

The Art and Science of Being Believable

By Will Newman

Growing up, even though we sometimes didn't have enough money for food or shoes, we had books.

My mother made sure of that.

She read to my sister and me from before I can remember. Not just fairy tales. She read us Greek, Roman, and Norse myths. (I knew of Loki before I knew of President Eisenhower.)

She scrimped and saved to buy us the *World Book Encyclopedia* when I was just barely five.

My mother's greatest gift to me is my love of books, reading, and, most of all, words.

So I credit my mother (or maybe I should say "blame" her) for a quirk I have. When I'm writing or talking, I'll often come up with words like "obfuscate" before my mind drills down to "hide."

I'm not trying to show off. That's just the way my mind works.

This suited me well in high school and college. But in copywriting, that's another story.

Drop those fancy words out of your copy

Here's why my love of what I call fancy words is a problem. Take a look at this paragraph ...

To attain primacy in your chosen vocational pursuit of copywriting and its adjunct services, remember the significance of eschewing sesquipedalian rhetorical constructs and the necessity of writing in a manner that replicates instinctive vocal phrasing and intonation.

Huh?

Translation: To be a successful copywriter, write like you talk.

The field of study called Cognitive Fluency gives copywriters three important reasons for doing that.

The first has to do with a natural human tendency. When given a choice between reading something easy vs. something harder, we choose the easier one.

It's not laziness. We choose the easier path because it's most efficient. Your prospects have a great deal to do during the day. Easy wins out over harder, because easy helps us accomplish more of what we need and want to do.

So, on that basis alone, if your reader has trouble understanding your words, he's *not* going to reach for the dictionary. He's going to reach for the trash can.

The second reason is ***The "echo effect" ...***

Let's say you've grabbed your prospect's attention with your headline and lead, and he decides to bull through the body copy.

He keeps reading. But your words — even the way your words are presented on the page — produce an "echo effect." Here's how this goes.

Two psychologists at the University of Michigan published a study in the journal *Psychological Science*. One experiment had subjects read instructions for a simple neck exercise. One was written in an easy-to-read font, the other in a difficult-to-read font.

Both groups understood the instructions perfectly. Participants who had the easy-to-read instructions thought the exercise would be easy to do. The ones with the harder-to-read instructions expected the exercise would be considerably more difficult.

With other experiments, the researchers extended this echo effect beyond visual difficulty. They summarized their conclusions in the title of their paper: "If It's Hard to Read, It's Hard to Do."

If your words and your writing are hard to understand, your prospect's going to feel what you're asking him to do will be hard, as well.

But, if you think about it, you're also asking your prospect to believe you. Which brings up the question ...

Who are you going to believe?

And, that brings up the third reason to write the way you talk: Believability. One of the most important reasons to keep your writing easy-to-read is that it's *more believable* than complex writing.

Let's say you read something with long words, long sentences, and a complex structure. Without realizing it, you wonder, "What's he trying to hide?"

On the other hand, when you read something direct and clearly stated — you feel in your gut, "This guy's being straight with me."

Easy-to-read ... not simplistic!

All too often, writers will question the need to keep their writing easy-to-read. They worry that easy-to-read reflects a simple mind and simple ideas.

Far from the truth.

Straightforward writing is *not* immature. It's *not* dumbed down. It's writing that recognizes your reader's understanding is more important than the writer's ego.

My favorite novel is Cormack McCarthy's *The Road*. It's written at a level a fourth or fifth grader could read. If you've read it, though, you know it's anything but simple. However, it does have *simplicity of diction*.

Let's make this distinction. "Simplistic writing" lacks depth. It lacks substance, fresh ideas, and the ability to compel your reader forward.

But, simplicity of diction is exactly the type of writing you need to use to be a successful copywriter. It communicates without trying to impress. It may *sound* simple ... but does not simplify ideas.

What does this all mean for your prospect? And, for your copywriting success?

Easy-to-Read	Overly Complex
I can get it done quickly.	This will take too much time and effort.
What I'm being asked to do will be easy.	Oh, man, it's going to be hard.
I can believe this!	What's he trying to hide?
I'm going to do what he asks.	The waste basket for this.

"Write like you talk" is way more than some rule you've been told to follow. It's the soul of your copywriting success.

How do you know your writing is easy-to-read? And, what can you do to make it even better?

We'll be covering this over the next few weeks.

Tell me what you think ...

What are your thoughts about writing easy-to-read copy? Is it easy for you? Is it hard? What strategies do *you* use to make sure your writing is easy-to-read?

You can tell us in the comment section. I'd love to hear what you have to say.

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22 Responses to "The Art and Science of Being Believable"

Note: Some comments below may pertain to an earlier version of this page

Sounds like we had similar backgrounds growing up Will. My Mom got the Encyclopaedia Britannica for us. I had it so bad I was a volunteer in our High School library.

I find it easier to write simple copy the more I write. I ran the FK on the last sales letter I wrote. And it was 6.5. There were no passive sentences. On the first draft. It comes easier with practice.

David Tomen – over a year ago

I refer to people who write overly complex as unfit for human consumption. It flows strong in our schools, and I wonder how they expect kids to understand them. Maybe it is just how they talk to the parents - to try and justify thier authority in their classrooms.

Andrew F – over a year ago

Agree with you - unfamiliar words do not allow simple images to form in our minds. As I taught junior high science once upon a time I used to tell my students on Fridays during ski season when we would get to bond with our kids on the local mountains - "we are going to go test the coefficient of sliding friction across frozen particles of di-hydrogen oxide (water) on varying degrees of slope." Blank stares of course till I said we are going skiing after lunch at Aspen Highlands.:) Much easier!

Guest (Dave gordon) – over a year ago

No obfuscation here, Will. Nice, tight and clearly written article. Thanks for reminding me to keep it simple. And fresh.

Guest (Tom Coalson) – over a year ago

Thank you for your article. I like what you had to say. Makes a lot of sense. Like you I tend to use overly complex words. I'm embarrassed now to admit it, but I've been doing it because I thought people would be impressed. Now my goal is to re-learn how to write -- in a way that's easy-to-read.

Mike Husak – over a year ago

To make sure my writing is easy to read, I check it by reading it over again and then I read it over again out loud. When I read it out loud, I'm able to hear the words and also feel the breaths I take and the pauses I need in the sentences as I read. This helps me to make sure my work sounds like I speak.

Guest (Eva Bazzarre) – over a year ago

Hi Will. My F/K reading level is always between 4.5 and 5.6.

I flunked spelling. And, if you can't spell it's hard to find the correct spelling in the dictionary.

Result: Lots of short words, direct clear statements. It's now working great for my copwriting.

Guest (joseph) – over a year ago

Hi Will Yes it's easy to read copy for me every time. As you say the more the writing is complicated, the less chance it will be read through and why use fancy terms when basic English is required. When you have to reach for a dictionary all the time, you will find the trash container easier.

upmarket – over a year ago

Writing is a conversation with the reader.

I start by "full writing," no matter how convoluted the writing is.

Then I 'get inside my prospect's head.' I read the copy from their perspective and see what doesn't work.

I review, revise, review, revise. Read it aloud. Walk away. Read it again. Sometimes, it doesn't work. If my gut tells me it won't work, I delete it and start over.

When I can't work it anymore, I let it go. I've done it to the best of my ability at that time.

Joan M – over a year ago

Thanks for the engaging article. I had a good laugh at your humor - better than caffeine at 3 in the afternoon. Words to write by! I have been going through white papers, blogs and articles in the industry I am targeting for B2B copywriting services. Articles like yours here and the other training at AWAI have ruined me! I read copy now and groan - did before as well, but at least now I know why it makes me groan and how I can contribute to better copy.

Nicole Johnson – over a year ago

During my legal career I represented a client who was accused of stealing a brilliant talent from another company, and the plaintiff wanted hundreds of thousands in damages. My plan in the mediation summary brief was to lead with a photo of the talent, who looked like he just got his drivers license. My thinking was there would be an insurmountable disconnect in the readers mind between the claim and the image. Very difficult to believe and understand, as you might say.

Guest (dave vigna) – over a year ago

Write as you talk is the basic fundamental to engage with your reader. The reader feels connected with you if you write conversationally. He gives his full attention to the words you write and what you want to convey. difficult words for which the reader have to consult the dictionary, will not engage him with your writing. So be simple and concise to make home in the heart of your reader and enjoy the fruits of your writing.

Guest (Mahesh seelvi) – over a year ago

Great article Will - this hit home for me as well. When I was growing up, Row Row Row your boat was, "Paddle, paddle, paddle your craft, cogently down the di-hydrous oxide. Rapturously, rapturously, rapturously, rapturously, existence is but an altered state of consciousness."

Needless to say, bigger words were a sign of intelligence. Some days I think it's a wonder I turned out as well as I did!

Guest (Rachel Frederick) – over a year ago

Thank you all for your very cogent -- I mean thoughtful -- comments. I'd like to respond to all of you, but I do not have the time. However, I do want to ask Rachel if she's ever heard Herschell Gordon Lewis' version of "Mary Had a Little Lamb?" His version sounds much like your version of "Row, Row, Row Your Boat."

Best wishes to all,

Will

Will Newman – over a year ago

I couldn't find the source, but someone is noted for saying we should strive to express, not impress.

Nora King – over a year ago

Will, isn't it amazing that the same author wrote "The Road" and "Blood Meridian"? The style and vocabulary of these two books perfectly captures your lesson today. I had to look up over 200 words to get through "Blood Meridian", and reread sentences endlessly (finished it though)...but it was a labor of love. "The Road" was over before I knew it. That bleak, open style completely matched the content. I guess that is the takeaway--in commercial writing we are NOT painting epic, swirling elegiac tapestries--we are getting to the POINT :)

David Whiteside – over a year ago

This article reminds me of something my father used to tell me. His advice was, " speak at the level of the person you are speaking to".

Wayne88 – over a year ago

This style of writing is most suitable when writing grants. Both readability and scanability are vital to success as a grantsman.

Guest (Charles99) – over a year ago

Hello all,

Thank you again for responding.

David W: I haven't read Blood Meridian. I don't generally read adult fiction,m opting for YA fiction and nonfiction. I saw an article about the filming of The Road that enticed me to see the movie. So true to my style, I read the book first . . . and so glad that I did.

Best wishes,

Will

Will Newman – over a year ago

I worked for a computer company for 14 years as a writer of user guides for our field people. We were told to write at a 7th grade, max 8th grade level. We had ways to test that. Greatest apprenticeship I ever had!! And that coming from someone with 8 years of graduate studies in literature!!

Guest (joe simoneau) – over a year ago

I enjoyed the topic and reminded me of my Mother's love of sharing new words with us when we were very little, pre school age. She would quiz us from Readers Digest ten words section. There is a time and place for everything, word choice/readers voice.

Thank you for sharing and I look forward to more writing resources. I am pleased with recent joining of AWAI on my part! Hello honey I am home!

Guest (Kristine) – over a year ago

Hi Will, I have not heard the H.G.L. version of Mary Had a Little Lamb, and a quick Google search unfortunately turned up empty... however we tacked on an extra verse in my house for that one as well... let's just say the poor tasty lamb ends up in a sandwich by the end...

Have a great week!

Rachel

Guest (Rachel Frederick) – over a year ago

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