



# Are We “Dumbing Down” Our Writing?

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*In a recent class, a participant asked, “Aren’t we dumbing down our writing when we make the sentences shorter and use simple words?” What an excellent question!*

*In editing, when we change “commence” to “begin,” are we underestimating our readers? When we break a 40-word sentence into two shorter ones, are we treating our readers like children? This article answers that question and offers tips on business communication.*

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As an English major in college, I read fat novels such as James Joyce’s *Ulysses* and Melville’s *Moby Dick*. When I came to a word I didn’t understand, I wrote it on the inside back cover, looked it up, and then tried to figure out what it meant in the context of the long sentence and paragraph it appeared in.

These days, picking through literary castoffs at garage sales, I have noticed that many people have done the same thing: words such as *elucidate*, *prodigious*, and *trenchant* are scribbled inside back covers. I am surprised to see that many words in lists are the same ones I remember learning, and I’m pleased that I still know the meanings.

I would never use such words as part of my vocabulary as a business communicator, however, and I encourage business writers to

avoid them. In writing classes, I suggest replacing *cognizant* with *aware*. I recommend changing *multifaceted* to *complex*. And I urge business writers to break their flowing 40-word sentences into crisp 20-word statements.

**Is this “dumbing down” our writing?** I don’t think so. I prefer to think of it as recognizing our purpose and communicating effectively.

**In business writing, our purpose is to get a job done**, sell a product or service, keep a customer or client happy, and meet our obligations to employees, shareholders, citizens, and others. Our purpose is not to develop the other person’s vocabulary. And it’s not to tell them an epic story, broaden their intellectual horizons, or evoke profound emotion.

**There’s a place for wonderful words** like *nonplussed* and *truculent* and long, winding sentences that lead the reader on a journey to their end. But that place isn’t today’s email, reports, proposals, performance appraisals, procedure manuals, and other business documents.

To communicate clearly with your reader, follow these six principles.

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## **1. Use short, crisp words unless you must have a formal tone.**

Feel free to start a sentence with *and* rather than “in addition.” State that your program will *begin* rather than *commence*. Build *homes* rather than *residences*, and include *drawings* rather than *depictions*. Stop *utilizing*; simply *use*.



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## 2. Avoid unfamiliar though trendy words such as *nascent*.

Instead, use a synonym that everyone recognizes. Synonyms for *nascent*, for example, are *promising*, *hopeful*, *budding*, *emerging*, and *growing*. Pick the one that most clearly fits your meaning.

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## 3. Use standard words rather than creative substitutes, especially in technical documents.

I recently bought an external hard drive for my computer. Trying to follow the instructions, I came across the word *forget* where I expected to find *delete*.

And instead of *file*, the instructions used *snapshot*. Rather than *source*, which I understand completely, the instructions referred to a *volume*. Each of these choices slowed me down and created doubts that I was using the drive correctly.

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## 4. Avoid using newly minted words until their meaning is clear.

In a news article about landslides in California, an individual used the word *mansionize*. In the context, I believe she meant “to change the character of a neighborhood by building mansions in it.” But she may have meant “to renovate a home into a mansion.” Although *mansionize* may seem clear, it isn’t.

When clarity is important to you and your reader, use a standard expression, even when it means using more words.

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## 5. Avoid creating *shoulds* for your readers.

When I ask workshop participants whether a reader will understand their words, technical terms, or acronyms, I am often told “Well, they

*should.*” But whether they should or not is irrelevant. The question is “Will they?”

Remember that your reader may be in her first week on the job or in an office on the other side of the globe. Perhaps your readers *should* know you mean “Fault Tree Analysis,” but to them “FTA” may mean “Free Trade Agreement.”

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## 6. Break your long sentences into short, crisp ones.

Your favorite author in college may have written a sentence a whole page long, but his or her purpose was not to inform. It was perhaps to enlighten or provoke the reader, create a marvelous new world, and push the limits of language. In contrast, your purpose is to communicate clearly and concisely with your readers. Keep it simple.

For easy understanding, sentences should average no more than 15 to 20 words each. Sentences in this article average 13.6 words.

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Don’t be tempted to bemoan “lowering the bar” or writing for the “least common denominator.” After all, when the bar is lowered, more people successfully vault over it. And writing for the “least common denominator” means communicating clearly with the widest range of people.

Dumbing down? Not at all. It’s smart communication.

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For more business writing tips, visit Lynn’s blog: <http://www.businesswritingblog.com>

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