

Writing in Plain Speak

By Wendy J. Cook

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Above all, favor brevity.

The value of that advice is easy to see. Consider the first draft of my opening line, for instance:

The preeminent rule for good writing is, perhaps, to always strive to use as few words as possible and to keep those words as short as possible.



Wow. What a difference! Here a few tricks that you too can use to convert your initial drafts into “plain speak.”

Choose words wisely

Begin by looking for extra words that go without saying, especially adjectives and adverbs. For example, I started by removing qualifiers like “good” and “always.” No harm done.

Use higher-level words where they work well. For example, the language became more formal when I replaced “to use as few words as possible and to keep those words as short as possible” with “to favor brevity.” But, boy, was I able to get to the point. Sometimes, elevating the language can improve the results.

Other times, it can't. For example, why say “*preeminent*” when “*above all*” is easier? Simplify fancy words whenever they don't add value.

Investment advisors, however, must sometimes sacrifice brevity on the altar of compliance. To ensure that your communications reflect full disclosure and scrupulous accuracy, you have to add clarifications such as “expected” to “returns” and detailed sourcing to your charts.



Proceed in an orderly fashion

Remember good, old “verb-subject” sentence-parsing from high school English? Even if you don’t, I’ll bet you can intuitively sense that dropping “perhaps” into the middle of an otherwise tight sentence can throw off readability. On a second draft, I moved “perhaps” to the front, where it wouldn’t interfere with the flow:

Perhaps the first rule for writing is to favor brevity.

Upon reflection, I removed it entirely. By considering the word order, I also was able to shorten “rules of writing” to “writing rule” in yet another draft:

The first writing rule is to favor brevity.

Finally, I cut it to the bone. Without “perhaps,” the statement is more confident. One word at a time, consider the order of your words.

Mind your audience

Simplicity need not imply stupidity. Particularly for investment advisors, your target audiences are often older, college-educated folks who will appreciate fresh writing. You’re allowed to use words like “brevity” when they will improve your message.

Now, to jargon. Of course you know your financial jargon so well that you can (and maybe you do) recite it in your sleep. But even well-versed readers may not be familiar with the secret language of investing.

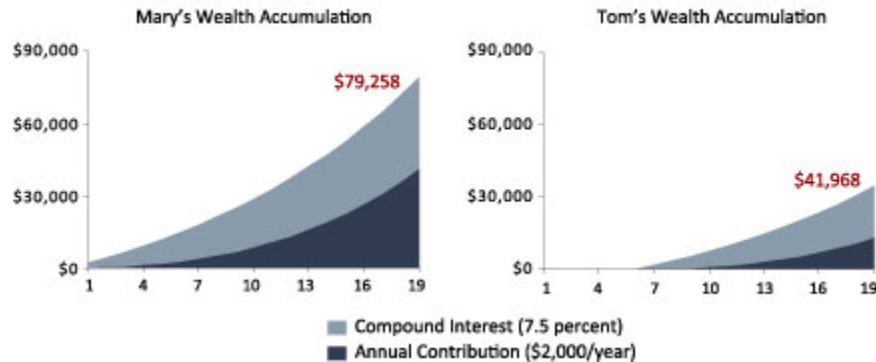
It’s okay to use industry-specific language when precision is called for. As you educate your clients, it’s in their best interest to learn terminology such as “diversification,” “asset allocation,” and “equity versus fixed income.” But always consider the context of your writing. Especially when you are writing for new investors or for the general public, take the time to clearly define industry terms on first use.¹

Picture this

Sometimes, the best communications are seen and not heard. Charts or graphs are often the best way to communicate important information coming from large or complex data sets. For example, consider this illustration, which appeared in a [blog](#) posted by Darrell Armuth of Armuth Asset Management (reprinted here with permission):

¹ You can use footnotes for your definitions, so those already familiar with the term can read more quickly.

The Power of Compound Interest



Even without reading Darrell’s full blog post, you can probably easily spot the value of starting one’s savings plan early. Now, imagine how many words it would take to explain what can be seen here at a glance!

While an effective illustration can help a reader see the light, a poorly designed one can cast a long shadow across your work. Quality data visualization is a subject of its own, for another article. Others have written entire books on it. I recommend those by Stephen Few and Edward Tufte.

Revise your revisions

Professional writers may write better than most people, but we don’t necessarily write any faster. We put our creative pants on one leg at a time, just like everyone else. We write. We revise. We let it rest. We revise again with fresh eyes. We rinse and repeat. We recruit a second set of eyes. ... Sometimes we start all over again. Then we have it reviewed for compliance.

Of course, if you’re shooting off a quick e-mail to a colleague, take practical short-cuts. But the wider the audience and the more critical the outcome, the more it behooves you to take several passes through your writing, allowing yourself time between readings to refresh your perspective. Another technique is to read your text out loud. If you stumble over a word, or if you find that you need to take a deep breath to go on reading, these are cues to simplify.

A labor of love

One of my favorite quotes about writing is from Isaac Asimov, who is reported to have said, “If my doctor told me I had only six minutes to live, I wouldn’t brood. I’d type a little faster.”



Hopefully you're that enthused about investment advice! For me, I'm right there with Dr. Asimov, in sentiment if not in talent. As with any creative process, whether it's writing a novel or constructing a robust investment portfolio, people will be able to spot your enthusiasm — or your lack thereof — from a football field away.

To the extent that you can relax and truly enjoy the writing process, you'll have a leg up in the quality of your work. Unfortunately, passion is more an infection than a learning process. Some of us are highly susceptible, while others seem immune. For those who would rather devote their energy to delivering sound investment advice, consider outsourcing some writing to quality services that can assist you.

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