, they're likely to have meandered off to find something more interesting or useful to watch, read or listen to!

So, be creative with the headline, it must pull the viewer in. Then pay particular attention to the relevance and interest of what follows. So long as you recognise that you are in a constant competition for their attention, and that keeping it all connected and short is vital, your blogs should end up with loads of support and onward circulation in tweets, links and messages.

In a similar way to writing a good proposal or pitch, a good blog can help your company to sell services and products, raise your profile and help you to expand into other markets.

By Lynda Russell-Whitaker

Footnote: Lynda is about to start a blogging website at www.brainbankpresents.co.uk. Do go and take a look!

Speaking at a conference

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When you have a key presentation to deliver, such as at a major conference, systematic preparation always pays off. So make it part of the day job.

Introduction

You have been asked to speak at a major three-day conference in Monaco in three months' time. You're chosen because of your involvement with a new European consortium project to build a transport aircraft. This is very flattering and it's a nice venue. Spouses can come too!
Now to the serious business – you have to start preparing. One method is to use Rudyard Kipling's famous quote:
"I keep six honest serving-men
(They taught me all I knew)
Their names are What and Why and When
And How and Where and Who."
We might add one more: "With Whom", as some presentations are done as a team. This article deals with Why, What, Who, Where, When and How.

A speaker's view of the audience

Why: Deciding your objectives

The very first thing to get clear is why you are talking. Should you even accept? You are very busy and have a number of key events. There are general objectives as well as the specific ones. The two are usually not the same.

General objectives will fall into one or more of the following categories:
- to inform
- to sell or persuade
- to stimulate discussion
- to entertain
- to promote your company or yourself
- to fill a spare slot in a harassed conference organiser's schedule!

Specifically for the Monaco Conference, given that you have been asked to talk about your new transport aircraft, you decide they are to:
- raise the profile of your consortium
- make the case for your project
- stimulate discussion about it.

What: Content and Key Messages

Now focus on what you want the audience to remember. What do you want them to be talking about afterwards? If you go into "information mode" then you may well fall into the ruinous trap that you say far too much! At this early stage we recommend you give yourself 60 seconds to write down in two sentences what you would like the audience to be talking about after.

For Monaco, your 60 seconds produces:
- Europe needs to continue to make transport aircraft
- We have the technical ability to make an aircraft that will perform to the highest criteria
- There is a global market for these products.
A good start has been made.

Who: Research the audience and other speakers

Generally we should consider the audience in a number of ways:
- What are their expectations?
- How much they know about your topic
- How many of them are there?
- Are there any sensitive issues to avoid or handle with care?
- What is their English language comprehension like?

The Monaco conference: The audience includes people in the aviation industry, journalists, and from Asia and North America. Most are knowledgeable about the major issues but most don't know so much about the topic. Most are not engineers, so complex design parameters

Alastair Grant

Advice *squeezed* straight from the experts

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Speaking at a conference .....continued

Our Services

Grant Pearson Brown Consulting Ltd is a respected adviser based in London. We enhance the performance of businesses, helping clients to excel in the use of the spoken and written word, improving the performance of individuals and teams. Over the long term our work improves the way a firm does business.

We coach and advise individuals to perform at their best in the toughest situations including: Presentations, New Business Pitches, Business Development, Negotiating, Media Interviews, Telephone Calls and Document Writing.

We also produce scientific voice, visual and content analysis reports, which are unique to GPB. We then provide voice and visual coaching, and content advice.

Our clients' needs are the only focus of our work; we listen to them and closely tailor our response to deliver first class coaching and advice. In support of this we selectively pursue new ideas and approaches, continually hone our advice and create tools such as:

- Voice, Visual and Content Analyses,
- Prospect Relationship Management (PRM),
- the Information Iceberg,
- Client s' Rights Act,
- Feature, Benefit Impact (FBI),
- Buyers' Criteria Analysis, (BCA), and
- Our Q&A Methodology.

will pass them by. Based on this you decide to:
- have a fairly sophisticated message
- leave out vast wads of technical detail but to cover some key points
- be careful not to offend anyone — you have a global market·
- keep your language simple for non-native English listeners.

Where: The venue, room and staff

This involves straightforward preparation and attention to detail:
- Room layout and seating plan
- Facilities for the speaker e.g. mic/PA system, podium, laptop
- Lighting and audio visual facilities, memory stick and remote control 'clicker' for the slides
- Have the correct address and know how to get there.

Monaco, anyone?

When: The plan

There are two aspects: how long to speak for and the preparation plan from. The important thing is to plan to be under the time limit. Conference chairs hate speakers who overrun! It throws out the schedule. Typically, conference speakers are asked to talk for 40 minutes and then take questions. This is beyond most people's attention span, so generally you need to:
- Agree a shorter speaker slot time with the organisers
- Avoid detail and using variety, showing video clips which allow the audience to refresh their brains

- Shorten to allow time for questions.

For the Monaco conference, as the event is in three months there is a temptation to plan it sometime later. It's sensible to make a simple plan now and place dates in the diary for:
- an initial draft
- research (you may wish to delegate some of this)
- the preparation of visuals, if any
- time for a rehearsal or three.

How: The Prompts and Questions

How will you deliver the presentation? You have some choices:
- Deliver from a full script with a continuous series of slides
- Use notes or bullet points with slides
- Use no visuals at all
- Deliver from memory after much rehearsal
- Seek questions early on, or plan to have all questions at the end
- Have material to hand out at the start or end.

Summary points:

- Decide why you are presenting, in terms of informing or persuading.
- Avoid a mass of detail. Consider what main points you would like the audience to be talking about later
- Consider who the audience are in terms of knowledge, attitude and expectations
- Pay attention to stage management issues such as where and when
- Consider how you are going to present, in terms of using visuals, memory prompts or even a script
- Prepare well for the expect and unexpected questions!

Conference speaking can be daunting, but with good planning and preparation it is not only a highly effective way of reaching a large audience at comparatively low cost, but it can also be fun!

By Alastair Grant