



10 WRITING STRATEGIES

THAT DRIVE UP LEARNER ENGAGEMENT ONLINE

SHIFT
DISRUPTIVE LEARNING

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Introduction

^{KEYBOARD}
The ~~pen~~ is mightier than the sword.

The written word is powerful. It can encourage or discourage, inspire or depress, uplift or sadden, educate or mislead, and entertain or put you to sleep.

As an instructional designer, you know how powerful eLearning courses can be. A well-designed learning program creates awareness, inspires learners to forego ways of thinking and working that are serving them no purpose, embrace new attitudes or cultivate positive habits, learn new skills, and overcome obstacles in their path to success.

As part of your job, you have to write killer introductions, create realistic scenarios, tell stories that entertain and educate, draft

assessment questions that align with the learning outcomes, and prepare video scripts that pack in a punch. As you go about your sundry writing tasks, you have to always keep in mind that you have to produce content that:

- ✓ Grabs eyeballs
- ✓ Keeps learners hooked to the course
- ✓ Engages learners
- ✓ Fulfills the learning outcomes

That's a tall order, and it is easier said than done. Even for a competent writer like you.



That is why, we have come up with this book, to help you master the art of writing and tap into the power of words to create memorable courses.

There's more to writing great content than sticking to the rules of grammar, spelling, and punctuation. There's even more to writing great and effective eLearning content if you are writing for adult corporate learners. They are busy, goal-oriented people who have definite expectations from your eLearning course. They may come across as serious and staid individuals, but you definitely cannot dish out dull, boring content to them.

So how should you write for such an audience?

We have compiled 10 tried-and-tested tips to help you write effective and sticky eLearning courses. In this book, you will learn how to analyze your audience—their needs and wants and professional aspirations—so you can dish out exactly what they need. You will learn the basics of storyboarding. Most importantly, you will learn how to write engagingly, evocatively, and effectively. You will get the low-down on the hallmarks of effective writing, so you can incorporate these qualities in your write-ups. You will also learn about the common pitfalls that befall writers, so you can steer clear of these.

This eBook packs in a comprehensive list of basic actionable writing tips to help instructional content developers produce content they can be proud of.

Strategy #1:

Write for Your Learner

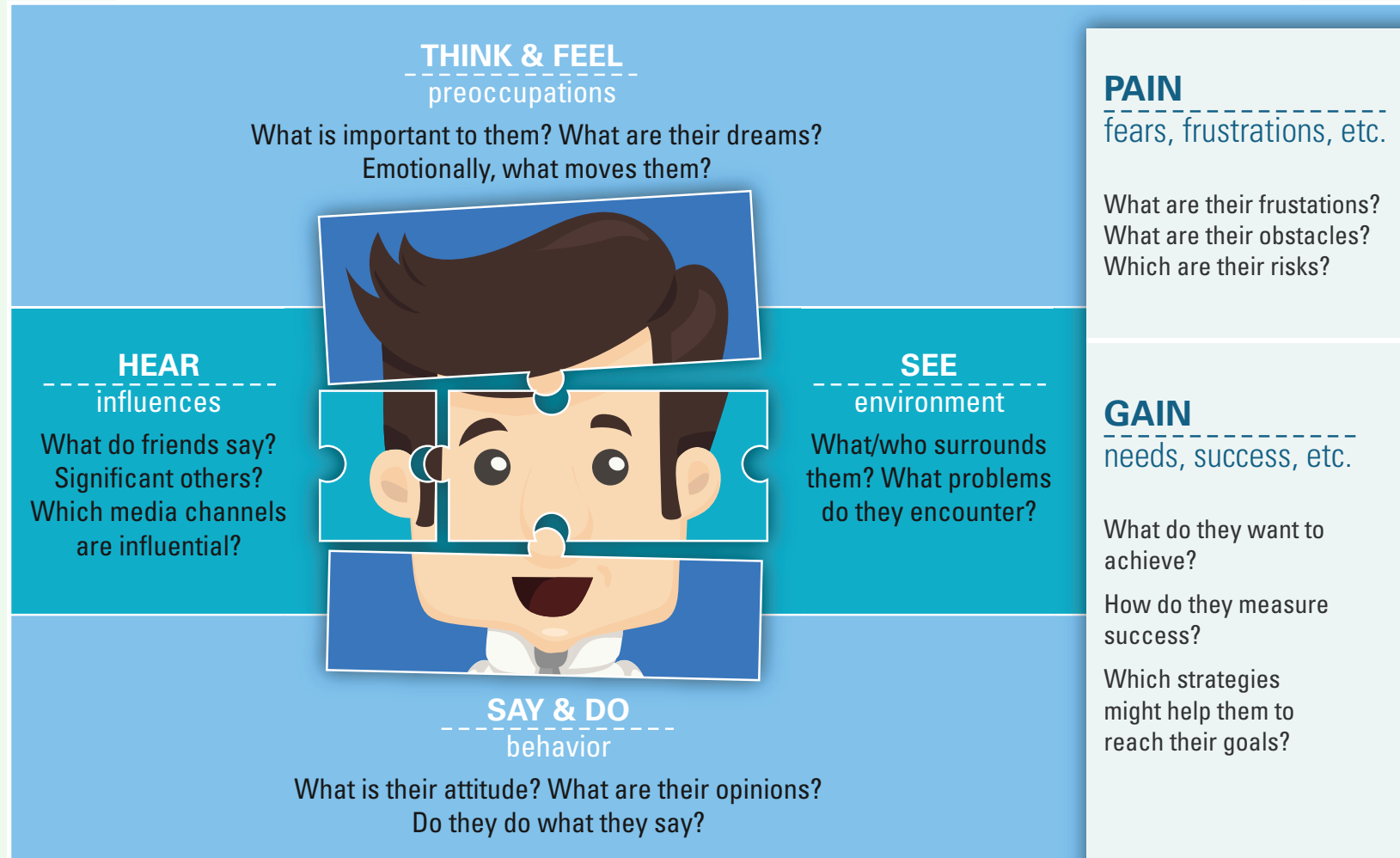


To create a course that sticks and connects with your learners, you have to step into their shoes, delve into their minds, and deliver what they need. You have to know your learners so well you can get inside their heads. Use empathy to guide your writing in eLearning. Empathy will tell you what to write or when to make a joke.

Demographic profiles of your target audience do not always paint the complete picture. You have to look beyond statistics like age, educational qualification, and occupation to understand the learner. Your learner is a sum total of his past experiences, desires, aspirations, and expectations. His learning styles and media preferences are shaped by his familiarity with and access to technology. His cultural upbringing influences his perception of symbols, images, words, or analogies. The learner is a complex and multi-dimensional human being; just a few numbers do not define him.

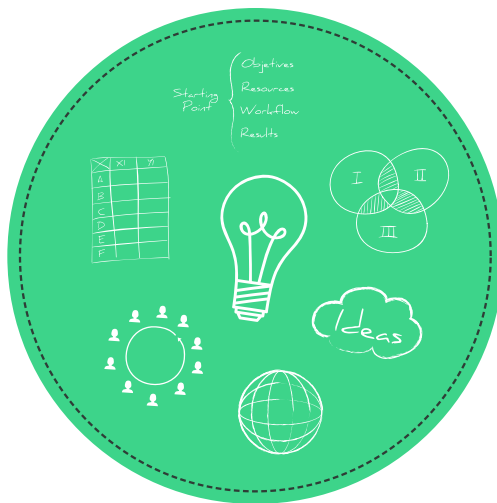
Try to understand as much as you can about your learners. **Use the “Empathy Map” to analyze your learners effectively.** Then try to make your eLearning course a conversation with this “persona”.

Empathy Map



Strategy #2:

Plan before you write



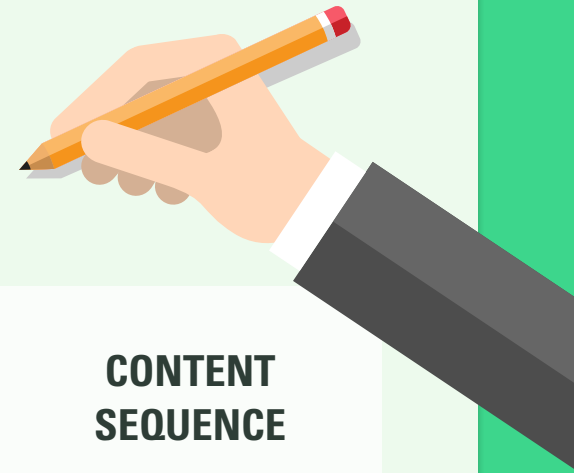
How do you travel? You first decide where to go. Then you find out the best time to visit that place. You arrange the air tickets and hotel accommodation. Finally, you chalk out a sightseeing itinerary. If you don't plan your holiday so meticulously, glitches and hitches are sure to crop up.

Writing for an eLearning course is no different from planning a vacation; you have to plan it to perfection before you get down to create it. For that purpose, a storyboard can come in very handy.

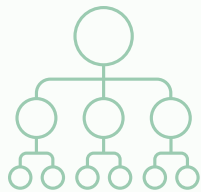
However, writing a storyboard for an eLearning course is not just transferring the textbook on to the screen. You have to keep in mind sundry factors like learning outcomes, usability, the nature of the content, and the overall design of the course. You cannot plunk down the content on the screens and hope the learners will figure out the content for themselves.

The Storyboarding Process

The creation of the eLearning storyboard itself is up to you, but here is a guide to important questions to answer **before** buckling down to write:



ORGANIZING MATERIALS



What do you have to work with? What learning material has been provided for you? What files are available? How are you going to break the course into modules?

DEFINING GOALS



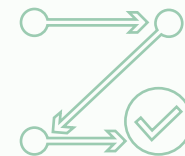
Keep the learning objectives in mind, so the screens you create are always relevant. What is your single objective? Do you have any secondary objectives?

SELECTING INSTRUCTIONAL TECHNIQUE



Do you want to present this content through storytelling, a scenario-based approach, or some other method?

CONTENT SEQUENCE



What order do things go in? What topics need to come before or after others? Are there any units or modules that fit together more naturally than others?

As you go about the storyboarding process, always ask yourself these questions:

Why would the learner sit through and read this screen? *If you don't have a satisfactory answer to this question, ditch the screen.*

Why am I delivering this message, and how will this piece of information help the learner? *The answers to these questions ensure you deliver value to the learner.*

Strategy #3:

Write for the scanning eye



It is tempting to cram in every teeny-weeny bit of content you have into the course to make it information-dense. But do you think you help the learner by jam-packing the screens?

According to Morkes and Nielsen (1997), the [*usability of a Web site goes up a whopping 47 percent*](#) when the on-screen text is scannable. This fact does not seem surprising in our times. The average Web user is busy, and with smartphones and tablets all around, he has too much information thrust down his throat. He is more comfortable digesting information from 140 characters and one-liner updates. He prefers to scan a document—read the sub-titles and skim over the bullet lists—to get the gist rather than sit and read through a lengthy article. Your time-crunched adult corporate learner is no different. Besides, we read [*25 percent slower online*](#) than when we are reading from print because reading from screen is stressful for the eyes.

You cannot [*overload*](#) a screen with content and expect the learner to glean the most crucial piece of information from that mess. In fact, don't even expect him to squint his eyes, wrinkle his brows, and try; he will move on to the next screen without extracting any learning. Your course thus fails to fulfill its purpose.

Ensure you chunk and arrange content to make it [skimmable](#):



Break It Up: Break it up into chunks of information or small bytes. This helps with retention. Also, mix it up with headers and sub-headers to create an easy flow through your content.



Use White Space: Use margins around your text blocks, and additional spacing between lines so that people know where one paragraph ends and the next begins.



Alignment: Content that is left-aligned is easier to read than type that is right-aligned. You can use right alignment occasionally, like when you're wrapping text around photos, but in general, lean to the left.



Keep paragraphs short: Text is easiest to read when you deliver it in short paragraphs – ideally, no more than four sentences each.



Go for short sentences too: Short sentences are always preferable to long ones. Less text makes it easier for learners to concentrate.



Put your most important information first: Be considerate, and write in the [inverted pyramid style](#) where you place the most critical pieces of information right at the beginning of the text block. You should also place key words and crucial ideas at the start or end of a sentence.

Strategy #4:

Reduce Wordiness



A common mistake done by eLearning course creators is the tendency to over-explain everything. If you are one of these people, your intentions are commendable; however, your end result will be that you will bore your learners to death.

Trim the fat! Or even better, if a picture is worth a thousand words, use it. By offering information in a concise, precise manner, you will attract more learners and you will help them learn.

Here are some strategies for trimming your courses:



REWORK THE LANGUAGE

Try to translate all the information you want to convey in simpler terms.



TRIM LONG SENTENCES

Split longer sentences into shorter ones, and read again, out loud, if possible. You will notice that the actual flow of the text becomes more human friendly.



CUT OFF WEAK WORDS

Your safest course of action is to cut off any weak words you encounter. Take a moment or two to think when reading each phrase: does this truly belong here? No matter how tempted you feel to emphasize your speech with pompous and redundant words, just don't.



OPT FOR CONCISE WHENEVER POSSIBLE

Go for the phrase that is most concise, without losing any of the meaning you are trying to convey. For instance, instead of using "at the present time", use the more common word "now".



FAVOR THE ACTIVE VOICE

Passive voice is one of the closest friends of wordiness. Instead, use the active voice. The active voice is more direct and engaging. Writing in the active voice gives energy and movement to your content, which will keep your learners interested all way long.

THE WORDY VS THE USEFUL

LANGUAGE	
specific terms	simple terms
SENTENCES	
too long & artificial	short & with natural flow
WORDS	
tons of weak words	only the necessary
PHRASES	
convoluted & redundant	concise & meaningful
PASSIVE VOICE	
loved	abhorred
CONTENT	
flowery	straightforward
PHARAGRAPHS	
long & clustered	short & spaced

Strategy #5:

Humanize Your Writing



Simplicity makes sense. Reeves and Nass, in their book *The Media Equation*, published an interesting finding. According to them, human beings [*respond more*](#) to learning programs that use an informal, conversational language than those that employ a formal (read: officious) tone. Learners glean more from a program when they concentrate their mental energies on understanding concepts and learning new skills instead of trying to make sense of the language.

Here's how you can write in a simple, easy-to-understand manner:

BANISH THE CURSE OF KNOWLEDGE

After interviewing SMEs, reading through countless books and journals, and browsing umpteen Web sites, you now more or less have expert-level knowledge of what you are about to teach. But the learner does not. He cannot connect the dots as readily as you can. He might not understand jargons and acronyms that you toss at him. So he will quickly become frustrated and lose interest in your course.

You have to [*banish the curse of knowledge*](#). Here's how:

- ✓ **Stop writing in abstract terms.** Instead, use relevant and commonplace analogies to explain technical concepts.
- ✓ **Expand acronyms** when you introduce them.
- ✓ **Chuck out the fluff** -adjectives and adverbs that do not describe the specifics- and concentrate on writing lucidly.

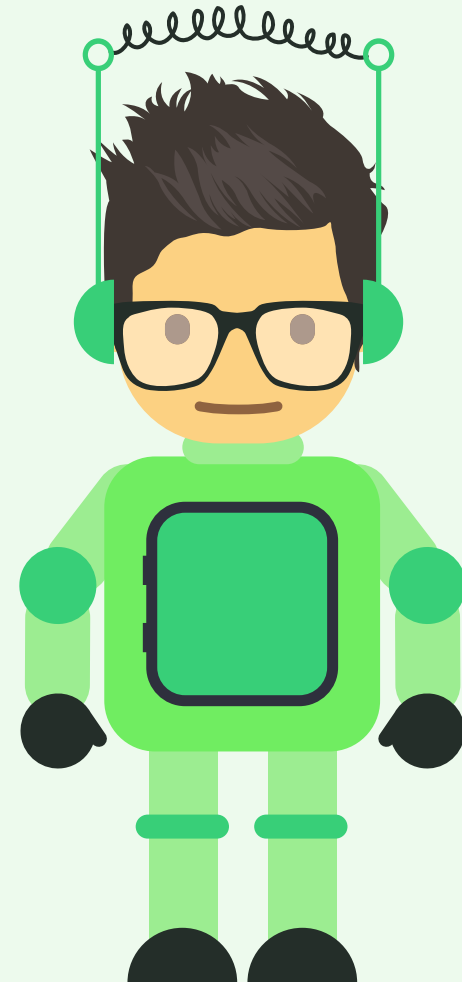
WRITE LIKE YOU TALK. SOUND CONVERSATIONAL

Talk to the learner instead of talking down to him. Talk to him like you would to a friend. Use the pleasant and personal “you” tone to reach out and connect to him. When you build a rapport, the learner will be more willing to accept what you have to say to him.

Write in a conversational tone. We are social animals, and we love chatting and conversing. In fact, we remember more of what our friends tell us over a hot cup than what we listen to during a formal lecture or presentation session. We remember stories more vividly than statistics. We remember celebrity gossip more than we remember the graphs we might have come across in a whitepaper.

More writing suggestions:

- ✓ Use contractions. It makes you sound less robotic.
- ✓ Use words that would be encountered in the learning.
- ✓ Use jargon only when strictly necessary.
- ✓ Use short sentences (when we talk we use short sentences).



Strategy #6:

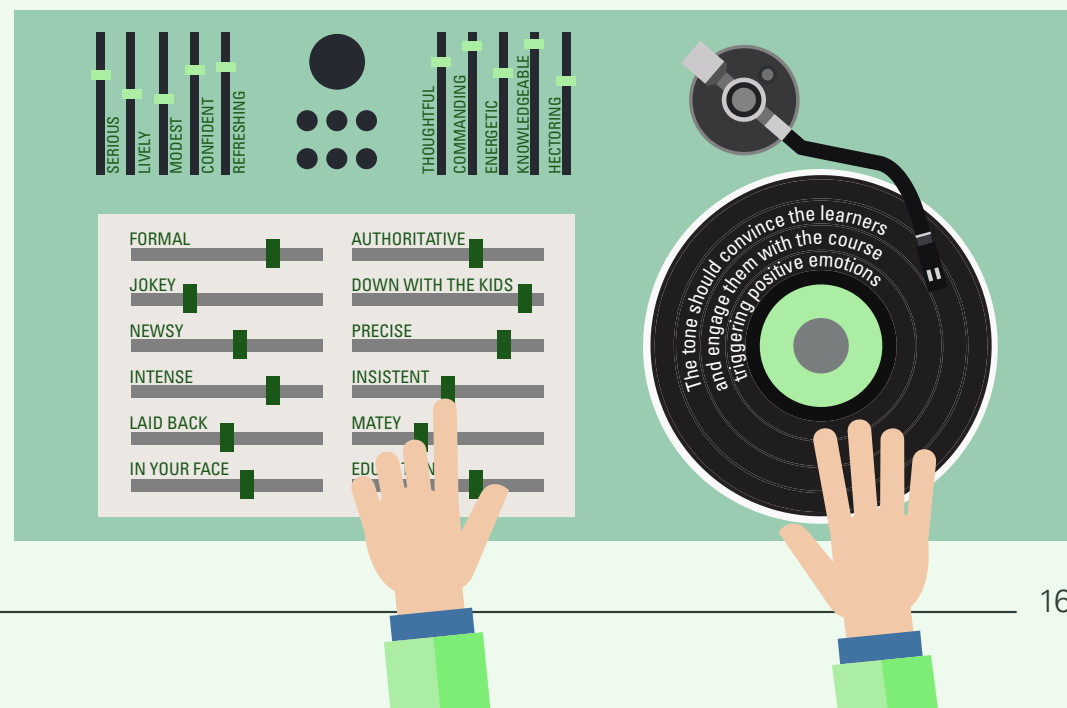
Strike the Right Tone in Your Writing



The tone you adopt for an eLearning course isn't about **what** you say but **HOW** you say it and the effect it has on your learners. Learners may not see their instructors face-to-face but that doesn't mean they won't notice your approach. On the contrary, words have to work harder than ever if you don't want to lose your learners.

Learners cannot be wooed with glitzy effects. Nor does technology impress them as much. The right tone for a corporate eLearning course is a happy blend of the informal and the informative, the casual and the convincing, and the entertaining and the enlightening.

Getting your tone right is key to making the biggest possible impact with your eLearning content. It will tell you what to write or when to make a joke. It'll tell you to use certain punctuation or use specific word choice.



DEFINE CONTENT AND COURSE TYPE



Needless to say, the type of content you will cover in your course determines the tone of voice. For instance, explaining complex technical processes demand that you write in a straightforward manner.

The type of course also determines the tone of voice. For instance, you can adopt a slightly informal tone for a refresher course or a sales onboarding course and reserve your matter-of-fact writing style for technical documents.

CONSIDER AUDIENCE DEMOGRAPHICS



How do you address your teachers? Do you strictly mind your (verbal) P's and Q's when you are amongst your best buddies? How you speak and the words you use depend on the company you are with.

It is no different in the eLearning sphere. The tone of voice you adopt in your courses should be determined by [target audience demographics](#).

CREATE A LIST OF ADJECTIVES THAT DESCRIBE YOUR TONE OF VOICE



Nail down the tone of voice you will adopt for the course. Use adjectives (as many as possible) to describe the tone. Once you have an exhaustive list, boil down your essence down to 4-5 adjectives that best describe the tone of voice that you will eventually adopt.

Strategy #7:

Keep Writing Interesting and Relevant



Don't stuff your eLearning course with meaningless information. If your learners cannot fathom how your course will be useful to them, they won't stick around for long.

Your goal should be to create a course that packs in only that much information that fulfills the learning outcomes. [Relevance increases learner engagement](#). Besides, your corporate learners are busy people; you cannot expect them to sit through a course as you ramble on.

Try to keep the learner interested by focusing on what *they will be able to do* after completing the course. People are more interested when they know they will gain something.

Here's how to make your courses more relevant for your learners:



Follow the I.B.I. Rule.: I.B.I. means "interesting but irrelevant," and you are supposed to apply this rule to every piece of text and image you use on screen. An analogy may seem interesting to read, but if it does not enhance understanding, out it goes.



Blurt out the “what’s in it for me” information right at the start of the course. State the learning objectives clearly, so learners know what they can gain from your course.



Throw in facts, statistics, or research findings to support your statements, so your learners know you are not talking pie in the sky.



Use realistic characters and real-life scenarios to impart the content, so your learners can relate to what you have to say. Besides, scenarios that depict real-life problems add to the relevance of the course.



Pepper your course with takeaways, so your learners have the confidence in the knowledge that they can apply the learning when they go back to work.

Strategy #8:

Use Powerfully Emotive and Evocative Words



Words are powerful tools that can stir emotions and rouse crowds to action.

You need powerful words to make the world-weary, set-in-his-beliefs, and habit-led adult corporate learner see relevance in your content, be convinced, and actually learn. And to achieve this, you have to do more than just dump the facts on them; you have to trigger their emotions.

The following guide on how to write to evoke emotions should help you:

USE WORDS THAT SOUND OFF EMOTIONAL ALARMS

You would be surprised to know how certain words (*automatically*) hit us like a ton of bricks and force the brain to sit up and pay attention. You will want to sprinkle these words throughout your course:

- ✓ **You:** When you address the learner with a “you,” the content suddenly gets a personal touch. The learner feels he is being seen and treated like a unique individual, not a nameless, faceless entity.
- ✓ **Relevant:** The word “relevant” gives your learners the confidence that you are about to provide substance.
- ✓ **Imagine:** This word is a powerful weapon in your arsenal to engage the learner. When you ask the learner to “imagine,” you rouse him from passivity, tickle his subconscious mind, and make him take the journey with you. With this one word, you can enter the learner’s mind and trigger his subconscious mind into “seeing” a vision that it thinks is reality.

PEPPER WITH POWERFUL ACTION VERBS

Action verbs breathe life into a sentence. They can metamorphose a dull, yawn-inducing, insipid piece of content into text that crackles with energy and verve.

These are some action verbs that you can use to write effective instructional objectives:

- ✓ Define
- ✓ Identify
- ✓ Demonstrate
- ✓ Compare
- ✓ Outline
- ✓ Create
- ✓ Select

STIR THE SENSES WITH SENSORY ADJECTIVES

Details and evocative descriptions bring your content alive and etch it in the learner's mind. Like action verbs, sensory adjectives can also describe the details of a scene to create pictures with words.

- ✓ **Words describing touch.** Bumpy, crisp, dry, dull, elastic, furry, moist, sharp
- ✓ **Words describing taste.** Buttery, fruity, hot, mellow, salty, refreshing, spicy, toasty
- ✓ **Words describing smell.** Perfumed, rotten, savory, stagnant, earthy, sulfurous
- ✓ **Words describing sound.** Clapping, cracking, exploding, hush, jangle, growling, rumbling, screech, slamming

Important note: Avoid meaningless and wishy-washy adjectives. Going overboard with adjectives causes your text to be verbose and awkward.

Strategy #9:

Create powerful, self-explanatory headlines



The headline is one of the most critical elements in a write-up. It provides the first glimpse into the content that follows. The ideal headline grabs eyeballs, draws in your audience, and provides them with the hook to continue reading. So to keep busy adult learners interested in your course, you have to create headlines that make them curious and also convey the relevance of what you are about to explain.

Here's what to remember to help you create effective headlines:



Aim for clarity. Write explanatory headlines that leave no question unanswered. For instance, consider this headline, "Benefits." *Of what? For whom?* The learner is most likely to be baffled by generic headlines like "Causes" and "Benefits." A headline like "3 Ways in Which Time Management Will Increase Your Profits" leaves no doubt about the purpose and intent of the content that follows.

**Make your headline emotionally compelling.**

The headline is the space where you can pinpoint the relevance of a screen or section. You have to provide a compelling reason for the learners to carry on reading. Tickle their emotions and aspirations. So instead of writing “Benefits of Learning Team Management Skills,” expand on the idea and craft a headline that reads, “How Will Mastering Team Management Skills Keep Your Employees Happy?”



Write catchy, intriguing headlines. Keep it short and crisp, but make it catchy. Apart from the words you use, the emotions you tickle, and the images you evoke, you can use custom fonts, attractive colors, and interesting but relevant graphics to call attention to headlines.

Strategy #10:

Add a dash of humor to lighten your writing



Laughter eases tension and bridges gap. A well-timed joke or a gentle poke at humor can turn a somber, stressful situation into a lighthearted one. Humor can also ward off a potential conflict. [Humor is a powerful tool of communication.](#) Humor enriches your eLearning course in more ways than one.

Humor makes technical training easy. It heightens audience engagement. So when learners focus more on the content, they can absorb, assimilate, and retain more of the content. Humor also lessens the stress of learning a complex matter. When your learners are relaxed, they can focus on learning instead of fretting over the difficult concepts.

You can infuse humor in your course in several ways; the choice depends on the nature of the content and learner preferences. Here are a few ways you can't go wrong:

USING METAPHORS

Use metaphors to compare unlikely objects and elicit a laugh. For instance, you can compare the spiky hairstyle of a character in your course to a porcupine's coat to evoke a vivid image that is sure to bring out the laughs.

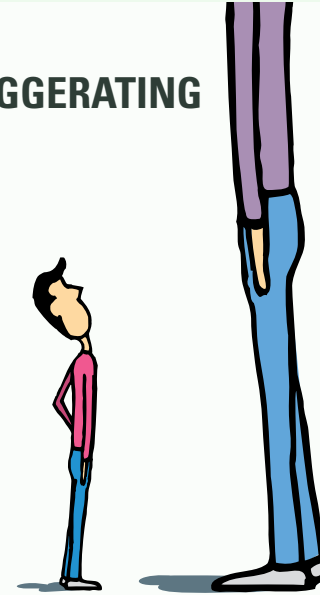


FINDING NOVEL WAYS TO DESCRIBE SITUATIONS, PEOPLE, AND OBJECTS



Don't just state the facts. Describe situations or people in unusual ways. Look for odd connections. For instance, don't just say a man is thin. Add that he is so skinny that he can walk between raindrops without getting wet.

EXAGGERATING



There is humor in exaggeration. Exaggeration is taking everyday situations, people, and objects and blowing them out of proportion. In fact, they bring out more chuckles, guffaws, and laughs than jokes because the silliness is apparent.



Note: Don't get carried away. Don't let your course become a comic act that entertains but does not educate. Use humor sparingly, so it does not become a distraction. Also be careful that you don't hurt sentiments, sensibilities, beliefs, and communities with your brand of humor.

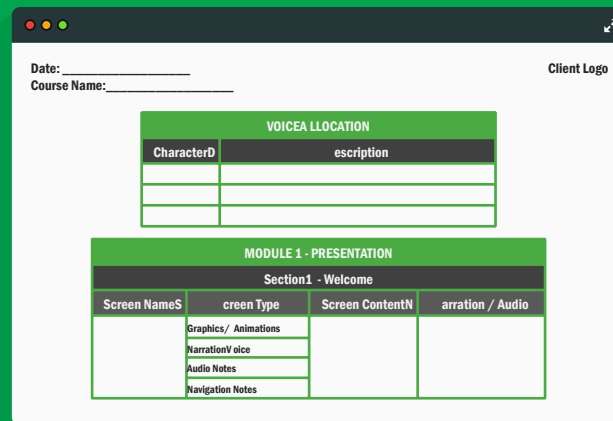
Conclusion

And finally...

You now have in your kitty 10 tips to add sheen to your writing and make it sparkle. Sticking to them might seem daunting at first, but keep at it. Give yourself time to master the steps; excellence is not reached in a day. Most importantly, remember that even the most accomplished and efficient instructional writer once wrote insipid content. He probably still chews off his nails and loses sleep over his write-ups. But eventually, he does produce killer content that shines with relevance and crackles with insights and humor. You will too; keep in mind the tips.

Practice all you can about **WRITING** for **ELEARNING**!

Grab this free eLearning storyboard template and start right away



The screenshot shows a web-based storyboard template. At the top, there are input fields for 'Date:' and 'Course Name:', and a 'Client Logo' placeholder. Below these is a table titled 'VOICE LOCATION' with columns 'CharacterID' and 'Description'. Underneath is a section titled 'MODULE 1 - PRESENTATION' with a sub-header 'Section1 - Welcome'. This section contains a table with four columns: 'Screen NameS', 'Screen Type', 'Screen ContentN', and 'Narration / Audio'. The 'Screen Type' column has a dropdown menu with options: 'Graphics / Animations', 'NarrationVoice', 'Audio Notes', and 'Navigation Notes'.

VOICE LOCATION	
CharacterID	Description

MODULE 1 - PRESENTATION			
Section1 - Welcome			
Screen NameS	Screen Type	Screen ContentN	Narration / Audio
	Graphics / Animations		
	NarrationVoice		
	Audio Notes		
	Navigation Notes		

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