

Twain Associates, Inc.

Judging Writing Advice

Many people think English is English. How could one business writing consultant or book teach it any differently than another? How could writing seminars vary? Well there's a huge variance--a huge difference.

Nationally known, published authors sometimes teach business writing workshops or speak at writers' conventions. Ask these individuals what constitutes good writing advice and they'll likely comment on the following four points:

- Measuring conciseness
- Measuring persuasiveness
- Selecting the right words
- Organizing your ideas

Let's explore these points in detail.

Measuring Conciseness



Need to Quantify Conciseness

In mastering any skill, participants should be able to judge their improvement. In English, one should learn to **measure** the two most important characteristics of effective writing--conciseness and persuasion. Professionals will tell you that a writing seminar that can't measure conciseness and persuasion is a course without a test, a race without a finish line.

What stirs a reader's interest? Does great literature (effective writing) have certain common characteristics? Yes, indeed. Look at heart-throbbing love letters, best-selling novels, wide circulation magazines or big city newspapers. They all share two writing traits:

- **Shorter Sentences.** The average sentence length will run 18 words or fewer. The average sentence in ponderous business letters and proposals weighs in with a whopping 50% increase in bulk – 27 words.
- **Shorter words.** Professional writers shy away from big heavy words, those with three syllables or more. Business and government writers, however, love to write to impress rather than to express an idea. Their writing is awash with “utilization,” “initiate,” “implement,” “functional,” “ultimate,” “modification,” “objective,” “assistance,” or “significant.” Professional writers won't use more than five percent of their words that are three or more syllables.

Taking these two elements (words and sentences) a writer can benchmark his or her word choice and sentence length against how professional writers create paragraphs.

Fog Index as Measure

We all compare ourselves to pros, whether it's in golf, tennis or basketball. In comparing one's self to writing pros, you'll need to use one of the readability yardsticks, such as Robert Gunning's Fog Index®.

A writing course that doesn't show participants how to use a readability yardstick is short-changing them. If one can't measure conciseness, you'll never know your place in the race. Are you lagging in the back of the pack or heading toward the finish line with the front runners? Only a tool like the Fog Index® will tell you that.

Measuring Persuasiveness

Persuasive Writing is Valuable

All pros agree that if a writing course covered only one topic, it should zero in on persuasive writing; how to stir emotions, open wallets and change minds. The participant would learn two things.

- How to motivate readers to some action or behavioral change
- Equally important, how to measure persuasiveness.



Just as a writer can **measure** conciseness with Gunning's Fog Index®, writers should know how to calculate the conviction of their message. Without such a diagnostic tool, you'll never know how much muscle (or how much fat) your writing contains.

Famous authors will tell you that an exceptional writing course would show participants how to measure persuasiveness. How convincing is one's letter, email, novel, or proposal? What chance does it stand to persuade the reader, the publisher, or the buyer?

Documenting Persuasiveness

Twain's writing books, DVDs, videos and seminars show participants exactly how to measure persuasion in their writing. Using the proprietary "motor-to-weight" ratio, you can document the degree of persuasiveness in a text.

Selecting the Right Words

Simplistic, Vague Advice

Professional writing speakers comment that writing advice is often too general, even simplistic. For example, almost all writing courses endorse using simpler, smaller words. Who would argue with that? But does the simpler, smaller word always fit? Is it always better? Does it always exist? What short, simple word would you substitute for civilization? For republic, catastrophe or paralysis?

Concrete Recommendations

Pick a writing course that offers specific, usable advice. In choosing the right word, for example, the Twain course offers four distinct, legitimate reasons to use a big word. If the writer's use of a big word doesn't fit one of these four exceptions, the participant knows that the big word most likely falls into the category of "impressing" rather than "expressing" an idea.

Organizing Your Ideas

Ask bosses for their opinions on writing problems. You can bet they'll reply "wordiness and poor organization." Poor organization is a serious problem. It causes much more miscommunication than does wordiness.

Poor Methods

Consequently consultants differ more on how organizing is taught than any other writing topic. Advice ranges from poor approaches, such as mental mapping, to "rough drafting" method to the direction to "just get something down--anything to get you started."

Most amateurs organize as they write. They create a complex juggling problem by trying to capture ideas or dealing with the lack of them as they struggle to express each thought.

The mind is fast; the hand is slow. That is the essential problem in organizing writing. Most writing courses ignore that important fact--and recommend approaches bound to make the problem worse instead of better.

Why are so many messages disorganized? Chiefly because writers do rough drafts. They begin with only a general idea of what they want to say, spill their ideas as best they can onto paper, rough-edit for spelling and grammar--and send the message.

A Better Way

A good organization method ought to have these benefits:

- Separate the organizing process from the writing process, preventing writer overload
- Work with ideas throughout, not words or phrases
- Facilitate brainstorming
- Detect content omissions
- Filter out irrelevant content
- Detect redundant content
- Get the writer off to a fast start
- Cure "blinking out" at the keyboard
- Eliminate cut-and-paste (electronic or manual)
- Provide the best possible sequence of ideas
- Flow smoothly into writing
- Allow easy revision
- Lead to concise writing
- Save time

Twain's method for organizing your writing accomplishes all of the above.