

How To Be A Better Writer: 6 Tips From Harvard's Steven Pinker

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U want 2B a better writer?

Good writing is often looked at as an art and, frankly, that can be intimidating. No need to worry. There are rules — even science — behind writing well.

Our brain works a particular way; so what rules do we need to know to write the way the brain best understands?

To find out the answer I gave [Steven Pinker](#) a call.

Steven is a cognitive scientist and linguist at Harvard. He's also on the Usage Panel of the [American Heritage Dictionary](#).

Steven was recently ranked as one of the [top 100 most eminent psychologists](#) of the modern era.

His latest book is [The Sense of Style: The Thinking Person's Guide to Writing in the 21st Century](#). And it's great.

Below you'll learn:

1. The two key elements that will improve your writing.
2. The biggest mistake we all make — and how to fix it.

3. The science behind what makes writing work.
4. The most pleasant way to improve your knowledge of grammar.

And a lot more. Let's get to work.

1) Be Visual And Conversational

One third of the human brain is dedicated to vision. So trying to make the reader "see" is a good goal and being concrete has huge effects.

Via [The Sense of Style: The Thinking Person's Guide to Writing in the 21st Century](#):

We are primates, with a third of our brains dedicated to vision, and large swaths devoted to touch, hearing, motion, and space. For us to go from "I think I understand" to "I understand," we need to see the sights and feel the motions. Many experiments have shown that readers understand and remember material far better when it is expressed in concrete language that allows them to form visual images...

You also want to be conversational. Too many people are trying to impress others and sound smart.

And research shows that trying to sound smart actually [makes you look stupid](#):

...a majority of undergraduates admit to deliberately increasing the complexity of their vocabulary so as to give the impression of intelligence. This paper explores the extent to which this strategy is effective. Experiments 1–3 manipulate complexity of texts and find a negative relationship between complexity and judged intelligence.

Research shows things that are easy for our brain to process [feel more true](#) than concepts that require work.

Think of the reader as an equal. If you're trying to impress, at best you will make the reader feel dumb. And nobody likes to feel dumb.

Via [The Sense of Style: The Thinking Person's Guide to Writing in the 21st Century](#):

Classic writing with this assumption of equality between a writer and reader makes the reader feel like a genius. Bad writing makes the reader feel like a dunce.

Imagine you're telling a friend who is as smart as you are something they don't know.

Here's Steven:

...imagine that you are in a conversation with a reader who is as competent as you are, but happens not to know some things that you know. And you orient the reader so that they can see something in the world with their own eyes that you have noticed, but they have not yet noticed... A symmetry between reader and writer. A conversational, informal style. A determination to be visual and concrete. An excitement about showing the reader something in the world that the reader can see for themselves, rather than concentrating on the activity of the people who have studied that thing.

(To learn more about what the words you use say about you, click [here](#).)

Those two simple things — be visual and conversational — can instantly take your writing to the next level. But they're not the #1 obstacle you face.

What's the biggest reason your writing doesn't shimmer and shine? Here's where we get into some very interesting cognitive science.

2) Beware "The Curse Of Knowledge"

The main reason your writing isn't clear is not your fault at all. Seriously, your brain isn't wired to write well. It's actually working against you.

Once you know something you assume others do too. It's human nature. And that leads to bad writing.

Here's Steven:

...another bit of cognitive science that is highly relevant is a phenomenon called "the curse of knowledge." Namely, the inability that we all have in imagining what it's like not to know something that we do know. And that has been studied in various guises in the psychological literature. People assume that the words that they know are common knowledge. That the facts that they know are universally known... the writer doesn't stop to think what the reader doesn't know.

Ever hear someone say, "Explain it to me like I'm 5 years old"? That's an attempt to get around the curse of knowledge.

So what's the best way to avoid the number one problem in writing? Do what writers have done forever:

Have someone else read your work and tell you if it makes sense to them.

Via [The Sense of Style: The Thinking Person's Guide to Writing in the 21st Century](#):

...show a draft to some people who are similar to our intended audience and find out whether they can follow it. This sounds banal but is in fact profound. Social psychologists have found that we are overconfident, sometimes to the point of delusion, about our ability to infer what other people think, even the people who are closest to us. Only when we ask those people do we discover that what's obvious to us isn't obvious to them. That's why professional writers have editors... Your reviewers needn't even be a representative sample of your intended audience. Often it's enough that they are not you.

(To learn more about effective storytelling from a UCLA Film School professor, click [here](#).)

So you got yourself an editor (even if that just means your friend Larry is reading it for you.)

What do you need to do to make sure your reader is with you from the start?

3) Don't Bury The Lead

Yeah, it's an old saying from journalism. What's it mean? Tell the reader what your point is. And tell them early.

What I didn't know was that this isn't just an old journalism saying — it's also [backed by research](#).

People need a reference point so they can follow what you're saying. Without it they're lost.

Here's Steven:

Readers always have to fill in the background, read between the lines, connect the dots. And that means that they're applying their background knowledge to understanding the text in question. If they don't know which background knowledge to apply, any passage of writing will be so sketchy and elliptical, that it'll be incomprehensible. And that's why journalists say, "Don't bury the lead." Basically, a writer has to make it clear to the reader what the topic of the passage is and what the point of the passage is. That is, the writer has to have something to talk about and the writer has to have something to say.

Feel like that will kill the suspense? Again, stop trying to be clever and just be clear.

Suspense isn't useful if people have no idea what you're talking about and quit reading after the first paragraph.

Here's Steven:

A lot of writers are reluctant to do that. They're reluctant to say something like, "This paper is about hamsters," or whatever the paper is about. Because they feel that kind of spoils the suspense. But unless you're a really skilled mystery writer or a really good joke teller, it's good not to try to build up suspense and then have a sudden epiphany where it all makes sense. The reader should really know where the writer is taking them as they proceed.

How soon should you say what the topic is? Soon. Really soon. Not too far from the beginning.

Via [The Sense of Style: The Thinking Person's Guide to Writing in the 21st Century](#):

The exact place in which the point of a text is displayed is less important than the imperative to divulge it somewhere not too far from the beginning. There are, to be sure, stand-up comedians, shaggy-dog raconteurs, consummate essayists, and authors of mystery novels who can build up curiosity and suspense and then resolve it all with a sudden revelation. But everyone else should strive to inform, not dumbfound, and that means that writers should make it clear to their readers what they are trying to accomplish.

(For writing tips from a staff writer on Family Guy, click [here](#).)

So you're not trying to be smart and clever and you told the reader up front what your point is. Awesome. Can you be clever now? Occasionally, yes.

4) You Don't Have To Play By The Rules (But Try)

We all know those people who are sticklers about *who* and *whom*, and who ain't very happy when you say ain't.

But what these people forget is that when it comes to the "rules" of English, the lunatics are running the asylum.

Dictionaries aren't rulebooks. They follow language, they don't guide it.

Via [The Sense of Style: The Thinking Person's Guide to Writing in the 21st Century](#):

That's right: when it comes to correct English, there's no one in charge; the lunatics are running the asylum. The editors of a dictionary read a lot, keeping their eyes open for new words and senses that are used by many writers in many contexts, and the editors add or change the definitions accordingly.

Should we follow rules as best we can? Do they make our writing better on average? Absolutely.

But creative license is encouraged. Languages can, should and will change and that's great. To be a great writer, know the rules before you break them.

Here's Steven:

There is no tribunal. There's no rules committee when it comes to English. It's not like the rules of Major League Baseball which are exactly what the rules committee stipulates them to be. That would just never work with language. There are hundreds of millions of English speakers and they are constantly adding new terms to the language. They're constantly changing shades of meaning.

Do you want to live in a world where James Brown would be forced to sing "I Feel Well" instead of "I Feel Good"? *Hell, no.*

(To learn about all the positive effects writing can have on your life, click [here](#).)

So you gotta learn the rules to break them. What's the best way to learn those rules that doesn't feel like 4th grade English class all over again?

5) Read Read Read

Many great writers have never read a book about writing. Ever. So how did they learn?

By reading and reading and reading. Writing guides are excellent tools but anyone who wants to improve their writing needs to read *a lot*.

Here's Steven:

I don't think you could become a good writer unless you spend a lot of time immersed in text allowing you to soak up thousands of idioms and constructions and figures of speech and interesting words, to develop a sense of writing at its best. Becoming a writer requires savoring and reverse-engineering examples of good prose, giving you something to aspire to and allowing you to become sensitive to the hundreds of things that go into a good sentence that couldn't possibly be spelled out one by one.

Yes, research shows you can [tell a lot about a writer's personality](#) by reading their stuff.

(For the books everyone should read, click [here](#).)

So you're reading. But there is one last thing you need to do with everything you write and, frankly, it makes all the difference.

6) Good Writing Means Revising

Being a better writer doesn't mean that the words come out perfect immediately. It means you spend time to hone them.

The way the ideas initially pour out of your head is not the best way to get them into someone else's. That takes work.

You need to beat those words into submission. Roll up your sleeves and wrestle with them. Make time to revise.

Here's Steven:

Much advice on good writing is really advice on revising. Because very few people are smart enough to be able to lay down some semblance of an argument and to express it in clear prose at the same time. Most writers require two passes to accomplish that, And after they've got the ideas down, now it's time to refine and polish. Because the order in which ideas occur to a writer is seldom the same as the order that are best digested by a reader. And often, good writing requires a revising and rearranging the order of what you introduce so that the reader can easily follow it.

It's all in the editing. Think that texting, email and social media are destroying the written word? Wrong.

[Christian Rudder](#) points to research showing Twitter might actually be *improving* people's writing by making them edit and be more concise.

Via [Dataclysm: Who We Are \(When We Think No One's Looking\)](#):

Twitter actually may be improving its users' writing, as it forces them to wring meaning from fewer letters— it embodies William Strunk's famous dictum, "Omit needless words", at the keystroke level... The linguists also measured Twitter's lexical density, its proportion of content-carrying words like verbs and nouns, and found it was not only higher than e-mail's, but was comparable to the writing on Slate, the control used for magazine-level syntax. Everything points to the same conclusion: that Twitter hasn't so much altered our writing as just gotten it to fit into a smaller place. Looking through the data, instead of a wasteland of cut stumps, we find a forest of bonsai.

(To learn the ten rules for communicating effectively, click [here](#).)

All ready to stop reading and do some writing? Let's round up what we've learned and put it in perspective.

SUM UP

Here are six of Steven's tips for good writing:

1. **Be visual and conversational.** Be concrete, make your reader see and stop trying to impress.
2. **Beware "the curse of knowledge."** Have someone read your work and tell you if it makes sense. Your own brain cannot be trusted.
3. **Don't bury the lead.** Clarity beats suspense. If they don't know what it's about they can't follow along.
4. **You don't have to play by the rules, but try.** If you play it straight 99% of the time, that 1% will really shine.
5. **Read Read Read.** The English language is too complex to learn from one book. Never stop learning.
6. **Good writing means revising.** Never hit "send" or "print" without reviewing your work — preferably multiple times.

Rules, rules, rules. There is a science behind these words but as Steven makes clear, language is ever-evolving. It's organic and alive.

So don't forget to have some fun with writing, too. As [Oscar Wilde](#) said:

A writer is someone who has taught his mind to misbehave.