



Whadda Ya Mean?

Six Principles of Clear Writing

Sponsored by The Center for Teaching and Learning at UIS



- 1. USE SHORT, FAMILIAR WORDS.** Vocabulary is a tool—a means to an end. It is not an end in itself. Although a large vocabulary may be an asset, do not “show off” with it. Why use a large word when a small one does just as well?
- 2. KEEP MOST SENTENCES SHORT AND SIMPLE.** Your sentences should average less than 20 words. It is better to express a thought in several short sentences than in one long one. Do not worry about sounding choppy. Writers are much more aware of so-called choppy than readers are. Much worse than being choppy, is trying to pack too many ideas into one sentence.
- 3. USE ACTIVE VERBS; AVOID PASSIVES.** Nothing adds more dullness to writing than the passive voice. Write, “The fullback *hit* the line” rather than “The line *was hit* by the fullback.”
- 4. LISTEN TO YOUR EAR.** Write what you want to say the way you would explain it verbally in a more or less formal situation—minus the “uh’s,” “um’s,” halting and backing up, of course. Ask yourself, “Does any of it sound phony, stilted, or slangy?” If so, it probably is phony, stilted, or slangy. Try reading your writing aloud. You will be surprised how well it works in helping you find problem areas. Then ask yourself, “Does this sound like me?” The answer now should be, “Yes.”
- 5. GET PEOPLE INTO YOUR SENTENCES.** The impersonal style, so traditional in both school and the workplace, is hard to justify except that “it’s always been done that way.” Times are changing. “We decided” is usually better than “It was decided.” Your reports will be more accurate, more interesting, and easier to write.
- 6. KNOW YOUR SUBJECT BEFORE YOU START.** Vague statements are the result of not knowing what you are talking about. The best way to be a good writer is to know the subject you are writing about. However, you do not have to know *exactly* what you are going to say or *exactly* how you are going to say it before you begin; sometimes you will discover how you want to say something, and even generate a new idea or two, during the act of writing the first, exploratory draft. If you know your subject, your assurance and self-confidence will show through your writing. And do not try to tell everything you know about the subject; instead, say only what your reader needs to know or is interested in.