

Ten Commandments

1.1. BE INTERESTING

1.1.1. **Angle: *Find your best hook, line, and bait***

There are no dull subjects. There are only dull writers.
—H.L. Mencken¹

1.1.1a. ***Begin with a bang, not a whimper.***

Your writing—whether it’s for school, a broker’s office, police department, law firm, sales force, op-ed page, professional conference, Women’s Online Bible Study, or a restroom stall—must compete for attention and credit with the work of other writers. Professional journalists know that they need to hook the reader’s interest in the first two sentences or their story will not be read. The same goes for you. If you do not have a good lead, only your mother, sweetheart, and best friends will follow you onto page two.

1.1.1b. ***Choose a subject that grabs you.***

If your teacher or boss or editor has assigned you a boring topic—“The Semicolon,” let’s say—and you are not a boring person, find a way to make the subject interesting not just for yourself but for your readers. If your task is to review a book or a show or a Hollywood film, read published reviews to see how it’s done. If it’s to be a research project, become an expert on your subject. If it’s an opinion paper, be persuasive. Don’t just stand there dribbling, take the ball and run with it. If nothing really interests you, then try writing about the benefits of a career in fast food or telemarketing.

1.1.1c. ***Find a title that will interest your intended readers.***

Subscribers to *Cosmo* are more likely to read an article on “Bedroom Gymnastics” than if the same piece were called “Family Circus.” Students of literature may take more interest in an essay called, “You base football player: Oswald and Defective Masculinity in Shakespeare’s *King Lear*,” than in a paper on “Shakespeare’s Sports Knowledge.” And your history teacher may form a better first impression of a classmate’s eight-page paper titled, “Making the A-List: Adultery among the Puritans” than of your own ten-page paper, which is labeled: “Midterm Essay.”

Before brainstorming for a title, consider your genre, your subject, your designated audience. The title for a work of fiction or for an op-ed piece should catch interest even if your reason for having chosen it

remains unclear until well into the narrative. The title for an academic essay (or, more succinctly, for a news story) may or may not be interesting, but it should always signal to your intended readers what the essay or article is about.

1.1.1d. ***“Fit audience find, though few”*** (*Paradise Lost*, 7.31).

Or, as John Milton might say if he were alive today, don’t just fling it—pitch it to someone who can catch. Milton knew that his writing could not be all things to all people, not even when writing a lofty Puritan epic in blank verse, or a prose defense of political assassination. What’s clear, direct, and compelling for one reader may be too elementary for a second, impossibly difficult for a third. Know for whom you are writing: to talk down to an informed audience can be as ineffective as talking over the heads of the uninitiated.

For each particular writing task, envision your ideal readers—local taxpayers, high school athletes, state legislators, Southern Baptists, Uncle Ralph, an impatient creditor, the NPR crowd—someone other than your English teacher. Find the best angle, the right level and tone, for those intended readers. Whom will your chosen subject concern? Who needs to consider what you intend to say? Who will be informed or persuaded or best entertained? Direct every remark to your imagined set of ideal readers, even if they are unlikely ever to read what you have written.

Are you addressing an audience of men and women? Then do not use *men* or *he* as if it meant everyone, including women. An essay on drunk driving addressed to emergency medical teams will have little in common with a paper on the same subject addressed to members of the Teamsters Union. Writing a classroom essay? Imagine yourself performing for other bright students in the course who would like to write as well as you can do. Whether addressing children or adults, follow the example of Jesus: if your audience is hungry, feed them. If grieving, console them. If ignorant, inform them. If skeptical, convince them. If hostile, outfox them. And when you need to make a point, make it through examples, figurative speech, and story-telling. Your opponents may nail you anyway, but at least you will not have deserved it.

1.1.1e. ***Exhibit some gusto.***

Having settled on a topic and an approach, let your voice be heard. Be assertive. Be bold. Be definite. Take a position. Make us give a damn. Writing, like courtship, is a performance art. Think of every writing assignment as a blind date with beautiful minds. Be prepared to show them a good time.

1.1.1f. ***It's not really about you.***

Take your eyes off your navel. Estimate how many people on the planet Earth are interested in your topic, and how many are interested in you as a person; adjust your focus accordingly. Most writers should be heard and not seen. Except in a diary, an autobiography, a résumé, or a letter to Mom, avoid making yourself the subject of your own writing. Use “I,” “me,” and “my” as needed, but don't overdo it: your readers, after all, may not share your conviction that you are a uniquely interesting specimen of the human race:

- *This may sound a little West Texas to you, but I like it when I'm talking about—when I'm talking about myself, and when he's talking about myself, all of us are talking about me.* (President George W. Bush.)²

It may be great fun to talk and write about yourself but unless you are a celebrity, the audience for whom you are writing will be more interested in the performance than in the performer.

Don't tell us the fascinating story of how you settled on a topic (“As I was reading *Clarissa*, feeling rather bored with the slow pace of the action, it occurred to me that Mr. Lovelace's big sword is a phallic symbol...”).

Your topic may be earthshaking or even catastrophic but that is no reason to interject your feelings about it:

- U.S. Vice President Dan Quayle, on a California quake that killed sixty-two people: *I could not help but be impressed by the magnitude of the earthquake.*³
- President George W. Bush, on his response to seeing a hijacked commercial jet crash into the World Trade Center: *I saw an airplane hit the tower—the TV was obviously on, and I used to fly myself, and I said, “There's one terrible pilot.”*⁴

Address the problem at hand in a fresh way without pausing to narrate your own mental activity.

When applying for a job or for college admission, be matter-of-fact in presenting your particular skills, experience, and intellectual interests, without dwelling on your sorrows, anxieties, hopes for the future, and shoe size. Write from your own experience, but let the reader take interest in your writing, not in your subjectivity. Show us something we haven't seen before—new information, a fresh insight, a surprising truth—but don't show us the inner workings of your mind.

1.1.1g. ***If you want to write well, be well read.***

Read widely. Read attentively. Read thoughtfully. On a few special topics, read deeply. If you read nothing but online chat, or technical manuals, or your own diary, or biology textbooks, or Shakespeare, don't feel injured when no one wants to talk to you at a party, much less read something you have written. Flowers don't grow well in rocky ground. Nor do they grow well in over-fertilized peat moss. To bear good fruit, the human brain requires some cultivation.

1.1.2. **Tone: *Stay on pitch.***

*I will roar, that I will do any man's heart good to hear me. I
will roar, that I will make the Duke say, "Let him roar again!
Let him roar again!"* —Bottom the Weaver ⁵

1.1.2a. ***Be confident.***

A common fault of insecure writers and bad speakers is the introductory disclaimer. When a presidential candidate begins his talk with the caveat, "I don't feel like I've got all that much too important to say on the kind of big national issues," why listen to him? ⁶ So, too, for essay writing. Humility is a virtue. Ignorance is not. Don't undermine your own authority or discard your right to be heard. Never tell us that you have no clue what you're talking about. Let us make that discovery for ourselves. Strike out such remarks as "I may be wrong, but—" Speak and write as an authority. If you do not know the answers, find them. If the answers escape you, ask different questions.

You can be assertive and yet avoid sounding like a know-it-all by stating the facts plainly, without gloating, without puffing, without belittling your adversaries, and without roaring. Note where your opinions or conclusions differ from those of other writers and public speakers, but do not abuse those who addressed the same subject before you came along. Your readers will give you more credit for having surpassed the great thinkers who preceded you than for having exposed the mistakes of a fool.

Rarely is there a need to write, "I think," or "I believe," or "In my opinion," or "It seems to me that..." Unless you are a notorious liar, or a well-known nincompoop, we will take it for granted that your writing represents what you think.

1.1.2b. ***Don't lecture.***

If the force of your narrative, argument, and examples cannot persuade your readers of the truth, or move us to act, then preaching at us will not help. If you want to sound like a tour guide or a pedant,

write sentences that begin, “Compare,” “Consider,” “Keep in mind,” “Look at,” “Note that,” “Remember that,” or “Take.” Otherwise, don’t.

1.1.2c. ***Don’t be pretentious.***

When tempted to pluck fancy words from a thesaurus, such as *quotidian* or *praetertranssubstantiationally*, first go take a cold shower. Then dry off and use the words we already know. Go easy also on the conjunctive adverbs (such gluey words as *consequently*, *however*, *nonetheless*, *otherwise*, *therefore*). *Thus* is rarely necessary. *Thusly* is comical. Simple words, short sentences, active verbs, and a plain style will hold your reader’s interest. Textbook prose will not.

Some professional scholars and many ambitious students write over-long sentences glutted with abstract nouns, inflated with pretentious diction, and no active verbs. Their idea of good writing resembles the Christian’s idea of Heaven: inaccessible except to the chosen few; it goes on forever; and nothing happens.

1.1.2d. ***Decode the technobabble.***

Many technical writers and scientists are addicted to irregular noun clusters, producing such leaden waste as *army lab scientists’ biosafety cabinet procedures manual*, or *all-wheel drive sport utility vehicle*, or an *IBM mainframe computer database users group newsletter*. If it is your job to tell consumers that “Hexnuts and lockwashers (fig. 3) must secure top frame angle bracket to wing sprocket flange grommet,” first learn some English verbs. Such prose is the stylistic equivalent of chronic constipation. Verbs are the fiber that will get your ideas (or your technical instructions) moving again, no matter what your assigned topic may be.

1.1.2e. ***Don’t be glib.***

Even in papers or talks that are witty or amusing, your seriousness of purpose should be evident.

1.1.2f. ***Don’t be quaint.***

When you feel inclined for cuteness’ sake to use such archaic words as *lo and behold*, *doth*, *hath*, *quoth*, *saith*, *thou*, *verily*, and *wherefore*, resist the temptation. Shakespeare, who was born in 1564, can be forgiven for writing like an Elizabethan. You have no excuse.

1.1.2g. ***Avoid cuteness.***

Unless you have a deft wit and good occasion to use it, don’t be jokey. “Surprise, surprise” is more irritating than funny. “Ho, ho,” is fine for Santa Claus because Santa is not a writer. Don’t say “no pun intended” if your pun was intended. Better yet, don’t say it at all.

Judicious punning can be a mark of fine writing but not when you draw attention to the ambiguity.

1.1.2h. **Avoid sentimentality.**

“The tiny cancer victim raised her precious little hand to wave goodbye, just as a lone sparrow took wing over the treetops” (student novelist). “Every once in a while, you let a word or phrase out, and you want to catch it, and bring it back. You can’t do that. It’s gone—gone forever!” (Vice President Dan Quayle).⁷ “It’s rural America. It’s where I came from. We always refer to ourselves as real America. *Rural* America, *real* America. Real, real, *America*” (Dan Quayle, again).⁸ Do not hint at sentimental solutions for problems of international conflict, economic crisis, or realpolitik: “I couldn’t imagine somebody like Osama bin Laden understanding the joy of Hanukkah” (President George W. Bush).⁹ Make us feel sad if you must, or warm and fuzzy inside, but hold the slop, we’re not really that hungry.

1.1.2i. **Take responsibility for your own conclusions.**

Avoid heaping up quotations from other writers who think as you do. Let the force of your argument, the value of your information, and the liveliness of your own prose carry the day.

1.1.3. **Variety: Get out of the rut.**

*Not chaos-like together crush’d and bruis’d,
But, as the world, harmoniously confused:
Where order in variety we see,
And where, tho’ all things differ, all agree.*

—Alexander Pope¹⁰

1.1.3a. **No drumbeat repetition.**

Repetitious vocabulary and repeated phrases will cause your audience to tune you out, even if you are the President of the United States:

This is a world that is much more uncertain than the past. In the past, we were certain. We were certain it was us versus the Russians, in the past. We were certain, and therefore we had to keep the peace. That’s what we were certain of. [...] You see, even though it’s an uncertain world, we’re certain of some things. We’re certain that even though the evil empire may have passed, evil still remains. We’re certain there are people that can’t stand what America stands for. [...] We’re certain there are madmen in this world, and there’s terror, and there’s missiles. And I’m certain of this, too: I’m certain, to maintain the peace, we better have a military of high morale—and I’m certain that under this administration, morale in the military is dangerously low.

—President George W. Bush¹¹

Every writer has pet words that he or she uses repeatedly. Watch out for your pets, taking care not to kick them senseless. No one, of course, can write without repeating common function words, such as pronouns (*him, its, she, who*, etc.), prepositions (*for, from, in, on, to*), and conjunctions (*and, but, or*). It is actually better to repeat *and* and *but* than to clog your prose with *moreovers* and *howevers*, and better to repeat *he said* or *she said* than to write “he retorted,” “he opined,” “he commented.” But it is good to avoid unneeded repetition of any word or phrase. First do your cuts and phrase-tightening. Then find accurate but simple substitutes for the repeated terms. *Novel, narrative, story*, and *text* may be useful synonyms for *book*, but *tome* is pretentious. When writing a business report, *staff, workers*, and *personnel* may sub for *employees*, but *breadwinners* is trite, and *workmen*, sexist.

1.1.3b. **Vary your sentence structure.**

Vary the beginnings of your sentences and paragraphs. Vary their length. Vary their structure. Chant, sing, or shout, dance or march, but do it gracefully. A procession of clunky sentences having mechanical symmetry soon cloys. If every sentence has a dozen words and every paragraph five sentences, or if half of your thoughts begin with the same dreary formula, you are being tiresome.

Here are four drab ways to begin an English sentence:

- *There is/are/was/were/will be ...* (“There is a problem with...” “There are many characters who...” “There will be funding for...”)
- *This is/was/has been/will be ...* (“This is a story about...” “This has been a good season for...” “This will be the second time that...”)
- *It is/was/has been/seems ...* (“It is interesting that...” “It is important to note that...” “It has been said that...” “It seems like only yesterday that...”)
- *One of the ...* (“One of the most serious problems is that...” “One of the most memorable experiences I ever had was...” “One of the best examples I can think of is...”)

If you like, choose one of these models to begin a novel (“It was the best of times, it was the worst of times...”), or a poem (“There is a Yew Tree, pride of Lorton Vale,...”), or a joke (“There was this blind dwarf who...”)—but do not heap them in the same paragraph. One too many slices of processed cheese can wreck a perfectly good burger.

Notes to the extract

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¹ H. L. Mencken, attrib. Unverified.

² George W. Bush, *Hardball*, MSNBC (31 May 2000).

³ J. Danforth (“Dan”) Quayle, Alameda Naval Air Station, speaking of the Lomo Prieta earthquake (18 Oct. 1989), qtd. *Washington Post* (14 Jan. 1990).

⁴ George W. Bush, Orlando, FL, *FDCH Political Transcripts* (4 Dec. 2001).

⁵ William Shakespeare, *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* 1.2.70-3, *Riverside Shakespeare* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2d ed., 1997); except as noted, all Shakespeare citations are to this edition.

⁶ George W. Bush, *20/20*, ABC News (15 Sep. 2000).

⁷ Dan Quayle (4 May 1989), qtd. *Esquire* (Aug. 1992): 119.

⁸ Dan Quayle (20 Oct. 1988), qtd. *Esquire* (Aug. 1992): 124.

⁹ George W. Bush, at a White House Menorah lighting ceremony, Washington, D.C., *FDCH Political Transcripts* (10 Dec. 2001).

¹⁰ Alexander Pope, “*Windsor Forest*,” *Works* (1736), 1.13.

¹¹ George W. Bush, Albuquerque, N.M. (31 May 2000), qtd. *The Guardian* (London) (4 Nov. 2000).

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