

## **FOUR CS OF EFFECTIVE WRITING (PODCAST 18 TRANSCRIPT)**

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Greetings everyone! This is Kurtis Clements with another effective writing podcast. In this episode, I am going to talk about the four Cs of effective writing.

When I was in my early twenties, I began sending out my writing, mostly short stories and poems, for publication consideration to magazines like the New Yorker and Atlantic Monthly. I sent out each piece with hopeful anticipation, and each and every piece was returned to me with a brief form reply basically saying, "Thanks, but no thanks." My father, military-schooled with a bottom line way of thinking, suggested I show one of my professors my work and ask him how to "fix it." What my father did not understand—and he is not alone—is that fixing a piece of writing is no easy task; in fact, there are so many variables to consider in a piece of writing that fixing one aspect of the piece may cause problems elsewhere. Fixing a piece of writing is not like fixing a car. If a brake light goes out, the bulb is replaced and the problem is fixed—it's as easy as that. Writing doesn't work this way.

So what's a writer to do?

For starters, writers need to consider their audience and purpose. If you do not know who you are writing to and why, the writing is probably already doomed. You also need to learn to trust the writing process itself, for shaping content into meaning takes time. Beyond these concerns, you need to consider what constitutes good writing. To this end, I find it helpful to think about the hallmarks of effective writing, what I call the four Cs of effective writing. Effective writing is clear, complete, concise, and correct.

Good writing is clear. You need to express your thoughts in a way in which a reader will understand what you are trying to say, the point. Clear writing is specific. It is precise. Clear writing is using the best words you can find to convey meaning. It's the difference, to paraphrase Mark Twain in a somewhat different context, between lightening and the lightening bug. As a writer, you need to ask yourself: Would my audience understand what I am trying to say?

To better understand my point (for I, too, must ask the same question mentioned above of my own work), consider the following anecdote. My first and most important writing mentor was my 6th grade English teacher Mrs. Walters. The Mrs. Walters in my memory had a warm smile, deep brown eyes, and a pair of green-framed glasses strung on a cord dangling around her neck. Pencils and pens kept her brown hair up in a bun. Mrs. Walters was passionate about writing. She was encouraging. One of her favorite sayings about writing, a tip that has stayed with me for over thirty years, was "to be terrific, you must be specific." I have this saying written on an index card, tacked to the wall in front of where I work. While the saying may seem cutesy, the truth of the remark contains penetrating wisdom. It is something I remind myself of every time I write.

If I write, "My grandparents are getting old," would you understand what I am trying to say? In a general way, perhaps, but in terms of communicating a specific meaning to an audience, my remark

falls short, for it is not clear. What exactly do I mean by “old”? A more effective way to communicate my idea would require greater specificity in the words I use. In this case, if I write, “My grandparents are in their late eighties,” you would have a much better understanding of my meaning.

Clarity, however, moves beyond words and must be applied to paragraphs and, indeed, to the composition as a whole. What writers need to consider here is how the sentences are organized to form paragraphs, and how the paragraphs are organized to form an essay. If you were going to give me directions to your house, how would you organize the content? Would you start in the middle? The end? In all likelihood, you would arrange the directions by some kind of chronology or sequence. To give directions clearly, you would start at point A, proceed to point B, then on to C, and so forth. Right? You would use words such as start, proceed, and then (as I do in this example) so that the order of the content is logical—I, or anyone else, could follow the directions and reach the destination.

For the writing to be clear, you need to present your content in a manner that is easy for the reader to follow and, therefore, understand. You need to use words that help guide the reader through a paragraph so that the point you are making is understandable—it is clear. These guide words (also called transitional expressions) are the glue to your content; they are the words that help you give order to your writing.

Effective writing is also complete in that you develop your ideas for an audience. You need to take your time and develop your points so that they make sense to someone else. You need to prove that what you say is true and that takes time; depending on your purpose, you will need to use examples, details, facts, quotes, statistics, and testimony to give meaning to your ideas. Complete writing is sustained writing.

As a way to understand the idea of being complete in your writing, think about this: Imagine it is summer. Late July. In New Orleans. If I were to state that it is snowing outside, would you believe me? Probably not, right. After all, it is July in New Orleans and the likelihood of snow is nil. But even beyond this fact, a statement with no proof, no development, is just an assertion. And an assertion is incomplete in the sense that it lacks sustained development. But what if after I said it’s snowing out (remember, it’s July in New Orleans!), I said, “Yup, it’s snowing outside. I can see my next-door neighbor, Mr. Hibble, a slight man in his 70s, out in his driveway right now, shoveling. He’s wearing a light yellow hat and tan gloves. And here comes the snow plow—will you listen to that clatter!” If I said all of that, you would be convinced, right? How could you not be?

While the above example is an exaggeration, the point should be clear: When you express yourself in writing, you need to develop your thoughts completely, taking your time and developing your point with specific, concrete details and examples so that you communicate meaning to an audience. That’s the idea of being complete—show readers the snow!

The next of the four Cs of effective writing is the idea of being concise—of having your ideas understood quickly and easily. The idea of being concise, on the sentence level, is to use only the number of words necessary to convey meaning. Being concise does not suggest brevity; you do not want a lot of short, choppy sentences. If you need fifty words to say what you need to say, use fifty words. But if you can express the same idea with forty-four words, use forty-four words.

Concise writing is tight writing.

Here are a couple of examples to help you understand. Here's a sentence that's a bit wordy:

Wordy: The people who are in my writing group help me improve my work.

Tighter: The people in my writing group help me improve my work.

Sometimes all you need to do is cut dead wood—words that are hollow and simply taking up space. Sometimes, though, you will need to overhaul the entire sentence. Listen:

Wordy: The people who are in my writing group help me improve my work.

Tighter: The people in my writing group help me improve my work.

Even Tighter: My writing group helps me improve my work.

Did you hear the difference?

Let's listen to another example:

Wordy: It is baldness which has caused men to search unceasingly for centuries to find a remedy that would cure their plight.

And here is the same sentence written more concisely: For centuries, men have searched for a remedy for baldness.

Being concise also applies to paragraphs and the composition as a whole. What the writer needs to think about in these contexts is whether or not the information included is needed. Concise writing is unified writing insofar as the content that is included is relevant and necessary. All the information in a paragraph must contribute to the idea the writer is trying to express; otherwise, the content is superfluous and the paragraph lacks unity.

The last of the four Cs concerns correctness. Effective writing is correct in that the writer has taken the time to ensure the writing is free from as many possible errors as possible—errors not only of grammar, usage, and mechanics, but also of format and content. As a writer trying to communicate meaning to an audience, it is your responsibility to check and recheck your document for errors.

In terms of grammar, usage, and mechanics (or, GUM), you want to avoid major sentence errors. Such errors include

- Subject-verb agreement
- Pronoun reference agreement
- Comma splice
- Run-on (also called fused sentence)
- Fragments

These are “major” errors because they involve basic grammar and for most people, with a little practice, such errors can be conquered. (This topic might make for a good future podcast!)

Correct writing also requires that you verify facts to make sure your message is accurate. For example, if you are writing a reaction to an essay entitled “Black Men and Public Space” written by Brent Staples, and you refer to the author in your composition as Bret Staples or Brent Staple, then you have an error in fact—the correct spelling of the writer’s name. While this may seem minor, believe me, it is not, for this type of error will affect your credibility; if you don’t have credibility, then your audience will not take what you say seriously.

Whenever you are dealing with someone’s name, a title, a place, a date, and the like, you alone are responsible for recording that information accurately.

You must also proofread carefully, watching for typographical errors such as repeated words, wrong letters, omitted words.

You must watch out for homonym errors such as the following:

- There, their, they’re
- It’s, its
- Too, to, two

Lastly, you must make sure that your paper is setup correctly and follows the formatting guidelines established for the course. What this likely means is that you will need to consult a good source for proper setup depending on whether your course uses APA, MLA, or some other style.

Writing requires attention and practice to keep skills sharp. It’s not enough just to put words on the page; indeed, you have to think about whether those words on the page add up to something that is clear, concise, complete, and correct. To this end, keep the four Cs of effective writing in mind when you compose.

Thanks for listening everyone. Happy writing.