



# CLARITY IN BUSINESS WRITING GUIDE

BY INSTRUCTIONAL SOLUTIONS



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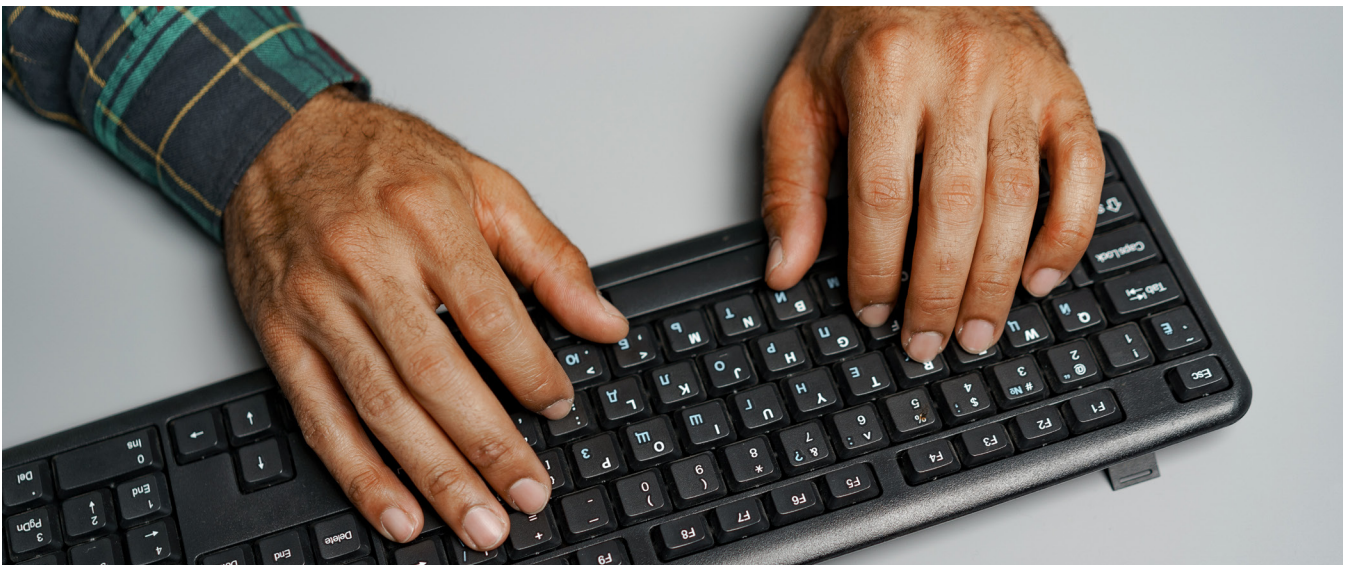
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# THE POWER OF VERBS

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Verbs are the backbone of sentences. Honing strong verbs is the single best strategy for clear writing.

Focusing on strong verbs also naturally resolves many other syntax problems, especially passive voice used incorrectly and clause sequencing errors.

## CLARITY TIP #1 UNSMOTHER VERBS

What is a smothered verb?

- Smothered verbs are action words that are buried in a group of other words.
- Eliminating the other words creates a clearer, more forceful sentence.
- Smothering phrases often begin with a form of *be*, *give*, *have*, *make*, or *take*.
- The noun in the phrase often ends with *-ion* or *-ment*.



# SMOTHERED VERB EXAMPLES

Be in agreement

Give consideration to

Have a suspicion

Make an adjustment

Extend an invitation

Hold a discussion

Make a decision

**LOOK FOR THE REAL VERB IN THESE PHRASES.  
CAN YOU FIND IT?**

Be in agreement ► Agree

Give consideration to ► Consider

Have a suspicion ► Suspect

Make an adjustment ► Adjust

Extend an invitation ► Invite

Hold a discussion ► Discuss

Make a decision ► Decide



## UNSMOTHERED VERB EXERCISE

I am in possession of your report, and my team held a discussion and gave much consideration to your budget recommendations.

After much deliberation, I will give instructions to my assistant to make an adjustment to your account. You will see the increase in your budget's total account on the intranet by Friday, when you can make a comparison between the two budget figures.

*(64 words)*

### TRY THIS: MOVE CLAUSE BY CLAUSE, AND UNSMOTHER EVERY VERB.

I am in possession of your report, and my team held a discussion and gave much consideration to your budget recommendations.

After much deliberation, I will give instructions to my assistant to make an adjustment to your account. You will see the increase in your budget's total account on the intranet by Friday, when you can make a comparison between the two budget figures.

*(64 words)*

### NOW, FIND THE CORE VERB.



## **RESULT: 26.6% WORD REDUCTION!**

I have your report, and my team discussed and considered your budget recommendations.

After much deliberation, I instructed my assistant to adjust your account. You will see the increase in your budget's total account on the intranet by Friday, when you can compare the two budget figures. *(47 words)*

**ON AVERAGE, UNSMOTHERING VERBS  
REDUCES BLOAT BY 25%.**

**THIS IS A POWERFUL CLARITY TECHNIQUE.**



## CLARITY TIP #2 USE POWERFUL VERBS

Choose powerful verbs that connote meaning, which don't need a second modifying word to do their job.

A verb that cannot stand on its own is wimpy.

For instance:

- *"The attendant shouted loudly."*
- *"The attendant shouted,"* is a perfect sentence. The adverb *"loudly"* is inferred and extraneous.
- To emphasize the shouting, if necessary, choose a more precise verb: *"The attendant screeched."*

### AVOID VERB + MODIFIER

Remember: A verb that cannot stand on its own is wimpy. Choose a single strong, evocative verb instead of a verb + modifier.

- *"The executive ran quickly into the boardroom."*
- *"Ran quickly"* is wasteful word choice. Pick a better verb. *"The executive sprinted into the boardroom,"* is concise, visual, and lively.



## CLARITY TIP #3 CHOOSE SHORT WORDS

Many business writers feel they convey their intelligence more by dropping long words, when short words actually work better rhetorically.

Long words don't make you sound intelligent unless used very judiciously. In the wrong situation they'll have the opposite effect, making you sound pretentious and even unsure.

They're also less likely to be understood and more awkward to read.



Consider Hemingway's response when Faulkner criticized him for his limited word choice.

*"Poor Faulkner. Does he really think big emotions come from big words? He thinks I don't know the ten-dollar words. I know them all right. But there are older and simpler and better words, and those are the ones I use."*





Richard Lederer sings the praises of the short word to enhance clarity in his book, The Miracle of Language:

*"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 the heart of what you speak and write. Short words are like fast friends. They will not let you down."*

Notice that Lederer's clear and confident recommendation is constructed entirely with single-syllable words.

## CHOOSE SHORT WORDS EXAMPLES

Can be improved:

*It has never been good writing practice to use big words indiscriminately.*

Better:

*It has never been good writing practice to use big words needlessly.*  
("Needlessly" is shorter and simpler than "indiscriminately.")

Best:

*It has never been a good writing practice to bloat with big words.*  
(The more powerful verb "bloat" instead of vague verb "use" eliminates the need for modifying adverb "needlessly.")



# HOW TO HONE CLARITY

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Blaise Pascal beautifully expressed the value and challenge of clear writing:

*"I'm sorry for the length of this letter. I did not have time to make it shorter."*

It takes skill and focus to write with clarity. It's much easier to bloat writing with unnecessary words than to write with precision.

Thankfully, there is an exercise to hone clarity in your writing. And, it only takes 10 minutes, 3 times a week. After 3 weeks of this exercise, you will have developed the habit of writing clearly.

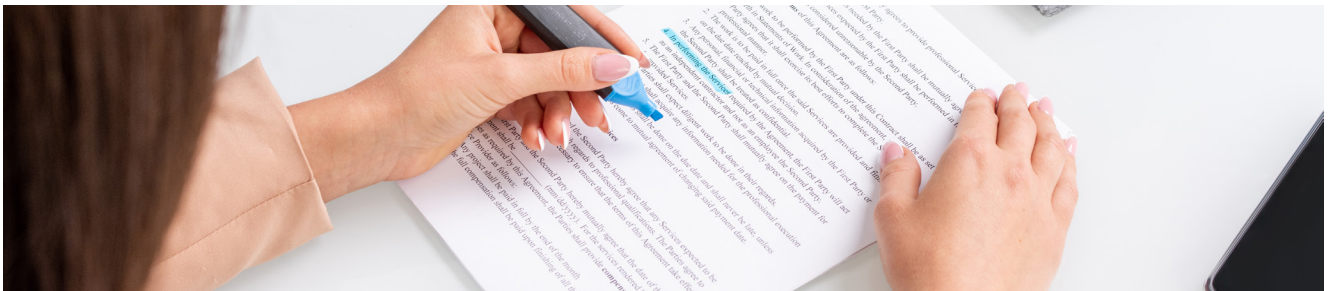


# HONING CLARITY WEEKLY EXERCISES

Two to three times each week:

1. Print out 2-3 emails you wrote the previous week.
2. Comb every sentence and clause, and circle every verb.
3. Unsmother any verbs that are smothered.
4. Change any verb + modifier constructions.  
(*"Denah slowly walked to the meeting."*)

Remove any wimpy verbs (*"walked"*) that need a modifier (*"slowly"*) to convey meaning. Substitute a single strong verb that evokes correct meaning (*"Denah strolled to the meeting."*)



- ▶ Tip: Are you having trouble finding smothered verbs in your documents? Use your word processor's find function and search for *be*, *give*, *have*, *make*, or *take*. If these words are near a verb, the verb is likely smothered.



# PRACTICE

The goal is to make crisp verbs your habit. This takes practice.

Continue this verb honing exercise, 2-3 times each week, for just 10 minutes each session, until clarity is crisp in your business writing.

There is no shortcut here. Honing verbs by following this practice will always bring beautiful clarity to your writing, but it does take a few weeks of focus as you retrain your habit.

As business writers, we read so much bloated writing that it can sound correct to our ears. It isn't. Stay with this exercise, week-by-week, and your business writing will become clear, lively, and interesting.



**WITH FOCUSED EXERCISE, YOUR  
CLARITY WILL SHINE!**

