Words at work: writing reader-friendly, real-world prose

You've got 15 seconds or so to grab most readers' attention, then keep them hooked. How to do it? **Words at Work** provides the writerly skills you need for translating your research, demonstrations, and general know-how into news people can use. These skills apply to whatever you write, from simple calendar listings or website stories and sidebars to content-rich newsletters and even fact sheets.

Contents:

These materials work you through the basics of writing clear, straightforward prose. Refer to the six steps often as you do the exercises. If you find that some selections lack information or even justifications that your readers need, don't hesitate to supply them in your revisions.

The cheat sheet provides more than a crutch if you get stuck—if you compare examples word for word, you'll see how the transformation from stilted academic prose to grabby, straightforward prose plays out.

And too, if you've got a convoluted sentence that you can't whip into shape, the solutions to these examples may help you clarify your thoughts.

Accessory materials:

If you have difficulty getting by-in for a conversational voice and tone from others on your team, the first two documents may provide the extra bit of credibility and umph you need. The third suggests ideas for turning your expertise into memorable, easily grasped nuggets—in print or on the air.

And if you want to know why we wrote "wanna" in the first line of the bedbug PSA—well, give me a call. 607 255 7783.

This workshop was presented at the 2006 National IPM Symposium by
Mary Woodsen, science writer, NYS IPM Program

Mary Woodsen writes features, news releases, annual reports, public service announcements, impact statements, and more for the New York State Integrated Pest Management Program. As a freelancer, she has published in *The New York Times (Science Times), Audubon, Outside, Utne Reader, American Forests, Fine Gardening, The Growing Edge,* and other venues.

Six steps to better prose

***It won't do to say that the reader is too dumb or too lazy to keep pace with the train of thought. If the reader is lost, it's usually because the writer hasn't been careful enough.* —William Zinsser, On Writing Well**

1. Write in English. Replace jargon, buzzwords, and overused words and phrases with words that people understand. Otherwise they lose their impact and can't stand up and be counted when you need them most.

If you use acronyms like "EPA," "CSREES," or "IPM," you *must* be confident your reader will know what you mean. Otherwise spell it out, then put the acronym in parenthesis. But—if you won't use the acronym again, no point having it there in the first place.

Usually all you need is the delete key.

2. Woodsen's 70/30 rule, *aka* the Gettysburg Test. Roughly 70 percent of the words in your piece should be one syllable long. Two-and three-syllable words should make up the bulk of the rest. For every multi-syllabic word you write, ask yourself if there's a shorter one that would fit the bill.

Can't get buy-in on the 70/30 rule? Then develop a ratio that more suits your needs. Indeed, a 65/35 or 60/40 ratio is more common in magazines such as *The Atlantic Monthly* and *The New Yorker*.

3. Think white space. Most of us know how important white space is in design. It's equally valuable in crafting a story. You can create white space at the micro level by

- using periods liberally to break long sentences into short ones.
- hitting the return key often to break long paragraphs into short ones.

A newspaper or newsletter column—or a panel in a brochure—is only two or three inches wide. If you don't break up long paragraphs, your reader's eye too easily loses its reference point on the page—and you risk losing the reader. Aim for paragraphs one to three sentences long.

***This is how a seasoned pro does it. To get to that point in your own writing, you'll need practice, self-discipline, and a deep conviction that short sentences are better than long ones.* —Rudolf Flesch, The Art of Readable Writing**

4. Get rid of long strings of prepositional phrases. Eliminating them forces you to turn the nouns in each of those phrases back into the verbs they should be. And while you're at it, make them *strong, active* verbs.

5. Make sure your reader knows who's onstage: often writers forget to clarify who and what the sentence is fundamentally about. Be sure to identify the cast—and tell what they are doing. *And fess up to who's talking*. You don't eliminate bias by pretending that you're not in the picture. And when you are, readers more easily relate to what you're saying.

6. Write for the ear, edit for the mind. Don't start with a thesis statement and end with a summary simply because you think you should. Start with an anecdote—or new or startling information—or a good quote—or simple, straightforward names and numbers. (Readers, by the way, love numbers. Don't hesitate to work stats and comparisons into your text.) Work to recognize hackneyed leads, then avoid them in your writing.

Don't believe what they say about not beginning sentences with *and* or *but* or *so*. Ditto about not using contractions. Ditto about avoiding rhetorical fragments, otherwise known as sentence fragments. Just don't overdo it.

Do write conversationally. When people read, there's a voice in their heads. The person you're addressing is reader and listener both. Read what you've written out loud. If it seems stiff, it is. Rewrite it. **Strive to write for the ear.** This means, of course, great care for clarity, which is why you **edit for the mind**, using the best that grammar and composition have to offer.

***The lecturer pumps laboriously into sieves. The water may be wholesome, but it runs through. A mind must work to grow.* —Charles W. Eliot, president of Harvard University, Inaugural Address, 1869**

Mary Woodsen / mm95@cornell.edu / 607-255-7783 / NYS IPM Program

Words to use carefully—or avoid (including jargon, new and old)

Ask yourself if you are using the exact word or merely making an important sound.
—Theodore M. Bernstein

Overused words and phrases (including jargon, new and old).

actuate
addressing issues…
appropriate (try *best, most useful, suitable, well-adapted, etc*.)
assessing issues
closure
conceptualize
cutting edge
deliverables
democratizing
diverse (as in *diverse opportunities, diverse audiences, diverse tools*—try *wide-ranging, many, etc*.)
educators
effective, effectuate
enhance, enhanced reliability
experience (as in *we are experiencing delays…for a positive gardening experience…*)
facilitate
foster
generate (try *make*)
generative idea
goal
hopefully
impact; impacted *(a word best reserved for dentistry)*
implement
informational program, website, etc.
imperative(s)
individual (use *person*)
inputs
issues concerning…
leading edge
maximize (as in *maximize organizational effectiveness*)
meaningful
methodologies
multiplier / multiplier effect
observational data
one *("One could see that…"* substitute *"you")*
operative, operationalize
orientate
outcomes
participants
perceived problems
personal (as in *personal physician, friendship, opinion etc*.)
procedural (use *procedure)*
product (for anything we create—let's call them *books, brochures, fact sheets…* it's like using "substances" for "drugs" or "individual" for "person")
relevant; relevant links
significant (as in *significant improvements were made*)
successful (as in *the successful completion of the project*)
storm (and *weather, rain, mortality, runoff, etc…*) events
tool (a plant is a *tool*? a building is a *tool*? Think again…)
trial *as verb* (as in *trialed, trialing*)
unique (look it up in the dictionary)
usage
utilize
xxxxxxx-friendly

Empty phrases *(in other words, JUST SAY IT).*
a major reason for (try "our justification:")
also provide added information (try "also explain how to…")
as a result (try "that's why we…")
at this point in time (substitute "now")
by means of (substitute "by")
created a positive learning experience (try "helped")
due to the fact that (substitute "because")
for the following reasons (try "here's why" or delete)
in a manner of speaking (delete)
in the event that (substitute "if")
in the final analysis (substitute "finally" or just delete)
it has become obvious that (try "we saw that")
it has been shown that (try "clearly" or "we noticed")
it has often been remarked that (delete)
it is generally believed that (try "most people think…")
it would seem obvious that (try "clearly" or "the likeliest scenario…")
the purpose of this report is to (substitute "we provide" or "we'll show you how" or equivalent)

Redundancy.
as for example
basic essentials
close proximity
consensus *of opinion*
cooperate *together*
filled *to capacity*
final completion
observational data
overall goal; *overall* objective
several alternatives
summer *season*
various factors
intended purpose

There is… there are… It is… etc. at beginning of sentence

Words at work exercises, set 1:

1: Count all three-, two-, and one-syllable words in any paragraph, calculate their proportions, and relate to step 2.

Four score and seven years ago our fathers brought forth on this continent a new nation, conceived in liberty and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal. Now we are engaged in a great civil war, testing whether that nation or any nation so conceived and so dedicated can long endure. We are met on a great battlefield of that war. We have come to dedicate a portion of that field as a final resting-place for those who here gave their lives that that nation might live. It is altogether fitting and proper that we should do this.

But in a larger sense, we cannot dedicate, we cannot consecrate, we cannot hallow this ground. The brave men, living and dead who struggled here have consecrated it far above our poor power to add or detract. The world will little note nor long remember what we say here, but it can never forget what they did here. It is for us the living rather to be dedicated here to the unfinished work which they who fought here have thus far so nobly advanced.

It is rather for us to be here dedicated to the great task remaining before us--that from these honored dead we take increased devotion to that cause for which they gave the last full measure of devotion--that we here highly resolve that these dead shall not have died in vain, that this nation under God shall have a new birth of freedom, and that government of the people, by the people, for the people shall not perish from the earth.

The Gettysburg Address, *Abraham Lincoln*

2: Here's an example of extension writing that's already pretty good. Use the six steps to make it shine.

Identifying pests can be as easy as recognizing a dandelion from a picture. Generally speaking, however, the smaller the offending organism, the more difficult it is to identify. This is the case for many plant diseases. Occasionally the cause of a disorder is synonymous with the symptom. For example, mined leaves of a birch means birch leafminer; scab lesions on apple mean apple scab. If an animal is chewing on a leaf, a degree of identification is necessary before any management practice can be suggested. To know that it is a caterpillar may be adequate for making a pest management decision, but determining the kind of caterpillar is a job for a specialist. Likewise, many infectious microorganisms can be confirmed only by laboratory tests.

From: Pest Management Around the Home: Cultural Methods, *Cornell Bulletin S74, by Carolyn Klass and Karen L. Snover, p. 4*

3: You have some endophytic ryegrass seed you've put into packets for giveaway items at a home and garden fair. A turf specialist gave you this information. Write a 30-word label for the packet and a 150-word handout to accompany it. *What information do you lack?*

There are three species of cool season turfgrasses that are endophyte enhanced, perennial ryegrass, the fine leaf fescues (red, chewings, hard, and sheeps) and turf type tall fescue (very coarse bladed). Endophyte means "in" "plant" and is the term that applies to a fungal organism that grows in the lower part of a grass plant (the sheath). It is not present in the roots or to any large extent in the upper leaves. The mutualistic relationship between the fungus and the plant results in the production of chemicals that have been shown to deter surface feeding insects such as chinch bugs, sod webworm, and billbugs. They have no effect on grubs as there is no endophyte in the roots. There have been reports of disease and stress resistance conferred by the endophyte, but by no means was this enhancement major. The endophyte is passed in the seed

and does not move from plant to plant. It is not killed by pesticides once the plant is infected, however, any seed older than 18 months will have reduced levels as it does not store well...the seed we are giving you is repel III and endophyte enhanced and has been stored in a cool dry place for 6 months, therefore the endophyte will be viable.

4: Recast this workshop description with the six steps in mind. But first—perhaps this workshop promises too much. How will you redefine it or rein it in? See also the "Six steps crib sheet," step 1.

This workshop will explore improved understanding of contemporary options for developing organizations and positions that are appealing to diverse candidates, recruiting a diverse candidate pool, and meeting diverse needs of new employees.

Words at work exercises, set 2: Freeing trapped verbs

With step 4 as your guide, recast these sentences. Number 1 is a headline. Does it give you a sense of what will follow? Number 4 is a World War II rule. Does it demand too much? Optional—circle each word or phrase that violates the six steps, and note which step is violated.

1. **Hiring process to change with addition of on-line capabilities** (headline)

2. There has been an affirmative decision for program termination.

3. A lack of knowledge about local conditions precluded determination of committee action effectiveness in fund allocation to those areas in greatest need of assistance.

4. Such preparations will be made as will completely obscure all Federal buildings and non-Federal buildings occupied by the Federal government during an air raid for any period of time from visibility by reason of external or internal illumination.

5. Long-term goals include developing effective and environmentally conscious control measures that are practical and easily accomplished, and through extension talks and brochures, disseminating this information to the appropriate individuals.

6. The current estimate is of a 50 percent reduction in the manufacture, availability, and usage of currently registered pesticides to the agricultural industry through the completion of the process of reviewing said pesticides under FQPA protocols and complying with those protocols.

Make this sentence worse by turning verbs into nouns and recasting as one sentence.

7. The governor knew that cities needed new revenues to improve their schools. Even so, he vetoed the budget bill because he wanted to encourage them to increase local taxes.

Exercise 1 from For Your Benefit, Winter 2003, Cornell University Human Resource Communication Services; *2, 3, 6, and 7 adapted from* Style: Toward Clarity and Grace, *by Joseph M. Williams, p. 20-24; 4 adapted from* On Writing Well, *by William Zinsser, p. 8.*

Words at work exercises, cheat sheet:

Set 1
1. About 70 percent of the words in each paragraph are one-syllable words.

2. Identifying pests can be as easy as recognizing a dandelion from a picture. But the smaller the pest, the more difficult it is likely to be to identify. Sometimes the name of the problem is the same as the symptom. Birch leaf miners mine leaves. Scabby lesions on apples are apple scab. If the damage is chewed leaves, you need more info before you choose a solution. Just knowing that the pest is a caterpillar can help. But if the culprit is a microorganism, lab tests may be necessary. And even with caterpillars it may take a specialist to determine *which kind*. Since treating for the wrong pest could hurt rather than help, be sure you get the help you need.

3. Handout
Repel III: Pest-resistant lawn grass:

This perennial rye ("endophytic rye") naturally carries a beneficial fungus that helps deter chinch bugs, sod webworm, and billbugs. The fungus, *Acremonium ssp*., grows in the lower part of the stem—but not in the roots, and only somewhat in the upper leaves.

Together, the plant and fungus produce chemicals that are distasteful to surface-feeding insects. (No effect on grubs; sorry—grubs are root feeders.) The fungus may even confer some small degree of disease and stress resistance.

This fungus can't be killed by fungicides. Nor does it spread from plant to plant by the usual means of infection—it is passed only in the seed. But neither does it store well. Your seed will still be viable after 18 months, but the *Acremonium* in it won't be.

Fine leaf fescues and turf-type tall fescues also carry *Acremonium ssp*.

Want to get more endophytic grass seed? If your garden center doesn't have it, they may be able to order some for you. Check with your Cornell Cooperative Extension office for a list of recommended varieties.

If you can't plant this fall, store the seed in a cool dry place till spring.

Label: Repel III:
Pest-resistant lawn grass!

This perennial ryegrass naturally carries a beneficial fungus that helps deter chinch bugs, sod webworm billbugs, and other surface-feeding insects. [note that material doesn't include planting instructions or site recommendations]

4. Are you developing new positions or filling old ones? Take a fresh look at your job descriptions and even your organization—and learn how to attract a wide and varied range of applicants while enriching your program and retaining your staff.

Set 2:

1. *Online capabilities help you find that job*
   Need a job? Look online!
   Find jobs online
   Surf to your new job

2. *The boss canned the program.*
   The program has succeeded so well it's no longer needed.
   With no new funds in the offing, we decided to end the program.
   Once we analyzed the data, we realized we'd be better off ending this program and starting a different one.

3. *Because they didn't have a handle on what local needs were, they failed to get funds to the hardest-hit areas.*
   The committee lacked the information it needed to get funds to the people who needed them most.

4. *Tell them to put something over the windows where work needs to go on at night.—F.D.R.* (If you don't know who F.D.R. was, look him up online.)

5. *We'll develop practical, safe, and easy-to-use methods for dealing with ants. We'll take our message to apartment superintendents and school staff through workshops and consultations.*

Or… on a website, for homeowners… (links are underlined)
   Need safe, practical ways to deal with ants? Check out our workshops and brochures.

6. *We expect to lose about 50 percent of currently registered pesticides once all products are reviewed under the Food Quality Protection Act.*

Make this sentence worse by turning verbs into nouns and recasting as one sentence.

3. *Despite knowledge of the need by cities for new revenues for the improvement of their schools, a veto of the budget bill has been executed to give encouragement to municipalities for an increase of local school taxes.*

Six steps crib sheet:

Most academic writing is an embarrassment. We think that "big words" and convoluted sentences correspond with the depth and richness of our thoughts, but it's workaday words that bring intelligible, sophisticated, *useful* expression to complex ideas.

Readers have an attention span of a half-minute or less. This isn't because they're stupid. But you do have a lot of competition for their attention—and even more so if you write for the web. Think of your readers as scanning, not reading; not, at any rate, until you've given them good reason to. And don't worry that you're dumbing it down. You're not. Want to know why? Call me: 607 255 7783.

Here, then, is how to grab and keep your readers' attention.

Six steps to better prose

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1. Write in English. Replace jargon, buzzwords, and overused words and phrases with words that people understand. Otherwise they lose their impact and can't stand up and be counted when you need them most.

Take a look at p. 3, *Words to use carefully—or avoid,* when you have a few minutes to spare. Ask yourself how often you need to use words like *diverse, appropriate, unique.* Ask yourself if you even know what *unique* means.

If you use acronyms like "EPA," "CSREES," or "IPM," you *must* be confident your reader will know what you mean. Otherwise spell it out, then put the acronym in parenthesis. But—if you won't use the acronym again, no point having it there in the first place.

Usually all you need is the delete key.

2. Woodsen's 70/30 rule, *aka* the Gettysburg Test. Roughly 70 percent of the words in your piece should be one syllable long. Two-and three-syllable words should make up the bulk of the rest. For every multi-syllabic word you write, ask yourself if there's a shorter one that would fit the bill.

Can't get buy-in on the 70/30 rule? Then develop a ratio that more suits your needs. Indeed, a 65/35 or 60/40 ratio is more common in magazines such as *The Atlantic Monthly* and *The New Yorker*.

How do they pull it off? By careful attention to steps 1, 4, 5, and 6. If you dip below 60/40, you're in trouble.

3. Think white space. Most of us know how important white space is in design. It's equally valuable in crafting a story. You can create white space at the micro level by

- using periods liberally to break long sentences into short ones.
- hitting the return key often to break long paragraphs into short ones.

A newspaper or newsletter column—or a panel in a brochure—is only two or three inches wide. **Webtext shouldn't be much wider—it's really hard to read onscreen.** If you don't break up long paragraphs, your reader's eye too easily loses its reference point on the page—and you risk losing the reader. Aim for paragraphs one to three sentences long.

I've analyzed stories in the New York Times "Science Times" and other newspapers. This rule holds across the board. And while we're thinking (however tangentially) about design, three no-no's: DON'T justify text, especially across narrow columns. Left-align it. DON'T center text except for the occasional header or short, formal invitation—it's passé. And DON'T write in all-

caps. (Do a web search to find out why, or simply "change case" on set 1, number 3 and try reading it.) Also: ONE SPACE BETWEEN SENTENCES. Again: search the web if you need to know why. Or give me a call.

***This is how a seasoned pro does it. To get to that point in your own writing, you'll need practice, self-discipline, and a deep conviction that short sentences are better than long ones.* —Rudolf Flesch, The Art of Readable Writing**

4. Get rid of long strings of prepositional phrases. Eliminating them forces you to turn the nouns in each of those phrases back into the verbs they should be. And while you're at it, make them *strong, active* verbs. **Usage experts have a $50 word for this: *nominalization*. Nominalizations are words that are derived from verbs or, sometimes, adjectives. Think of them as *trapped verbs*.**

Some ideas we can express only as nominalizations. Freedom. Death. Love. Hope. Wisdom. But since verbs, overall, are your strongest, most compelling words, you need to watch out for these nouns-derived-from-verbs that obscure action—the real deal.

You'll often find trapped verbs in prepositional phrases, though they can sneak in at other ports of call. Sometimes they masquerade as the subject. Think twice about every noun, adjective, or prepositional phrase you write. Be certain that each one is essential to your thought *and* to your reader.

5. Make sure your reader knows who's onstage: often writers forget to clarify who and what the sentence is fundamentally about. Be sure to identify the cast—and tell what they are doing. *And fess up to who's talking*. You don't eliminate bias by pretending that you're not in the picture. Being in the picture is essential if you want readers to relate to what you've done.

If for political reasons you simply can't say who's onstage—well, that happens. Then you'll have to write in The Institutional Passive. But don't let that excuse sloppy writing, and keep steps 1, 2, 3, 4, and 6 well in mind.

Remember that readers appreciate forthrightness and clarity. If there's no reason to hide, don't—you'll capture a wider audience and reach them at a deeper level.

6. Write for the ear, edit for the mind. Don't start with a thesis statement and end with a summary simply because your English teacher told you that you should. Start with an anecdote—or new or startling information—or a good quote—or simple, straightforward names and numbers. (Readers, by the way, love numbers. Don't hesitate to work stats and comparisons into your text.) Work to recognize hackneyed leads, then avoid them in your writing.

Don't believe what they say about not beginning sentences with *and* or *but* or *so*. Ditto about contractions—use them liberally. Ditto about avoiding rhetorical fragments, otherwise known as sentence fragments. Just don't overdo it.

Good writing is conversation. When people read, there's a voice in their heads. The person you're addressing is reader and listener both. Read what you've written out loud. If it seems stiff, it is. Rewrite it. **Strive to write for the ear**. This means, of course, great care for clarity, which is why you **edit for the mind**, using the best that grammar and composition have to offer.

The lecturer pumps laboriously into sieves. The water may be wholesome, but it runs through. A mind must work to grow.

—Charles W. Eliot, president of Harvard University, Inaugural Address, 1869

That said—let's get to work.

Mind your "ands" and "buts"—and your sentence fragments

Zinsser, *On Writing Well,* 1998. p. 74
Many of us were taught that no sentence should begin with "but". If that's what you learned, then unlearn it—there's no stronger word at the start. It announces total contrast with what has gone before, and the reader is thereby primed for the change. If you need relief from too many sentences beginning with "but," switch to "however." It is, however, a weaker word and needs careful placement. Don't start a sentence with "however"—it hangs there like a wet dishrag. And don't end with "however"—by that time it has lost its howeverness. Put it as early as you reasonably can, as I did three sentences ago. Its abruptness then becomes a virtue.

Walsh, *Lapsing into a Comma: A Curmudgeon's Guide to the Many Things that Can Go Wrong in Print—and How to Avoid Them,* 2000. p. 102
And or *but* are just as eligible as any other word for the honor of starting a sentence. And they often work well to express continuity or transition. "But I was taught never to do this," you might say. Well, you were taught wrong.

Bryant, *Current American Usage,* 1960. p. 21
AND (BUT, OR NOR) AT THE BEGINNING OF A SENTENCE
The objection to opening a sentence with *and* (*but, or,* or *nor*) has no basis in usage. It is exclusively a matter of stylistic taste. *Summary: This construction is used in the best writing*.

Fowler, edited by Gowers, *A Dictionary of Modern English Usage,* 1965. p. 29
That it is a solecism to begin a sentence with *and* is a faintly lingering superstition. The Oxford English Dictionary gives examples ranging from the 10th to the 19th centuries; the Bible is full of them.

Copperud, *American Usage: the Consensus.,1*970. p. 15
There is no reason why sentences should not begin with *and* (Bernstein, Bryant, Copperud, Flesch, Follett, Fowler). Copperud and Flesch add that when this is done, *and* should not be followed by a comma.

Copperud, *A Dictionary of Usage and Style,* 1964. p. 95
Don't be misled … by sentences that start with *and, but, so,* etc. This construction is common in informal writing, and informal writing ought to be commoner than it is. But a conjunction is still a conjunction, no matter how you slice the sentence. So forget the commas in "And, I took him up on it" or "But, the cork wouldn't come out of the bottle" or "So, we took the train instead."

Follett, *Modern American Usage,* 1966. p. 64
A prejudice lingers from the days of schoolmarmish rhetoric that a sentence should not begin with *and*. The supposed rule is without foundation in grammar, logic, or art. *And* can join separate sentences and their meanings just as well as *but* can both join sentences and disjoin meanings. The false rule used to apply to *but* equally; it is now happily forgotten. What has in fact happened is that the traditionally acceptable *but* after a semicolon has been replaced by the same but after a period. Let us do the same thing with *and*, taking care, of course, not to write long strings of sentences each headed by *And* or by *But*.

Williams, *Style: Toward Clarity and Grace,* 1990. p. 179
We can all slip up on the right number for a verb distant from its subject, and when someone calls such an error to our attention, we correct it. But when someone calls to my attention the fact that I begin sentences with *but*, I ask the person to name a writer who, in that person's opinion, is a nonpareil of linguistic decorum. We then begin leafing through something that person has published. Invariably, we find numerous instances of sentences beginning with *and* or *but*, along with a number of other so-called "errors of usage."

If any, at this point, throw up their hands in dismay and contempt, claiming that authorities like Fowler and all those otherwise excellent writers are still wrong, I can only ask that person what would count as evidence of his being mistaken, what would persuade him that he is in fact wrong? If that person can think of no evidence that would change his mind on these matters—not history, not the practice of good writers, not the opinion of those who are more informed than he, then we are debating not matters of usage but theology.

Einsohn, *The Copyeditor's Handbook,* 2000. p. 337
"Never begin a sentence with *and, but, or, also,* or *however."*

… as you gingerly tiptoe around the landmines that dot the prescriptive-descriptive battlefield, you

will encounter dozens of "rules" that were never really rules, just the … prejudices of someone bold enough to proclaim them to be rules. Despite what may have been drilled into you … in high school, (these) taboos are routinely broken—even scoffed at—by well-respected writers and editors and by experts in contemporary American usage.

The American Heritage® Book of English Usage. A Practical and Authoritative Guide to Contemporary English, 1996. http://www.bartleby.com/64/
"And now, here's Groucho," said George Fenniman, introducing the host of the game show "You Bet Your Life" in the manner of all game show moderators. But this time at least Groucho would not be so introduced. "What do you mean, Fenniman? You can't begin a sentence with and. What kind of show do you think this is?" Groucho's mock indignation only points out the difficulty of grammatical rules like the one asserting that sentences beginning with and or but express incomplete thoughts and are therefore incorrect. But it is Fenniman and not Groucho who has history on his side, for writers from Shakespeare to Joyce Carol Oates have used *and* and *but* to start sentences. … a glance through any magazine or newspaper will show you that beginning with [*and* or] *but* has become common practice, and … must be considered acceptable at all levels of style.

http://www.andromeda.rutgers.edu/~jlynch/Writing/b.html#but
Contrary to what your high school English teacher told you, there is no reason not to begin a sentence with but or and; in fact, these words often make a sentence more forceful and graceful.

Baker, *The Practical Stylist*, 1977. p. 56
The fragment, of course, usually counts as an error. The reader expects a sentence and gets only a fragment of one: you leave him hanging in air, waiting for the second shoe to fall, or the voice to drop, with the thought completed, at the period. The *rhetorical* fragment – the effective and persuasive one – leaves him satisfied: *Of course*. The *grammatical* fragment leaves him unsatisfied. *When the vote was counted.* A question hangs in the air: *what* happened? Who won? Who got mad? But the point here about rhetorical fragments is to use their short, conversational staccato as one of your means to vary the rhythm of your long and longer sentences, playing long against short.

Flesch, *The Art of Readable WritingThe Art of Readable Writing,* 1949, 1974, p. 107-108
If there are any rules of style an American school child carries into his adult life, they are the rule of thumb against repetition of the same word and the taboo against so-called sentence fragments and run-on sentences.

There's hardly anything more ruinous to good writing than the rule of thumb against repetition of the same word. Fowler, in his *Dictionary of Modern English,* says "There are few literary faults so widely prevalent… Sentences in which the writer has carefully NOT repeated a word set readers wondering what the significance of the change is, only to conclude disappointedly that it has none … A dozen sentences are spoiled by ill-advised avoidance of repetition for every one that is spoilt by ill-advised repetition."

…The schoolteachers' taboo against sentence fragments and run-on sentences is even more of a superstition. Human speech teems with these constructions. In fact, on the average, it probably contains more sentences than standard-brand "grammatical" sentences. There would be more fragments and run-on sentences in writing too, if we didn't disguise the true state of affairs by tricks of punctuation.

Zinsser, *On Writing Well*
There is no minimum length for a sentence that's acceptable in the eyes of God.

http://www.andromeda.rutgers.edu/~jlynch/Writing/b.html#but
… really bad writing is rarely a matter of broken rules -- editors can clean these up with a few pencil marks. It's more often the result of muddled thought. Bad writers consider long words more impressive than short ones, and use words like "usage" instead of "use" or "methodologies" instead of "methods" without knowing what they mean. They qualify everything with "It has been noted after careful consideration," and the facts get buried under loads of useless words. They pay no attention to the literal sense of their words, and end up stringing stock phrases together without regard for meaning.

And this tidbit from linguist Steven Pinker:
"Most of the prescriptive rules of the language mavens make no sense on any level. They are bits of folklore that originated for screwball reasons several hundred years ago and have perpetuated themselves ever since. The rules conform neither to logic nor to tradition, and if they were ever followed they would force writers into fuzzy, clumsy, wordy, ambiguous, incomprehensible prose. (Pinker, *The Language Instinct: How the Mind Creates Language*)

HEADLINE: Dancing With Professors: The Trouble With Academic Prose

BYLINE: By Patricia Nelson Limerick, history professor at the University of Colorado

In ordinary life, when a listener cannot understand what someone has said, this is the usual exchange:

Listener: I cannot understand what you are saying.

Speaker: Let me try to say it more clearly.

But in scholarly writing in the late 20th century, other rules apply. This is the implicit exchange:

Reader: I cannot understand what you are saying.

Academic Writer: Too bad. The problem is that you are an unsophisticated and untrained reader. If you were smarter, you would understand me.

The exchange remains implicit, because no one wants to say, "This doesn't make any sense," for fear that the response, "It would, if you were smarter," might actually be true.

While we waste our time fighting over ideological conformity in the scholarly world, horrible writing remains a far more important problem. For all their differences, most right-wing scholars and most left-wing scholars share a common allegiance to a cult of obscurity. Left, right and center all hide behind the idea that unintelligible prose indicates a sophisticated mind. The politically correct and the politically incorrect come together in the violence they commit against the English language.

University presses have certainly filled their quota every year, in dreary monographs, tangled paragraphs and impenetrable sentences. But trade publishers have also violated the trust of innocent and hopeful readers. As a prime example of unprovoked assaults on innocent words, consider the verbal behavior of Allan Bloom in "The Closing of the American Mind," published by a large mainstream press. Here is a sample:

"If openness means to 'go with the flow,' it is necessarily an accommodation to the present. That present is so closed to doubt about so many things impeding the progress of its principles that unqualified openness to it would mean forgetting the despised alternatives to it, knowledge of which makes us aware of what is doubtful in it."

Is there a reader so full of blind courage as to claim to know what this sentence means? Remember, the book in which this remark appeared was a lamentation over the failings of today's students, a call to arms to return to tradition and standards in education. And yet, in 20 years of paper grading, I do not recall many sentences that asked, so pathetically, to be put out of their misery.

Jump to the opposite side of the political spectrum from Allan Bloom, and literary grace makes no noticeable gains. Contemplate this breathless, indefatigable sentence from the geographer Allan Pred, and Mr. Pred and Bloom seem, if only in literary style, to be soul mates:

"If what is at stake is an understanding of geographical and historical variations in the sexual division of productive and reproductive labor, of contemporary local and regional variations in female wage labor and women's work outside the formal economy, of on-the-ground variations in the everyday content of women's lives, inside and outside of their families, then it must be recognized that, at some nontrivial level, none of the corporal practices associated with these variations can be severed from spatially and temporally specific linguistic practices, from languages that not only enable the conveyance of instructions, commands, role depictions and operating rules, but that also regulate and control, that normalize and spell out the limits of the

permissible through the conveyance of disapproval, ridicule and reproach."

In this example, 124 words, along with many ideas, find themselves crammed into one sentence. In their company, one starts to get panicky. "Throw open the windows; bring in the oxygen tanks!" one wants to shout. "These words and ideas are nearly suffocated. Get them air!" And yet the condition of this desperately packed and crowded sentence is a perfectly familiar one to readers of academic writing, readers who have simply learned to suppress the panic.

Everyone knows that today's college students cannot write, but few seem willing to admit that the professors who denounce them are not doing much better. The problem is so blatant there are signs that students are catching on. In my American history survey course last semester, I presented a few writing rules that I intended to enforce inflexibly. The students looked more and more peevish; they looked as if they were about to run down the hall, find a telephone, place an urgent call and demand that someone from the A.C.L.U. rush up to campus to sue me for interfering with their First Amendment rights to compose unintelligible, misshapen sentences.

Finally one aggrieved student raised her hand and said, "You are telling us not to write long, dull sentences, but most of our assigned reading is full of long, dull sentences."

As this student was beginning to recognize, when professors undertake to appraise and improve student writing, the blind are leading the blind. It is, in truth, difficult to persuade students to write well when they find so few good examples in their assigned reading.

The current social and political context for higher education makes this whole issue pressing. In Colorado, as in most states, the legislators are convinced that the university is neglecting students and wasting state resources on pointless research. Under those circumstances, the miserable writing habits of professors pose a direct and concrete danger to higher education. Rather than going to the state legislature, proudly presenting stacks of the faculty's compelling and engaging publications, you end up hoping that the lawmakers stay out of the library and stay away, especially, from the periodical room, with its piles of academic journals. The habits of academic writers lend powerful support to the impression that research is a waste of the writers' time and of the public's money.

Why do so many professors write bad prose?

You can find the entire article at *http://trc.ucdavis.edu/bajaffee/NEM150/Course%20Content/dancing.htm*

NYS IPM PSAs: 2001, 2003

If bats rule your roost…
60 sec (120 words) • sound: bat hunting calls, bats flying
run from 10/01- 3/02

Halloween belongs to bats, but your attic shouldn't. But these uninvited house guests can be great neighbors. Bats eat thousands of insects—including mosquitoes and agricultural pests—so bat-proof the right way. Now's a good time because they've gone to their winter roosts. Go up in the attic during the day to make sure they're all gone, and look for the holes that let them in. Bats can fit through a crack that's shorter and narrower than a stick of gum. Consider putting up a large bat box so they'll have a safe place to raise their young. For details about bat-proofing, and more tips about environmentally sound pest management, call the New York State IPM Program, 800-635-8356, or <nysipm.cornell.edu>.

If bats rule your roost…
30 sec (61 words) • sound: bat hunting calls, bats flying
run from 10/01- 3/02

Halloween belongs to bats, but your attic shouldn't. Your backyard is another story. Bats eat thousands of insects—including mosquitoes and agricultural pests—so bat-proof the right way. Now's a good time, because they've gone to their winter roosts. For details about bat-proofing, and more tips about environmentally sound pest management, call the New York State IPM Program, 800-635-8356, or <nysipm.cornell.edu>.

Fall yard work: don't slack off now
30 sec. (61 words) • sound: raking leaves
run from 10/01- 11/31/01

So maybe you've put off your fall yard work. Do it now, or all kinds of pests will thank you. Go clean up those leaves—and the garden. Prune diseased branches. Mulch. Wrap shrubs in burlap to protect them from deer. For more tips about environmentally sound pest management from the New York State IPM Program, check <nysipm.cornell.edu>. *Informed. Intelligent. IPM.*

Fall's the time to shape up
30 sec. (61 words) • sound: a short hit of music and instructor voice from an aerobics class
run from 10/01- 11/31/01

Fall is a great time to get your lawn in shape. Keep mowing 'til the grass stops growing. Then fertilize, any time until Thanksgiving. Rake up leaves, or shred them with a mulching mower so they won't suffocate your lawn and attract diseases. For more tips about environmentally sound pest management, call the New York State IPM Program, 800-635-8356, or <nysipm.cornell.edu>.

The crabgrass solution
30 sec. (61 words) • sound: lawnmower
run from 10/01- 2/02

If you've battled crabgrass all summer, it's time to relax. Don't apply herbicides now; crabgrass dies in the winter. And after a frost, it turns straw-colored, so it's easy to spot. Go look for it, so you'll know where to re-seed next spring. For more tips about environmentally sound pest management, call the New York State IPM Program, 800-635-8356, or <nysipm.cornell.edu>.

Living in a roach motel? What to do
15 sec. (30 words)• sound: light switch flipping on, then roaches scuttling across floor

You don't have to live with roaches, even if you're in an apartment building. For tips about what to do, call the New York State IPM Program, 800-635-8356, or <nysipm.cornell.edu>.

Living in a roach motel? What to do: 29 words
15 sec. [a light switches on. Clink of dishes. Child's complaint:]

—"Eeuwww…"

Don't share your midnight snack with roaches. For tips on environmental solutions, even for apartments, call the New York State IPM Program, 800-635-8356, or <nysipm.cornell.edu>.

Living in a roach motel? What to do: ***126 words***
60 sec. [*La Cucaracha; fades]*

Dealing with cucarachas, or cockroaches, isn't fun—but you can use integrated pest management and you might not need to spray them. First, stop the invasion. Look [from floor to ceiling,] for holes and cracks, especially on shared walls—and where pipes and wires come in. Plug the holes with caulk, foam filler, or steel wool. Some baits and sticky traps work really well, but give them time. To knock down roach populations quickly, vacuum them up, then seal the bag. Get rid of clutter. Clean more than you want to, especially in areas that are warm or moist, or not used often.

[*La Cucaracha picks up; fades*]

These tips brought to you by the New York State Integrated Pest Management Program. 800-635-8356 or nysipm.cornell.edu. *Informed. Intelligent. IPM.*

Bed bugs? History! Here's how: 65 words
30 sec.

[Brahm's lullaby]

Bedbugs don't make a good bedtime story. Wanna sleep tight? To get rid of them without harmful chemicals, vacuum all sides of your mattress and box spring every day—especially around seams and creases. Don't forget the headboard, floor, and baseboards. And toss your linens into a hot dryer for twenty minutes. For more tips go to this website: nysipm.cornell.edu.

(Lullaby again)

And sleep tight! The New York State IPM Program. 800-635-8356. *Informed. Intelligent. IPM.*

Exile mice
15 sec. (42 words) • sound: mouse squeaking
run from 10/01- 11/31/01

Mice can fit through holes that are a quarter-inch wide. That's smaller than a dime. Think about that. For a quick fix, use stainless steel wool or caulk. And for more tips, call the New York State IPM Program, 800-635-8356, or <nysipm.cornell.edu>.

Exile mice
30 sec. (64 words) • sound: mouse squeaking
run from 10/01- 11/31/01

As it gets cold, mice look for warm homes. To keep them out, seal all their entry points—even the tiny cracks—because they can fit through a hole that's a quarter-inch wide. That's smaller than a dime. Install door sweeps, and put screens over vents. For more tips about environmentally sound pest management, call the New York State IPM Program, 800-635-8356, or <nysipm.cornell.edu>.