Seven Pillars
of Great Writing

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Contents

Introduction

Welcome to *Seven Pillars of Great Writing*!

I've designed this ebook so that you can jump straight to any chapter – you don't have to read it in order. Each chapter covers one key concept, giving you concrete advice plus real-life examples to learn from.

I know there's a lot here: don't try to take it all in at once, but turn to this as a resource any time you're looking to improve a particular aspect of your writing.

I've kept the colours and graphics minimal so that you can print the ebook out, annotate it and make your own notes.

If you have any problem, questions or feedback on the ebook, you can email me at ali@aliventures.com any time.

Happy writing!

Ali x

Credits

Cover design and *On Track* logo by Jo Hale.

#1: Structure

Great writing isn't just about how you put words together. It's about conveying a message – your ideas, an argument, a story. And for your reader to "get" that message, it needs to be structured in a way that makes it easy to take in.

All pieces of writing, from short blog posts to epic novels, have structure. The most basic structure is that identified by Aristotle in the *Poetics*, in 350 B.C: *beginning, middle and end.*

This structure is so ingrained in the way which we think and write that it might seem utterly obvious, even unavoidable, to you. It's worth paying attention to, though – because great writers need to get it right.

- **Beginnings** have to hook the reader and introduce (or at least hint at) your key theme. Obviously, the beginning of a magazine article will look very different to the beginning of a novel – but both have similar functions.

- **Middles** need to work out an argument, idea or plot, drawing the reader steadily onwards (see [Flow](#) for more on this). The middle makes up the bulk of any written piece and, for all but the shortest pieces, needs careful structuring.

- **Ends** must provide a sense of resolution. They draw conclusions, provide a dramatic climax, tie up loose ends or prompt the reader to take action. Endings are what we remember best, and a disappointing ending can ruin a novel or book – however good the rest of it was.

The structure of your work is like a map, helping you and the reader to know where you're going next and to understand where you've been.

You may well have a natural sense of structure, particularly when it comes to shorter pieces. If you're working on something longer, though, it's worth getting the structure in place before you start to write.

Outlining

There's no one right way to outline, and different writers have different techniques. Often, though, you'll find that sitting down and writing a linear outline straight away is tough – you need to sift through your ideas first in order to find the structure.

Here are a couple of things to try in order to get your ideas down:

1. **Draw a Mindmap**

   You can do this on paper or using a program like XMind. Write the topic or title of your piece in the centre of the page, and then start adding key points and ideas around the edge. Draw lines to connect these, or to show sub points.

   Once you've got your ideas down on the mindmap, you can begin to sort them – I like to write numbers next to each key point to get a rough order in mind.

2. **Use Index Cards**

   Write key points (e.g. novel scenes, parts of your argument) onto index cards. Once you've got all your ideas out of your head and onto the cards, start ordering them – don't glue or tape them down, because you may want to continue moving them.

Writing Your Outline

Once you've got this raw material, you can create a linear outline. I'd suggest starting big and gradually filling in more detail, like this:

Step #1: Start with a list of key sections, chapters or subheadings – perhaps five to ten points.

The first outline of this ebook was just a list of chapter headings, which I shuffled around till I was happy with the progression from 1 to 7. *(You can read them in any order, but I wanted a sense of structure within the whole ebook.)*

You can see that outline to the right.

1. Structure
2. Flow
3. Clarity
4. Tone
5. Grammar
6. Economy
7. Heart

Step #2: Flesh out each of these points. For instance, write the subheadings (or key points) for each section, or write a chapter-by-chapter list for your novel.

Once I had my list of chapter headings, I began to add details. For instance my notes for "Tone" originally looked like this:

- generally best to keep it conversational, especially for online writing – readers are increasingly used to this in books too

- the passive voice, how to avoid it

- specific tips on what to do and what not to do

- give some examples of different "tones" in writing

Step #3: Go even further, perhaps adding specific points for a subsection or details about particular scenes within a chapter.

My third stage of outlining added the details under "specific tips on what to do and what not to do":

> - specific tips on what to do and what not to do
>
>> - keep your language at a similar "register" throughout (not too formal or informal)
>>
>> - use contractions
>>
>> - don't overdo it – e.g. normally not appropriate to use regional slang or curse words
>>
>> - consider varying your tone

You don't have to go through all three steps right at the start of your project. So long as you have the broad structure in place, you can fill in the details as you progress – perhaps reaching "step #3" whenever you come to the start of a new chapter.

Further Reading on Structure

Story Structure in Short Stories – by Philip Brewer on PhillipBrewer.net

Obviously enough, this one's aimed at short story writers!

The Structure of Persuasive Copy – by Brian Clark on Copyblogger

Great advice from a copywriting master. If you're producing any sort of persuasive writing (like a sales letter or a charity appeal), give this a read.

#2: Flow

Note that in this chapter, I'm talking about the flow of your writing itself – not the creative state of being "in flow".

Flow is an elusive quality – it's easy to spot an article or story which *doesn't* flow well, but it's sometimes hard to ensure that your own piece is working.

If a piece flows, it's easy to follow. The reader will barely notice the words; instead, they'll be carried along steadily from paragraph to paragraph, chapter to chapter. It's as if the writing is a stream, flowing smoothly from start to end.

Structure really helps with flow: it lets you ensure that your ideas flow fit together logically, without the reader getting stuck or confused – the equivalent of the stream drying up. If you're struggling to get your ideas flowing, turn to [Structure](#), and get the framework of your piece right.

When you're drafting, it's best to focus on getting the words down – don't agonise over whether the flow is perfect. But when you're revising, look out for choppy or clunky bits of writing, and pay attention to your *transitions* and *pacing*.

Add Transitions

Even when you've got a great structure, your piece may lack flow. You need transitions between sections and paragraphs in order to keep the reader on board.

For instance, I introduced this section with "pay attention to your *transitions* and *pacing*". It was a short, simple phrase, and you might feel that it wasn't necessary, since you have the subheadings to guide you – but it prepared you for what was coming next.

Transitions can be used to manage the reader's expectations like this, and to form links between two sections. You'll want to look at your transitions between sections (check the final sentence before a subheading, for instance) – and you'll also want to check transitions between paragraphs.

You can use transition words and phrases when:

- Introducing an example: *For example, for instance, that is, e.g. ...*

- Giving the other side of an argument: *However, on the other hand, but, despite this...*

- Drawing conclusions: *Therefore, this leads to, the result of this...*

- Summarising: *Summing up, in short, overall...*

Check Your Pacing

Is your writing flowing fast or slow? Is the stream roaring past your bewildered reader or trickling on so slowly that they've lost interest?

Pacing matters in every sort of writing. It's not just a matter of being succinct (covered in [Economy](#)); it's about choosing an *appropriate* pace for your content, and varying it for effect and flow.

Speeding Up

Fast-paced writing is appropriate when you want to convey a sense of urgency or excitement. You might use it for a dramatic, heated exchange between two characters in your novel, or for a sales letter which urges readers to take action *now*.

To pick up the pace:

- Use shorter paragraphs and sentences.

- Use sentence fragments – phrases which don't make a complete sentence. (e.g. *No. He didn't.)*

- Cut out extra details or explanations.

- Add rapid-fire dialogue (usually fiction – but also possible in non-fiction)

- Use bullet points.

Seth Godin, who blogs at Seth's Blog, writes short, pacy posts. Here's an extract from one:

> **A culture of testing**
>
> Netflix tests everything. They're very proud that they A/B test interactions, offerings, pricing, everything. It's almost enough to get you to believe that rigorous testing is the key to success.
>
> Except they didn't test the model of renting DVDs by mail for a monthly fee.
>
> And they didn't test the model of having an innovative corporate culture.

(You can read the rest of the post at A culture of testing.)

Seth uses short sentences ("Netflix tests everything.") and very short paragraphs. He keeps explanations and details brief ("renting DVDs by mail for a monthly fee", rather than delving into Netflix's different packages).

Slowing Down

Slow-paced writing is useful when you want to give the reader a chance to relax or to think. In a predominantly break-neck novel (a thriller, for instance), you'll want occasional slower scenes so that the reader can catch their breath. If you're writing a complex or technical work, you may need to slow down the pace in particularly tricky sections to ensure that the reader can keep up.

To slow down:

- Write longer, more descriptive sentences and paragraphs.

- Add details, examples and anecdotes.

- Explain in greater depth.

- Give background detail. This might be historical information in a non-fiction piece, or character back-story in a novel.

- Prompt the reader to pause and think – for instance, by asking them a direct question.

A slower pace is *not* an excuse to pad out your writing with waffle: the extra information which you include needs to be relevant and useful to the reader.

Here's a good example –from [What We Gave Up When We Gained Abundance](), written by Charlie Gilkey on [Productive Flourishing]().

> At one point, we were running low on processed firewood of a certain size. In that moment, I recognized how different of an orientation to tasks this was for me, compared to my normal orientation. I didn't ask "What do I need to do?" or "What's the most meaningful thing I can right now?," because what I needed to do was very clear: I needed to get off my ass and cut some more firewood.
>
> The choice was easier and clearer, but the work was harder – and the consequences of not doing the work were much more clear. This is the exact opposite of my current daily activities, where the choices are harder, but the "work" is easier; furthermore, the consequences of not doing what I need to do are much less clear. This reinforced to me how much the paradox of choice is a problem that only comes with abundance; in a context in which you're just trying to

You can instantly see the difference between Charlie's piece and Seth's. Charlie writes much longer sentences and paragraphs, and goes into far more detail. He doesn't write *"We got low on firewood, so it was obvious that I had to go and chop more"* – he explains his thought processes, and the typical questions that he'd normally be asking himself.

This extra detail is useful for the reader because it helps them relate Charlie's mini-epiphany to their own lives.

Further Reading on Flow

[Flow and Transitions](#) – undergraduate handout from the University of Texas

Although this article is aimed at students, it's useful for any writer of non-fiction – particularly if you're producing longer articles.

[Pacing (Fiction)](#) – by Dr. Vicki Hinze on Fiction Factor

This article explains why pacing is important (to avoid monotonous content) and how to achieve good pacing in a novel. There's plenty of specific advice that you can apply in your own work, plus handy examples.

#3: Clarity

Have you ever had to read a sentence twice – or even three or four times – to figure out what the author meant? Me too. It's jarring when this happens, because it breaks you out of your reading flow.

Clarity means avoiding writing which is *unclear* or, worse, *ambiguous*. This doesn't just apply at the sentence by sentence level – an important part of writing is conveying your arguments, themes and ideas clearly.

Overall Clarity – Arguments, Themes and Ideas

Big-picture clarity means:

- **Explaining ideas in a logical way** – you may want to refer to the chapters on Structure and Flow for more help with this.

- In fiction, **making character's motivations clear**, unless there's a particular plot reason for keeping them ambiguous.

- **Ensuring that your argument is sound** – and acknowledging any weak spots. Don't try to skate over flaws in your logic by making the writing itself complex or hard to follow, you'll just make the piece even weaker.

- **Using analogies or examples** to make your meaning clearer, if you're discussing something complicated.

Sentence-Level Clarity

Avoid clunky or confusing sentences. Sometimes, the sentence seems clear to *you*, but won't be to your reader.

Here's an example of an ambiguous sentence: *I hate irritating people*.

Does that mean "I hate people who are irritating" or "I hate to irritate people"?

Watch out for:

- **The passive voice.** This is a construction which avoids using a subject (typically a person word), and it's indirect and often not all that clear. For instance:

  - *The postcards were sent* = passive voice

  - *I sent the postcards* = active voice

- **Misplaced clauses.** "*Running round the corner*, the hat fell off my head." This implies that the *hat* is doing the running. It takes a second or two for the reader to mentally unpack the real meaning of the sentence.

- **Misplaced qualifying modifiers** – words like *only, nearly, almost, hardly, just*. "I *almost* ate the whole pie." This would be better as "I ate almost the whole pie."

Incoherent, confusing or just plain bad sentences often occur because of a mistake. Maybe you haven't put in a comma where you need one, or you've accidentally missed out a word – or spliced together two sentences when editing. Usually, these sentences are easy to spot when you read back through your work.

Word-Level Clarity

Pick the simplest word that carries your full meaning: don't write *John observed* when *John saw* is just as good.

Using unnecessarily complex words doesn't make your work stronger. And if you get the meaning slightly wrong, you'll cause more confusion.

You definitely don't need to dumb down for readers, and you should use precise language and technical terms where necessary. Just don't throw in long words for the sake of it.

Watch out for:

- **Jargon** – unless you're writing for a very particular audience.

- **Slang or regional phrases** – these may mean something different, or nothing at all, to your readers.

- **Words with a Latin route** - often long formal-sounding words (e.g. "prevaricate").

Further Reading on Clarity

[Are You Writing With Clarity?](#) – by Skellie, on Copyblogger

Aimed at bloggers, this article runs through some of the important features of *clear* writing. If you write for the internet in any form, you'll find it useful.

[Improving Sentence Clarity](#) – by Chris Berry and Allen Brizee on OWL (Purdue Online Writing Lab)

An article with tons of specific information and examples on how to structure your sentences for maximum clarity. Covers issues like using parallel constructions (something which I often see writers getting wrong).

#4: Tone

Some writers have great content, but struggle to convey their ideas in an engaging way. Unless you're writing a thesis or a textbook, you'll want to avoid a dry, academic tone – it makes it hard for readers to get through your piece.

Many "rules" of writing have been relaxed over the past few decades. Outside academia, it's perfectly acceptable to use contractions ("don't" instead of "do not"), to write in the first person, to start sentences with "and" and "but", and so on.

If you're writing non-fiction – blog posts, magazine articles or popular books, for instance – then you'll want to adopt a conversational tone. This isn't just a great way to establish a sense of rapport and connection with your reader, it also tends to make the writing process easier for you.

A Conversational Tone

Conversational writing is informal and friendly in style. Unlike academic or legal writing, it uses the first person ("I" or "we") and the second person ("you").

Here's an example, from Copyblogger's [The Best of Copyblogger 2010](#):

> Every year on the 24th of December, we tell you we're taking the rest of the year off. And every year, we instead slip in a "Best of Copyblogger" post before New Year's just in case you missed something from the past year.

You often hear advice to "write like you speak". This works as a good rule of thumb – but it's not always much help when you're struggling with how to write (or rewrite) a particular passage.

To make your writing more conversational:

- **Write as directly as possible.** Use the active voice, not the passive voice (see [Clarity](#) for more on this).

- **Use contractions.** Write *don't* instead of *do not* and *I'm* instead of *I am*.

- In general, **use shorter, simpler words**. For instance, write *eat* not *consume*.

- **Address the reader directly as "you".** Unless you really need to, don't talk to your readers as a group ("some of you may remember...") because each person will be reading alone.

There are a few conversational features that you'll probably want to avoid:

- **Think carefully about any clichés** ("cool as a cucumber", "easy as pie") – sometimes, a common phrase is appropriate and useful, other times, a cliché dilutes your meaning.

- In real life conversation, we often break off sentences midway, leave thoughts unfinished, or go on sudden diversions. By changes in tone and pitch, we can still make our meaning clear. In writing, **your grammar and punctuation matter.**

- **Be careful if you're using irony or sarcasm**. These tones come across well face-to-face, but they can be misinterpreted in writing.

- **Avoid regional slang**, unless you're writing for a local audience. Some phrases are specific to particular states or countries, and you may leave readers baffled or alienated.

Of course, not every piece of writing is conversational. If you're writing fiction, for instance, you might well be working in the third person (he/she). Academic essays will require a particularly formal tone – avoiding the use of "I", for instance.

This brings us on to *register*.

Keeping a Consistent Register

The *register* of a piece of writing is its level of formality. You might have a formal register *("I am writing in response to your letter dated 01/01/11")* or a very informal one *("Yo John, you gonna be at the party??").* Most likely, the writing you do will fall somewhere in the middle.

In fiction, you may be writing in a higher register (e.g. historical fiction or fantasy) or a lower one (contemporary or young adult fiction).

Keeping the register consistent means paying close attention to the words you pick. Think of the difference between "dosh" (low), "money" (neutral) and "remuneration" (high), for instance.

If the register slips, it's jarring for your reader. A very informal word in an otherwise slang-free piece disrupts the flow, just as an overly formal word or phrase does.

How to Vary Your Tone

Of course, there'll be times when you want to vary your tone and create a different mood for the reader. You might want to go from an inspirational tone to an instructional one, or contrast a playful tone with a more solemn one.

In fiction, you may want to use change the tone of your language to help reinforce lighter and darker moments in the plot. Your tone can make it clear that you disapprove of character's actions, or that you're treating your story humourously.

A sudden shift in tone can jar the reader, so don't switch mid-paragraph. It often helps to use a scene break (in fiction) or a subheading (non-fiction) when there's a sudden change – or alternatively, you can gradually lighten or darken your tone.

Although your *tone* will change, your *voice* – the personality of your writing – will not. Think about your speaking voice and tone: your tone is a way of using your voice, a subset of it.

Here are a couple of examples of tone, from Edgar Allen Poe's *The Pit and the Pendulum*:

> My worst thoughts, then, were confirmed. The blackness of eternal night encompassed me. I struggled for breath. The intensity of the darkness seemed to oppress and stifle me. The atmosphere was intolerably close. I still lay quietly, and made effort to exercise my reason. I brought to mind the inquisitorial proceedings, and attempted from that point to deduce my real condition. The sentence had passed; and it appeared to me that a very long interval of time had since elapsed. Yet not for a moment did I suppose myself actually dead.

In this passage, the tone is consistent. Although the narrator is clearly in distress ("I struggled for breath" … "oppress and stifle me"), he's thinking clearly and rationally – and this is reflected in the matter-of-fact nature of the language and the clear, grammatical sentences.

Compare this with:

> Amid the thought of the fiery destruction that impended, the idea of the coolness of the well came over my soul like balm. I rushed to its deadly brink. I threw my straining vision below. The glare from the enkindled roof illumined its inmost recesses. Yet, for a wild moment, did my spirit refuse to comprehend the meaning of what I saw. At length it forced—it wrestled its way into my soul—it burned itself in upon my shuddering reason.—Oh! for a voice to speak!—oh! horror!—oh! any horror but this!

Here, we see a shift in tone, heralded by a narrative event. This extract starts off with more fear and energy than first piece, with words like "rushed" (compare with "lay quietly" above). But the narrator's moment of horrified realisation comes with a change in tone, with a much more spoken-voice style – *Oh! for a voice to speak! – oh! horror! – oh! any horror but this!*

The words are emotional, unlike the measured rationality of the first passage. The sentence is broken up and fragmented, reflecting the near-madness of the narrator.

(You can read the rest of the story [here on enotes](#) or in any collection of Poe's work.)

In your own writing, you can vary your tone by:

- Using more emotional words – perhaps making an appeal to the reader, or heightening the tension in a novel.

- Having shorter, more forceful sentences – or longer, more relaxed ones.

- Focusing on how your words convey a particular mood. For instance, "brink" means the same as "edge", but has connotations like *danger*.

Further Reading on Tone

Formal and Informal Writing from SUNY Geneseo Writing Guide

This article has a good explanation of register, and offers points which formal writing (such as academic essays) should typically adhere to. Of course, if you're *not* writing essays, you can read through the advice here and do the opposite!

Tone: A Matter of Attitude from the Guide to Grammar and Writing

This is aimed at students, but it's applicable to most writers. Good guidance on tone, with a couple of clear examples of different types of tone, and a table showing some of the different tones you might adopt.

#5: Grammar

Does the word "grammar" make you wince? Perhaps you're yawning already. Or perhaps you're anxious – grammar seems like a bit of a mystery to you.

Grammar is the set of rules that govern how a language works. You already know plenty of grammar, whether you realise it or not.

You know that *I ate the sandwich* is good English, but *I the sandwich ate* isn't. This is the "subject – verb – object" structure that forms basic sentences. ("I" is the subject, "ate" is the verb and "the sandwich" is the object.)

In this chapter, I'm going to explain some of the common myths about grammar – and also point out some common mistakes.

Grammar Myths

Myth #1: Don't Split an Infinitive

An infinitive is a verb with the "to" attached, like *to go* or *to run* or *to love.*

In many languages (like Latin, which old grammarians were fond of), infinitives are a single word (the Latin for "to love", for instance, is "amare"). Obviously, you can't split up a single word. There's no real reason, though, not to split the infinitive in English – *if* your sentence reads better that way.

For instance,

"To boldly go where no man has gone before" sounds more natural than *"To go boldly..."*

"I promise to always love you" sounds heartfelt, but *"I promise to love you always"* seems stilted and old-fashioned.

Just be careful not to create too big a gap between the "to" and the verb word. Don't write *"I promise to, all my life, every single day, every hour, love you."*

Myth #2: Don't End a Sentence With a Preposition

This is another unnecessary "rule" that often leads to clumsy sentences. Prepositions are words like "*to, on, over, under, for, while, during, with*" – they're to do with the relationship between the subject and object in space or time:

- The ball is *under* the garden table.

- She read from her book *during* the lecture.

So far so good. But sometimes, it seems most natural to have the preposition at the *end* of the sentence, especially in questions – where the object might be unknown:

- What did you do that *for*?

- Who should Mabel sit *with*?

Sure, you could rephrase these sentences to make them "correct" *("For what did you do that?")* or try to rewrite them somehow – but there's absolutely no need.

Myth #3: You Must Use "Whom" for the Object

Technically, "who" is used for the subject of a sentence and "whom" for the object. For instance:

- **Who** took my cake?

- She wondered **whom** to blame.

However, we're living in the 21st century, and very few people use "whom" in everyday language. Unless you're writing something very formal, like an academic paper, it's fine to use "who" instead. *(You might have noticed that I did just that in the "Who should Mabel sit with?" example.)*

Myth #4: Never Start a Sentence With "And" or "But"

You may well have been taught this one in school – I was. Nowadays, it only applies to fairly formal writing, like business letters and academic essays. It's absolutely fine to start sentences with "and" or "but" in other contexts.

The Oxford English Dictionary has examples of sentences starting with *and* and *but* going right back to the 10th century – so it's hardly some newfangled trend.

You can stop worrying about trying to stick to *any* of those outdated principles. Hurrah!

Instead, check your work for some all-too-easy mistakes...

Common Grammar Mistakes

Mistake #1: Confusing "It's" and "Its"

The word *it's* is short for "it is". The word *its* means "belonging to it" – compare with "his" and "hers".

Here are some examples:

- It's my cake.

- It's raining.

- I've plugged in its charger. When it's finished, will its light stop flashing?

An easy check to make sure you've got the right one is to replace "it's" with "it is" and see if the sentence still works.

Mistake #2: Incorrectly Used Apostrophes

It's not just "it's / its" that confuses writers. Apostrophes in general are easy to get wrong.

They work like this:

1. **Plurals *do not* have an apostrophe:**

- I have four sisters.

- She brought two batches of cookies and three cakes.

2. **Possessives *do* have an apostrophe:**

- This is my sister's bedroom.

- Where did you put the dog's food bowl?

.... except possessive pronouns (his, hers, its) *don't* have an apostrophe:

- This bedroom is hers.

- Where did you put his food bowl?

3. **Missing letters are (usually) indicated by an apostrophe:**

- Do not = don't

- Should not = shouldn't

- I am = I'm

- He is = he's

- We are = we're

4. **Names ending in an –s often cause confusion.**

There are two ways to create the plurals:

- *Charles'* or *Charles's*

Different experts will advise you differently on this. Neither is really incorrect, though – so I'd suggest that you pick one form and use it consistently.

Mistake #3: Their, They're and There; Your and You're

Some words *sound* exactly the same – but they're spelt differently, and using the wrong one can alter the meaning of your sentence.

- *Their* is the possessive form of *they*.

- *They're* is short for *they are*.

- *There* relates to a particular place.

For instance:

- Their dog bit my cat.

- They're going to the theatre.

- Your ball is over there.

Any time you're not sure, stop and think, and the correct version will usually be obvious.

Similarly easily confused words are *your* and *you're*.

- *Your* is the possessive form of *you*.

- *You're* is short for *you are.*

For instance:

- Your dog big my cat.

- You're going to eat a WHOLE cake?

Watch out too for "we're" = "we are". I've seen this misspelt as "were" which is a different word entirely!

Mistake #4: Using "of" When You Mean "'ve"

When you say aloud *"I could've..."* or *"I would've..."* it probably sounds like *"I could ov" and "I would ov"*.

Some writers get confused and write this as *I could of* and *I would of*.

This is incorrect. The *'ve* is the shortened form of have:

- I could have = I could've

- I would have = I would've

Mistake #5: Confusing "Less" and "Fewer"

This isn't a really awful mistake – lots of people get it wrong – but it's not one of those "rules" that's been recently relaxed.

The words *less* and *fewer* aren't interchangeable.

Less is used for something that you can't count – something that's not divided into discreet units (e.g. "water")

Fewer is used for something that you can count – something which you could have two of (e.g. "glasses of water")

For instance:

- *Less* property, *fewer* houses

- *Less* time, *fewer* hours

- *Less* space, *fewer* square meters

...and so on. You may need to stop and think for a second to get this one right – just ask "can I count it?" or "can I have two of it?"

Most people only get this wrong half the time. I've never seen a native English speaker write the incorrect "fewer time" but I've seen plenty of people write the equally incorrect "less hours".

How to Avoid Grammatical Mistakes

It's frustrating to make mistakes in a piece of writing – because however good your writing is in other respects, the little slips tend to get noticed by readers, and they make you look like a poor writer (even when you're not).

To minimise mistakes:

- **Brush up your grammar.** Go over this chapter again if you're not sure about anything, and read through Grammar 101 on Daily Writing Tips – see the link in Further Reading, below.

- **Make a note of any areas where you have particular problems** (maybe apostrophes, or distinguishing between "its" and "it's"). Pay close attention to these areas in your writing.

- If a sentence doesn't seem quite right, **try rephrasing it a different way.**

- **Break long, complicated sentences into shorter ones.** It's easier to get these right, and they'll probably flow better for the reader too.

- **Always read over your work**, don't send it off or hit "publish" on your blog without proofreading.

- Ideally, **get someone else to proofread your work too**. It's easy to miss mistakes like confusing modifiers, because *you* know what you mean.

Further Reading on Grammar

Daily Writing Tips – Grammar – mostly written by Maeve Maddox

Daily Writing Tips has a brilliant archive of posts on grammar (they also have posts on all sorts of other writing topics). For any grammar-related question, head here first.

There's also a Grammar 101 series of posts, and a free ebook that you can download if you subscribe to the blog: The Basic English Grammar eBook.

#6: Economy

One of the best ways to make your writing strong is by *taking words out*.

That might seem counter-intuitive. But by pruning away weak words, you'll make your prose stronger and punchier.

Most writers have a tendency to overwrite. They'll struggle to get going, producing saggy introductions. They'll sound hesitant, including lots of qualifying phrases like "I believe" and "in my opinion".

Don't worry about the economy of your writing during the first draft. Just get it all down on paper, then go through and tidy it up.

(I do this myself: the previous paragraph read "I'd advise not worrying about..." until I went through and edited the whole ebook.)

So what can you safely cut out?

Ideas to Cut

Before you get into the nitty-gritty of economy – making sure that your sentences, phrases and words aren't redundant or tautological – consider cutting on a grander scale.

- Have you spelt out a "moral of the story" for your reader which they don't need?

- Have you laboured over a tangential point, when you could provide a hyperlink to more information?

- Have you brought in a half-finished idea which needs to be an article in its own right?

- Do two chapters of your book, or two scenes of your novel, cover similar ground?

These sorts of questions are best answered by reading through the whole draft in one sitting (or as close to it as you can manage) – in an extended piece of writing, it's easy to end up saying the same thing twice or belabouring a point.

Sentences to Cut

Look out for paragraphs where you've said the same thing twice. It's easy to do, especially when you're still clarifying your thoughts as you write. Find a stronger way of putting it, and just say it once.

When you're writing, it's important to consider the reader. It's not enough to just write without thinking about how your words will be received. You should keep the reader in mind as you write.

Think of the reader as you write.

Phrases to Cut

Delete any redundant or tautological phrases (where you've said the same thing twice).

For instance:

- The ~~annual~~ garden party is held every year. *("annual" means "yearly")*

- He phoned me at 6am ~~in the morning~~. (*"am"* means *"morning"*)

- I looked at each ~~and every~~ page.

Occasionally, you *may* want a phrase like "each and every" for effect – but be very careful not to overdo this.

Other phrases are overly wordy and can be replaced by a single phrase:

- At this point in time → Now

- Due to the fact that → Because

- Has a tendency to → Tends

And some phrases are unnecessary in all but the most cautious of writing. Look out for these and, unless you've got a really good reason to include them, cut them entirely:

- It is my opinion
- It seems that
- The point that I am trying to make is
- What I mean to say is
- In a manner of speaking

- In other words
- In fact
- I believe
- I think

(This isn't an exhaustive list, just some common examples.)

Words to Cut

Individual words can sap the power from otherwise strong sentences. Compare these:

- I was very angry about the really foolish decisions that she made.

- I was ~~very~~ angry about the ~~really~~ foolish decisions ~~that~~ she made.

- I was angry about the foolish decisions she made.

The first version uses "very" and "really" as intensifiers, but these words don't make the reader feel the emotion any more strongly. A better choice would be to use *"furious"* or *"infuriated"* instead of "angry", if that was closer to the writer's meaning.

The word "that" can be cut with no loss of meaning.

Words to watch out for are:

- Really
- Quite
- Very

- Perhaps
- Often
- That

- Some (and sometimes)
- Generally / usually / normally

You get the idea. Sometimes, you *will* need these words. But, often, you can cut them out – and your writing will be stronger.

A good test is to remove the word in question and see if the sentence still works. Let's take the sentence above:

- But, *often*, you can cut them out – and your writing will be stronger.

- But you can cut them out – and your writing will be stronger.

In this case, the "often" is important (I'm saying that you can usually but not always cut these words).

Here's an example where you probably don't need a word:

- The people in my city are *generally* friendly.

- The people in my city are friendly.

Depending on context, you might decide you do need "generally" (perhaps you're about to warn the reader of a dangerous downtown area in your city). Otherwise, cut it.

Further Reading on Economy

Writing Concise Sentences – from the Guide to Grammar and Writing

This page gives loads of examples of words and phrases that can be cut out, covering issues like clichés, redundancies and tautologies. It gives clear explanations throughout.

Are Vampire Words Sucking the Life Out of Your Writing? – by me, on Copyblogger

A light-hearted look at the words which suck the power out of your sentences. Covers similar material to this chapter, but with an extended vampire analogy.

Redundant Phrases – from Garbl's Writing Center

A huge list of poor phrases, with suggested changes. For instance "absolutely complete" becomes "complete".

#7: Heart

You can have an expert grasp of grammar, pacing, tone and style – but write prose which never touches anyone.

One of the main reasons I write is to reach people. I want to communicate a message and make a difference. I know that I'll never do that by churning out content that's *good* but lacks heart.

Truly great writing comes out of emotions – the heart. (If that's too girly for you, call it the gut.) Great writing is powerful. It can make readers laugh, cry, take action. It's rich with voice – *your* voice.

How to Put Your Heart Into Your Writing

- **Write on a topic you're enthusiastic about.** Even if your grammar isn't perfect or your pacing isn't quite right, your passion will shine through.

- **Write when you're angry.** Write about the injustice that you see in the world. Use that anger to craft a powerful, punchy message.

- **Be brave.** We often hesitate to tackle the things which we deeply care about. It's tough to put your soul out there on the page – but it's also very rewarding.

- **Don't trudge through writing.** If you start on a piece which seems mundane or tedious, stop and try something different.

- **Let your first draft spill out.** Don't self-censor by tweaking clunky sentences or by editing out things which feel too close to the bone. Put it all down – you can decide what to cut later.

- **Think about the reader.** What do you want to tell them? How do you want this piece of writing to touch them? It's easy to lose your perspective while you're in the thick of writing – and remembering the reader at the end of the process helps you reconnect to the *point* of it all.

How to Add Heart When You Don't Really Care

Sometimes, you have to write about something that holds no real interest for you. Maybe you're being paid by a client, or you're doing it as a favour for a friend. Whatever the reason, you end up writing something *dull*. You're frustrated – perhaps putting off writing for as long as possible – because you really don't care about the content.

Instead of struggling on:

- **Look for an angle.** Perhaps you've written variations on "How to Set Great Goals" a few dozen times, but you could spin a *what-not-to-do:* "Goal-Setting for Losers: How to Fail." By making a piece interesting or funny, you'll put heart into it.

- **Focus on the reader.** Let's say you're writing a dry technical document. You can put heart into it by making sure it's easy to read, clear and as concise as possible.

- **Find the story.** Adding *people* can bring a piece to life. You might include an anecdote, make up a fable, or search beyond the headlines to make the news relevant.

- **Bring what you value into your writing.** For instance, instead of just going through the SMART goal setting framework, you'll also encourage readers to set goals that help others, not just themselves.

What Writing From the Heart Looks Like

When you write from the heart, you can see the effects in the word choices you make:

- You use the word "I" more often than usual

- You use more emotional language, like "love" or "hate" or "angry" or "scared"

- You may have hesitant or frustrated phrases like "I don't know" or "Maybe I'm wrong". In the right context, these can make your writing powerful and engaging.

Even when you're writing strong, passionate content, don't forget the other six pillars of great writing. Take time to check for clumsy phrasing or poor grammar. Revising your work doesn't make your writing "fake" in any way – it allows it to shine.

This is an example of heart-felt writing from someone who brings heart, guts and all to her work, Naomi Dunford of IttyBiz.com:

> I'm afraid if I move to the country, **I will become isolated**. I'm afraid that if I'm unhappy there, that will mean I'm vacuous and shallow.
>
> I'm afraid that if we move to the city, I will be happy and Jamie will not. I'm afraid I won't be able to enjoy it because of the **guilt**.
>
> I'm afraid of finding out five years from now that **we should have had more kids**. I'm much more afraid of actually having more kids.
>
> I'm afraid that now that I'm living my dream, I will be **struck by a fatal illness** and not live to enjoy it. (The dream, not the fatal illness.) I'm afraid that if I tell anyone that fear, then I will jinx myself and the fear will come true.

(I recommend reading the whole post, [Entrepreneurship: What To Do When You're Scared Sh*tless](#). As with all Naomi's content, it comes with a strong language warning.)

This piece has energy behind it that comes from really *meaning* it. You can see how Naomi's words alone show that this is from the heart: she writes "I" a lot, she uses emotionally-charged words like "afraid" and "guilt" and "fear" and "jinx".

Beyond the words, the *content* here is heart-felt. It's fresh and honest. Naomi doesn't do what a lesser writer might try, and go through a list of typical fears – "I'm afraid of losing money" or "I'm afraid of failing my customers". She relates some very specific, personal fears like being "struck by a fatal illness".

Try it Yourself

Whatever you write, put more than your cleverness and book-knowledge into it.

Pour something *real* into your words. Use what you know in your heart or in your guts.

Yes, it will be hard and scary at times – but it's worth it.

Further Reading on Heart

[Ten Steps to Finding Your Writing Voice](#) by Holly Lisle on HollyLisle.com

Voice and heart are very much connected in writing – if you feel that your writing lacks voice, that's probably because it lacks heart. Holly has ten great ways to bring heart to your writing.

[Find Your Writing Voice – By Starting With Your Heart](#) by me, on Aliventures

This is my story about how I found my own writing voice, in my fiction and my non-fiction writing.

About the Author

Ali Luke is a writer and writing coach living in Oxford in the UK.

Since 2008, she's been making her living online – through freelancing and by making money from her own writing projects.

She blogs regularly at Aliventures, covering topics related to writing and the writing life. You can hire her as a writing coach for one-to-one help and support.

Her other writing-related ebooks include:

- The Blogger's Guide to Effective Writing (2010) - $29

- The Staff Blogging Course (2009) - $19

Ali graduated from the University of Cambridge in 2006 with a degree in English Literature, and took a Masters in Creative and Life Writing at Goldsmiths College, London, finishing in 2010.