



# Write for 1.4 Billion

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*Why write for 1.4 billion? With the Internet and the global reach of many organizations, the number of potential readers for our documents written in English is 1.4 billion!*

*That figure is made up of the estimated one billion people who speak and read English as a second, third, or fourth language, along with the 400 million for whom English is a first language.*

*This article focuses on writing effectively for 1.4 billion readers.*

By Lynn Gaertner-Johnston  
Founder, Syntax Training

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To write effective business documents, it's important to think about our reading audience. When our audience is one person or a small group, that task is not too difficult. But these days our instructions, requests, web pages, white papers, job descriptions, and other documents may be read by people around the world. The potential size of our audience, along with their varied language backgrounds, makes our job as writers much more of a challenge.

Even if your reading audience is limited to colleagues in your company, lab, or agency—or customers down the street—chances are good that some of them speak English as a second, third, or fourth language. To communicate effectively with them and with readers around the globe—follow these 10 suggestions.

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## 1. Use plain words.

Use plain words that are likely to be part of your reader's normal vocabulary. For example:

Use *discuss*—not *address*:  
We will discuss the problem today.

Use *result*—not *upshot*:  
The result was an increase in sales.

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## 2. Use words that have few alternate meanings.

Some common words have many meanings. For example, *The American Heritage College Dictionary* includes about 40 definitions for *right*. Consider:

The details are right.

She has spoken with the right people.

You have a right to complain.

It's important to right this wrong.

Avoid words like *right* when you can easily use a word with fewer meanings, as in “The details are *accurate*” or “She has spoken with the *appropriate* people.” The word *accurate* has just four dictionary definitions; *appropriate*, only three.

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## 3. Avoid words with opposite meanings.

Some words in English have opposite meanings depending on their context. Note these examples:

Is your *transparent* system invisible or plainly visible?

Is the *oversight* a close review or a failure to review?

When you *clip* an item, do you attach or detach it?

Other common opposite pairs include the verbs *weather*, *sanction*, *temper*, and *screen*.

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## 4. Use simple verb forms.

From your study of a foreign language, you know that present, past, and future tense verbs (*write*, *wrote*, *will write*) are essential to communication. Other tenses (*will have written*, *should have been writing*) are less common and more complex. You may not have mastered them despite years of study.

Help your readers of English as a second, third, or fourth language by using simple verb forms whenever possible. For example:

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Use “If you have questions”—not “Should you find you have questions.”

Use “Will you take a vacation?”—not “Will you be taking a vacation?”

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### 5. Use concise verbs rather than long phrases.

For readers anywhere, use concise, clear verbs—not wordy phrases. For instance:

Use “I received”—not “I was the recipient of.”

Use “Please invite”—not “Please extend an invitation to.”

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### 6. Avoid figurative expressions that may not translate accurately.

It can be a joy to use colorful language to paint a picture. But creative expressions may be confusing for people who speak English as a foreign language.

We ought to *pick the low-hanging fruit* first.

This assignment is a *walk in the park*.

Be sure to have *all your ducks in order*.

Although the expressions above may be included in foreign language dictionaries, they do not appear in *The American Heritage College Dictionary*. That means even native English speakers who are unfamiliar with those expressions will be in the dark. By the way, although “in the dark” does appear in current dictionaries, it may slow down readers.

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### 7. Avoid sports, military, and cultural terms that may be unfamiliar.

Like figurative expressions, when these terms are unfamiliar to readers, they don’t communicate well:

This will be his *third strike, and then he’s out*.

We need to work through the *chain of command*.

We spoke with the *usual suspects*.

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### 8. Spell out dates.

People around the world abbreviate dates differently. Therefore, it’s essential to spell out dates. For

example, write “July 2, 2006”—not “7/2/06,” which may be a date in February or July.

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### 9. Use simple but complete sentence structures.

In North American English, it’s common to leave out or abbreviate words that do not seem essential, as in “I know Mark’ll make it.” However, when the sentences are complete, they are understandable for all readers: “I know that Mark will attend.”

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### 10. Avoid abbreviations, acronyms, and nicknames.

Members of the same department often do not agree on the meaning of abbreviations and acronyms. For outsiders, especially those who are not native English speakers, the situation is much worse.

Do you recognize *WSA*? Many people do. The problem is that they recognize it differently. These are just a few of the possibilities:

- World Snowmobile Association
- Wine and Spirit Association
- Waist strap and attachment
- Workers’ Safety Advisor
- World Summit Award
- Winchester School of Art

Nicknames such as “Old Miss” (for the University of Mississippi) and “Mass Ave” (for Massachusetts Avenue in Boston) make some readers work too hard.

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Whether you write for one billion potential readers or one dozen, be aware of those who speak English as a second, third, or fourth language. Doing so will make your writing clearer for all your readers.

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