

1 Let's be clear

What clear writing is, what it does
and how this book will help you do it.

What is clear writing?

Anything that can be said can be said clearly.

LUDWIG WITTGENSTEIN¹

What do you need to write?

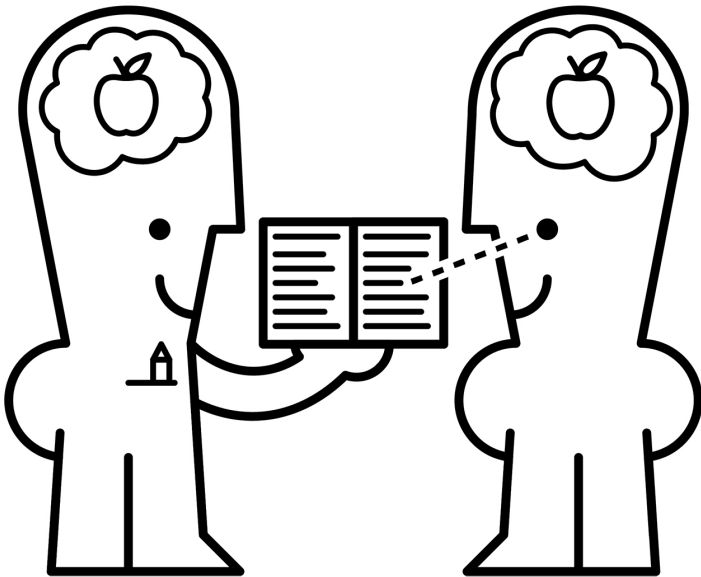
- If you're at **work**, it might be an email, a presentation or a plan to explain what's happening, or what you think should happen.
- If you **run a company**, it might be a business plan or a strategy to shape your future.
- If you're a **marketer**, it might be an article or a white paper to showcase a company's knowledge, or a marketing brochure to sell its products.
- If you're a **teacher**, it might be a worksheet, lesson plan or case study to get across some new facts and ideas.
- If you're a **student**, it might be an essay to show that you understand what you've learned.
- If you're an **academic**, it might be a paper presenting your findings for publication in a journal.

- And in **everyday life**, it might be an important email or letter to a friend, a relative or a company, or just a social media post about your life or the lives of those close to you.

So much for the things *you* want to do. But they are only one side of the story. The other side is the person you're writing *for*: your reader.

When we talk about 'writing', we think about the act of choosing words and putting them on to a page or a screen. That puts the focus on ourselves – our ideas, our decisions and our goals.

In reality, writing is a story with two sides. It's a conversation, not a monologue. It involves both the writer *and* the reader. The words and ideas are what the writer puts in, but understanding and knowledge are what the reader gets out.



Writing clearly is about getting ideas out of your head and into someone else's. The words and the page are just the tools you use to make that happen. In other words, it's a *process of communication*, including both writing and reading, where two people are connected through language. You can see it in the illustration.

To make this process work, the first step is to decide what you want to say. Clear writing depends on clear thinking. If your message isn't clear to you, it won't be clear to anyone else.

Then you need to think carefully about your reader and what *they* need from what you write. Otherwise, your writing won't mean that much to them – if they read it at all. That's why you have to consider the reader *before* you start to write.

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Now, with your reader in mind, you begin to write. That means choosing the words to get your message across, as well as thinking about how much to write and how to structure it. It also means taking the time to work on your writing until it's as clear as you can make it. And it means thinking about how your words will appear on the page or the screen.

If you want the reader to learn, you'll need to explain the new ideas. If you want them to remember, you'll have to make your message stick. And if you want them to do something new or different, you'll have to make a convincing case.

Clarity is in the mind of the reader

When you write, the reader's response is just as important as the choices you make. The reader can only understand if you communicate, and you can only communicate if

they understand. A writer who neglects their reader is like one hand clapping.

In other words, you can't make yourself clear in isolation. You can only be clear *to your reader*. The measure of clarity is the reader's understanding.

If someone doesn't understand you, you can't say, 'But I explained it very clearly!' If your message had been truly clear, they would have understood. The meaning of your communication is the response that you get.²

The measure of
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Clarity is your responsibility, not your reader's. You are talking, and they are listening. You're the one who wants to get this message across, so you must put in the effort to make yourself clear. And the more thought and effort you put into your writing, the clearer your message will be in the reader's mind.

Clear writing means easy reading

Easy reading is damn hard writing.

NATHANIEL HAWTHORNE

With most non-fiction writing, the reader has something they need to do, or find out, and your writing will allow them to do it. So they're probably not reading for fun. In fact, reading your text is just another job on their to-do list.

By writing clearly, you make that job easier. You work hard so the reader doesn't have to. As they read, nothing trips them up or gets in the way; the ideas just seem to flow from the page or screen into their mind.³ And because their reading experience is a positive one, they're far more likely to learn new things, accept new ideas or change the way they act.

On the other hand, if your writing is hard to understand, your reader will wind up confused, irritated or just plain bored. Reading your words will be harder and take longer, and there's a good chance that the reader will just give up. And whatever you wanted them to do, they probably won't do it.

If that happens, you won't just miss the target. You'll actually make things worse. Before, the reader simply lacked knowledge – but now they're actively irritated. Worst of all, you may have blown your one and only chance to reach them. That's why clear writing is so vital: it helps you get communication right first time.

Content and context

When you write, you want to communicate something to the reader. But they're not just a blank slate that you can write your message on. They bring something to the party too. They have knowledge, beliefs and emotions of their own, and those things will affect how your message comes across. So a big part of writing clearly is to start where the reader is now, and talk *to* them – not just at them.

Clear writing
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You can think of this as content vs. context. The *content* of your writing is the words you put on the page. But just as important is the *context* in which those words are read – who the reader is, what they know, how they feel and what's going on for them at the time they read your message. Content is what you say, but context determines what the reader hears.

The best writing works with its context, not against it, so it has the best chance of being understood. And content that works in one context might fail in another.

For example, most young teens would have a hard time understanding an academic article on particle physics. But on the other hand, a middle-aged particle physicist might be baffled by a teenager's Instagram feed. If you don't know who your reader is, you can't write clearly for them.

Context has different levels. It can include a here-and-now situation, like reading on the bus, or a broader life situation, like looking for a job. But whatever the reader has going on, in any sense, your writing needs to take account of it.

Another important part of the context is what the reader thinks about *you*. Their view could be based on what they think already, but it also depends on what you write. And you might need to give yourself some credibility in the reader's eyes before they'll listen to what you have to say.

What clear writing can do

Clear writing is a powerful tool, in work and in life. For example, you can use it to...

- Help people learn new things
- Show people how to do a task, or get a job done
- Offer advice and support to people in a new or difficult situation
- Keep people safe, or explain how they can look after themselves or others
- Help people see things differently by introducing them to new ideas and perspectives
- Express your own views or opinions so other people appreciate them
- Explain new or complex ideas, so people can get to grips with them more easily

- Make services easier to access for the people who need them most
- Introduce a product or a service to those who might be interested in it
- Improve the user experience of digital products, so people can use them without getting frustrated.

Clear writing is always useful in *one-to-many* forms of writing, like websites and articles. By writing clearly, you can make sure that as many people as possible understand your message.

However, clarity can still make a big difference when you're writing one-to-one. For example, you might be writing a job application, or an email to try and patch up a friendship. In fact, within the context of your own life, this might be some of the most important writing you ever do.

You might not even be writing at all. For example, you could just be answering the questions of a curious child, or discussing a tricky subject with a partner or your boss. If you can get them to clearly understand your thoughts, you're halfway home already.

As you can see, clear writing isn't just about communicating ideas. It can be a powerful tool for growth and change. No matter what you're doing, the clearer your message is, the easier your life will be.

Why clear writing can be hard

*The single biggest problem in communication
is the illusion that it has taken place.*

WILLIAM H. WHYTE

Clear writing sounds like it *should* be straightforward. You could sum it up as ‘Just say what you mean’, or ‘Keep it simple, stupid.’ But stating the aim is one thing. Actually achieving it is something else.

First, the more complex your message, the harder it is to express it clearly. If I want you to think of an apple, I just write the word ‘apple’. But to explain how to write clearly, I had to write this whole book.

Second, language is big, messy and hard to handle. There are half a million words in the English language,⁴ and while most people only know around a tenth of those,⁵ the number of possible sentences is still effectively infinite.⁶ So whatever you want to say, there will always be a *lot* of ways to say it.

Clear writing
can never be an
exact science

On top of that, language never stands still. It evolves all the time as people use it, so the same words can mean different things to different people at different times, or in different situations.⁷

That’s why clear writing can never be an exact science – not even for the most neutral or factual message. It’s not like maths, where you can work out the one correct answer. You’ll always have to make choices, judgements and compromises, and you can never be 100% sure that your writing will work the way you want. All you can do is learn what *generally* works, get

feedback when you can, read widely and keep working on your writing skills.

About this book

I wrote this book to do exactly what it says on the cover. My aim is to help you express yourself clearly in writing, so your reader understands exactly what you mean.

This book is meant for businesspeople, marketers, journalists, educators, students and anyone else who needs to communicate facts or ideas in writing.

When I first had the idea, I imagined that UFOs had beamed up every freelance writer in the world, including me. From now on, my clients would have to write their own stuff – but I had one shot at helping them out, by writing this book. What would I tell them?

I've aimed to make this book as accessible as I can. You don't have to be a professional writer, a word nerd, a grammar guru or a bookworm. As far as I'm concerned, your writing is a job you need to do, and I'm here to help you do it.

The chapters of the book will lead you through the writing process, from planning and writing through to editing, getting feedback and design. Along the way, we'll be looking at many ways to make your writing clear, from choosing words and crafting sentences to being more persuasive and memorable.

Throughout the book, I use the word 'subject' to mean the thing you're writing about, and 'message' to mean whatever you want to say. I use 'writing' or 'text' to mean the actual words you choose, and 'reader' to mean the person or people you're writing for.

You've probably already noticed that I talk about the reader a lot. Get used to it. Throughout this book, we're going to be

all over the reader like a cheap suit. We'll be using concepts and findings from linguistics, education and psychology to get inside the reader's head and understand how and why they might respond to what you write.

Crucially, we'll be treating the reader with respect. We won't think of them as a passive receiver of our message, but as a real, living person with thoughts and feelings of their own. We'll always remember that they have a choice over how, and whether, they read our words. And we won't assume that they will act or react in ways that we never would ourselves.

Clarity vs. poetry

At some points, you might read my advice and think, 'But my favourite writer never does that!' If so, please bear in mind that this book is not about creative writing. It's *only* about making your message absolutely clear to your reader.

Now, fiction and poetry can do more than that. Much more. They can make words do things we don't expect. They can evoke deep and mysterious emotions. They can take us to unknown places. They can be subtle, allusive and deliberately ambiguous.⁸ As a result, they can mean many different things to different readers.

All those things are wonderful in their place. But they are not what this book is about.

Ideas, not rules

Since every writing project is different, there's no magic formula for clear writing that will work in every situation.

So although I'll be sharing plenty of practical advice, you won't find any tips, tricks, hacks, secrets, formulas or shortcuts that promise to make you a superb writer with zero effort.

For me, that sort of cutting and pasting is the very *opposite* of learning to write.

Instead, I want you to think deeply about what writing clearly really means – in *your* mind, on *your* project, for *your* reader. On that foundation, you can build your own clear writing ability, which will serve you well in everything you write.

That's why this book is more about *ideas* than rules. We'll be spending just as much time on our aims, our message and our reader as on the actual hands-on writing.

Ready to get started? Then let's dive in.

Takeaways from this chapter

- Clear writing is a process of communication between writer and reader.
- Through clear writing, you can help the reader learn and understand new things or think and act in new ways.
- Clarity is measured in the reader's understanding. Being clear means being clear to your reader in context.
- Clear writing can be hard work, because there's no single right answer you can find.
- The harder you work on your writing, the easier it is for your reader to read and understand it.

2 Know your reader

Before you can write for your reader, you need to know who they are, what they want and what they already know.

Who is your reader?

*Bad writing is almost always a love poem
addressed by the self to the self.*

TOBY LITT⁹

As we saw in the last chapter, writing starts with something you want to say. But even more important is who you want to say it *to*. You need to know who your reader is before you can write for them, because how they see your message will depend on where they're looking from.

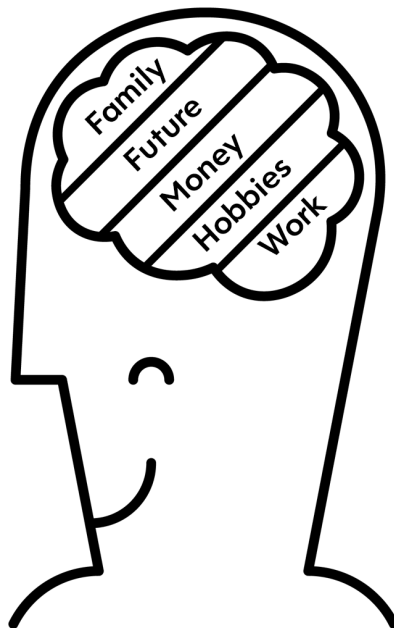
This is obvious when you think about one-to-one writing. You can't just write a job application, or a love letter, in isolation. You need to know who you're writing *to*, so you can say the right things in the right way. (Imagine using the exact same approach for both the job application and the love letter.)

However, the same point applies when you're writing for a group of people. Of course, you can't know all your readers individually. But you can get some idea of what they're like, or

what they have in common. And the clearer the picture you have of your readers, the clearer your writing will be.

For example, you could identify your reader by their:

- Age and gender
- Race, religion or culture
- Home and family
- Location
- Work, employment or career
- Finances
- Hobbies and interests
- Tastes and opinions
- Problems and priorities
- Hopes and aspirations.



If your reader is at work, you might also want to think about:

- Their role and responsibilities
- ‘Pain points’, or problems they need to solve
- What their boss wants from them
- Their personal priorities or career ambitions
- What their own users or customers need from them.

You probably won’t know all of these things about your reader. You may only know one or two. But whatever you do know, you need to keep it in mind as you write, so you can stay focused on the things your reader is most interested in or concerned about.

Personas

A persona is a written profile of an individual reader, covering details like their work, home, family, beliefs, consumer choices and so on.

Here’s an example for an online guide about tax:

Our reader is Marcus, the owner/manager of a pizza takeaway in the suburbs that employs two other people. Business is steady, but recently cash flow has been a little tight. Marcus is a 30-something father of two. He wants to know how the new tax regulations for part-time workers will affect his business, and what changes he might need to make.

The best personas are based on research, not guesswork. Qualitative research (words) can include findings from customer surveys and client interviews, while quantitative research (numbers) can bring in things like demographic data,

online behaviour, user numbers, sales figures and so on. Combine everything you find out to create an accurate, fact-based picture of your typical reader.¹⁰

To give your personas more character, you can give the person a name or find a photo to represent them. You can also use multiple personas to represent different types of reader – for example, different groups of customers or service users.

Personas are helpful because they make your reader human, and that gives you a way to speak to them. We'll come back to this in chapter 11.

The problem with personas is that they reduce your whole readership to a single person. If you rely too heavily on them, you could focus too much on writing for a certain profile, when in fact your readers are all different. And you need to be clear to *everyone* who might be reading, not just your single imaginary reader.

What does your reader want or need?

For some projects, it might be more useful to think about what your reader wants or needs, as opposed to who they are.

For example, if you're writing about using painkillers, or choosing a TV, you're writing about subjects that almost *any* adult reader might be interested in. So a user profile or persona won't tell you very much.

Instead, you can write a *user story*. This is a brief sentence, written from the reader's own perspective, that sums up what they want and need. It takes the form:

When [A], I need to [B] so I can [C].

Where A is the reader's *situation*, B is the *task* they need to do, and C is the *goal* they want to achieve.

For example, let's say you're writing a web page giving people information about measles. One of your user stories might be:

When **a child is sick**, I need to **learn about symptoms** so I can **decide whether to take them to the doctor's**.

Notice how this user story cuts across the reader's personal profile to focus on *needs*. It doesn't matter whether you're writing for a parent, a childminder or a teacher. What matters is that they urgently need to care for a sick child.

When you think about that, your job as a writer becomes crystal clear. First, you need to make sure readers realise that your web page is aimed at them and will help them with their problem. Then, you need to explain measles symptoms and when medical help is needed as clearly as you can. And you need to do it quickly, because the reader is in a hurry – yet also sympathetically, because they may be worried and upset.

Think about what
your reader wants
or needs, as
opposed to who
they are

If you're writing for different groups at once, you could create a user story for each one – although if they turn out very different, that might suggest that you need to write different things for each group of users.

Next time you're reading about a subject that's new to you, take a minute to think about your own user story. What's your situation right now? What do you need to find out? And once you know, what will you be able to do?

What does your reader know?

Whatever new information you give your reader, it has to fit with their existing knowledge, or it will be harder for them to

understand. At the same time, you don't want to waste their time by telling them too many things that they already know.

Ask yourself:

- What does my reader already know about my message?
- What do I want them to learn from my writing?
- How can I use what they already know to explain the things I want to say?

The answers will feed into many of the decisions you need to make about your writing: how to structure it, which topics to cover and how much to write overall.

We'll take a closer look at how to build on the reader's existing knowledge in chapter 14.

How does your reader feel?

As we saw in chapter 1, your reader comes to your writing with their own emotions, and that will affect how they respond to what you write.

Some readers will be actively interested in your message, and eager to learn about it. Obviously, that makes your job a whole lot easier. You can use their enthusiasm and curiosity as a springboard to get your message across, by answering their questions and guiding them in new directions.

Other readers will be neutral, with no strong feelings either way. They don't know much about you, or your topic, and they're waiting to see what you have to say. They might need your message to help them complete a task. So while they do have a reason to read, they might still feel reluctant or impatient about actually doing it.

This is the realm of written instructions like product manuals and how-to guides, and work-related correspondence like emails. Here, your job is to make the reader's experience as

simple and pain-free as possible, so they get the information they need with minimum effort.

Then there are those readers who have negative emotions about your message. They might be confused, doubtful or sceptical, or they might not trust you to speak on this subject. We'll look at how you can show empathy with the reader's feelings in chapter 16, and in chapter 17 we'll explore how to overcome their objections.

Next time you read something, notice your feelings. How do you feel about this writing, and your experience of reading it? Why?

Researching your reader

Any time you spend thinking about your reader is well spent, and your own intuitions are a perfectly good place to start. However, knowing your reader doesn't have to be guesswork. There are lots of ways to do some factual research.

The simplest approach is to talk to them. You could interview typical readers, carry out a survey or just chat to someone you know who is broadly similar to the reader. All these are excellent ways to discover what language people use around your subject, which you can then reflect in your own writing. This is sometimes called the 'voice of the reader'.

However, bear in mind that interviews may raise a similar problem to personas. Your interviewees are real, but they're not necessarily representative. Because interviews are such a vivid personal experience, and provide so much interesting detail, they could distort your sense of your readership as a whole.

So instead, you could talk to someone who knows people like your readers or deals with them regularly. Someone like a teacher, receptionist, sales rep, bartender and so on. They might

be able to tell you the sorts of things that people *generally* think or say about your subject, which could be more helpful than one person's perspective.

In the digital realm, discussions on Facebook, Twitter/X, Instagram, LinkedIn or Reddit could give you a window on the conversations people are having about your subject. You might be able to see the questions they ask, the things that preoccupy them and what they feel about your subject.

If you're writing about a product, Amazon reviews might be useful. Even reviews of books about your subject can show you what sort of questions novices have, or the things they most want to know – or what they really *don't* want or need. If you're writing about a product, check out reviews of alternatives or substitutes. Positive reviews highlight preferences and desires; negative ones point to objections and pain points.

Google's autocomplete function offers a quick and easy insight into the concerns of its users. Type a question word like 'what', 'how', 'which', 'can', 'where', 'why' and so on, followed by a relevant word. Then, *without* hitting Return, look at the popular searches that appear under the search field.

Let's say I'm writing a beginner's guide to looking after your lawn. When I go to Google and start typing 'can lawn', I see queries including:

can lawn **mowers cut wet grass**
can lawn**mowers fly**
can lawn **mowers be stored outside**
can lawn **mowers explode**

As these examples show, people's questions may be very different from what you expect. I'm willing to bet that if you

asked a garden expert to write a lawn-care guide, they would cover wet grass and outdoor storage, but probably not lawnmowers exploding or flying into the air. But however silly those ideas may seem, they may be precisely what some readers have in mind when they come to this subject for the first time. And you should always start where the reader is.

For something more precise, head over to [quora.com](https://www.quora.com) or [answers.com](https://www.answers.com), where you can search real people's questions and answers. At [answerthepublic.com](https://www.answerthepublic.com), you can see a wide range of questions and searches related to a keyword.

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Here's what to look for when researching your reader:

- **Words and phrases.** What language do people use about your subject? What terms do they use? Are they different from the 'official' words that you use within your organisation or profession?
- **Knowledge and knowledge gaps.** What do people know about your subject, and what do they need to find out? How can you bridge that gap?
- **Questions and answers.** What questions do people ask about your subject? What are they curious about? Where do they look for answers, and whose answers do they trust?
- **Problems and unmet needs.** What problems are people trying to solve? What are they worried about? Are they looking for help and not finding it?
- **Priorities and concerns.** What are people most worried about? What's their top priority?
- **Preconceptions.** What are people *already* thinking when they come to your subject, and why?

- **Misconceptions.** What mistaken ideas or false beliefs do people hold about your subject? Where do they come from?
- **Emotions.** What do people feel about your subject? What makes them excited or joyful? What makes them fearful or anxious?

Takeaways from this chapter

- Before you can write for your reader, you need to know who they are.
- Consider your reader's profile, as well as what they already know, think and feel about your subject.
- Think about your reader's problems and priorities. What are they trying to get done? How can your writing help?
- Research your reader in person or online, to learn more about them before you start writing.