

W R I T I N G F O R
HUMANS
AND
ROBOTS

The New Rules of Content Style

First Edition

Maddy Osman



Lakewood, Colorado



CHAPTER 1

IMPORTANT CONSIDERATIONS WHEN CHOOSING WORDS

If you commit nothing else from this guide to memory, at least commit to internalizing this:

Words matter.

Words can inspire—or they can alienate. Using certain words can be polarizing. As such, you must be thoughtful when choosing words to describe specific things and situations. After all, nuance helps to convey meaning. Your word choice may have different effects depending on the audience.

That being said, here are some guidelines you can use to create a level of consistency around voice as it's conveyed by word choice.

Voice/Tone Spectrum

The Nielsen Norman Group helps simplify the process of codifying voice and tone with these four dimensions:

1. Funny versus serious.
2. Formal versus casual.
3. Respectful versus irreverent.
4. Enthusiastic versus matter-of-fact.¹

Start with agreement on these basics before writing for a new brand.

Writing with Concise, Simple Language

Complicated, multisyllabic words are not preferred by internet readers. Their objective is to locate information rapidly, and dense content is not the territory in which to navigate. Your competition has likely realized this, and your audience may default to them if you're not meeting them halfway with simple language.

As such, here are some guidelines for writing with simple language:

Say more with less. **Cut unnecessary words.** Aim for "concise."

For example:

Instead of "*more and more*," just go with "*more*."

Besides complex industry-specific words that you can't avoid without losing meaning, **use uncomplicated language.** Assume

¹ Kate Moran, "The Four Dimensions of Tone of Voice," Nielsen Norman Group, 2016, <https://www.nngroup.com/articles/tone-of-voice-dimensions/>.

middle-school level reading comprehension. Consider writing at a reading level below what you normally expect for complex topics.

Don't repeat the same words too close together in the same sentence or paragraph. It comes across as lazy and uninspired. Vary your word choice.

Cut out fluff words. These are words that don't add value or can be removed without changing meaning.

For example:

- "*That*"—Instead of "*They say **that** it's better,*" choose "*They say it's better.*"
- "*Simply*" or "*Just*"—Instead of "***Simply** open the app,*" choose "*Open the app.*"
- "*However*" and "*So*"—These words **can** be useful but are often unnecessary. Ask yourself if you need the word or if your sentence makes sense without it.

Choose strong verbs instead of adverbs. Rather than modifying a common verb or adjective, choose a less common option that better conveys your intention in a stronger, single word.

For example:

Don't write this:
"We're very excited."

Write this instead:
"We're thrilled."

A Reminder about Possessives

Sometimes, it's nice to restate existing grammar rules that have a knack for getting confused.

Here are the guidelines about possessives for writers in The Blogsmith Style Guide:

If the word is plural and ends in an "s," put the apostrophe at the end.

For example:

"Those classes' schedules."

If the word is singular and ends in an "s," add an apostrophe and an additional "s."

For example:

"That class's schedule."

Making References to People or Objects

Clarify your ideas by making appropriate references in your writing.

If you're referring to a brand, restate the brand name in every paragraph in which it's mentioned (don't refer to the brand as "it").

Pro tip:

While going through edits, repeat the proper noun/noun of whatever you're referring to, determining whether it sounds weird in a sentence out of context.

For example:

A sentence like, *"It is useful for all e-commerce niches,"* doesn't make as much sense out of context as *"WooCommerce is useful for all e-commerce niches."*

If you're referring to a company, it is a thing rather than a person.

For example:

Don't write this:
*"the company **who**."*

Write this instead:
*"the company **that**."*

Always choose positive language when referring to the brand commissioning the content. Avoid phrasing that could be interpreted negatively, even in subtle or unintended ways. Spin limitations positively.

For example:

Don't write this:
"Previously only available in the US."

Write this instead:
"Available in the US at launch."

Avoiding Ambiguity

On a related note, **don't leave room for ambiguity** when referencing different concepts. Take this opportunity to add clarity with a related search engine optimization (SEO) keyword, if possible.

For example:

Instead of a sentence ending in "it," such as *"How do you do—?"*, fill in the blank.

What is *it*?

Here are some additional examples of ambiguity and what to do instead:

- “Many” is less clear than “50%” or even “the majority.” If you say, “Many people love this product,” take the opportunity to prove it by quoting positive customer reviews.
- When you use a number, tell the reader *how many of what* (offer a specific unit of measurement).
- Instead of saying, “See how things are going,” be specific about what the “things” are.

Finally, when making any comparison, be clear about what you’re comparing something to.

For example:

<p>In addition to: <i>"Most e-commerce businesses have to process much more data through their website"</i></p>	<p>Add: <i>"than a standard business website."</i></p>
--	---

This is a little nitpicky, but in headings, The Blogsmith uses “**advantages and disadvantages**” rather than “pros and cons.” It sounds more like a complete thought.

Using Inclusive Language

Why bother with inclusive language? Because we never want someone to feel left out, like their needs are a burden, or you’re judging them for something they can’t control. Using inclusive language is a good way to show your audience that you care about everyone’s preferences, not just those of one specific

group. Depending on your target market, you can adjust the exact nature of the inclusivity of your content.

Default to gender-neutral language. Instead of generalizing with **his or her** or **she or he**, use “their” or “they.”

If you’re writing for a brand and the article is going on their website, don’t refer to the brand in the third person. It should be a first-person plural when the client is referring to themselves in an article.

For example:

Don’t write this:
“The company”

Write this instead:
“Our company,” “we,” “us”

Here are some further guidelines for ensuring inclusivity:

- Use people-first language that doesn’t put weight on descriptors over characteristics. For example, you might refer to someone with a hearing disability as “a person who is deaf” instead of “a deaf person.”
- Use approachable language that doesn’t unintentionally alienate—learn more about the nuances around word choice in [Chapter 2](#).

Here are some words to avoid and to use instead:

- Instead of “old,” try “aging/older.”
- Instead of “girlfriend” or “boyfriend,” try “partner.”
- Instead of “homeless,” try “person experiencing homelessness.”
- Instead of “accused,” try “reported.”

Words and Phrases to Avoid Completely

Some words shouldn't be used when creating online content because they're either confusing or devoid of real value.

These guidelines will keep you on the right track for creating quality content that doesn't mince words:

Don't use -ing suffixes together.

For example:

"Involving throwing" should be "that involved throwing."

Don't use "ones" to describe a noun you've already defined.

Use the same word again or find another way to say it.

For example:

*"During the interview process, be sure to ask the right questions. This could be a mix of common restaurant job interview questions and ones (try **those**) that are more unique to your company's culture."*

Here are some word choice swaps you can make to improve your writing:

- "Utilize"—choose "use."
- "Aside from"—choose "besides."
- "Host"—choose "a variety," "a number of," or "suite."
- "Allow"—choose something less passive, like "empower" or "enable."
- "Cheap"—choose variations of "affordable."

Also, remove “thankfully,” “fortunately,” “luckily,” or “actually,” and any other words that don’t add value. Instead of these terms, try a bucket brigade like “**Here’s the good news:**”

But what is a bucket brigade? This is defined in Chapter 4, with more examples.

Avoid using words that might insult the reader’s intelligence. We’re trying to educate people, so don’t assume anything is obvious. Avoid phrases like “obviously,” “of course,” “clearly,” and “everyone knows.”

Instead of “COVID-19,” use “the pandemic.” When it comes to search engines and social media platforms, ranking COVID-19 content is reserved for relevant authorities sharing public health information. Confusing the algorithm by including similar phrases in your less-relevant content may jeopardize the ranking of your articles that aren’t about public health information.

Even after the pandemic is over, it’s important not to optimize for keywords people use to locate health and safety information. When talking about an adjacent (but not as critical) topic, use a thesaurus to come up with alternate labels.

Buy the book: <https://www.amazon.com/dp/B09X4NJ9H8>

Learn more: <https://www.writingforhumansandrobots.com>
