

## Writing Rules from Great Writers

David Ogilvy, from "How to Write"

The better you write, the higher you go in Ogilvy & Mather. People who think well, write well. Woolly minded people write woolly memos, woolly letters and woolly speeches. Good writing is not a natural gift. You have to learn to write well. Here are ... hints:

1. Write the way you talk. Naturally.
2. Use short words, short sentences and short paragraphs.
3. Never use jargon words like reconceptualize, demassification, attitudinally, judgmentally. They are hallmarks of a pretentious ass.
4. Never write more than two pages on any subject.
5. Check your quotations.
6. Never send a letter or a memo on the day you write it. Read it aloud the next morning — and then edit it.
7. If it is something important, get a colleague to improve it.
8. Before you send your letter or your memo, make sure it is crystal clear what you want the recipient to do.

John Steinbeck

1. Abandon the idea that you are ever going to finish. Lose track of the 400 pages and write just one page for each day, it helps. Then when it gets finished, you are always surprised.
2. Write freely and as rapidly as possible and throw the whole thing on paper. Never correct or rewrite until the whole thing is down. Rewrite in process is usually found to be an excuse for not going on. It also interferes with flow and rhythm which can only come from a kind of unconscious association with the material.
3. Forget your generalized audience. In the first place, the nameless, faceless audience will scare you to death and in the second place, unlike the theater, it doesn't exist. In writing, your audience is one single reader. I have found that sometimes it helps to pick out one person—a real person you know, or an imagined person and write to that one.

George Orwell

1. Never use a metaphor, simile, or other figure of speech which you are used to seeing in print. (Phrases such as toe the line, ride roughshod over, stand shoulder to shoulder with, play into the hands of, an axe to grind, Achilles' heel, swan song, and hotbed come to mind quickly and feel comforting and melodic. Common phrases have become so comfortable that they create no emotional response. Take the time to invent fresh, powerful images.)
2. Never use a long word where a short one will do. (Long words don't make you sound intelligent unless used skillfully. In the wrong

situation they'll have the opposite effect, making you sound pretentious and arrogant. When Hemingway was criticized by Faulkner for his limited word choice he replied: "Poor Faulkner. Does he really think big emotions come from big words? He thinks I don't know the ten-dollar words. I know them all right. But there are older and simpler and better words, and those are the ones I use.")

3. If it is possible to cut a word out, always cut it out. (Great literature is simply language charged with meaning to the utmost possible degree. Accordingly, any words that don't contribute meaning to a passage dilute its power. Less is always more. Always.)
4. Never use the passive where you can use the active.
5. Never use a foreign phrase, a scientific word, or a jargon word if you can think of an everyday English equivalent.
6. Break any of these rules sooner than saying anything outright barbarous.

#### C. S. Lewis

1. Always prefer the plain direct word to the long, vague one. Don't implement promises, but keep them.
2. Never use abstract nouns when concrete ones will do. If you mean "More people died" don't say "Mortality rose."
3. Don't use adjectives which merely tell us how you want us to feel about the thing you are describing. I mean, instead of telling us a thing was "terrible," describe it so that we'll be terrified. Don't say it was "delightful"; make us say "delightful" when we've read the description. You see, all those words (horrifying, wonderful, hideous, exquisite) are only like saying to your readers, "Please will you do my job for me."
4. Don't use words too big for the subject. Don't say "infinitely" when you mean "very"; otherwise you'll have no word left when you want to talk about something really infinite.