



The Machinery of Language

Habits and methods of writers

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Write brilliantly

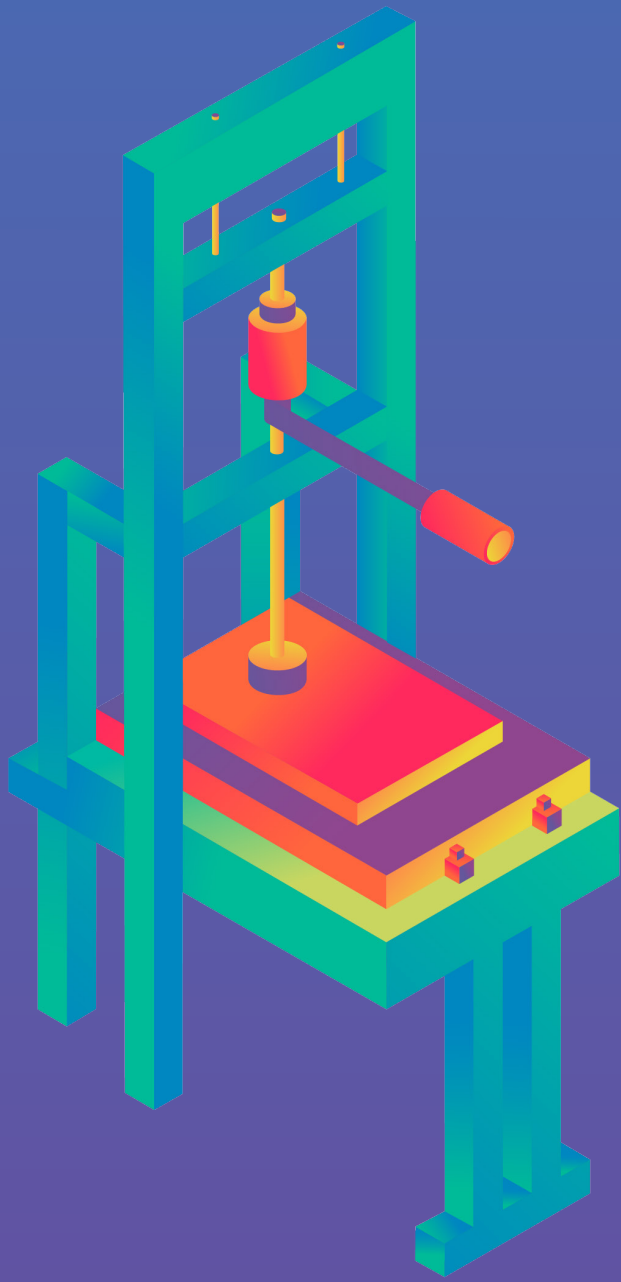
From countless texts, emails and social posts to web copy, reports, and job applications, we're expected to spend hours every day committing words to one medium or another. Words are the universal technology we use to communicate. But we are not taught how to write. Not from our parents. Not at school. Not really. Getting your thoughts down in an email is one thing, but how to wield language with precision and power to persuade someone into action is entirely something else. And because it's universal, understanding writing is important whether you are trying to land a customer or secure a first—or fifth—date.

At Stiff, we rely upon our proprietary system, built over more than 30 years of developing and refining our writing methodology. We call it the Machinery of Language and it consists of six pillars that shape all communication: diction, grammar, syntax, punctuation, logic and rhetoric.

Writing well isn't something you're born with. Great writing can be learned. And we're going to show you how. The following pages will give you techniques that when adopted will immediately improve your writing.

We hope you enjoy.





Diction


Choice of words



Choice of words

While the English language boasts almost one million words, the active vocabulary of the average English speaker is estimated to fall between 6,000 and 10,000 words. On the other hand, the average passive vocabulary is thought to approach 50,000 individual terms. Therefore, writers wishing to engage the full experience of their readers must develop active vocabularies at least five times that of the average. At Stiff, each writer must take on this mission, and undertake a rigorous program of professional development to achieve it.

To master diction, follow these rules:

1. Confess when you don't know a word.
 2. Be alert to new words—especially in your reading.
 3. Keep up-to-dates dictionaries at home and at work.
 4. List all words you learn in one place.
 5. Make a point of speaking well.
- 

Avoid these words

a total of
 accordingly
 actually
 after all
 afterward
 as a matter of fact
 at the end of the day
 at the same time
 at this moment in time
 basically
 besides
 consequently
 current, currently
 during the period from
 e.g.
 each and every one
 equally important
 etc.
 existing
 extremely
 for example
 for this purpose
 furthermore
 in addition
 in any event
 in other words

in point of fact
 in the end
 in the final analysis
 in total
 indeed
 meanwhile
 moreover
 namely
 naturally
 obviously
 of course
 on the contrary
 otherwise
 quite
 the fact of the matter is
 the month(s) of
 really
 similarly
 still
 surely
 then
 therefore
 thus
 to all intents and purposes
 very
 viz.

Test yourself on confusing pairs

English is rich in vocabulary, offering a wide variety of similar but distinct terms for making subtle distinctions. Check your knowledge on these commonly confused terms.

accede *vs.* exceed

adverse *vs.* averse

affect *vs.* effect

aggravate *vs.* irritate

alternate *vs.* alternative

among *vs.* between

amoral *vs.* immoral

anticipate *vs.* expect

appraise *vs.* apprise

appreciate *vs.* realize

bated *vs.* baited

born *vs.* borne

capital *vs.* capitol

complacent *vs.* complaisant

complement *vs.* compliment

comprise *vs.* compose

connote *vs.* denote

continual *vs.* continuous

dependant *vs.* dependent

deprecate *vs.* depreciate

derisory *vs.* derisive

discrete *vs.* discreet

disinterested *vs.* uninterested

effect *vs.* affect

emotive *vs.* emotional

envelop *vs.* envelope

except *vs.* accept

exalt *vs.* exult

fewer *vs.* less

flaunt *vs.* flout

founder *vs.* flounder

gender *vs.* sex

hanged *vs.* hung

immoral *vs.* amoral

imply *vs.* infer

impracticable *vs.* impractical

include *vs.* comprise

intense *vs.* intensive

laid *vs.* lain

lightning *vs.* lightening

loath *vs.* loathe

mankind *vs.* humanity

median *vs.* meridian

minuscule *vs.* miniscule

mitigate *vs.* militate

mold *vs.* mould

none *vs.* not one

on *vs.* upon

persons *vs.* people

personal *vs.* personnel

phenomenon *vs.* phenomena

prescribe *vs.* proscribe

presently *vs.* present

principle *vs.* principal

realize *vs.* imagine

regretful *vs.* regrettable

round *vs.* around

sensuous *vs.* sensual

shall *vs.* will

simple *vs.* simplistic

sprang *vs.* sprung

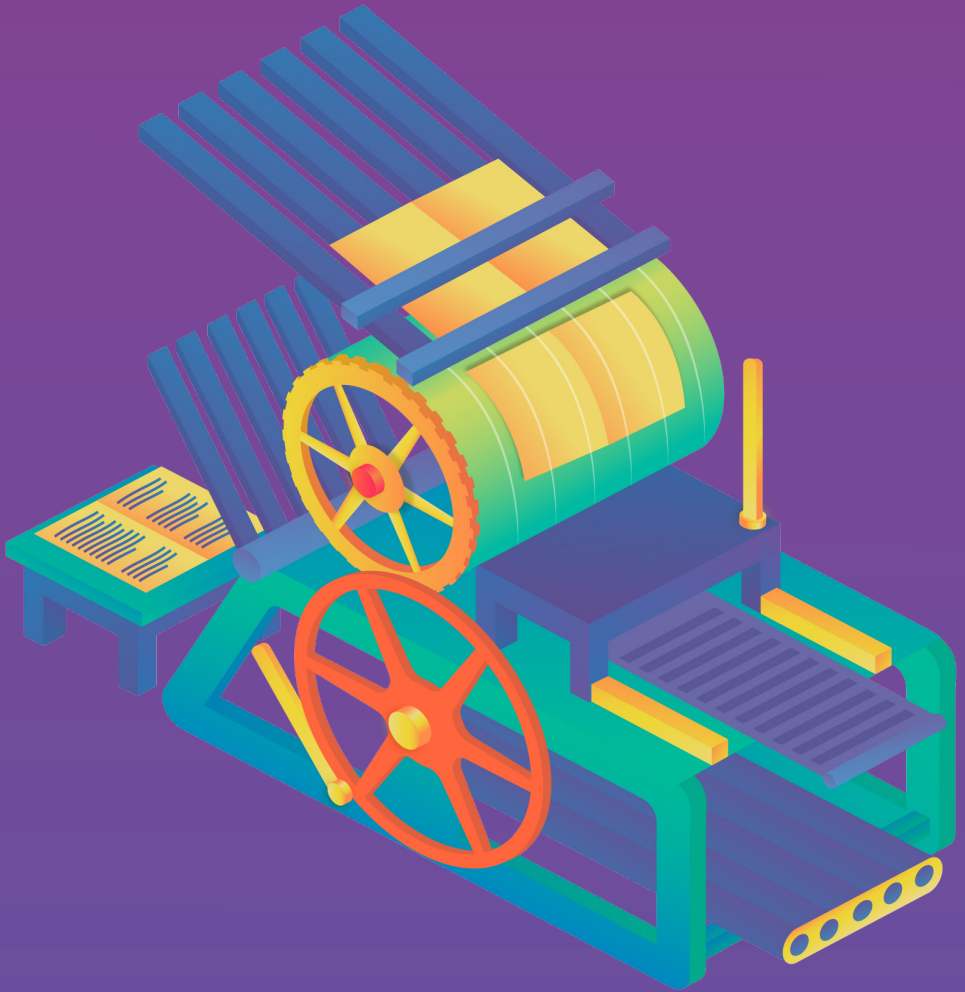
stationary *vs.* stationery

that *vs.* which

tortuous *vs.* torturous

unsociable *vs.* unsocial

verbal *vs.* oral



Grammar

Traditions of expression

Traditions of expression

It's a paradox that, while there is no universally recognized authority over English grammar, there is no shortage of people willing to take up the position. Opinions about what is grammatically correct vary widely. Stiff clients in North America, Europe and Asia have divergent notions of what is permissible, and their own audiences hold equally irreconcilable views. The rule of thumb is to respect the grammatical conventions of your intended audience. Backdraft fumble codes address most common issues of grammar, and much can be gained by reading some of the many excellent, contemporary books that examine grammatical choices as they contribute to or detract from meaning. Among them, David Crystal's Cambridge Encyclopedia of the English Language may be the most enjoyable and helpful.

Memorize verb tense names

Verbs indicate action and verb tenses clarify when that action occurs in relationship to the writer's present moment and to other events. As well as tense, verbs can precisely express the qualities of voice, person, aspect and mood. When actions occur in complex timeframes and when moods are subtle (as in the conditional and the subjunctive), tenses are difficult but essential to master. When discussing tenses, use these terms:

Tense	Example
Simple present	<i>it walks</i>
Present continuous	<i>it is walking</i>
Present perfect	<i>it has walked</i>
Present perfect continuous	<i>it has been walking</i>
Simple past	<i>it walked</i>
Past continuous	<i>it was walking</i>
Past perfect	<i>it had walked</i>
Past perfect continuous	<i>it had been walking</i>
Simple future	<i>it will walk</i>
Future continuous	<i>it will be walking</i>
Future perfect	<i>it will have walked</i>
Future perfect continuous	<i>it will have been walking</i>

Syntax


Order of words





Order of words

It's a true pleasure to be drawn down a page teeming with fresh ideas. For writers, achieving that effect depends heavily on syntax—the delicate art of word order. Syntax is poorly taught and therefore only vaguely understood by average writers, but intimate knowledge of the topic is a precondition for true mastery of writing. The conventions of syntax are to writing what gestures are to speech: they add subtlety and nuance to otherwise dull conversation. Through syntax we control and manage style.



Experiment through syntax

You can play with:

- Order of words for juxtaposition
- Density of punctuation
- Degree of repetition
- Meter, rhyme and alliteration
- Pleasant or harsh sound of the words themselves
- Variety of length of sentence
- Visual structure as in shape poems
- Internal page and paragraph structure (full text, easy thought paragraphs, dialogue paragraphs screenplay format)
- Internal paragraph structure (prose, bullets, tables, parenthetical clustering)
- Sentence style such as subject verb object, single clause, concatenated by semicolons and columns, use of punctuation quote emphasis unquote, punctuation cluster, starting with conjunctions, and open versus closed or locked sentences
- Word style such as long and short, formal and informal, serious or joking, positive and negative, straightforward and flourished, or understated or overstated

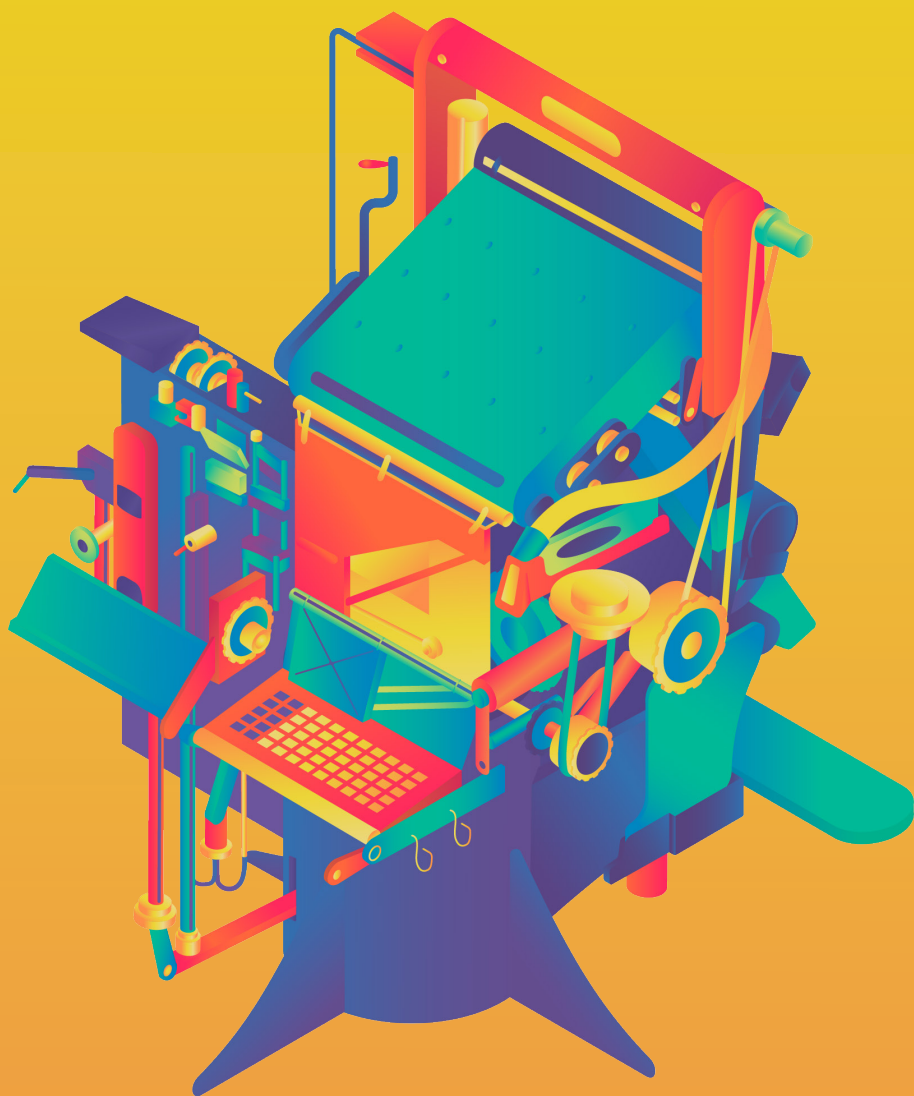
Vary the rhythm

Vary the length of your sentences to keep readers alert. At least one in every ten sentences should be short and punchy. Think five words or fewer. Expressing a single idea powerfully will help keep the reader engaged and lend weight to the points you make in longer sentences.



Try writing a short, punchy sentence to break up the following paragraph. Experiment with placing your new sentence at the beginning, middle and end.

Last year saw reports warning that climate change continues to threaten the stability of developing nations, particularly those that have heavily populated coastal communities. Some research indicates that the infrastructure of these areas will not outpace the accelerating effects of climate change, and thus will never meet the safety standards required by insurers. Escalating costs of rebuilding and reinsuring are a constant struggle for businesses, and so these economies stagnate when commerce moves elsewhere.




Punctuation

Signposts of logic



Signposts of logic



Today, awash in a sea of information, readers demand a compelling, fast-moving text unencumbered by the halting effects of inelegant punctuation. A smooth-flowing read is the surest route to swift comprehension; nothing must stand in its way. The trouble with punctuation is that it changes over time. Conventions of the past such as parentheses (used too frequently) double hyphens and exclamation marks are now virtually obsolete. Keeping track of the changes is challenging but critical. To avoid the common pitfalls, master the use of the colon, semicolon, em-dash and en-dash, as they give a writer great control over logic while ensuring clear logic. Study and adhere to the 50 rules detailed in *The Thoughtful Writer's Guide to Punctuation* published by the Backdraft Corporation.

Punctuation is changing

Writing is a technology, and in the past few years that technology has been upgraded. The trend is towards written English that is consistently logical, uncluttered and easy to read. Punctuation marks—the signposts of logic—are a key ingredient.

Looking back at documents written just a decade ago, one can be amazed at the odd habits writers had then—plenty of parentheses, commas peppered through unending sentences, double dashes everywhere and, without exception, at least two spaces after every period. Those days are over.

The following 50 rules reflect the most recent trends. As you apply them in your documents, proposals, reports and email correspondence, be confident that wherever in the world your readers may be, your writing will have greater effect.

Learn the latest trends

The comma

Fewer commas are used now, usually achieved by rearranging sentence elements to form smoother syntax.

The period

Disappearing from salutary abbreviations and bullet points.

The semicolon

Rarely used now to separate listed elements in sentences, or to end bullet points.

The apostrophe

No longer used to denote plurals in dates and abbreviations. Seldom used for possessives with names that end in *s*.

The parenthetical

Parentheses are no longer used for extended asides and are reserved instead for short explanations.

The ellipsis

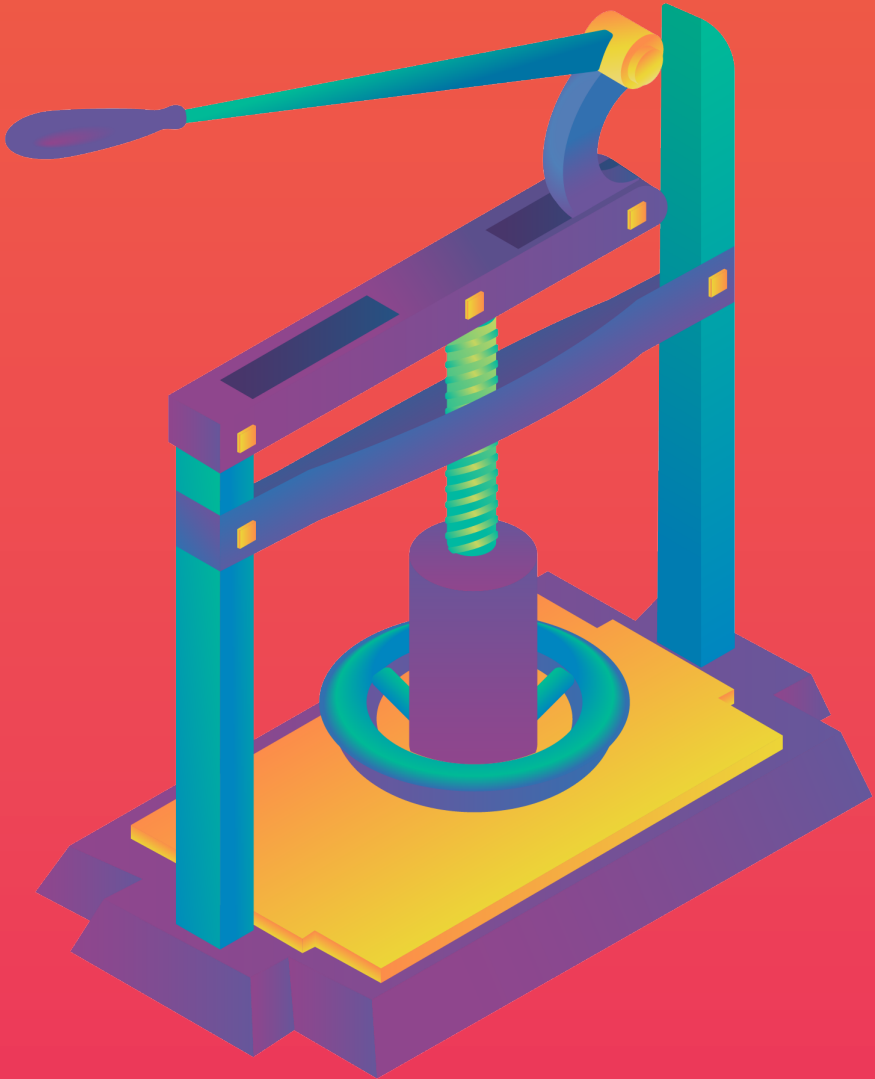
The four-dot ellipsis is rarely used now.

The hyphen

Hyphens disappear quickly from new compound terms such as *outsource*, *email* and *website*.

Logic

Evidence of truth



Evidence of truth

Aristotle said it first: humans measure the likelihood of truth by assessing how closely an argument adheres to the principles of logic. If a premise leads to a logical conclusion, the argument is accepted, and the next premise can be confidently delivered. Failure to be logical triggers skepticism and disbelief. Maintain faultless logic by assessing each point as part of a syllogism that leads readers to an inevitable conclusion. Note that a seemingly weak argument is usually one advanced without sufficient evidence. For the writer, diligent research is always the route to clear thinking.

Know how to use syllogisms

Logic, as Aristotle wrote, is the everyday system of analysis that people use to assess whether they are dealing with the truth. If they feel they are near the truth, they soon believe they are near the truth. Aristotle proposed that the sensation of being near the truth flows from a simple and predictable pattern called a syllogism, or argument. If a writer reminds a reader of something already believed, and adds to it something that can be proved, the writer can guide the reader to a desired conclusion. This simple structure is the basis of all promotional writing—and most advertising.

Successful advertising employs features, benefits and offers with calls to action, advancing simple ideas to lead readers from their own beliefs to a client's desired conclusions. When conceiving ad campaigns, use the Stiff ACE™ method to ensure creative breadth and flair.

Major premise

Something the reader already believes to be true.

“Seat belts save lives.”

**Minor premise**

Something you can prove to the reader.

“This new van has more seat belts than any other.”

**Logical conclusion**

Something the reader now believes to be true.

“This van will save more lives.”

Use the ROI filters

Delete the redundant

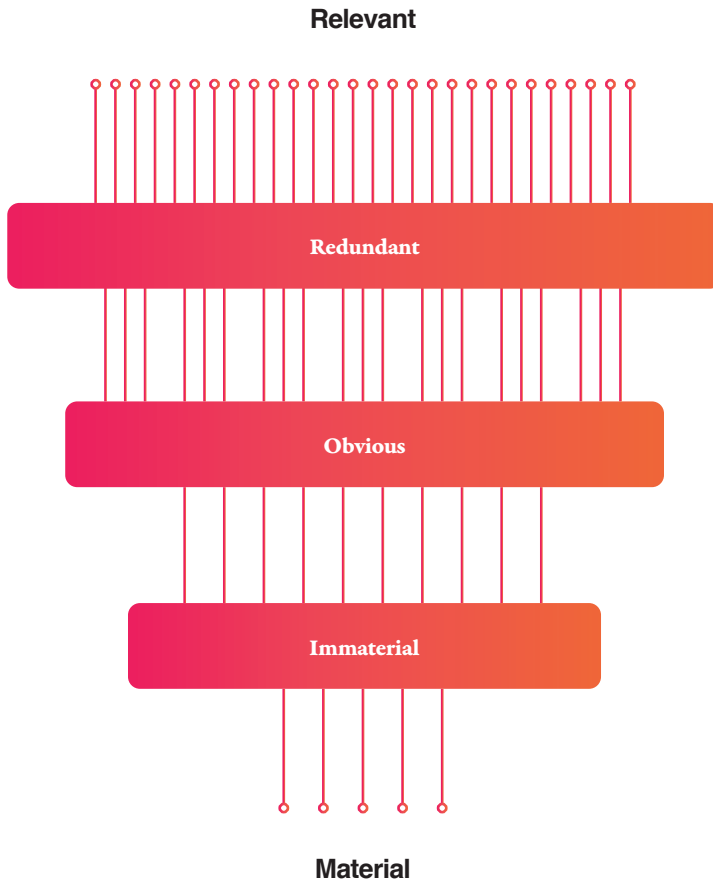
Look for repetition of ideas in your draft and get rid of them. These might be facts that are unnecessarily explored from different angles, restated for emphasis or simply ones that appear twice by mistake. They might be points that already appear elsewhere—in documents your audience will surely read. To be concise, make tough decisions about what to cut, confident that your readers may encounter some of your points in other places.

Delete the obvious

Decision makers need to know the best of your thinking about the most critical evidence, linked to a conclusion or recommendation they can consider and choose to enact. If something goes without say, let it do so. If facts are common knowledge, and if arguments can be easily deduced by the reader, remove them.

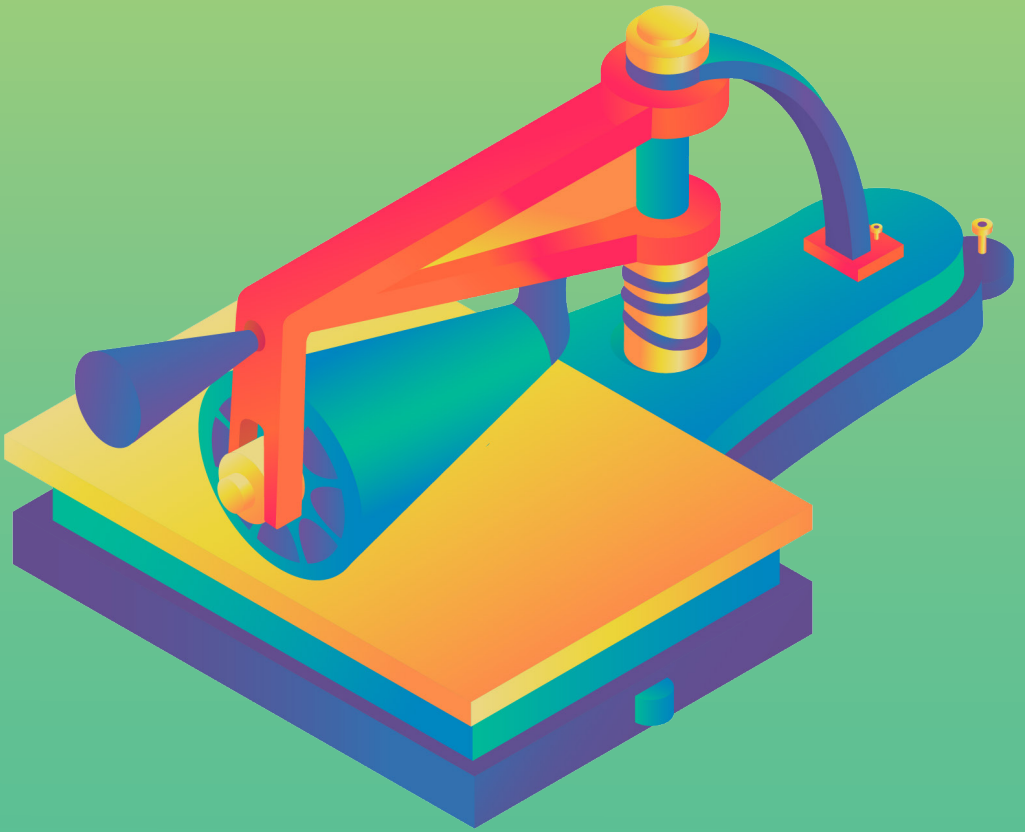
Delete the immaterial

Even relevant research can be immaterial. Look for ideas that are on a different topic than the central one. Learn to spot when your writing has gone off on a tangent, exploring related subjects that, while interesting, will not affect a decision. Within individual sentences, look for nuances that add little but padding, and delete them.



Rhetoric

Art of persuasion



Art of persuasion

Rhetoric has earned a bad reputation. Yet while empty speeches and flowery prose are rightly damned as pompous and pretentious, all persuasive writing relies on rhetoric for effect. The desired impression is always the sympathetic conviction of readers, an attitude known colloquially as buy-in. Writers must have a detailed knowledge of rhetoric to write anything that leaves a mark.

Individual print, radio and television advertisements rely typically on a single rhetorical device, while documents for broad public consumption often feature many devices working in harmony. Masterful writers can name and apply dozens—from metaphors and analogies to litotes and chiasmus.

Master these rhetorical devices

Simile

Comparison of one thing with another thing of a different kind, used to make a description more emphatic or vivid.

- ▶ *He is crazy like a fox.*
-

Metaphor

Application of a word or phrase to an object or action to which it is not applicable literally.

- ▶ *I had fallen through a trapdoor of depression.*
-

Anaphora

Repetition of a word or phrase at the start of successive clauses.

- ▶ *Ask us if we are ready to act. Ask us if we plan to fight.
Ask us if we intend to win.*
-

Procatalepsis

Anticipating and defeating listeners' objections in advance.

- ▶ *To those who say this program will be expensive, I say, yes, it will.
But who better deserves our generosity than our nation's children?*

Syndeton

Forced addition of conjunctions between parts of a sentence to lend gravity to a series of events or things.

- ▶ *We've been despised and beaten and forgotten.*
-

Asyndeton

Omission or absence of a conjunction between parts of a sentence to hint at a causal connection.

- ▶ *In college, we danced, drank, fought, flunked.*
-

Analogy

Comparison between two things, typically on the basis of their structure and for the purpose of explaining or clarifying.

- ▶ *Language is a kind of machinery in which logic, diction and rhetoric function as pulleys, wheels and levers.*
-

Rhetorical question

A question in which readers' or listeners' knowledge of the answer is presumed.

- ▶ *Are we now prepared to stand aside and let our fellow citizens suffer even more?*

Parallelism

Use of successive verbal constructions that correspond in sound, meter, meaning or structure.

- ▶ *Let's dress splendidly, eat lightly and dance endlessly.*
-

Expletive

A word or phrase used to fill out a sentence or a line of verse without adding to the core meaning.

- ▶ *The response we carry forward, please understand, must flow from the principles upon which we stand.*
-

Litotes

Ironical understatement in which an affirmative is expressed by the negative of its contrary.

- ▶ *When he asked how I discovered the cure, I answered, "Well, I'm not entirely stupid."*
-

Chiasmus

Words, grammatical constructions or concepts repeated in reverse order in the same or modified form.

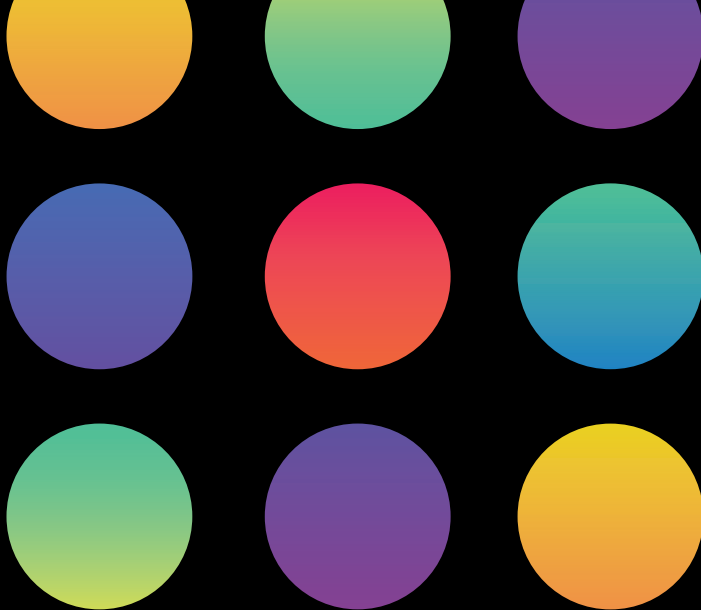
- ▶ *Ask not what your country can do for you; ask what you can do for your country.*

Never stop writing

Just like golfing or playing the piano, writing is a skill you can continue improving throughout your career. Mastering the Machinery of Language is one step. Another step is to embrace the practices of strong writers. What are they?

- Welcome writing as a difficult job.
- Accept constructive commentary.
- Know that your writing will be read.
- Admit it when you are uncertain.
- Use a consistent process.
- Use a consistent structure.
- Use dictionaries, thesauruses and style guides.
- Identify your fumble cluster.
- Ask for peer reviews.
- Revise, revise.
- Reread after a night's rest.
- Read your writing aloud.

You now have the basic tools you need to hone your writing skills and become a compelling, persuasive communicator. With practice and polish, you'll deliver flawless copy time after time.



Ready to learn more?

We can offer a tailored curriculum for your organization's specific writing needs. Contact us for online and classroom-based training.

get@stiff.ca