

# Clear Writing Principles

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**PRINCIPLE 1**

**Keep sentences short.**

Sentences must vary in length to avoid boring your reader. But the average length should be short. Fifteen to 20 words per sentence is a good average.

Control sentence length by noticing the number of lines in each sentence. A typewritten line, or a line in average handwriting, averages 10 to 12 words. Remember to vary sentence length, but worry about those that run more than two lines.

**PRINCIPLE 2**

**Prefer the simple to the complex.**

This principle does not outlaw the use of a complex form. You need both simple and complex forms for clear expression. At times, the complex form may be best. So, if the right word is a big word, go ahead and use it. But if a shorter word does the job, use it. Such as:

INSTEAD OF	USE
accomplish	do
attempt	try
utilize	use
construct	build
deficiency	lack
equitable	fair
infrequent	rare
occurrence	event
terminate	end
requisite	required

Use compact substitutes for wordy phrases.

INSTEAD OF	USE
basic principles	principles
hollow tube	tube
mutual cooperation	cooperation
personal opinion	opinion
exactly equal	equal
consensus of opinion	consensus
past history	history
ask the question	ask
still continues	continues

**PRINCIPLE 3**

**Avoid unnecessary words.**

Unnecessary words usually are included unconsciously.

INSTEAD OF	USE
on the order of magnitude of	about
in the nature of	like
in view of the fact that	since
give encouragement to	encourage
make an adjustment in	adjust
is equipped with	has
avail yourself	use
a majority of	most
take into consideration	consider
large number of	many

**PRINCIPLE 4**

**Put action in your verbs.**

“The fullback hits the line.” That’s writing with an active verb. “The line is hit by the fullback.” In this sentence the verb is passive. The electricity has gone. The snap of action is no longer there.

INSTEAD OF	USE
Present design methods are predicated on the assumption that one-piece windshields are preferred by the public.	At present, designers assume the public prefers one-piece windshields.
When an application of wax is made to this surface a brilliance is imparted to it.	Waxing this surface brightens it.

**PRINCIPLE 5**

**Write more like you talk but leave out the ums and ahs.**

**PRINCIPLE 6**

**Use terms your reader can picture.**

Avoid fuzzy words. “Conditions,” “situations,” “facilities,” “inadequacies” are typical examples.

**PRINCIPLE 7**

**Write to express, not impress.**

Learn how to calculate a fog index and use it to test readability of your writing. Fog indexes measure the complexity of writing samples, and often provide a means of calculating

the reading or educational level required to understand a particular passage. Some fog indexes are available as computer software programs, or you may do the calculations yourself. Below is an example of a fog index you might try.

THE GUNNING FOG INDEX
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Select a sample at least 100 words long. Divide the total number of words in the sample by the number of sentences. This gives the average sentence length of the sample.</li> <li>2. Count the number of words with three or more syllables in the sample. Don't count words (a) that are capitalized; (b) that are combinations of short, easy words (such as “bookkeeper” or “butterfly”); (c) that are verb forms made into three syllables by adding -ed or -es (such as “created” or “trespasses”). Divide the total of such words by the number of words in your sample: for example, 15 long words divided by a sample 100 words long gives you 15 percent hard words in the passage.</li> <li>3. To get the fog index, add the sentence length and percentage of hard words. Multiply this total by 0.4. The answer corresponds to the years of education needed to easily understand the piece of writing.</li> </ol>

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**About Right Hat**

Right Hat specializes in strategic brand consulting and design for professional services firms. We work with firms, large and small, to create marketing programs that are memorable and transforming.