4 Essentials of Powerful Writing



Mark Wainwright

Write Purposefully • Edit Insightfully • Publish Strategically

www.Mark-Wainwright.com

4 Essentials of Powerful Writing

Whether you're writing a college literature paper, crafting a novel, or deep into the development of a nonfiction book—your goal is to communicate clearly with readers.

Easier said than done.

As you know, writing is hard work. Quality writing doesn't magically appear on the computer screens of accomplished authors. Rather, they recognize key characteristics of quality writing. These authors then work hard at infusing those qualities into their writing as they type feverishly at their keyboards.

The good news is that quality writing can be learned through instruction, practice, and persistence. Has your writing craft grown in the past twelve months? The fact that you're reading this paper illustrates that you're heading the right direction. Will your writing skill continue to develop in the next twelve months? It will if you remain intentional in pursuing writing excellence.

During my 18+ years in the publishing industry, hundreds of manuscripts crossed my desk. I saw all kinds of writing styles, subject matter, and creative approaches to attract interest. But those authors we offered publishing contracts to had manuscripts with the following attributes. Keep these four characteristics in mind as you cultivate your own quality writing.

1 Relevant Content

Powerful writing begins with content tailored toward readers. Relevant content is prized by readers because it provides entertainment, instruction, and value.

Yet, too often, authors simply write what interests them. And although infusing personal interest and passion into one's writing is essential for believable copy, writers must continually keep their readers in mind.

> Question: Do you know your readers? How well do you know their demographics? By demographics, I mean the general characteristics of who they are, both on the outside and inside. Thoroughly understanding your readers isn't optional. It's paramount—especially in today's world where readers have countless other options available.



Consider copywriting as an example. Advertisers tailor their copy to sell products and services to specific customers. Because many forms of advertising cost money, copywriters strive to reach targeted audiences at the lowest possible price. And that makes sense. Why waste advertising dollars reaching prospects that aren't interested in your product?

Similarly, both fiction and nonfiction writers must know who their specific readers are. By clearly identifying and understanding these readers, writers then tailor their content to reach these readers' needs.

While managing editorial departments at both domestic and international publishing houses, I occasionally had to help authors refocus their writing toward their readership. Sometimes authors would become too academic in their tone and word choice. I knew their audience would quickly grow bored with their complex sentence structure and over-the-top vocabulary.

Tailor your content to meet your readers' needs.

Now there's nothing wrong with an extensive vocabulary that communicates the nuances of an idea—unless the audience doesn't know what those unique words mean. Thus the reader's vocabulary is an essential component in understanding your audience.

Other audience demographics include their age, educational level, gender, race, nationality, religion, geographic location, marital status, income, etc.

Make sure you also consider the psychographic segmentation of your readers. What are their attitudes, opinions, activities, and interests? Take time to carefully study your readership. Time invested in understanding your readers will propel you forward in writing targeted copy that is relevant and valued by readers.

Here's a tip: Scan old magazines or search the internet for a picture of your specific readership. If you're writing a girl's middle grade novel, clip a picture of a smiling eleven year old from a magazine and tape that picture to your monitor. Then, as you're writing that middle grade novel, you'll be continually writing to that specific reader—not just a vague, fuzzy readership. Whatever your specific demographic, find a picture of that person staring at you while you write. Your readership will suddenly become much more real.



The more in-tune you are with your reader, the more relevant you'll make your content. And creating relevant content will help you develop powerful writing that readers will enjoy.

2

Consistent Focus

As you write relevant content, it's vital that you stay focused, even while writing directly to your readers.

For fiction, even though you've introduced dynamic, relatable characters, it's easy to veer off track. No doubt you've got a jumble of ideas bouncing around inside your head. The character could do this or that. She could have this conversation, go to this location, stop at that restaurant, have this conversation, etc.

Remember that every scene within your narrative should propel readers toward the climax. Similarly, every subpoint in your nonfiction manuscript should support the main points that also back up the main ideas of the chapter.

Staying on track and maintaining focus during the writing process sounds easy. But it's not. In my experience, many writers become so close to their story or topic that they think every idea about the topic or plot must be explored. But those readers that can take a step back and analyze their content objectively are those writers that ultimately earn writing success.

Save yourself time and energy by developing outlines to guide you along the way.

To save yourself time and energy, follow the same efficient practices of experienced authors. One of these practices is developing outlines to guide you along the way.

I can already hear your groaning to this suggestion. The standard objection is that rigid outlines constrain writers and their imaginations. Some people feel structure stifles their creativity.

But experienced authors know that this is not the case. Rather, outlines help authors stay focused on the topic or scene at hand. Outlines help authors know where they're headed.

Rest easy. An outline doesn't have to be rigid in form. It's a living, breathing roadmap that merely guides you toward your destination. This roadmap will not only help you stay on track, but also guide your readers through the story or content.



An outline will also help you determine what material is appropriate to include. As you know, today's nonfiction readers digest information in bite-sized chunks. In nonfiction, headings and subheads help readers absorb these chunks of data in logical sequence.

Analyze any bestselling nonfiction book on your shelf. Undoubtedly, that book will use at least several structural tools. These include headings, subheads, bold typeface, underlining, numbered or bulleted lists, sidebars, icons, pull quotes, chapter summaries, charts, diagrams, illustrations, etc. These structural tools highlight important content in quick, digestible format.

A properly developed outline will help you discern if those chunks of content are relevant to the subject at hand, or whether they are a distraction to focused content.

The main point to keep in mind is that your writing must remain focused. Avoid rabbit trails that create confusion and chaos. Maintain your focus in developing clear content that will be appreciated by your readers.

3 Precise Language

Artists use brushes, paints, and canvas to create masterpieces. Although we, as writers, may not have such a visible spectrum of physical tools at our disposal, the alphabet is our instrument in creating art. From that, we infuse creativity to develop powerful writing.

As an author, you don't simply use words to compose sentences and paragraphs. Rather, you use words to sculpt vivid pictures and imagery in your readers' minds. The words you use should precisely convey the specific ideas you want the receiver to comprehend. In doing so, you'll certainly consider both the word's denotation and connotation to shape accurate communication.

Figurative language is another tool that helps writers convey ideas. Simile, metaphor, alliteration, symbolism, personification, paradox, onomatopoeia, and other literary techniques enhance your communication. Just be careful that such techniques clarify instead of distract.

As never before, readers have countless reading options at their disposal. Don't waste their time with meaningless dribble. Use precise language to accurately convey your thoughts. Here are some essential tips:

Use precise language to accurately convey your thoughts.



Be Concise

Don't ramble. Precise, crisp communication sells because readers expect authors to know what they're talking about and then communicate that value as succinctly as possible. Writing that wanders aimlessly won't impress readers or gain publishing contracts. Of course, speak to your audience on their level. This usually means

speaking conversationally (though still grammatically), and avoiding jargon that is an immediate turn off. Your goal is not to impress, but to provide value (entertainment, information, instruction, insight, inspiration, encouragement, etc.).

Be Clear

Strive for clear communication that is blatantly straightforward. I appreciate what Donald Miller in his book *Building a Story Brand* asserts, "If you confuse, you'll lose." Too many writers, in their attempt to be creative and clever, lose readers because of confusion. That's not to say that you can't infuse subplots and subpoints into your manuscripts. You definitely can. However, make sure that every anecdote or tertiary character drives the narrative forward. This will keep your readers engaged and glued to those pages.

Tailor Your Message

Again, know your readers and speak their language. Using precise language that communicates efficiently will require that you know your readers. Don't speak above or below them in terms of vocabulary, sentence structure, diction, content, and length. By speaking with your readers and addressing their needs, they'll come back to you time and time again.

By addressing your readers' needs, they'll come back to you time and time again.

Ever hear the term "purple prose?" This refers to vocabulary that is so exaggerated, extravagant, and over the top that it needlessly draws attention to itself. Avoid purple prose because it simply distracts and leads to reader confusion and frustration. Instead, write clearly, concisely, and purposefully. In doing so, you'll gain the trust and appreciation of your audience.



4 Clear Grammar

"Grammar is to a writer what anatomy is to a sculptor or the scales to a musician. You may loathe it, it may bore you, but nothing will replace it, and once mastered it will support you like a rock."

–B. J. Chute

As you write relevant, focused, and precise content, grammar will emerge as one of your best partners in communication.

In recent decades, standard grammatical rules have taken a beating from those who insist communication is in constant flux. These critics of descriptive grammar assert that people should not be compelled to follow established rules because "truth" or "correctness" is relative.

Although language does change over time, that change is slow. English from 200 years ago can still be read, understood, and appreciated today. Despite critic objections, grammatical rules have certainly fostered consistency within our English language.

And so, standard grammar remains one of the greatest tools in the author's toolbox. Grammar enables thoughts and ideas to flow from the writer to the reader. Without grammatical rules, what the writer strives to convey would not be interpreted by the reader as intended by the writer. Confusion and chaos reign in the absence of absolutes.

Grammar remains one of the greatest tools in the author's toolbox

As editorial director of a mid-sized publisher, I routinely evaluated author manuscripts. As I read cover letters and analyzed book proposals, I quickly absorbed an author's writing style and communication abilities. Content was key in my decision of whether or not to recommend a manuscript for publication. But in addition to content, the way that content was communicated proved vitally important. If grammar errors littered the page, that manuscript quickly found its way to the recycle bin. And almost every reputable publisher treats grammatically-deficient manuscripts the same way. Publishers are in the business of making money. Readers who spend their money on books expect them to be error free. They expect the content to be understandable and clear. Grammar remains a key tool in accomplishing that.

If you want to excel as a writer, use words grammatically within your sentences. If need be, take a refresher course online. Although the rules may seem confusing, don't despair. Like anything, practice will help you understand and apply the concepts. And as you understand the rules, you'll then be able to use them to enhance your communication.



So how well do you know grammar and syntax? Do you feel confident with capitalization, punctuation, parts of speech, complements, tense & mood, subject / verb agreement, pronoun / antecedent agreement, phrases and clauses, etc. If any of these areas seem confusing, take time to review. Knowing grammar will enable you to

The better you understand grammar, the better you'll be able to use it to enhance your communication.

communicate accurately and with maximum impact.

Get Started Today!

So there you have it. As you continue writing, keep these 4 Essentials of Powerful Writing in mind. By doing so, you'll communicate convincingly by developing relevant content that maintains consistent focus, infuses precise language, and applies clear grammar.

— 4 Essentials of Powerful Writing —

1. Relevant Content
2. Consistent Focus
3. Precise Language
4. Clear Grammar

Want to continue transforming your writing and editing? Ready to take your craft to the next level? If so, Mark Wainwright provides coaching services to help make your writing, editing, and publishing dreams a reality.

Learn more at www.Mark-Wainwright.com.

