

persuasive writing

Its unsecret ingredient

A writing course that doesn't teach you how to measure persuasiveness robs you of writing's best diagnostic tool.

People who find writing painful will, we suppose, always harbor the forlorn hope that someone, somewhere, will discover a "pill" for them. That is, a quick and painless one-shot remedy--preferably sugar-clad--for all that ails their messages. Or some all-purpose curative like Plastic Wood, WD-40, Neosporin ointment or chicken soup.

There is no such pill. But strong verbs come close.

Very close.

And you don't have to wait for them to be discovered. They've been around as long as language has, hiding in plain sight. "I came, I saw, I conquered" is 50 per cent active verbs. (In Latin, it would be 100 per cent: "Veni, vidi, vici.") Of the roughly 1500 words in the Declaration of Independence, only 12 of its nearly 200 verbs are passive. The Gettysburg Address has only three passives. Hamlet's soliloquy has only two--out of 25 verbs.

But in some business and technical messages, over 50 per cent of the verbs are passive. Does that correlate with boring, dry, lifeless writing? You bet it does.

Use verbs well and you will write effectively. It's just about as clear-cut as that.

Of the reading material that bombards you, you read some portion. Of that, you understand some part. Of the part you do understand, only a fraction of it motivates you; that is, *moves* you--to belief, to commitment, to action.

The key to writing that does move the reader is strong verbs.

Think of them as the motors of language. Think of words as having weight. There you have the makings of the most useful diagnostic tool: The ratio of your strong verbs to your total words. This Motor:Weight Ratio ^(sm)measures--all at one time--the conciseness, the dynamic quality and persuasive force of your writing.

A recommended target for persuasive writing is an M:W of 1:10. Normal conversation does pretty well, about 1:8. (That's why you are persuasive face to face.) But much government and business writing ranges up to 1:20--even beyond.

Whatever your goal in writing, strong verbs will help achieve it. You most certainly want to persuade your reader. You also would like your writing to be interesting; your reader already has enough boring material to deal with. You also probably seek conciseness. You'd like to be specific rather than vague. And you prefer to be correct rather than commit writing errors. Let's take each of these goals and see how strong verbs work toward it.

❖ Persuasive Writing

Too often people think of persuasion as useful in only certain contexts, such as advertising, politics or

OK, Ginty....
'FESS UP!

Well...I guess
HE
didn't do it...

Responsibility
for the entering
of the residence
and the removal
of the personal property
is acknowledged



MOST VERB MANGLERS AND MAULERS aren't aware that's what they're doing. But a few do it on purpose. They figure that if they hide the action words they can thus avoid responsibility for the action.

sermons. On the contrary--it is an essential of *anything* you write.

Often you want to form an opinion in your reader's mind; that takes persuasion. Perhaps--a tougher chore --you need to *change* her mind. Sometimes you want to have the reader modify an opinion, meet you halfway. And at least a secondary purpose of most messages is to reinforce some opinion you assume the reader already has: the boss, that you are a good employee; the customer, that you are expert in your field, and so on.

Sometimes all you want to do is for the reader to openly consider your opinion, even if he or she does not end up agreeing with it.

None of these--forming an opinion or changing one; modifying one or reinforcing one; or getting yours considered--none of these just happens. Each requires persuasion.

The truth is: *When the persuasive element fails, writing fails.*

❖ Concise Writing

The strong verb is the sworn enemy of wordiness. Try to find a message written in active verbs that is wordy. You won't find *one*.

❖ Interesting Writing

There is no surer way to make your writing lively and compelling than to lace it with strong verbs. You can verify this: Sometime when you idly begin an

article just to kill time, and find yourself compelled by its style to finish it, analyze that article. You'll find it has many verbs and most of them are strong. Or, when an on-job message that affects your own livelihood is boring you out of your chair, analyze that one. You'll find it short of verbs; and most of them will be the weaker passive forms.

❖ Specific Writing

Does this kind of writing leave you hanging?

It is felt that your application is better fitted to a less-technical company.

Might you not wonder exactly who feels that way? Is it the manager of the department to which you applied? Is it the Employment interviewer? Is it the writer of the letter? Who can say?

I feel your application is fitted to a less-technical company.

This may not make you feel happier, but at least you are not left in the dark; you know whom to be angry at.

Active verbs ("I feel," "The manager decided," "Our department requires") always fix responsibility for actions. Passive verbs ("it is believed that," "it is felt that") enable irresponsible, evasive writing.

❖ Correct Writing

Strong verbs are no "righter" than weak ones. But their use will reduce certain writing errors--including

subject/verb disagreements, by far the most common language goof--and structural awkwardness, such as pileups of prepositional phrases.

Active verbs are the unsecret ingredient of successful writing. Professional writers make excellent use of them. So do we when we talk. But not when we write; then, we defuse some verbs, disguise others and undercut much of what's left.

The result is writing that fails to achieve any of the goals we have for it. It isn't concise; weak verbs always contribute to wordiness--always. Nor is it interesting; the biggest cause of boring writing is verblessness. Nor does it motivate, or persuade, the reader.

It just sits there.

Some courses (ours among them) show writers how to calculate readability. But to our knowledge, only Twain's writing courses teach how to measure an even more critical ingredient--persuasiveness.

Without such a diagnostic tool, you'll never know how much muscle (or how much fat) your writing contains.



SOME READING WE'VE LIKED

Someone said, and many teachers have repeated, that you learn to write by writing. So you do. But you can learn *about* writing by reading good writing---and good books on writing . Here are a few we recommend:

☛ *If You Want to Write*, by Brenda Ueland; Graywolf Press. Ms. Ueland, a contemporary of Eugene O'Neill, has been "rediscovered" in recent years. We ought all be thankful. Her book has almost nothing to do with writing on the job, but everything to do with *writing*. Subtitled "A Book About Art, Independence and Spirit," it is even more than that. It is a book of inspiration. If you want to write, this small book is must reading. Carl Sandburg considered it "The best book ever written about how to write."

☛ *Writer's Guide and Index to Literature*, by Porter Perrin; Scott, Foresman and Company. You may have trouble rousting out a copy of this great college handbook, last published in 1943. It is our favorite. He deals in a scholarly, most thorough way with matters of correctness, style and clear thinking. Dr. Perrin comes through as helpful and wise.

☛ *The Careful Writer*, by Theodore Bernstein; Atheneum. Mr. Bernstein, newsman and teacher, covers enormous ground here. He preaches clarity and thoughtful writing, and practices it, too, in his large, informative and often witty guidebook. His eye for language foibles equals that of Edwin Newman; but, unlike Newman, he does not skewer the writer while analyzing the writing.

☛ *Look It Up*, by Rudolf Flesch; Harper & Row. Mr. Flesch, probably the most noted champion of Plain English, deviates here from his narrative books to provide a concise and comprehensive "deskbook of style and usage." He intended to make it useful and reliable. It is both. But it is not a book to sit on the shelf. As the author--sometimes a bit of a scold--writes: "It won't do you any good if you don't do what the title says--look it up."