

CLEAR WRITING (PODCAST 3 TRANSCRIPT)

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Hi everyone this is Kurtis, and this podcast is going to concern one of the Hallmarks of effective writing—clarity.

Effective writing is clear. When the writing is clear, the writer has composed sentences that work together to communicate to an audience. The intended message is the message received. In order for writing to be clear, one needs to keep a few guiding principles in mind.

First, clear writing is specific. Mrs. Walters, my sixth grade language-arts teacher, used to offer this writing advice: To be terrific, you must be specific. While this may sound like a “cutesy” sixth grade teaching saying, the truth is the advice is full of wisdom. To be terrific, you must be specific. That’s what’s at the heart of clear writing—specificity. If the writing is not specific, how will readers fully understand what the writer is trying to say? This kind of advice is something writers of all levels need to keep in mind.

In fact, just yesterday I was reminded of how important it is to be specific. My wife left me a note on a sticky note that read: Please pick up Haley after softball practice. I knew who Haley is—my daughter—but I wasn’t sure of the time or location to pick her up. I probably should have known, but I didn’t and because my wife’s note was not specific enough, her message was not clear. Why not write, Pick Haley up at 4:30 at the middle school field?

Had my wife included enough specific information, her meaning would have been clear and not used as an example in this podcast. (I still think she’s terrific, though.)

Another aspect of clear writing concerns the words used—clear writing uses the best words to express ideas. Clear writing is precise and exact in terms of the words used. Mark Twain once said, The difference between the right word and the almost right word is the difference between lightening and lightening bug.

Indeed, I recently saw an advertisement on eBay for “cheap” earbuds for iPods. Did the seller really mean “cheap” or did the seller mean inexpensive? Regardless, I definitely did not want “cheap” earbuds, so I went on to the next seller.

What’s clearer: There are not a lot of job opportunities in my field or there are not a lot of job opportunities for structural engineers? The latter, right? “Structural engineers” is much more specific than “in my field” and doesn’t leave readers guessing.

Part of the challenge for writers is to write with the audience in mind—what kind of information does that group need to understand the message? Writers need to take a step back from their writing and step into their readers’ shoes. Writers need to scour their prose, looking for language that is not as precise or exact as it can be. Identifying writing that is not precise puts the writer in the position to do something about it, and it is in this way that the writing becomes clear for an audience and meaning is



communicated.

Another characteristic of clear writing is that it is concise. The writer uses just the number of words necessary to say what needs to be said. That is, the writing is tight—no wasted words. The information is specific, words are precise, and every word matters—thus the sentences are clear.

When I say the sentences are concise, I am not saying that sentences need to be short. In fact, another hallmark of effective writing is sentence variety, a topic I will take up in another podcast, so sentences should utilize a variety of structures and lengths. Conciseness means that you are wary of the words used to convey meaning, and if you need 50, you use 50, but if you need only 30, then you use 30.

Lastly, clear writing presents content in an order that is easy for the reader to follow. One sentence logically leads to the next and to the next; one paragraph logically leads to the next and to the next—and on and on. Clear writing is organized—readers can follow along with what the writer has to say; the progression is easy to understand and logical. In a way, organized writing is like providing directions. You start at point A and progressively guide the reader to point B. From the parking lot in front of the Student Union, turn onto University Drive and take the first right onto New Meadow Road. Follow New Meadow Road for about four miles until you come to a flashing yellow light, where you turn left. And so on. Those directions are organized in a way that makes sense—your writing needs to make sense, too, in order to be clear on the page.

As you just heard, one of the hallmarks of effective writing is the clarity of that writing. Writing that is clear is specific, precise, concise, and organized. Clear writing doesn't just happen—the writer has to work at it and utilize the writing process, but with effort, one's writing can be clear. I hope the information in this podcast helps you think about what you need to consider in the composing process in order to write clearly. Happy writing, everyone!

