

To improve your business writing . . . rewrite it

You can learn to be a better writer by seeing how others do it.

By John Sturtevant



The words in that headline are adapted from the great fiction writer Elmore Leonard, who was an invaluable inspiration for me when I began my business writing career.

In a [previous article](#), I suggested you find inspiration from writers you admire. And I don't mean to say you should look only to bestselling authors as your role models, although there are plenty of them.

Just search the term “best financial writers” and you'll find a couple dozen people ready to inspire you. You'll see great storytelling from Michael Lewis, a fresh and often funny perspective from Erin Lowry, and unpretentious honesty and wisdom from Warren Buffett.

Add to that list the bloggers who write on the topic and the excellent journalists writing for print and online publications, and you have a nearly infinite assortment of writers who will guide you.

Plus, you can get inspiration from the people down the hall in your office — that manager who creates lucid memorandums, the researcher who writes clear and logical reports, and the executive who delivers compelling presentations.

Ideas can appear from unlikely sources. I've played piano since I was a child. My preference is jazz, and I'm influenced by the genius structure and phrasing of Thelonious Monk, the fluid and graceful transitions of Bill Evans, the energy and improvisation of Keith Jarrett.

But I also get ideas from other musical genres. I'm inspired by lyrical phrasing from Willie Nelson, layering and effects from Skrillex, an odd syncopation from Eminem.

Once you decide to look for inspiration for your writing, you'll similarly find clues, ideas, and techniques from all kinds of sources — sometimes where you'd least expect them.

So I won't tell you which writers to follow. In the same way I wouldn't tell you what music to listen to or which movies you should watch.

But I *do* suggest you read and write with a fresh perspective. I'll explain why and give you examples of writing I like.

Read like a writer. This means paying attention to more than just the content. Look closely at the writer's word choice, how the writer structures ideas into sentences and paragraphs, and how the writer uses punctuation to enhance meaning and focus the reader.

For example, here's a passage from [Warren Buffett's Berkshire Hathaway 2009 Shareholder Letter](#):

From the start, Charlie and I have believed in having a rational and unbending standard for measuring what we have — or have not — accomplished. That keeps us from the temptation of seeing where the arrow of performance lands and then painting the bull's-eye around it.

I like several things Buffett does in that paragraph.

He uses the word *believed* to connect a decision to feeling. We can't measure belief, but we know it when we have it. That simple word shows the reader how Buffett's decisions are influenced by his beliefs and feelings.

He uses dashes to draw the reader's eye to three words — *or have not* — because he wants the reader to know he and Charlie measure what they did well, and also what they didn't do well. The punctuation helps him deliver that message.

He uses an analogy of the bull's-eye. Analogies allow us to compare information with something we already know. Even if you have never held a bow and shot an arrow at a target, you know the bull's-eye is a universal symbol of hitting a target or achieving a goal.

So, when you read, look closely at how the writer connects ideas, keeps you wanting to read more, and helps you focus on the message. Then use those techniques in your own writing.

Write like a reader. It's often tough for financial professionals to look at their own writing objectively, because it's easy to stay focused on the minutiae of details. That's what you were trained to do.

I'd like you to train yourself to also focus on your style, your tone, your word choice, your story. Write from your reader's point of view. Think of your writing as a conversation between you and a friend. Would *you* want to have a conversation with you?

"Right now, somewhere in the world, a student is mouthing off to her math teacher."

Thus begins the wonderfully insightful book by Jordan Ellenberg *How Not to Be Wrong: The Power of Mathematical Thinking*.

Ellenberg draws the reader in with one simple sentence that rings familiar to everyone who suffered through math class wondering, "When am I ever going to use this?"

Although Ellenberg writes about the importance of linear regression and the value of null hypothesis significance testing, he describes these ideas from his readers' point of view. And he knows most of his readers are not mathematicians.

His book has chapter titles like "More Pie Than Plate" and "Dead Fish Don't Read Minds".

Ellenberg uses language, examples, stories, and humor to make mathematics more common sense for those of us who are interested in learning how mathematical thinking is useful in other areas of life.

It takes practice. Read everything you write out loud. Listen to what you wrote. If you're confused by your writing, rewrite it. If you're bored with your writing, rewrite it. If you are uninspired by your writing, rewrite it.

Strive to thrill yourself with everything you write. You are not being paid to churn out generic, vague, boilerplate ideas. So your writing shouldn't sound that way.

I understand, you have to work within certain parameters set by your organization and industry. Standards and procedures are useful to follow. But sometimes those rules get in the way of clear communication.

We get so caught up with following procedures, adhering to templates, and focusing on details that we lose sight of the real purpose behind nearly all of our communication — to help our readers understand ideas and make decisions.

So as you write, read what you've written with an objective eye. And if it sounds like writing, rewrite it. Or even better, delete it.

Finally, allow yourself time to develop your own clear writing style.

Remember the tourist lost in Manhattan who stopped a local and asked, “Excuse me, can you tell me how I get to Carnegie Hall?”

“Practice, practice, practice!” replied the New Yorker.