

Written Language Ergonomics: Exploring Expressive and Impressive ways of Communication

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Abstract: Sometimes writing impressively gratifies the writer, while writing expressively not only satisfies, but also benefits the reader. If so, writers who write to impress themselves had better keep their written work for their personal reading. How writers use language is critical, because it determines how meanings of their ideas are received, interpreted and acted upon (herein referred to as language ergonomics). This paper reviews literature from English language authorities on well—writing to express. It is about using a short, specific, concrete, common, and positive word; about using a strong verb and the active voice; about using a word that means what it is supposed to mean. That is all about effective writing as defined by eight Cs: Concise, saying what needs to be said using only the necessary words; Choice, using suitable words; Compelling, saying it in a way that makes the listener or reader pay attention; Compliant, obeying relevant language rules. It is also defined as Consistent, avoiding contradictions, i.e. being in agreement with what the experts say; Clear, using a simple and direct way so that listeners or readers understand it easily; Coherent, saying it in a logical and organised way; Concrete, trying to be as definite and as specific as possible. The researcher discovers through analysis that great writers use both adverbs and adjectives sparingly to avoid wastage. While adjectives overwhelm nouns, adverbs weaken verbs. Wordsmiths prefer strong verbs to modifiers, opt for concrete words as opposed to abstract ones, go in for a variety of sentences rather than only long-winded ones, and choose the active voice other than passive. If writers chose to follow these simple rules, communication objectives could be achieved.

Keywords: Language ergonomics, expressive writing, impressive writing.

INTRODUCTION

The story is told about a teacher of English sharing his classroom experience with a friend: “My preparation for my grammar lesson entails arming myself with a couple of elitist and high-sounding words. When I land in class, I immediately let go the first one. Before the students come to their senses, I hurl another one. If the third one doesn’t floor them, for sure the fourth will. While they are still in the state of hypnotism, I strut around the room, and my time is already up. I gather the tools of my trade and swagger out of the room with my head held high, for having done ‘my share in building the nation’, as Henry Balow says in his poem.” Now the teacher of English is a show-off, his aim is not to express himself but to impress. Had his aim been to express himself, then he would have cultivated the habit of always saying it simply. To say it simply is to write or speak in a natural, plain, straightforward, clear, and precise way. It is saying it in a way that is easy for the reader to grasp the meaning of the words used. Note that what makes the Bible one of the most sought after books is not its complexity—but its simplicity. In one instance, the Scriptures simply say, “Jesus Wept.”

The campaign to communicate in a simple way has been there for decades. According to Roger Ascham (1515-1568) [1], as recorded in Asprey [2], in the 4th Century BC Aristotle said:

He that will write well in any tongue must follow this counsel of Aristotle, to speak as common people do, to think as wise men do; so should every man understand him, and the judgement of wise men allow him.

Henry Watson Fowler and his younger brother Francis George Fowler in 1906 published *The King’s English*, the book that advised writers to write basically, directly and without misusing words. William Strunk Jr then came up with eight *Elementary Rules of Usage*, ten *Elementary Principles of Composition*, *A Few Matters of Form*, *49 Words and Expressions Commonly Misused*, and *57 Words often Misspelled*—all published in a single volume. In 1920 Harcourt published Strunk’s 52-page book about clean, accurate and concise use of English. Macmillan and Company commissioned Strunk’s 1919 student, E. B. White, to revise the book.

He expanded it and then published it as the 1959 edition.

Then in 1948, *Plain Words* emerged after the British Treasury asked Sir Ernest Gowers, a respected civil servant, to write a book to help improve the civil servants' use of English. In 1951 the writer followed the *Plain Words* with another volume titled *The ABC of Plain Words*. Come 1954, Sir Gowers put together the two books under one title *The Complete Plain Words*.

Other writers who have promoted simple language are American Bryan A. Garner and Australian Michele M. Asprey. In their writings the two lawyers have made a pitch for the use of clear and simple English. Take Garner, the Editor in Chief of the *Black's Law Dictionary*; in 2014 he published *The Winning Brief: 100 Tips for Persuasive Briefing in Trial and Appellate Courts*. The book argues strongly against legalese – a difficult language used by lawyers. It discourages the use of long sentences, *be*-verb, passive voice, Latin words, and so on. Asprey's book, titled *Plain Language for Lawyers*, now on its 4th edition, tackles the vocabulary of plain language, overused words, and explains what plain language is all about and why the law profession should embrace it.

Garner and Asprey have become some of the first lawyers to realise that, as Tom Goldstein puts it [3], "In law journals, in speeches, in classrooms and in courtrooms, lawyers and judges are beginning to worry about how often they have been misunderstood, and they are discovering that sometimes they cannot even understand each other."

Jonathan Swift is another staunch promoter of simple English. In 1726, Swift, the writer whom the Encyclopaedia of Britannica regards as the topmost satirist in English, criticize legalese as follows:

There is a Society of Men among us, bred up from their youth in the Art of proving by Words multiplied for the purpose, that White is Black and Black is White, according as they are paid. To this society all the rest of the people are slaves [4].

Most (if not all) alien words in the Legal Language are substitutable, even though some legal officials think they are irreplaceable. Consider words such as *force majeure* (unexpected conditions e.g. war), *amicus curiae* (a friend of the court), *adjournment sine die* (postponement without setting a date for another meeting), *ad infinitum* (without ending), *quid pro quo* (tit for tat), *ab initio* (from the start), *mutatis mutandis*

(with necessary alterations). Why then some lawyers prefer the gibberish to the familiar words defeats reasoning.

Some politicians in some parts of the world have also played a key role in the promotion of direct, clear and accurate language. Winston Churchill, the United Kingdom Prime Minister in 1940-1945 and 1951-1955, one time wrote to the Director of Military Intelligence, advising him to read Fowler's *Modern English Usage* on the use of two words, *intensive* and *intense*. The PM felt the Director had used the former instead of the latter.

In 1978 the then United States President, Jimmy Carter, instructed that regulations be simple and clear. Further, in 1979 he directed that government forms be concise and straightforward. To carry on from where Mr Carter had left, Bill Clinton directed heads of departments in his government to use plain language in a wide range of documents.

A Short and Familiar Word: The Best

The Economist began an essay with Winston Churchill's sentence, "Short words are best & old words when short are the best all." The British newsweekly then went on to add the following in the essay:

And, not for the first time, he [Churchill] was right: short words are best. Plain they may be, but that is their strength. They are clear, sharp & to the point. You can get your tongue round them. You can spell them . . . [5].

Mark Twain, in stressing the importance of a short word, says [6], "I never write 'metropolis' for seven cents because I can get the same price for 'city.' I never write 'policeman' because I can get the same money for 'cop'". So instead of long and multisyllabic words that hinder understanding, it is advisable to use words with as few syllables as possible because they promote understanding.

The long word should be used only when the writer wants to escape monotony or when the short word cannot convey the precise meaning. Otherwise, the long word is usually too heavy that it makes the writer seem pretentious. To approve of the use of the short word, Mark Twain [7], praises a natural and plain writer, "I notice that you use plain, simple language, short words and brief sentences. That is the way to write English – it is the modern way and the best way. Stick to it; don't let fluff and flowers and verbosity creep in."

In a sentence, short words increase momentum. If possible a writer should go for words such as the ones on the left column of the following table.

Use	Avoid
a 70-year-old	a septuagenarian
about	approximately
achieve	accomplish
afterwards	thereafter
allow	permit
almost	virtually
also/and	furthermore
also/and	moreover/additionally
ask	enquire
begin/start	commence
block	obstruct
buy	purchase
buy/get	acquire
cases	instances
chance	happenstance
condition	conditionality
copy	duplicate
dead	deceased
end	terminate
enough	sufficient
expect	anticipate
explain	elucidate
extra	additional
find out	ascertain
finish	finalise
force	compel
from now on	henceforth
give	furnish
have/own	possess
help	assist
helpful/useful	beneficial
hide	conceal
hire	engage
huge	enormous
in it	therein
keep	retain
live	reside
look at it again	review
main	principal
make	manufacture
make up	fabricate
many	numerous
meet	encounter
need	require
only	exclusively
outline	adumbrate
pay/salary	remuneration
payment	remittance
per year	per annum
postpone	procrastinate
precondition	prerequisite
put off/delay	defer
quickly/speed up	expedite

reduce/lessen	mitigate
repay	reimburse
seller	vendor
show	denote
show	demonstrate
show/tell	indicate
So/therefore	consequently
speed up	accelerate/expedite
spending	expenditure
Suitable	appropriate
sum up	recapitulate
tell	notify
try	endeavor
until now	hitherto
way	manner

Source: the Author of the paper

Efficient writers therefore are those who make information understandable to their various readers—not just understandable to the professor of English but also understandable to a school dropout. Richard Lederer, a language expert, says in his book, *The Miracle Language* [5]:

Small words cast their clear light on big things – night and day, war and peace, and life and death. Big words at times seem strange to the eye and the ear and the mind and the heart. Small words are the ones we seem to have known from the time we were born.... Here is a sound rule: Use small, old words where you can. If a long word says just what you want to say, do not fear to use it. But know that our tongue is rich in crisp, brisk, swift, short words. Make them the spine and heart of what you speak and write. Short words are like fast friends. They will not let you down.

The strong verb: also the best

Writers should also use strong verbs, for they add verve and create pictures in the reader's mind. Consider the following sentences:

- Unemployment has soared since the new president took over power.
- Rain pounded Kisumu City yesterday.
- Strong waves lashed the shores of Lake Victoria.
- She drove him too hard.
- The police officer grabbed him from behind and dragged him through the door into a waiting GK car.
- Floods swept through the streets of Nairobi yesterday evening.
- The campaigns of the big parties shook every corner of the country.
- *Weep not, child* catapulted Ngugi wa Thiong'o to international fame.
- The thugs frog-marched him out of his house and his whereabouts are still unknown.
- The news of Michael Jackson's death rocked the music world.

- The government crushed (instead of *stopped*) the opposition protests.
- He echoed (instead of *repeated*) Ali Mazrui's words.
- She lashed out at (instead of *attacked*) her critics.
- The county government demolished (instead of *brought down*) houses on road reserves.

So this is the point: Instead of saying, *James went to hospital quickly*, it is better to say, *James rushed to hospital*.

The Right Place for The Important Word

The right place for the most important words is at the end of a sentence. When people speak, they use the intonation to stress words; when they write, however, they arrange words to achieve emphasis. If one writes, for example, *What inspires me more than any other thing is your experience*, the emphasis is *your experience*. But if one writes, *Your experience inspires me more than any other thing*, the words *your experience* are less stressed. Examine following sentences as well:

- Because of your good work, the company has promoted you.
- The company has promoted you because of your good work.

Redundant Words

Successful writers weed out unnecessary words to keep their sentences tight. In the sentence *I'll be there in two hours' time*, the word *time* is redundant. Strunk and White [8] say:

A sentence should contain no unnecessary words, a paragraph no unnecessary sentences, for the same reason that a drawing should have no unnecessary lines and a machine no unnecessary parts. This requires not that the writer make all his sentences short, or that he avoid detail and treat his subjects only in outline, but that every word tell.

Use	Avoid
60 packets	a total of 60 packets
about	with respect to
about/regarding	in connection with
according	in accordance with
advocated	advocated for
and/also	what is more
at the end	upon the expiration
ATM	ATM machine
because	due to the fact that
before	prior to
blame	blame it on
call (e.g. she called)	telephone call
can	can be able
compared with	as compared with
comprise	comprise of
daily	on a daily basis
despite	in spite of the fact that
destroyed	completely destroyed
disaster	terrible disaster
end	tail end
every	each and every
first	first and foremost
hurry/rush	hurry up
if	in the event that
infant/child	infant child
last/lastly	last but not least
little girl	tiny little girl
meet	meet with
memo	internal memo
more than	in excess of
now	this particular point in time
now	this moment in time
outside	outside of
owing to/because	owing to the fact that
recoil	recoil back
refer	refer back
return	return back
revert	revert back
short time	Short space of time
since	ever since
sometimes	in some cases
take/example	take, for example
terms	terms and conditions
to	in order to
to	with a view to
when	as to when
where	as to where
whether	as to whether
whether	whether or not
why	as to why

Source: Author of the paper

A word that serves no purpose in a sentence diverts the reader's attention away from the important

words. "The ability to simplify means to eliminate the unnecessary so that the necessary may speak" says

Hans Hofmann [3]. John Ruskin [7] also says, “Say all you have to say in the fewest possible words, or your reader will be sure to skip them; and in the plainest possible words or he will certainly misunderstand them.”

Writers please their readers if they make their readers’ work of reading easy. For example, a sentence such as, *She will go there on foot*, should simply say, *She will walk there*. And instead of, *They are eating their dinner*, say, *They are dining*.

Word-Saving Techniques

Other techniques that can be used to save readers time and extra work

a) Converting relative clauses into participial phrases

Concise	Wordy
The new Constitution, promulgated in 2010, has a lot of flaws.	The new Constitution, which was promulgated in 2010, has a lot of flaws.
Mr Kenyatta, sworn in late last year as the President of Kenya, pledged to serve all Kenyans equally.	Mr Kenyatta, who was sworn in late last year as the President of Kenya, pledged to serve all Kenyans equally.
She said given another chance, she would lead a different life altogether.	She said that if she were to be given another chance, she would lead a different life altogether.
Only qualified people will be recruited.	Only people who are qualified will be recruited.
A woman dressed in red snatched the baby.	A woman who was dressed in red snatched the baby.

b) Converting subordinate clauses into prepositional phrases

Concise	Wordy
After resigning, she will be struck off the payroll.	After she resigns, she will be struck off the payroll.
With luck, she will get the job.	If she is lucky, she will get the job.
During the rainy season, farmers will plant maize and beans.	When the rains come, farmers will plant maize and beans.

c) Converting subordinate clauses into infinitive phrases

Concise	Wordy
Williamson works hard to pass his exams.	Williamson works hard so that he can pass his exams.
I have begun to jog every day to shed a few kilos.	I have begun to jog every day so that I can shed a few kilos.

Source: the author of the paper

Active and Passive Voice

Active sentences are more emphatic and vigorous than passive ones. Also, active sentences—rather than passive ones—are shorter, simpler, clearer, more direct, and easier to understand [6]. In active sentences the subject performs the action. For instance, in the sentence *The girl kicked the ball*, the verb *kicked*

is in active voice because the subject is doing the kicking of the ball. Likewise, in the sentence *The ball was kicked by the girl*, the person who was the subject earlier becomes the recipient of the action. Because *ball* is now the receiver of the *kick*, the verb *kick* therefore is in the passive voice.

Active Voice	Passive Voice
The government has decreed that all public service vehicles, commonly called <i>Matatus</i> , should not operate at night.	It has been decreed by the government that all public service vehicles, commonly called <i>Matatus</i> , should not operate at night.
In 1952 the Colonial government declared a state of emergency in Kenya.	In 1952 the state of emergency was declared by the colonial government in Kenya.
The Supreme Court of Kenya upheld the election of President Uhuru Kenyatta in 2013 and in 2017.	The election of President Uhuru Kenyatta was upheld by the Supreme Court of Kenya in 2013 and in 2017.
The Supreme Court has hereby issued a declaration that the presidential election held on 8 th August 2017 was not conducted in accordance with the Constitution and the applicable law, rendering the declared results invalid, null and void.	A declaration is hereby issued that the presidential election held on 8 th August 2017 was not conducted in accordance with the Constitution and the applicable law, rendering the declared results invalid, null and void. (The Supreme Court President and Chief Justice, David Maraga, 2017) [9]

Source: author of the paper

But sometimes certain situations may force a writer to use passive sentences:

- If the agent (doer of the action) is unimportant.
- If the agent is unknown.

- If a writer wants to keep the agent’s identity secret.
- If the focus of the sentence is on the patient (the recipient of the action of the verb).
- If the passive sentence sounds better than the active one.

Long and Short Sentences

Because variety is the spice of life, writers should compose both long and short sentences, with an average of 20 words. Silverman, Hughes, and Wienbroer [10] point out those short sentences simplify and dramatise a point. They are forceful and useful in creating suspense and rhythm. Short sentences, they add, convey meaning that is easily understood.

Main and Subordinate Idea

Competent writers subordinate ideas in their sentences, i.e. they make some ideas less important because ideally not every idea is important. For example, in the sentence *The student was playing football when he collapsed and died*, one idea is subordinated. When some ideas are subordinated, the reader’s work becomes easy.

In the following sentences, some ideas are subordinated:

- The Kenya National Transport and Safety Authority (NTSA), established through an Act of Parliament on 26th October 2012, has the mandate to minimise road accidents in the country.
- The Kenya National Transport and Safety Authority (NTSA), with the mandate to minimise road accidents across the country, was established through an Act of Parliament on 26th October 2012.

The writer is probably the only one who knows the important ideas to be packaged in the main clause, the less important ones to be put in a phrase or subordinate clause, and those that are equal in importance and should be expressed in two or more main clauses.

Reading Aloud

Mature writers cultivate a habit of reading their sentences aloud to check whether they are clear, simple, brief, accurate, complete, and so on. When they read them, they focus on the following areas:

- Coherence
- Logical Issues
- Punctuation
- Tense
- Whether words sound stilted
- Syntax

Too Many Prepositional Phrases

Experienced writers avoid too many prepositional phrases in a single sentence, especially phrases introduced by *of*, because such phrases drain readers’ energy. So writers avoid sentences such as, *The daughter of the governor of the county of Nairobi has lauded the people of Nyanza for conducting themselves in a mature manner during the past general elections.*

End Focus

Because not all the elements of a sentence are of equal importance, when accomplished writers want to stress an important element, they consider formulating a cleft sentence. This is a structure in which a simple sentence is split into two clauses to give prominence to a certain piece of information.

Ordinary sentence: On Tuesday the workers rejected the new CEO.

Focus on the workers: It was the workers who rejected the new CEO.

Focus on the day: It was on Tuesday that the workers rejected the new CEO.

Focus on the new CEO: It was the new CEO that the workers rejected on Tuesday.

Here is the point: Although the last sentence is grammatically correct, less important information *on Tuesday is* unnecessarily emphasised.

Ordinary sentence	Cleft sentence
Omari works harder than any other student in the school.	The student who works harder than any other person in the school is Omari.
I want another fruit because an apple a day keeps the doctor away.	All that I want is another fruit because an apple a day keeps the doctor away.
I badly need a new car.	What I badly need is a new car.
I do not like him, because he is lazy.	The reason I do not like him is that he is lazy.
You should finish the assignment before sunset.	The thing is that you should finish the assignment before sunset.

Source: the author of the paper

Say It Positively

Affirmative word is better than a negative one:

Positive	Negative
absent	not present
admit	not deny
consider	not ignore
deny	not admit
different	not similar
disengaged	not engaged
few	not many
forget	not remember
forgotten	not remember
ignore	not consider
include	not omit
incorrect	not correct
innocent	not guilty
many	not few
often	not rarely
omit	not deny
prevent	not allow
rarely	not often
remember	not forgotten
Similar	not different
well	not sick
wrong	not correct/right

Source: the author of the paper

Here is the point: But for the purpose of laying emphasis, a negative word should be used.

tables, cats, women and men, because abstract words make it hard for the reader to visualise.

Concrete and Specific

Concrete and specific words are better than abstract and general ones because they grab the reader's attention. In other words, sentences should contain tangible things and humans such as metals, dogs, chairs,

Converting Verbs Into Nouns

Nominalisation ('nouncing' verbs), i.e. forming nouns from verbs, should be avoided, because they complicate a sentence.

Concrete/specific	Abstract/General
mention what you did to show kindness	kindness
how tall?	tall
describe how he looks	cute guy
mention what you call problems	problems
votes were stolen	elections were rigged
voters were bribed	election malpractices
netball, football, volleyball, tennis	sports
short story, poetry, folk tales	Literature
governor, senator, MP	politician
chicken and chips, beef and rice	food
100km	very far
Sh100	little money
bananas, mangoes, oranges	fruits
NB Abstract and general words are dull, vague and confusing.	

Source: the author of the paper

EXAMPLE:-

Verb	Noun
complete	completion
implement	implementation
formulate	formulation
provide	provision
prioritise	prioritisation
consider	consideration

Source: the author of the paper

Use	Avoid
are swimming	are having a swim
are bathing	are taking a bath
shouted	gave a shout
arrange	make arrangements
propose	make a proposal
decide	make a decision
plan	make a plan
investigate	conduct investigations

Source: the author of the paper

Now consider the following sentences. The poor ones are awash with nominalisation (very many nouns preceding the verbs). In the poorly constructed sentences, a reader *wades* through too many nouns before reaching the verb.

- The causes of many African countries' development backwardness since the attainment of independence over 50 years ago has been largely ineptitude, corruption, tribalism and lack of foresight (**poor**).
- Ineptitude, corruption, tribalism and lack of foresight have been largely the causes of much African country's development backwardness since the attainment of independence over 50 years ago (**better**).
- Although he has full knowledge of the huge problems facing the common person in the country, he has not done much since taking over the reins of power about four years ago (**better**).
- My lack of experience in the management of funds denied me the project, which was given to our rivals (**poor**).
- Because I lacked experience in the management of funds, they gave the project to our rivals (**better**).

CONCLUSION

Writing is like making a piece of furniture, and the writer is akin to a carpenter. As the writer works with words to form sentences that convey meanings, the carpenter works with wood to produce tables, chairs, and the like. In carpentry there is this rule that states: *measure twice, cut once*. The rule means that if you can't measure, you can't manage. So carpenters have to measure the wood they work with once, twice or more before cutting it. Whereas the carpenter takes care to avoid wasting wood, the writer omits unnecessary

words to avoid wasting words. It is evident that language experts advise writers to write directly: to use simple language, i.e. the familiar word and not the far-fetched one, the concrete and not the abstract. And Williams [3] argues that:

We should discourage writers who love turgid language. A well-bred person speaks simply, in a way that is neither vulgar nor exaggerated. We should not measure our words, but speak them clearly and deliberately. After we rid our language of vulgarity, we should aim at simplicity, and then as we can, acquire the finer shades of accomplishment. No one can claim to be a man or woman of the world who exaggerates sentiments or deliberately speaks in language that is turgid or pedantic.

Writers should learn to wrap up their ideas in a suitable language before conveying them. This is because their efforts bear no fruit unless readers are able to encode those ideas to unearth meanings. If a writer forces his/her readers to keep flipping through the pages of dictionaries, searching for meanings of words, the readers are likely (however ardent they could be) to throw in the towel to look for something else to do. Seasoned writers affect their readers by expressing themselves in ways that are easily understandable.

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