



Simple Business Writing

Cut the crap

Banish the BS

Ditch management speak

8 ways to transform complexity, jargon and mumbo jumbo into clear, simple and engaging text

Why we must fight back against the bull.

Do you like things simple?

I do too. I've always been a stickler for simple language in marketing communications. I've always tried to avoid jargon, gobbledeygook and most of all, long passive sentences.

But I'm still astonished by some of the complex language and mumbo jumbo some companies put in their communications.

How about this example from a well-known financial services company:

“Key to this is shifting the business from a product sales led focus to an approach based on end to end customer experience and data driven insight, as well as moving beyond the rational economics behind much traditional financial communication, towards creating a positive emotional resonance in customers with innovative engaging marketing using innovative digital channels and capabilities.”

I think it means, “Let's stop talking about products and talk to customers about what they want.”

I recently received an email from a marketing agency wanting to set up a meeting. Let me simply share with you the beauty of their bull.

“Our unique, proven and collaborative approach of combining doctorate level theoretical analytics, strategy and world-class creative execution delivers ground-breaking, game-changing initiatives for ambitious brands.”

Incredible.

Why do companies communicate like this?

- Perhaps they think that more complex language sounds more professional?
- Maybe they think big words offer more legal protection?
- Could be that they write their communications by committee. And by the time everyone has had their say, the result is a confused mess?

It's time to change. It's time to fight back against the bull. Have a look at some business copy. Any industry. Any company. As a customer would you be happy to read it? Is it engaging? Can you understand it?

- If something is **"unique"** you know that it is just the same as everything else.
- If it is **"very unique"** you know the copy writer doesn't realise that you can't have degrees of uniqueness.
- "Innovative"** is equally meaningless, **"game-changing"** even more so.
- And what about **"value added"** or how something has been **"optimised"** or **"finessed"** so that it attains the **"scalability"** to become **"world-class"** and **"impactful"**.

Let's talk in plain English. That's how most people like to communicate. Verbally and in writing.

When you work in an industry of complex products and processes you owe it to your clients and each other to make communications simple. Resist the people who comment on your copy and want to reintroduce complex language unless there is a legal reason for doing so. The fact that they "wouldn't have written it that way" is not good enough.

What's in this eBook.

I'm going to give you 8 tips for writing Simpler Business copy.

I've used the content of this eBook to run courses on Simpler Business Copy. When I run this course in live groups, participants bring along some business copy they've already written. Could be a brochure or an article. We then apply each tip in turn. It's a fantastic way to see how complex copy transforms into simpler copy after each tip.

You could do this yourself with some copy of your own, or just apply them as you write.

Here are the 8 tips we'll cover

- Tip 1 - Active not Passive Sentences
- Tip 2 - Shorten long and padded text
- Tip 3- How to dump most adverbs and adjectives
- Tip 4 - The "saying of this"
- Tip 5 - Ditch "there is" and "there are"
- Tip 6 - Root out "to be"
- Tip 7 - Condense paragraphs and sentences
- Tip 8 - Getting rid of jargon and management speak

I hope you enjoy the tips and can introduce them into your own writing.

Now let's come up with a big idea for the talk. This will guide you as you put together the messages, and calls to action.

Tip 1- Active not Passive Sentences

Which of these sentences reads better to you?

“One thousand pounds was donated to the children’s charity.”

or

“We donated one thousand pounds to the children’s charity.”

The first sentence uses the “**passive voice**”. The second the “**active voice**”. Businesses, especially big corporates, love passive language.

With the active voice, the subject and verb relationship is straightforward. The subject does the work, and the verb moves the sentence along.

With the passive voice, the subject of the sentence doesn’t do anything. Some other “agent” or unnamed “power” does the work. The result is weak writing. In fact you could add the words, “...by Muppets” to the first sentence and it would make sense.

“One thousand pounds was donated to the children’s charity by Muppets.”

Perhaps this is why Corporates like passive so much. It depersonalises the writing. It masks responsibility, for example:

“Sorry but your cheque wasn’t processed on time.”

Sounds like buck passing, doesn't it? Who didn't process the cheque?

"Sorry the accounts team didn't process your cheque on time."

Better. An active sentence. But it still hides responsibility.

"Sorry we didn't process your cheque on time."

Even better. An active sentence and taking responsibility.

Here's another example:

Passive: "There is a wealth of expertise shown by accountants when talking to their clients."

Active: "Accountants show a wealth of expertise when talking to their clients."

And another example:

Passive: "The health and safety computer-based training must be completed each year by all members of staff".

Active: "Each year, all members of staff must complete the health and safety computer-based training."

You don't have to seek out and cut all passive language. But in business copy, where most writing is passive, someone who takes time to get active will stand out from the pack.

How to get active

Spotting passive language takes practice. Over time you'll find it gets easier. To save time you can use the grammar settings in Word, or software like Grammarly or Hemingway Editor to spot passive language for you.

Using active language will transform your writing. Of all the tips in this eBook, getting active will immediately make your copy less dull and more engaging.

Tip 2- Shorten long and padded text

Why do businesses use long and padded text? Maybe they feel it makes copy stronger, more professional or legally binding?

Most of the time it does none of that. It just makes the copy longer and more padded. For example.

“But the fact of the matter is...” – long and padded.

“But...” – short and sweet.

Long and Padded	Short and Sweet
Along the lines of	Like
As a matter of fact	In fact
At all times	Always
At the present time	Now. Currently
At this point in time	Now. Currently
Because of the fact that	Because
By means of	By
Draw your attention to	Point out
Due to the fact that	Because
For the purpose of	For
For the reason that	Because
Long and Padded	Short and Sweet

Have the ability to	Be able to. Can
In the light of the fact that	Because
In order to	To
In regards to	On. About
In spite of the fact that	Although. Though
In the event that	If
In the final analysis	Finally
In the nature of	Like
Make decisions about	Decide
On the occasion of	When
On two separate occasions	Twice
The majority of	Most
The people who are located in	The people in
The pie chart that is included in	The pie chart in
Until such time as	Until
With reference to	Of. On. For. About
The level of water rose	The water rose
In the neighbourhood of	About

Those are just some examples.

Always be on the lookout for flabby, padded language and shorten it.

It does take time before spotting it becomes second nature. More so if you've worked in a big corporate environment.

But if you're aware of it, then brief will become normal for you.

Tip 3 - Dump most adjectives and adverbs

Students learning creative writing know that overuse of adverbs and adjectives makes their writing flabby. So they cut overusing them or dump them full stop.

It's a good tip for just about any writing. Including business writing. Some people imagine that cramming in adjectives and adverbs will give their writing colour. Or help create more descriptive images. But they do just the opposite. They add clutter that slows the reader down.

Ditch these over-used adverbs and adjectives.

Adjectives

A noun is a person, place, or thing – and an adjective describes the noun in more detail (for example “successful business people”). Choose nouns that work, rather than using adjectives to flower them up.

Here are some examples.

- Instead of “A large man” try “a giant”.
- No need for “The man died after a fatal shooting”. Dump the word “fatal”. If he died it was fatal wasn't it?
- Not “A visual treat for the eyes”. Dump the word “visual”. A treat for the eyes is going to be visual isn't it?

Adverbs

A verb contains all the action: writing, editing, getting published, signing copies of your book for fans. An adverb helps describe the action but isn't essential. And again they can clutter your writing.

Here are some examples.

- Instead of “ran quickly” try “sprinted”.
- Not “knocked loudly” what about “pounded”?

If you scan through your writing it's easy to spot the words ending in “y”. Once you've found them, either dump them or change the verb instead.

- Really
- Totally
- Actually
- Seemingly
- Suddenly
- Probably
- Hopefully
- Perfectly
- Viciously
- Usually

And worst of all is “very”. Always try and find an alternative to using very.

Here are some examples:

- ❑ Instead of “very simple” try “basic”
- ❑ Instead of “very tasty” try “delicious”
- ❑ Instead of “very rich” try “wealthy”
- ❑ Instead of “very short” try “brief”
- ❑ Instead of “very noisy” try “deafening”
- ❑ Instead of “very hard” try “difficult”

If you Google “alternatives to very” you’ll find hundreds of examples. All of them will make your writing read better.

Tip 4 - The saying of this

Another characteristic of dull business writing is the “saying of this”. You’ll have seen this everywhere and you might even do it yourself. People write “the taking of minutes” instead of “taking minutes.” Or, “the measuring of feedback” instead of “measuring feedback.”

If you catch yourself doing this try taking out “the” and “of.” You’ll halve your word count but say the same thing.

Here are some examples.

- Instead of “the fuelling of the van” try “fuelling the van”.
- Not “the rebooting of the system” just “rebooting the system”.
- No need for “the handing out of the bonuses” when “handing out bonuses” will do.

You can use the find and replace function in your word processor to search for “of” and “the” in your writing. You’ll then find examples of “the saying of this” and you can make them simpler.

Tip 5 - Ditch “there is” and “there are”

We often overuse the two phrases “there is” and “there are” in our writing. When you’re writing an outline it makes sense to use them because it lets you write quickly.

But it deadens the copy and makes it dull. So change it once you’re done drafting.

For example in your draft you might write, “There is a new and powerful app that will relieve the stress and frustration caused by planning projects.”

Later, as you edit try banishing “there is” from the copy.

“A new and powerful app relieves the stress and frustration caused by planning projects.”

A quick tweak to the verb and the sentence reads better.

- ❑ Instead of “There are three strategies you can use to make your writing simpler.” try “You can use three strategies to make your writing simpler.”
- ❑ Instead of “There is a need to compliance check every marketing brochure.” try “We must compliance check every marketing brochure.”
- ❑ Instead of “There are elephants in Africa.” try “Elephants live in Africa.”

When you've finished drafting your article or eBook or report, use the find and replace facility in your word processor to highlight every "there is" or "there are".

Banish them all. Tweak your verbs where necessary. Your writing will come alive.

Tip 6 - Root out “to be”

It’s difficult to write without using “is” or one of the other forms of the “to be” verb:

- am
- are
- was
- were

These verbs often don’t give a good feel for what you’re trying to say. You want to use verbs that describe an action or create an image.

For example, say you want to get your reader to understand the detoxifying properties of green tea.

You might write:

“Green tea is a powerful detoxifier.” Sounds weak doesn’t it? It lacks punch.

Try rooting out the verb “is,” and find a better, more visual alternative. When you replace “is, am, are, was and were” with better verbs, try and make them as powerful as possible.

“Green tea destroys toxins that threaten your health.”

Here’s a few examples.

- Instead of “David is afraid of internal audit checks.” try “Internal audit checks scare David.”

- ❑ Instead of “David is afraid of internal audit checks.” try “Internal audit checks scare David.”
- ❑ Instead of “The business lunch was delicious.” try “The business lunch tasted delicious.”
- ❑ Instead of “The sales director was the author of the business strategy.” try “The sales director wrote the business strategy.”

And one of the best ways to root out “to be” is to make sure you use the active voice as we discussed on Tip 2.

“The car was parked by the garage attendant.” – passive

“The garage attendant parked the car.” – active

Once again, the find and replace function on your word processor will help you help you spot the verb “to be” so you can change them to spruce up your writing.

Tip 7- Condense paragraphs and sentences

This tip is beautifully simple.

Look at your copy overall and see how long the paragraphs and sentences are.

Then challenge yourself to condense the paragraphs and sentences.

- Try and condense each paragraph down into a single sentence.
- Try and condense any stand-alone sentences into shorter sentences, maybe only a few words.

This can be quite tough. But it's worth it. You must make sure you don't lose the meaning of the paragraphs and sentences. But stick with it and it will make your writing simpler and more engaging.

And now let's move onto Tip 8, which is perhaps the most important.

Tip 8 - Get rid of jargon and management speak

“Let’s take that offline, do a gap analysis to identify synergies, think outside the box to stretch the envelope, and move the goal posts to put ticks in boxes.”

Management speak and jargon ruins business copy. It puts customers off. Everyone has a laugh about how ludicrous it is when we talk about it in the pub. But many people still use it.

It’s as if they feel they need to sing from the same hymn sheet. Oops! Sorry.

Be on the lookout for this gobbledygook. Don’t talk about “bandwidth” or suggest to someone you “touch base”.

Think of easy ways to replace management speak with plain English alternatives.

- Helicopter View – how about an overview?
- Let’s take this offline – you could say, “let’s have a chat” or “How about a coffee?”
- We haven’t enough bandwidth – you’re really saying you’re too busy.
- Let’s get all our ducks in a row – please just get organised.
- Actionable – as in “actionable tips” or “actionable ideas”. Tips and ideas are just fine as they are.

Then there are nouns that management ruthlessly turn into verbs.

For example:

“Marketing have been tasked to produce a report.”

That’s a passive sentence.

“We tasked marketing with producing a report”.

That’s active but it’s still management speak. A task is a noun not a verb.

“We asked Marketing to produce a report”.

That’s so much better

Worst of all, in my opinion, is “impact”. This is another noun managers have corrupted. The BBC are notorious for this.

- “The stock market crash impacted our ability to trade.”
- “David’s broken leg impacted his performance.”

“Affect” is a much better word.

- “The stock market crash affected our ability to trade.”
- “David’s broken leg affected his performance.

Using affected will have a great impact on your writing. Oops again!

Here’s some more jargon and management speak to get rid of. What would be better?

- Evidenced
- Utilised
- Synergy
- Upskill
- Decisioning

- Ongoing
- Deliverable
- Resourced
- Paradigm
- Onboarding

Thanks For Reading

I hope you enjoyed the guide and that I gave you some ideas about how you can make your copy simpler and more engaging.

If you need help with your marketing strategy, please get in touch.

About Roger



Roger helps companies nail their offer, set their goals and plan their marketing activity in a world where business BS and complexity threaten to stifle success.

An experienced marketing professional helping businesses with their marketing strategy, content, and social media, Roger clocked up many years in the 'big corporate' world as marketing director of several UK financial services brands before getting out of all that and starting his own consultancy.

He now uses his expertise to guide his clients in designing engaging marketing and is known as a prolific content creator and podcaster, and as a speaker. He's the host of the popular and award-winning Marketing and Finance Podcast.

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