

ed/tage Insights
Network for Learning and Growth

Words

Becoming a more competent writer

Presented by
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Does this paint a picture in your mind?

Category	Wind speed (km/h)
• Calm	<1
• Light air	1–6
• Light breeze	7–12
• Gentle breeze	13–19

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Does this paint a picture in your mind?

Category	Description
• Calm	Smoke rises vertically
• Light air	Smoke drifts
• Light breeze	Wind felt on face; leaves rustle
• Gentle breeze	Leaves, small twigs in constant motion

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The \$1000 challenge to explain jargon

Doug MacDonald, Secretary, Dept of Transportation, Washington, organized a competition to 'translate' into English a term used in transport engineering, namely [through-put maximization](#).

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The prize-winning answer

Car-flow on a highway is like pouring grains of rice through a funnel. If you pour too slowly, the flow is even but it takes longer: if you pour too fast, the funnel is clogged and very few grains of rice come out. The optimum speed is that which moves most cars under typical conditions.

[Paul Hasse](#), winner among 258 participants

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What is effective writing

Effective writing is writing that delivers.

Effective writing secures defined objectives

- from a defined audience
- while keeping within defined constraints
- and contributing to better relationships.

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Define readers and objectives

- A typical reader ('persona')
Gender? Age? Education? Occupation? Finances? Interests?
Reading habits?
- Purpose: Inform? Explain? Persuade?
- Outcome: What would you like the reader to do on reading the document?

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Features of effective writing

- **Useful**: relevant and pitched at right level
- **Clear**: who does what to whom
- **Vivid**: paints pictures in the mind's eye
- **Specific**: free of vague generalities
- **Confident**: free of hedging and ifs and buts
- **Organized**: follows a clear sequence
- **Friendly**: uses personal pronouns

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Explaining chance, clusters, and randomness, 1

Apparently unusual events happening simultaneously do not necessarily share the same cause, and that unusual patterns of numbers in life, including the incidence of illness, are not at all unusual, not necessarily due to some guiding force or single obvious culprit, but callously routine, normal and sadly to be expected.

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Explaining chance, clusters, and randomness, 2

To see why, stand on the carpet – but choose one with a pile that is not too deep (you might in any case want a vacuum cleaner to hand) – take a bag of rice, pull the top of the packet wide open ... and chuck the contents straight into the air. Your aim is to eject the whole lot skyward in one jolt. Let the rice rain down.

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Explaining chance, clusters, and randomness, 3

What you have done is create a chance distribution of rice grains over the carpet. . . . One thing the grains have probably not done is fall evenly. There are thin patches here, thicker ones there and, every so often, a much larger and distinct pile of rice: it has clustered.

Wherever cases of cancer bunch, people demand an explanation. With rice, they would see exactly the same sort of pattern, but does it need an explanation?

— From [The Tiger That Isn't](#) by Michael Blastland and Andrew Dilnot

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Avoid abstractions

Standby power consumption very often is much smaller than the total power consumption of the appliances during running mode. However due to the long running hours of appliances in standby mode, and the high penetration rate of certain appliances, the total standby power consumption for the country can turn out to be significant.

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Make writing concrete

Although electricity consumption in standby mode may be only 10% of that in normal mode, millions of appliances left in standby mode for hours add up to a significant amount: 68 million TV sets in cities, left in standby mode for 10 hours a day, add up to more than 1.5 billion units—enough to supply electricity to * villages for a whole year.

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Develop analogies

... the genome is as a kind of instruction manual for the body. Viewed this way, the chromosomes can be imagined as the book's chapters and the genes as individual instructions for making proteins. The words in which the instructions are written are called codons, and the letters are known as bases.

— From [A Short History of Nearly Everything](#) by Bill Bryson

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Develop analogies and give examples

Some materials are like music: the gaps are as important as the filled-in bits. Holes in a material gives it all sorts of useful bulk properties that the equivalent dense material would not possess. Take bone, for example: its open, porous structure provides spaces for capillaries and soft tissues to pass through, and ensures that the material, while rigid and strong, does not overburden us with its weight.

— From [Made to Measure: new materials for the 21st century](#) by Philip Ball

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Ask questions; make lists

Why do children take so long to learn about right and left, and **why** do they have such problems with the concepts? A complete understanding involves the coordination of **three** separate skills: understanding right and left, carrying out a mental rotation, and seeing the world from a difference perspective.

— From [Right Hand, Left Hand: the origins of asymmetry in brains, bodies, atoms and cultures](#) by Chris McManus

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Be specific: mention numbers, size, etc.

- Be specific: How large is large? How small is small?
- A large number of people were present.
More than 200 people were packed in the room.
- Apply a small quantity of urea to each pot.
Add a teaspoon of urea to each pot.

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Use abbreviations sparingly

FIRB (1051.94 m³) saved 1/3rd water as compared to **CT** (1535.17 m³) and also gave high **WUE** (18.58 kg/ha-mm).

- Furrow-irrigated raised beds
- Conventional tillage
- Water use efficiency

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Use abbreviations sparingly

R K U

- Right Knuckles Up (sports community)
- Ryutsu Keizai University (Japanese school)

F D S R

- Front Desk Service Representative
- Formal Descriptions and Software Reliability
- Family Development Services and Research (est. 1985)
- Financial Data Submission and Reconciliation (Canada)

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Use a friendly tone

Writing is, after all, a personal transaction between two people, even if it is conducted on paper, and the transaction will go well to the extent that it retains its humanity. Therefore, I urge people to write in the first person—to use ‘I’ and ‘me’ and ‘we’ and ‘us’.

— William Zinsser, [On Writing Well](#)

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Use a friendly tone

- Kindly specify your requirements so that steps can be taken to comply with the specifications.

Versus

- **Let us know you needs so that we can meet them.**

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Untangle noun stacks with prepositions

Untangle noun-stacks and re-arrange them with proper prepositions.

- GHG emissions related impact mitigation
versus
- **Mitigating the adverse effects of emissions of greenhouse gases**

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Put first things first

- Before you invest, read the fine print.

Versus

- **Read the fine print before you invest.**

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Put things positively

- We cannot admit more than 50 participants.

Versus

- **We can admit up to 50 participants.**
 - Do not buy if the price exceeds Rs 150 per tonne.
- Versus
- **Buy if the price is up to Rs 150 per tonne.**

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Give pronunciations and etymologies

- The phylum Protozoa (proh-toh-zoh'ah; "first animals" G) includes all animal organisms consisting of a single cell.
- The phylum Echinodermata (ee-ky'noh-dur'muh-tuh; "spiny skin" G) is radially symmetrical.

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Tackle a writing task systematically

- Write the core message in 25 words.
- Expand the core message to a 250-word abstract.
- Prepare and revise an outline (the skeleton).
- Flesh out the skeleton: for writing text, target at least 400 words per session. Write fast; forget about errors.
- Revise only after writing at least 2000 words.

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Tips on scheduling writing

- Write and revise the outline whenever convenient.
- Keep large chunks of uninterrupted time for writing text.
- Set the target in terms of number of words.
- End a session at a point from which it is easy to resume.

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Learning to be a writer

- Effective writing is an acquired skill.
- Elements of acquiring a skill
 - Progressively difficult tasks
 - Regular practice
 - Supervision
 - Monitored progress

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Progressively difficult tasks

- Ten sentences a day for 30 days
 - Each sentence to be at least 12 words long
 - No repetition of a single pattern
- Ten sentences on a single topic each day for 30 days
- Two paragraphs on a topic each day for 30 days
- Rewriting what you have read
- Summarizing what you have read

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Read extensively

- Prefer books or longish feature articles in magazines to newspapers.
- Read popular fiction to absorb the common patterns of grammar.
- Read writers known for the quality of their prose.
- Spend about ten hours on reading for every hour you spend on learning to write.

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The Royal Society Winton Prize for Science Books

The Royal Society Prize for Science Books celebrates the very best in popular science writing.

Ever since the prizes were originally established in 1988 they have had the same aim: to encourage the writing, publishing and reading of good and accessible popular science books.

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Winton Prize: winner and shortlist, 2014

- Serving the Reich: the struggle for the soul of physics under Hitler by Philip Ball
- Seven Elements That Have Changed The World: iron, carbon, gold, silver, uranium, titanium, silicon by John Browne
- The Perfect Theory by Pedro G. Ferreira
- The Cancer Chronicles: unlocking medicine's deepest mystery by George Johnson
- **Stuff matters: the strange stories of the marvellous materials that shape our man-made world** by Mark Miodownik
- Gulp: adventures on the alimentary canal by Mary Roach

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PEN/E. O. Wilson Literary Science Writing Award

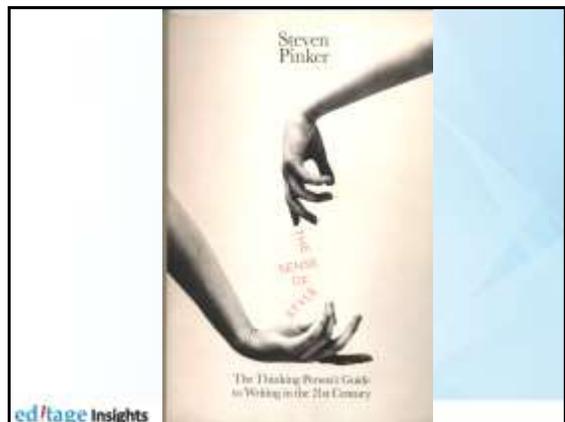
- Celebrates literary excellence in physical and biological sciences.
- Books that exemplify the quality of writing the award is designed to acknowledge include [Silent Spring](#), [The Double Helix](#), and [The Lives of a Cell](#).

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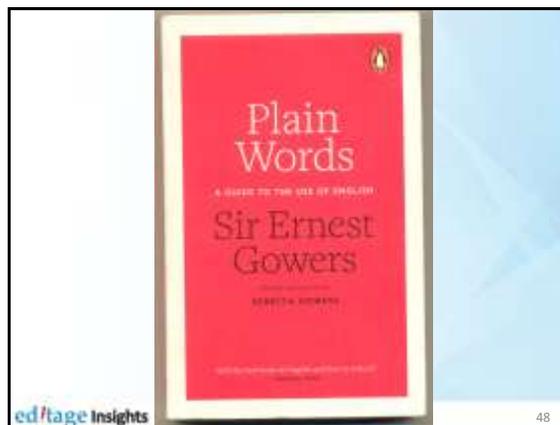
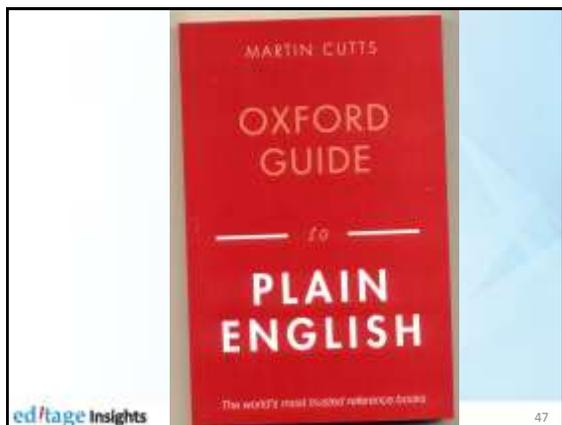
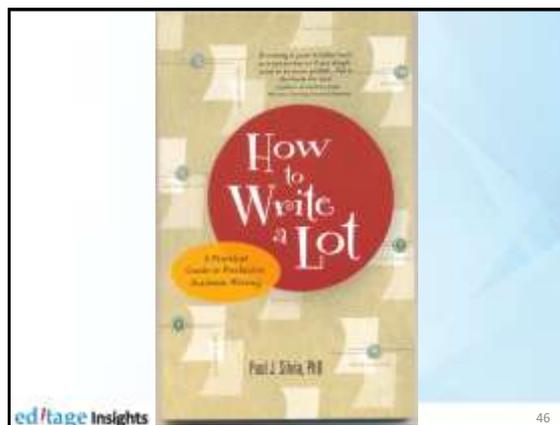
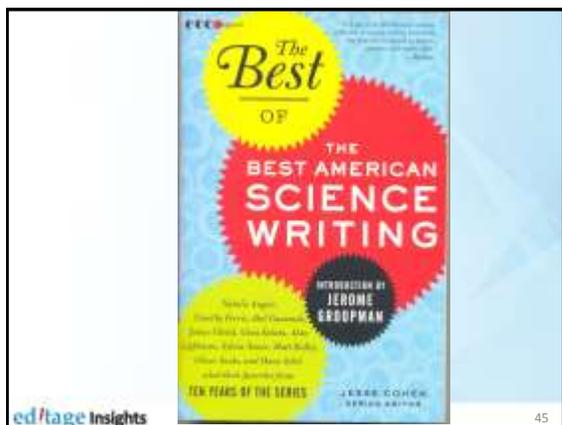
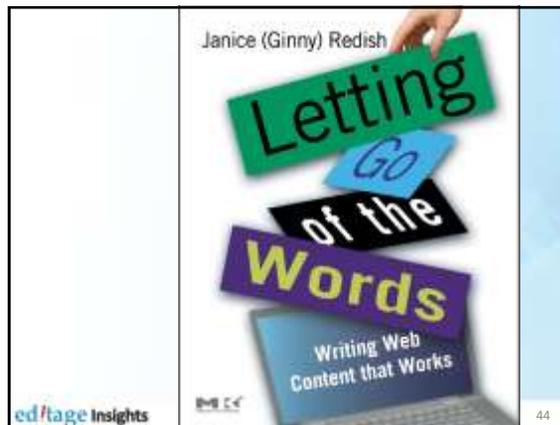
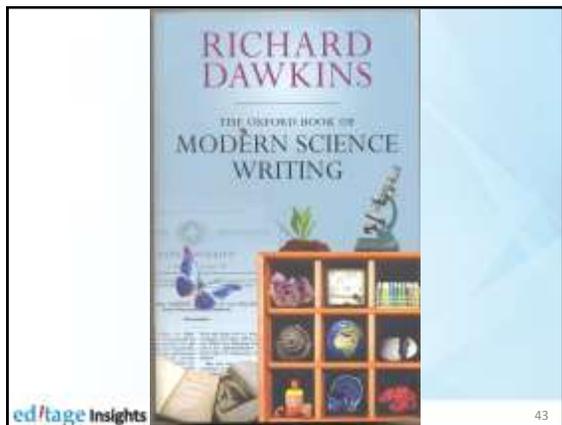
PEN/E. O. Wilson Literary Science Writing Award

- 2014 [High Price: a neuroscientist's journey of self-discovery that challenges everything you know about drugs and society](#) by Carl Hart
- 2013 [Subliminal: how your unconscious mind rules your behavior](#) by Leonard Mlodinow
- 2012 [The Information: a history, a theory, a flood](#) by James Gleick
- 2011 [The Emperor of All Maladies: a biography of cancer](#) by Siddhartha Mukherjee

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Recommended reading, 1

- Pinker S. 2014. **The Sense of Style: the thinking person's guide to writing in the 21st century**. London: Allen Lane (Penguin Group). 360 pp.
- Dawkins R (ed.). 2008. **The Oxford Book of Modern Science Writing**. Oxford Univ. Press. 419 pp.
- Redish J. 2007. **Letting Go of the Words**. San Francisco, California: Morgan Kaufmann. 364 pp.

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Recommended reading, 2

- Groopman J (ed.). 2010. **The Best of the Best American Science Writing [2000–2009]**. New York: HarperCollins. 346 pp.
- Silvia P.J. 2007. **How to Write a Lot: a practical guide to productive academic writing**. Washington, DC: American Psychological Association. 149 pp.

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Recommended reading, 3

- Cutts M. 2013. **Oxford Guide to Plain English**, 4th edn. Oxford: Oxford University Press. 320 pp.
- Gowers E and Gowers R. 2014. **Plain Words: a guide to the use of English**. London: Particular Books (Penguin). 320 pp.

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*What is written without
effort is in general read
without pleasure.*

Samuel Johnson
1709–1784

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