

How You Write Is as Important as What You Say: A Guide to Trauma-Informed Writing*

“How you are is as important as what you do,” is a quote from Jeree Pawl that we at NCDVTMH sometimes use in our training on trauma-informed practices. Many of those who we train are engaged in a number of activities related to providing social services, including developing resources for the folks they work with. In this context, we might say, “How you write is as important as what you say.”

This guide is intended for writers of resource materials, such as tipsheets, handouts, brochures, and other materials that provide information for people to use in their work and lives. It includes tips for writing clearly and concisely, as well as tips on accessibility and using plain language. It includes suggestions on trauma-informed and emotionally accessible language, as well as tips on inclusive and non-objectifying language. In other words, this resource is intended to guide the writer in thinking about how we can embody in our writing what we are trying to create in the world. At the end, you will also find a few tips on grammar and punctuation, addressing issues that come up frequently for writers of resource materials.

1. Clear & Concise Writing

We may have many goals in writing, including being understood by our audience and writing something that will resonate with our audience. Writing clearly and concisely can help our readers to easily understand our ideas, while sometimes we may decide to include language that is less concise but more meaningful for our audience. This section will address the former goal: writing more concisely.

It is no small task to translate complex ideas into simple sentences. There is a saying that is attributed to multiple authors: “If I had more time, I would have written you a shorter letter.” In other words, expressing

Writing Tip #1: Train-of-Thought Passages

Sometimes writing about something clarifies our thinking about it. As a result, we might start writing about something in one way and by the end of our passage, we’ve shifted our conclusions or ways of thinking. In creative writing, that might be okay because the narrator is part of the story and the reader is interested in their evolution as a character. But in writing that is meant to inform or provide resources, this way of organizing information can be confusing to a reader. Be sure to reread and, if needed, rewrite paragraphs and sections so that your ideas are clearly organized from the very beginning.

* Written by Rachel White-Domain, JD. Many of these ideas and suggestions have been developed from numerous discussions about language that I’ve had over the years with NCDVTMH staff; in particular, many insights in suggestions included here I learned from or with Jen Curley.

ideas clearly and concisely is labor-intensive work. But it is often worth the investment. If you are doubtful that the extra time will pay off, think about the number of emails you didn't read or didn't respond to because they were too long or because it wasn't clear what the sender wanted. Our audience includes people who are experiencing stress in their work places and personal lives. Thus, our reader's ability to process lengthy or complex writing might be impacted by feeling too busy or overwhelmed, experiencing the traumatic effects of abuse, or feeling anxious due to urgent needs or dangers.

Thus, taking the time to make your writing clear and concise will increase the likelihood that others will read and understand what you have written. For all writers, this requires rereading and revising everything you write. As you reread, the following questions might help you notice and clear up confusing passages.

Questions to Ask Yourself as You Revise for More Clear & Concise Writing:

1. Do the main ideas "jump off the page" or are they buried in the document?
2. Does each sentence say exactly what I mean to say? What if someone asked, "What does that sentence really mean?" Would I be able to explain it more clearly?
3. Are most sentences short and easy to understand?
4. Is there "fluff" that doesn't add either information or meaning? Would any areas benefit from "pruning" to remove words, phrases, or sentences that don't add to what's already there?
5. Does the writing progress forward throughout or does it "stall" in places? In other words, does it move from one idea to the next or does it say the same thing over and over again, in slightly different ways?

2. Plain Language & Accessibility

The use of dense prose, professional and technical language, and obscure words can often exclude people who are not familiar with that language from accessing information and participating in conversations. While sometimes using this kind of language may serve your goals in writing, it can often be avoided in the interest of making the information and ideas in the document more accessible.

- 1. Use sentences that are short, clear, and specific.** While alternating the length and structure of your sentences is a good way to make your writing more enjoyable to read, having too many long, complex sentences slows down the reader and makes a passage difficult to read. APA Publication Manual, Rule 3.08. Your goal as a writer is for each sentence to clearly say exactly what you mean to say, and nothing more. Often these things—conciseness, clarity, and specificity—go hand-in-hand. When we first start writing something, we may use long and run-on sentences because we are trying to figure out what we want to say. If when you review your work, you notice

that a sentence or passage is long and convoluted, try asking yourself, “What was I trying to say there?” Your answer to yourself is often a better version of what you originally wrote.

2. In most cases, avoid jargon, obscure words, and clinical or technical terms.

This is especially true if you are creating materials meant for multiple audiences. If you think it’s important to introduce clinical or technical terms, be sure to clearly define the terms so that your reader can “come with you” rather than being left behind. If you find yourself wanting to use a word that many people will not know, ask yourself whether you want to introduce the word to your reader (with an explanation), or if the word itself is not significant and a simpler word or phrase would work better.

3. Think about how the text looks on the page. The way that text appears on a page affects the readability and accessibility of your writing. Using a font and size that is accessible to most people is important. This means using a relatively large size both in the main text and the footnotes of your document. It also means avoiding Serif fonts (fonts with curls or strokes at the end of letters), such as the popular Times New Roman, especially if your materials may be read online.[†] Arial and Verdana are good alternatives. In addition, many of us are visual learners. Use of images, as well as vertical lists, text boxes, and headings, can make the text more visually accessible and easier to understand and remember. Finally, thoughtful use of white space on the page makes reading easier on the eyes.

Writing Tip #2: Guiding Your Reader

We often do many things within a single passage of writing: we may introduce new ideas, say something and then make a caveat to it, tell stories or lay out sequences of events, explain relationships between ideas, criticize and analyze ideas, or try to provide the reader with a new way of looking at something.

Thus, the way that ideas are *linked* together in writing is critical. When we express these links clearly, we allow our reader to quickly follow us through our writing. We can provide links or cues by using headings, topic sentences, transitional words, and punctuation. Transitional words include the following (from the APA Publication Manual, Rule 3.06):

- *Time links:* then, next, after, while, since
- *Cause-effect links:* therefore, consequently, as a result
- *Addition links:* in addition, moreover, furthermore, similarly
- *Contrast links:* but, conversely, nevertheless, however, although

[†] For more information on visually accessible text, see <http://www.abilitynet.org.uk/quality/documents/StandardofAccessibility.pdf>.

3. Trauma-Informed & Emotionally Accessible Language

As writers, we have a responsibility to attend to the emotional impact of our language and our writing. This includes taking a trauma-informed approach to language, as well as avoiding aggressive and objectifying language.

1. Be careful about including descriptions of abuse and violence. Violence is pervasive in our society, and regardless of your intended audience, many of your readers will undoubtedly have experienced violence in their lives. Descriptions of abuse and violence can be triggering for someone who has experienced violence, meaning that they bring up uncomfortable or frightening feelings or memories from the past. These feelings can come up for any of us, regardless of past experiences. But writing about abuse and violence is sometimes necessary. In fact, sometimes the main purpose of our writing is to describe abusive or violent tactics (e.g., as part of domestic violence awareness-raising materials). Sometimes, it is important to include as much detail as possible about an abusive or violent event or dynamic.

When you notice a description of abuse or violence in your writing, the following questions might be helpful:

- Is it important to include this description of abuse or violence?
- If so, is it important to describe it in this much detail?
- Is it possible and helpful to provide a warning to the reader prior to the description?
- If I include descriptions of abuse and violence in the document, can I be thoughtful about how I share it with others? For example, if I am attaching the document to an email or posting it to a website, can I include a warning that will be visible prior to accessing the document?

2. Avoid unnecessarily violent language. Violence is also pervasive in the English language. Often our verbs convey violence in contexts that do not require it, such as using, “taking a stab at it,” to mean that we will give something a try. While descriptions of abuse and violence are sometimes important to what we are trying to accomplish in our writing (for example, in expressive writing), the use of violent language is rarely necessary or helpful in resource materials that are intended to inform or educate.

3. Avoid objectifying language. Abuse, violence, and oppression require the objectification and dehumanization of a person or group. Objectification reflects an assumption that a person or group doesn’t have the ability or the right to make their own decisions—instead (according to this assumption), they must be acted upon. Thus, this assumptions leads to many false beliefs—sometimes spoken and sometimes unspoken—that a person or group needs to be spoken for, made to follow rules, governed, punished, “civilized,” or controlled. Objectifying language can bring

up feelings of past experiences of abuse, marginalization, and oppression. Therefore, in addition to being an important goal in and of itself, using non-objectifying language is a necessary part of trauma-informed writing. Non-objectifying language is explored in more detail in the next section.

- 4. Avoid judgmental language.** How we describe someone's choices and actions often reflects our judgment of them as a person. Your writing should convey respect for people's decisions as well as an awareness of the possibility that trauma might have impacted those decisions, particularly with regard to their interactions with social service systems. For example, when we say that someone "refused to seek assistance" or even that they "neglected to seek assistance," we are not simply saying that they "did not seek assistance." On the contrary, the first two examples may reflect our negative assumptions and judgments about that person. It can take time to recognize the assumptions that are reflected in our writing.
- 5. Be thoughtful about command statements.** Command statements are often very useful, but it's important to consider how and when we use them. In particular, suggestions about what someone should do with their body or in their own personal lives should rarely if ever take a command form. Such statements may not only remind someone of past abuse but can also be disrespectful in and of themselves. Thus, for example, "Keep both feet on the floor while doing this breathing exercise," can be written, "If it's more comfortable, you can keep both feet on the floor while doing this breathing exercise."

4. Inclusive & Non-Objectifying Language

Inclusive language is language that is reflective of diverse experiences, such that many different folks can "see themselves" in the writing.[‡] Non-objectifying language is language that does not treat people as mere objects of study. Non-objectifying language does not define people solely by one of their experiences or characteristics. Furthermore, it reflects a belief that people have the ability and the right to figure out their own lives.

Learning how to make our language more inclusive and non-objectifying is an ongoing process. This process cannot be undertaken by itself but rather must be part of a broader effort to embody the principles that we want to see in the world. The points listed below are only a few

Writing Tip #3: Put Yourself in Their Shoes

One quick tip to help avoid objectifying language is to put yourself in the shoes of the person or group that you are writing to or writing about. Reading the document with this lens, would you feel respected as a person with the right and ability to make their own decisions? Would you feel that you are being represented as a whole person, i.e., not reduced to one experience or characteristic?

[‡] This helpful language is from Jen Curley of NCDVTMH.

examples of concrete things that are part of inclusive and non-objectifying writing.

- 1. Ask, "Who can see themselves in your writing?"** Ask yourself who might look at what you wrote and say, "This doesn't include me," or, "This wouldn't work for me." Is there a way to be inclusive of more diverse experiences in both your language and what you are trying to communicate? In some cases, you may realize that what you've written is very helpful for some readers but simply not as helpful for others. In any event, try to avoid "window dressing," meaning changing just a few words while avoiding larger problems with who is left out of your writing.
- 2. Use person-first language.** Person-first language reflects the fact that a person is not defined by one aspect of themselves or their experience, such as a disability. Person-first language is especially important when referring to someone who belongs to a community that, because of the way oppression is operating toward them, is often defined by one aspect of their experience. Thus, for example, the person-first language, "a person with a disability," centers the person, while "disabled person," defines the person by their disability.
- 3. Use gender-inclusive language.** Using gender-inclusive language allows many people to see themselves in our writing. It also demonstrates our recognition of everyone's right to gender self-determination. For example, writing with gender-inclusive language can include using the pronoun "they" in place of "she/her" and "he/his" or using a number of different pronouns. Simply switching back and forth between feminine and masculine pronouns, as recommended by some style guides, is an inadequate way of addressing the need for gender-inclusive language, as it does not reflect the full range of gender identity and expression.
- 4. Don't generalize.** When we write about things like the harms that result from poverty, violence, and oppression, we must be careful not to overgeneralize. Things that we know are true for some of us, some of the time, are not necessarily true for all of us, all of the time—but it's easy to make this mistake in our writing. For example, saying that "survivors of abuse use alcohol to cope with the traumatic effects of abuse," makes a generalization. However, it is true that "many survivors use alcohol to cope" and that "survivors may use alcohol to cope." Your writing should reflect an awareness of this distinction.
- 5. Be cautious about euphemisms.** Euphemisms include things like "touched" for someone with a disability and also things like "monetarily felt scarcity" for "poverty" (APA, Rule 3.09). Euphemisms are often intended to be patronizing. Others may be patronizing because they obscure the intended meaning of the word or phrase to readers who are not "in the know." Some euphemisms also intentionally minimize violence or harm, such as the euphemism given above to describe poverty or the euphemism "collateral damage" for "civilian deaths." Sometimes we use euphemisms to avoid saying things that we are worried might be too harsh or to avoid using violent language. We must balance the need to care for our reader's ability to

emotionally access the materials and the need to avoid a patronizing approach that imagines our readers as fragile and in need of our protection from what we are really trying to say.

6. **Avoid pathologizing.** In Western cultures, illness is historically associated with some inadequacy or fault of the person who is sick. Pathologizing someone means implying that someone's experience is not only like a "sickness" but also that they are to blame. For example, survivors of domestic violence have sometimes been pathologized as masochistic, meaning that they wanted to be abused or that they sought out this treatment. Of course, this is false and hurtful.
7. **Be humble.** Whether we are writing directly to folks with some suggestions for them (for example, a tip sheet for people involved in court proceedings) or writing with suggestions for some folks on how to work with other folks (for example, a tip sheet for advocates on how to work with pro se clients), we must be humble about our expertise. Your writing should rarely adopt a stance that presumes to have "the solution" for what someone should do in their personal lives. Instead, consider only offering information and suggestions.

5. Grammar & Punctuation 101

You don't have to learn every comma rule in the book to be a good writer. But being attentive to how you use grammar and punctuation can help you communicate more effectively. This section offers a selected sample of tips on issues that come up frequently in writing resource materials. These rules are from the APA Publication Manual, Sixth Edition, and the Chicago Manual of Style, 16th Edition.

A sentence is a puzzle and each word or phrase is a puzzle piece. Do the linked items fit together?

1. **Things you CAN do!** What? I thought grammar rules were supposed to tell you what you can't do! This section dispels a couple of myths that can get in the way of clear, effective writing.
 - **You can start a sentence with a conjunction.** The Chicago Manual refers to the myth that you can't start a sentence with "and" and "but" as a belief that has "no historical or grammatical foundation." It continues, "In fact, a substantial percentage (often as many as 10 percent) of the sentences in first-rate writing begin with conjunctions." Rule 5.206.
 - **And you can end a sentence with a preposition.** The Chicago Manual similarly refers to the rule against ending a sentence with a preposition (such as for, to, from) as a "superstition." Rule 5.176.

2. Parallel structure! The break down of parallel structure is a common problem in complex sentences. To avoid such problems, it might help to visualize your sentence like a puzzle. Identify the words or phrase that is serving as the central connector for other words or phrases. Consider, for example, the following sentence: "She was well known as a first-rate teacher, an accomplished writer, and a pioneer in her field." In this sentence, the phrase, "She was well known as," is working as a connector. Each of the puzzle pieces that follow must be able to link with the connector. This requires them to be alike, in other words, to be parallel. "When linked items are not like items...the sentence breaks down." Chicago Manual, Rule 5.212.

She was well known as a first-rate teacher, an accomplished writer, and a pioneer in her field.

~~*She was well known as a first-rate teacher, an accomplished writer, and became a pioneer in her field.*~~

The second sentence is not correct because the third item does not link with the connector. It reads, "She was well known as became a pioneer in the field." Yuck! While this problem is easy to see in this short example, it is a problem that is often missed in more complex sentences.

3. Headings! You need not strictly follow the APA requirements for headings in all of your writing, as these are intended for preparing a manuscript for publication. However, here are a few thoughts about headings:

- **Use them!** Headings are helpful to readers, especially in long documents. They make it easier to see how the document is organized.
- **Clearly indicate headings versus sub-headings.** You don't have to use numbers and letters to distinguish between headings and sub-heading, but you should clarify the distinctions between headings in some way. Especially for shorter documents or documents with less headings, you might be able to use font style, capitalization, underlining, or color to show distinctions between headings.
- **No sub-heading stands alone!** Every level should have at least two headings or sub-headings. Thus, in this example, the material in Section I, Part A, should simply be incorporated into Section I.

Section II - Finding the Right Coffee Place

~~Part A – The only really important thing here is that the place has good coffee.~~

Section II - Finding the Right Take-Out Restaurant

Part A - Fast delivery is important.

Part B – Delicious food is also really important.

4. Numbered and Bulleted Lists! Lists are great tools, but lists can also create confusion. Here are some things to remember when using lists:

- **Use lists to emphasis information.** Lists command attention! When you use a list, you draw the reader's eye to the items on the list. Make lists when you want to draw attention, not just because you have a lot of similar items. When the most important thing you want to say is buried in a paragraph and you have lists of less important things, the main point of your writing will be overshadowed.
- **All items in a list should be parallel.** Chicago Manual, Rule 6.121; see APA, Rule 3.04. For example:

~~This tip sheet provides information on (a) using language that is accessible, (b) trauma-informed language, and (c) use of language that is inclusive.~~

This tip sheet provides information on using language that is (a) accessible, (b) trauma informed, and (c) inclusive.

- **How you punctuate a list depends on how you introduce the list.**

(1) You can introduce a list using a complete grammatical sentence, followed by a colon. Then, each item in the list can consist of one or more sentences, punctuated as complete sentences. Or each item in the list can consist of a word or phrase that does not constitute a complete sentence—and are therefore not punctuated. Thus, both of the following examples are correct:

According to our extensive research, there are many reasons why dogs are great:

- Dogs are loyal no matter what.
- Dogs are gentle unless they've been mistreated.
- Dogs are smart.

According to our extensive research, dogs have some very impressive traits:

- loyalty
- gentleness
- intelligence

(2) You can also break into a vertical list in the middle of a sentence. In this case, there is no colon and your whole list maintains the same punctuation that it would if it were not in a list.

In accordance with this research, dogs

- are loyal no matter what,
- are gentle unless they've been mistreated, and
- are very smart.

Don't just throw a colon in there though. You can't use a colon unless the words preceding it could stand alone as a complete sentence. In other words, you can't use a colon unless you *could* use a period.

~~In accordance with this theory, dogs:~~

- ~~○ are loyal no matter what,~~

- ~~○ are gentle unless they've been mistreated, and~~
- ~~○ are often very smart.~~

~~Dogs have some very impressive traits, including:~~

- ~~○ loyalty~~
- ~~○ gentleness~~
- intelligence

5. Comma love! Learning how to use commas can help you better understand sentence structure overall. This is because where we place commas in a sentence reflects our understanding of different kinds of phrases in our sentences and the ways that they fit together. Thus, learning how to use commas can increase the overall quality of our sentences.

- **Two independent clauses joined with conjunctions = comma.** Independent clauses are just clauses that could actually be complete sentences. They each have their own subject. Use a comma to separate independent clauses. If the entire sentence is very short, it is optional to omit the comma.

We are committed to peace, and we work to end violence.

She went to the park, but they stayed home to work.

- **Two or more verbs with the same subject = no comma.** In this case, two verbs share the same subject. In contrast to sentences with two independent phrases, no comma is used.

We want to go to the park and ride on the swings.

I planted the flowers and imagined them in bloom.

- **Dependent clause before the main clause = comma.**

If you make us dinner, I will do the laundry.

When she arrived, she quickly went to work.

- **Dependent clause after the main clause = no comma.** Many writers just use commas whenever they pause, which often results in the overuse of commas. If you are one of those writers, this rule is for you! In most cases, when a dependent clause follows a main clause, no comma is used.

I will do the laundry if you make us dinner.

He arrived late because he lost track of time.

- However, a comma can be used if the dependent clause is “merely supplementary or parenthetical.” When is that? Whenever you as the writer *intend* that information to be supplementary or parenthetical. The following sentences can be correct:

I'd like the tom yum, if you don't mind.

At last she arrived, when the food was cold.

- **Restrictive versus nonrestrictive clause (Chicago Manual, Rule 6.22):**

Restrictive clauses provide information that is essential to the sentence as it is constructed. Typically, “that” or “who/whom/whose” is used to introduce restrictive clauses, but the word “that” can occasionally be omitted. Restrictive clauses should never be set off with commas.

I went to the show that opened this weekend.

~~*I went to the show, that opened this weekend.*~~

How do we know that this sentence contains a restrictive clause? Because the whole point of the sentence is to tell someone that you went to *the* show that opened this weekend.

Nonrestrictive clauses “could be omitted without obscuring the identity of the noun to which it refers or otherwise changing the meaning of the rest of the sentence.” Typically, nonrestrictive clauses are introduced with “which.” Nonrestrictive clauses are always set off with commas.

The final document, which had been edited three times, was sent to the publisher this morning.

~~*The final document which had been edited three times was sent to the publisher this morning.*~~

In this sentence, the main point is that the final document went to the publisher this morning. The fact that it was edited three times is your commentary.

- **Commas between adjectives:** What if you have more than one adjective preceding a noun? Use a comma if the adjectives could be joined by “and” without affecting the meaning of a sentence—otherwise, doesn’t use a comma. All of the following sentences are correct:

We promote inclusive, accessible services.

It’s going to be a long, hot, exhausting summer.

They worked for a transitional housing program.

I purchased an inexpensive quartz watch.

- **Use a comma before the “and” and “or” in a series of three or more items.**

Last but not least! Although many writers omit the serial comma, Associated Press (AP) is the only style that does so. So unless you are writing for a newspaper, you should use the serial comma, which aids with clarity.

I love chocolate, vanilla, and mint!

Good luck with writing, editing, and changing the world!

Feedback on this tool is always welcome! If you have comments, questions, or suggestions, please contact Rachel White-Domain at 312-726-7020 x2011 or rwhitedomain@ncdvtmh.org.

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