

## Lesson #1. Speak Directly to Your Reader

Thanks for joining *Conversational Writing*.

My name is Gay Merrill. I'm a content writer and instructional designer focused on engaging educational content. I love working with words, online learning, and humor. (I also dabble at cartooning...but that's for another topic.)

### **So what's on the agenda for this course?**

Over the ten lessons, we'll be covering simple (and effective) techniques to make your writing friendlier and engaging. Like you're having a conversation with a good friend, close relative, or ...(insert person of your choice).

The goal is to give you practical skills you can use right away. In each lesson, I've created a few simple exercises for practice.

You might find some of the techniques simple, but I notice a lot of writing that doesn't use them.

Optional: To work through the lessons, I recommend you choose a small writing sample. So by the end of the course, if you've applied the lessons, your writing sample will have a more conversational tone.

Now let's get started with today's lesson, which is all about your reader.

### **Write for one person**

Picture a person you're writing for. Give that person a name. Joe? Fran? Who are you writing for? Describe the person with as much detail as possible. Think about age, profession, interests, and problems your reader has.

When you write, imagine you're talking to the person you've chosen. This strategy will help your writing sound more casual, as if you're speaking one-to-one with that person instead of to a faceless crowd.

Now you have a particular person in mind, write directly to that person.

How?

Use the second person, 'You' voice.

A lot of writers use the third person (she/he, they) voice. If you're one of those writers, change it.

### **Example**

- Indirect (third person): **My ideal reader** is smart and funny.
- Direct (second person): **You're** smart and funny.

The indirect sentence sounds impersonal. With a simple change to 'You' voice the sentence becomes personal, direct, and engaging.

Here's another example...

- Indirect (third person): **Bloggers** can engage **their** readers using conversational writing.
- Direct (second person): **You** can engage **your** readers using conversational writing.

Simple change. More direct.

Note: When you refer to yourself, use I (unless you're speaking on behalf of more than just yourself. In that case use we.) You also can start your sentences with 'I' when you're sharing your experiences, which adds a personal tone.

### Exercise

1. Picture your reader. Give him or her a name, and describe that person. For examples, take a look at content writer, [John Espirian's pen portraits](#).
2. Change the following sentences to speak to the reader.
  - The applicant for the position requires experience with WordPress, SEO, and graphic design.
  - Before publishing a post, writers should do a thorough check of their work.
  - We encourage guests to participate in the meeting and provide their feedback.
3. Find a piece of your writing and identify the voice you're using. If it's not in 'you voice', highlight the sentences that contain third person pronouns and see whether you need to change to 'you voice'.

In Lesson #2, I'll cover three tips to make your writing sound less robotic. (I'm talking to you R2D2).

Have fun writing,

Gay

### Recommended Book

Bird by Bird: Some Instructions on Writing and Life by Anne Lamott

### Recommended reading

[How to Write Conversationally](#)

[How to Get 247% More People to Read Your Content](#)

## Lesson #2. Talk Like a Human (And not a Robot)

In lesson #1, we covered two ways to talk to your reader: picture that person and write in 'you' voice.

Today's lesson covers three tips to help your writing sound more human:

1. Write the way you talk
2. Read it aloud
3. Use contractions

### **Write the way you talk**

A lot of conversational writing advice suggests you write the way you talk. The reason is to encourage you to write using spoken language and to share your unique way of expressing yourself.

When you talk to someone, you give that person a sense of your personality through your word choice, your vocal variety, your unique expressions, experiences, and preferences.

A way to write the way you talk is to dictate your thoughts as a first draft. I'm not suggesting you simply dictate and hit publish or send without editing.

Recording your spoken words can allow you to more quickly get your thoughts down. And once recorded, you can take note of particular expressions and words you use.

By dictating your writing, you can also increase your productivity and develop your personal writing style.

Some people use recording apps on their phone or devices to get their thoughts down.

Google Docs, for example, has a free voice to text feature that's easy to use. Here's how you can use voice typing in a Google Doc:

1. Check that the microphone on your computer works.
2. Open the Chrome browser.
3. Open a document in Google Docs.
4. Click **Tools > Voice typing**. A microphone box appears.
5. Click the microphone and start speaking. As you speak, the text appears in the Google doc.
6. To end typing, click the microphone again.

**Note:** You can use these phrases to add punctuation to your text:

- Period
- Comma
- Exclamation point
- Question mark
- New line
- New paragraph

Once you transcribe your spoken words, you want to go over them to take note of any words and expressions you use. You'll also want to remove filler words (um, ah, like, etc) and do a good edit. I'll cover more on how to make your writing clear and flow in future lessons.

### **Read it aloud**

Reading your work aloud helps you detect parts you need to improve.

Are there parts of your writing that are confusing? Do your words flow? Do you repeat words or use words that are boring?

If you find your writing lacks that certain oomph, most likely your readers will feel the same way.

Another suggestion which is related to this tip is to print your writing. With a print copy, you can highlight with a pen or pencil areas you need to improve.

### **Use contractions**

Using contractions to make your writing conversational is one of the easiest tips to apply.

Quick recap for those wondering what a contraction is...

A contraction is a combination of two words linked with an apostrophe into one, shortened word.

We use contractions when we speak because they're easier to pronounce. Yet I notice a lot of writing that doesn't use this simple conversational technique.



For example, in the image above, instead of **does not** compute, the contraction would be **doesn't**.

### **Examples**

- **Won't** is the contraction for **will not**.
- **You've** is the contraction for **you have**.
- **I'm** is the contraction for **I am**.

Contractions can shorten your sentences and make your writing less formal or robotic. If you want to write with a friendlier, conversational tone (and who doesn't), contractions are essential.

**Important:** It's is the contraction for it is. **Its** without the apostrophe is a possessive adjective, as in 'The robot lost **its** memory'.

A possessive adjective comes before a noun in the sentence to show ownership and let us know who the noun belongs to.

**Test:** Try talking without the use of contractions and note how it sounds. (Do you feel like the robot from Star Wars?)

### Exercise

1. Try recording your text using Google Docs or a device of your own that has voice to text capability.
2. Read the text you recorded aloud and note the areas for improvement.
3. Check your use of contractions by completing the table below:

Two words	Contraction
could not	
	everyone's
he had / he would	
does not	
	let's
should have	
who would / who had / who did	
that has / that is	
	there'll
you are	

Next lesson, I'll share the number one way to make your writing clear along with some handy tools to check for readability.

Have fun writing,

Gay

### Recommended Resource

For a full list of contractions, check out [Wikipedia's list of English contractions](#).

### Recommended Book

## Lesson #3. Make Your Writing Clear

Last lesson we covered three ways you can make your writing less robotic.

Today's lesson is a bit more grammatical. We're talking passive and active voice and readability.

Passive writing is harder to read and can leave your reader confused. Two clues a sentence is passive:

- The subject doing the action is unclear.
- The sentence uses a form of the verb to be (was, has been...).

The number one way to make your writing clear is to use the active voice.

### Examples

Consider the following sentences:

1. The spaceship *was* damaged.

This sentence is passive—we're left wondering 'Who damaged the spaceship?'

(Hint: The spacetrooper did it.)

**Active:** The spacetrooper damaged the spaceship.

2. In the scene, the Jedi *had been* wounded and left to die.

(Who did it? The spacetrooper? Nope.)

**Active:** In the scene, the guard wounded the Jedi and left him to die.

So, to eliminate the passive, aim for active, and specify the subject of the action.

Note: In some situations, it's okay to use passive voice. Read this Grammarly article on [passive voice](#) to understand when.

### How to check your writing for passive voice

You can highlight the passive sentences in your writing using an online editor like the Hemingway App, which is free at [www.hemingwayapp.com/](http://www.hemingwayapp.com/)

Here's a [video](#) that explains the Hemminway app.

If you're using Microsoft Word, you can check your use of passive sentences using its **Readability Statistics**. The screenshot below is a sample using Word 2008. (Still works for me).

Readability Statistics	
<b>Counts</b>	
Words	120
Characters	581
Paragraphs	3
Sentences	12
<b>Averages</b>	
Sentences per Paragraph	4.0
Words per Sentence	10.0
Characters per Word	4.7
<b>Readability</b>	
Passive Sentences	0%
Flesch Reading Ease	71.1
Flesch-Kincaid Grade Level	5.8

How you access the Readability Statistics depends on your version of Word. Check Word's Help feature for how to locate passive sentences or readability.

Note: You want to aim for 0% for Passive Sentences.

If you're using Wordpress, the Yoast SEO plugin detects your passive writing. You can download [Yoast SEO free](#).

**Note:** These tools can help you detect your passive writing. You still need to rewrite your text using proper sentence construction. Don't make changes to your writing blindly.

### How to check the readability of your writing

The Flesch-Kincaid Readability Tests indicates how clear your writing is based on word length and sentence length.

If you're using...

- The Hemingway app**  
 The app shows the readability grade level of your text and highlights sentences in yellow that are lengthy or complex, which you can shorten. It highlights sentences in red which are too dense and complicated and require editing.
- Microsoft Word Readability Statistics**  
 Word provides two readability statistics: Flesch Reading Ease (aim for a score of 60-80) and the Flesch-Kincaid Grade Level (aim for 7-11).
- Yoast SEO free**  
 The Yoast SEO plugin checks the Flesch reading ease on a scale from 0-100. The lower the score the more difficult the text is to read. Aim for reading ease score of 60-70.

## Exercise

1. Revise these passive sentences to make them active:
  - The app was named after the famous American novelist, Ernest Hemingway.
  - Answers to email inquiries were always responded to.
  - A glorious review about this course was posted on Highbrow.
2. Check your revised sentences for Exercise 1 above using Word's Readability Statistics or the Hemingway App.

Next lesson we'll cover how to make your writing sound less stuffy and convoluted. (You don't want your readers to think you're snooty, do you?)

Have fun writing,

Gay

### Recommended book

[Nitty-Gritty Grammar: A Not-So-Serious Guide to Clear Communication](#)



## Lesson #4. Choose Relatable Words

In the previous lesson, you learned to use active voice and check the readability of your writing to make it clear.

Today's lesson deals with word choice and covers three types of words to avoid: inflated words, jargon, and gobbledeygook.

The words you choose in your communication can be either formal and off-putting (aka corporate sounding) or informal and friendly.

Since many people are reading at an elementary grade level, you want to choose words people understand and relate to.

### **What are Inflated words?**

Cognizant, utilize, and leverage are what I call inflated words. They show off your vocabulary, but they also sound academic and a bit superior. To engage your readers in a conversation, speak with them not at them.

Why write cognizant when “aware” will do? Or how about the often used word utilize. Isn't “use” simpler and more direct? Do you need to leverage your cleaning skills to get your housework done?

The correction: Use a Thesaurus and find a simpler word.

### **What is jargon?**

The word jargon, itself, needs an explanation. Jargon refers to special terms, concepts, and acronyms professions or groups use. Jargon is a language of its own for the “ingroup”. And if you're not part of the group, you feel left out.

A problem readers can face is coming to grips with technical terms and industry lingo. Don't assume everyone knows your language.

If you're a naturopath, you know what mitochondria are. If you're a marketing whiz, you know the difference between B2B and B2C. Or if you're a grammar geek, you can write about past participles and dangling modifiers. But does your reader understand those terms?

When using an acronym in your writing. A good rule of thumb is to write the full term and follow it with the acronym in parentheses. That way, readers who may be unfamiliar with the acronym have a quick reference. So in my example above, you might write Business to Business (B2B).

The correction: Identify jargon in your writing (those ingroup terms). Eliminate or provide a simple explanation of what the terms mean.

For a great makeover, read this [article](#) on the company firing memo sent by Twitter's CEO Jack Dorsey.

### What is gobbledygook?

According to Stephen R Covey, gobbledygook (pronounced GOB-ul-dee-GOOK) is "language that is so pompous, long-winded, and abstract that it is unintelligible".

Gobbledygook has become a common part of corporate lingo consisting of overused catchphrases like state-of-the-art, world class, turnkey, scalable, and next generation. But what do these words mean? And how do they make you feel? Hmm. Skeptical? Confused? Irritated?

Consider the term "world class". If you or you or your company advertises "world class" service. How would you describe your service. What specific qualities does it involve?

Gobbledygook reads and sounds corporate and alienating. (Fine if you're the robot from Star Wars. Not so fine if you're an earthling.)

The correction: Recognize gobbledygook, and replace it with feel good meaningful words.

### Exercise

1. Get out your Thesaurus and find a simpler word for each of the following words:

Inflated word (formal)	Conversational word (informal)
ameliorate	
facilitate	
implement	
alleviate	
abbreviate	

2. Choose a technical term or jargon you've encountered while reading and find a simpler word or explanation for what it means.
3. Pick a gobbledygook term, for example turnkey, and describe it in everyday language.
4. Go through your writing and identify words that would perplex your reader. Write them down and find simple replacements.

Writing that lacks variety is dull and snooze worthy...just like a monotonous voice. The next lesson shows you how to vary the pace of your writing.

Have fun writing,

Gay

### Recommended book

[Talk Normal: Stop the Business Speak, Jargon and Waffle](#)

## Lesson #5. Vary the Reading Pace

Today we move on from specific words and terms you need to avoid to sentences and reading pace.

Sentences that are all similar in length produce boredom. And ultra long sentences (25 words or more) are difficult to read.

To make your writing enjoyable, vary the pace.

How?

Break up ultra long sentences. Combine short sentences when you have too many. And use sentence length variety:

- Ultra-short sentences
- Sentence fragments
- Single words

Let's take a look at each of these.

### **Ultra-short sentences**

An ultra-short sentence is super short (of course) and contains a subject and verb. In some ultra-short sentences, the subject is implied.

Ultra-short sentences draw attention to your words.

### **Examples**

- He was late.
- Clap with me.
- The guard stood his ground.

An ultra-short sentence provides a punch to your writing. How long is an ultra-short sentence? That depends more on the length of the other sentences in your writing. What's important is the sentence length contrast and variety.

Caution: Don't mix in too many ultra short sentences, or they'll lose their effect and become boring.

### **Sentence fragments**

A sentence fragment (aka a broken sentence) is part of a sentence and is missing a subject, a verb, or both.

When we speak, we often use short phrases and words to make a point. A sentence fragment in your writing has the same conversational effect.

A sentence fragment is short, and so it introduces a break in the rhythm of your writing.

Because a sentence fragment stands out, you can use one to emphasize a point.

### Examples

- The writing tips are short and simple. **But effective.**
- Who wounded the Jedi and left him to die? **The guard not the spacetrooper.**
- She made her last payment. **No more debt.**

### Single Words

Ever notice writing that uses a sound effect like \*Sigh\* or a single word question like 'Well?' These single words help vary the pace.

Introduce a single word paragraph to add white space, which makes your writing easier to read.

Use a combination of long sentences, ultra-short sentences, sentence fragments, and single words to vary the pace of your writing.

### Test the pace

The best way to test the pace of your writing is to read it out loud and listen to the rhythm. Combining longer and shorter sentences to create rhythm requires work, a good ear, and practice. While you practice, write and read a lot. And take note of how other writers vary their sentences.

Varying the pace will make a difference to your writing. The rewards of your efforts will be worth it.

### Exercise

Take a piece of writing that lacks sentence length variety. Use the techniques in this lesson to make it more interesting and conversational.

Now you know how to vary the pace of your writing, next lesson you'll look at your writing flow.

Have fun writing,

Gay

### Recommended book

[Spunk & Bite: A Writer's Guide to Bold, Contemporary Style](#)

## Lesson #6. Make Your Writing Flow

In the last lesson, you learned to use sentence length variety to create reading rhythm. Today we look at two ways to make your writing flow: transitions and varied sentence structure.

Good writing flow allows your reader to move smoothly through each sentence and paragraph.

When writing doesn't flow, it's missing elements which guide and focus the reader. A key element is a transition.

### Transitions

Transitions are words and phrases that connect one idea to the next and show the relationship between ideas. You use transitions to create a logical flow between sentences and paragraphs.

The English language has many types of transitions categorized by the relationship between ideas. The following table shows three transition types.

Transition type	Relationship	Transition words	Example
Addition	[idea 1] added to [idea 2]	And, also, as well, in addition...	The course covered writing techniques. <b>And</b> it included lots of practical exercises.
Contrast	[idea 1] in opposition to [idea 2]	But, however, although, despite, yet...	Tim wanted a new car. <b>However</b> , he'd have to wait til his finances were better.
Time or sequence	First [idea 1] then [idea 2]	First, next, earlier, soon, before, following...	<b>First</b> she measured the flour. <b>Next</b> she stirred in the milk and butter.

For a good overview, watch this [5-minute video](#).

Now you have an understanding of transitions, let's move on to the second way to make your writing flow.

### Varied sentence structure

Do you start many of your sentences the same way? When we write, we might often default to a standard way of starting our sentences.

Just as sentences with the same length create boredom, so do sentences which use the same structure.

To break the monotony of using the same sentence structure, try changing the way you start your sentences. Here are four simple ways to try.

Start a sentence with a(n)	Explanation	Example
Transition	A word or phrase that connects ideas and shows a relationship between them	<b>First</b> they looked at the map.
Dependent clause	A group of words with a subject and verb that isn't a complete sentence	<b>If you need help</b> , call technical support.
Preposition	A word such as after, in, to, on, and with used in front of a noun or pronoun and shows the relationship between the noun or pronoun and other words in a sentence	<b>In</b> the report, you'll find the results of the test.
Infinitive phrase	'To' plus the simple form of a verb	<b>To find</b> the solution, read the manual.

Using good transitions makes your writing easier to read because they provide direction to your reader. And changing the way you start your sentences helps eliminate monotony.

### Exercise

1. Add a transitional sentence to each example sentence in the table above, for example...**First** they looked at the map. **Then** they discovered they were lost.
2. Create a sentence of your own using each type of sentence start in the table above.

Want to learn how to grab your reader's attention? Learn a simple technique in the next lesson.

Have fun writing,

Gay

### Recommended Books

- *It Was the Best of Sentences, It Was the Worst of Sentences: A Writer's Guide to Crafting Killer Sentences* by June Casagrande
- *Keys to Great Writing* by Stephen Wilbers - see chapter 10
- *Getting the Words Right* by Theodore Cheney - see chapter 15

## Lesson #7. Change the Flow in Your Writing

You learned in the last lesson how to reduce monotony and make your writing flow using transitions and sentence structure variety.

Today's lesson, you learn to use questions and pauses to change the flow in your writing.

Have you ever been in conversation with someone who blathers on?

That person just keeps talking. And talking.

As interesting as that person might be, you wonder, "When is it my turn to speak?" Or, "Aren't you interested in what I have to say?"

Then an opening appears. He asks you a question. Phew. Now you're engaged. You're part of the conversation.

You can do the same for your readers.

How?

### **Ask a question**

A question changes the flow of your writing because the reader has to stop to think about the answer.

Questions keep your reader involved in the conversation.

Here are some ways you can use questions:

- Follow the question with an answer.  
How many people read the blog? Zip. Nada. Zero.
- Try a series of questions to emphasize a point.  
Are you a blogger? Do you want to engage your readers? Do you use conversational writing?
- Ask the reader to confirm a point.  
Adding a question to your text helps engage a reader. "Do you agree?" or "Right?"
- Invite your reader to guess the answer.  
How long is the average attention span of a reader?

- Ask the reader to recall an experience.  
Remember when you were in elementary school and...?

You can introduce a question or series of questions anywhere within the the body of your text: the opening, middle, closing. Just don't overdo it.

### **Introduce a pause**

The second way you can change the flow in your writing is to introduce a pause.

A pause creates a moment of suspense for your reader. Or an opportunity to stop and think.

When you speak, you pause with silence.

When you write, you can pause with punctuation.

The em-dash and ellipsis are two ways to insert a pause.

Here's a mini primer on how to use them.

### **Em-dash ( — )**

Use em-dashes to indicate a sudden shift in thought or a break in your sentence.

Example: The spaceship made that noise again—loud, rattling, and worrying.

Note: Never use a space before or after an em-dash.

### **Ellipsis (...)**

Ellipses are useful for slowing your reader down.

Example: We heard the noise again...a loud, worrisome rattling.

Use ellipses to indicate...

- A pause: The Jedi whimpered..."Help".
- Omitted text: The ... flight was late.
- A trailing-off thought: If only I'd taken this course sooner...

You can use ellipses to shorten long text, for example when quoting a long passage. Use the ellipsis to show missing words or even a few sentences.

### **Exercise**

1. Take a piece of writing, and introduce a question or series of questions to it.
2. Write a sentence using an em-dash.
3. Refer to the examples for the ellipsis above and write a sentence of your own for each use: a pause, omitted text, and a trailing-off thought.

Formal writing adheres to grammar rules taught in school. Stay tuned for the next rule breaker lesson.



Have fun writing,

Gay

**Recommended reading**

<http://sinandsyntax.com/talking-syntax/a-punctuation-primer/>

## Lesson #8. Break These 3 Writing Rules

So far in this course you've broken some formal writing rules to become conversational. You've learned to add contractions, use broken and one word sentences, and include ellipses and em dashes.

Today's lesson covers three more writing rules you can break:

1. Don't begin a sentence with a conjunction
2. Don't end a sentence with a preposition
3. Avoid interjections

To use conversational writing, follow these rules instead...

### #1: Begin a sentence with a conjunction

Formal writing follows conventions such as never start a sentence with a conjunction, a joining word like "and".

But you can break this rule.

You can start a sentence with one of the FANBOYS, which is a mnemonic for the words "for", "and", "nor", "but", "or", "yet", or "so". These words are also known as coordinating conjunctions.

Starting a sentence with a coordinating conjunction can make it short and easy to read. Use these joining words to carry a thought from one sentence to the next.

#### Example

- Luke rushed to catch his flight on time. **But** he forgot his passport.
- She enjoys walking. **Yet** she struggles to get to the gym.
- I like long walks in nature. **And** I enjoy time at my computer.

**Note:** When using the FANBOYS, keep these points in mind:

- Make sure the coordinating conjunction (and, or, but, etc) is following by an independent clause, which is a sentence that has a subject and a verb.
- Don't use a comma after the coordinating conjunction.
- Use coordinating conjunctions to help your writing flow. But don't use them to start every sentence.

### #2: End a sentence with a preposition

A [preposition](#) (words like 'on', 'in', or 'after') shows the relationship between a noun or pronoun (I, you, they, it, etc) and other words in a sentence.

In formal writing, the placement of the preposition can seem awkward.

So instead, you can **end a sentence with a preposition** provided it makes sense.

Notice the placement of the preposition in the following examples:

Which sentence sounds more conversational?

- a. Which blog did you publish your article **in**?
- b. **In** which blog did you publish your article?

Answer: Sentence (a) that ends with the preposition 'in'.

Which sentence would you choose?

- a. **With** which of your friends are you going to the show?
- b. Which of your friends are you going to the show **with**?

Answer: (b) sounds more conversational.

### #3: Use interjections (sparingly)

We use interjections, words that convey emotion, in everyday communication.

An interjection can be a single word like duh, yahoo, yuck, hallelujah, whoa, or yep. Or it can be a short statement like "High five" or "That bombed".

The interjection provides feeling about the information in a sentence.

#### Examples

- **Yikes!** That squirrel nearly got run over by a car.
- My favorite singer lost the competition. **Boohoo.**
- No matter how hard she tried, she couldn't resist the temptation. **Sigh.**

You can also emphasize the interjection with punctuation.

Use	To indicate	Example
Exclamation mark (!)	Strong emotions (excitement, surprise, anger)	Hooray! I won the contest.
Question mark (?)	Uncertainty or disbelief	Oh, really?
Comma (,) or Period (.)	Weak emotions like doubt or indifference	Meh, I didn't think much of it. She did it again. Typical.

Note: Don't overuse interjections or they'll lose their effect.

#### Exercise

1. Write a sentence and then follow it with a sentence that starts with one of the FANBOYS. Refer to the examples under #1 Begin a sentence with a conjunction.
2. Change the following sentence to move the preposition in bold to the end:  
You can be proud **of** the conversational writing skills this course gives you.  
We have to put **out** the recycling on Sunday night.

3. Add an interjection before or after each of these sentences:
- The weatherman predicted 45 degree heat for the weekend.
  - After six months on the job, Marcia got a promotion.
  - The next Star Wars movie comes out this year.

The writing technique in lesson #9 is a great way to help your reader connect with you.

Have fun writing,

Gay

**Recommended reading**

- <https://www.grammarly.com/blog/coordinating-conjunctions/>
- <https://natureofwriting.com/prepositions/>
- <https://www.grammarly.com/blog/interjection/>

## Lesson #9. Build Connection With Anecdotes

While you've been taught to use strict grammar rules in formal writing, last lesson you learned it's okay to break the rules to create a conversational tone.

Today's lesson is about using anecdotes in your writing.

### **What is an anecdote?**

An anecdote is a short, interesting story. The story might be about you, or it could be about someone else.

Whereas a story can be fictional, an anecdote is based on real life events.

You'll find an anecdote within a longer piece of writing, and it might be a few sentences or a few paragraphs long.

An anecdote illustrates a point and relates to the larger context. You can use an anecdote to provide an example to support the idea you're writing about.

You use an anecdote to inform, inspire, persuade or entertain a reader. And by sharing a small story about yourself, you build a connection with your reader.

Anecdotes add impact to writing of all types: essays, newspaper or magazine articles, blog posts, advertisements, emails, or courses to name a few.

While not a fiction story, an anecdote is best told using fiction writing tools. A good anecdote sets the scene, contains descriptive details, and might include a snippet of dialog. And like any good story, an anecdote uses the "[Show, don't tell](#)" writing technique.

### **Examples**

To illustrate the use of anecdotes, I've chosen examples from articles by three popular writers published on Medium.com, an online publishing platform.

#### **#1 - Jeff Goins**

In his article [How to Not Drift Through Life and Get What You Really Want](#), Jeff shares a personal account from his childhood to make his point: You have to take initiative and risk and become an active participant to get the life you want.

*"It reminds me of a time when I was about six years old, afraid to go outside and play with the other kids. My family and I were living in a small apartment near Aurora, Illinois, and I was so shy that instead of going outside to play with the other kids that summer, I stayed indoors.*

*But whenever the other kids from the apartment complex would run around the courtyard, I'd chase them from one end of the duplex unit to the other, running from window to window so that I didn't miss a thing."*

## **#2 - Nicole Bianchi**

In her article [How to Strengthen Your Writing with One Simple Technique](#), Nicole uses a story of teaching a class of six graders to introduce the one simple technique.

*"I realize I only have a few minutes before I lose complete control of the class.*

*"Okay," I say in a loud voice. "For example..." I pick up a marker and begin drawing a stick figure on the whiteboard. "Let's look at some sentences about Bob. He's going to help us see when we should and should not use commas in our sentences."*

*My illustration on the whiteboard is far from a masterpiece. In fact, my tutoring students are laughing at it. But they're also sitting up straight in their chairs now and all eyes are on me."*

## **#3 - Anthony Moore**

In [How to Be an Irresistible Conversationalist and Make People Laugh More](#), Anthony begins with an anecdote and a snippet of dialog from a movie as a segue into his own story which also involves stammering.

*"In the Academy Award-winning picture The King's Speech, there's a scene where speech therapist Lionel Logue (Geoffrey Rush) asks King George IV (Colin Firth), a chronic stammerer, "Do you know any jokes?"*

*The king hesitates. "Eh...ehm..." he stammers. "T-timing isn't my strong suit," he laughs darkly."*

Now you've seen a few examples, here are a few pointers on crafting them.

### **How to craft an anecdote**

1. Figure out the point you want to make.
2. Choose a relevant event that happened to you or someone else that is an example of your point. Think of a real life story that involved a problem, for example a challenge, a mistake, a life changing moment, a conflict, or a misunderstanding. To be clear about the point of your anecdote, ask yourself why you're including it. What purpose does it serve? Make sure it has some relevant value.
3. Structure your ideas, and put your story together.
4. Write your story like fiction. Tell it briefly. Write it out and cut out the bits you don't need. Omit any boring details and parts that don't support your point.
5. Draw a conclusion. Remind readers of your point.

Anecdotes are your opportunity to provide a personal touch to your writing. They help your reader get to know a bit about you, your life, your experiences, and your values. By sharing a little story about yourself, you can show your quirky side, give a brief look at your experience, or convey your view on a topic.

Because we're wired for stories, anecdotes add a sticky factor to your writing to keep readers engaged.

Writing a good anecdote takes practice. We learn by example. Keep your eyes out for those small stories in the writing you read. Brush up on your storytelling skills. Your readers will appreciate you for them.

### **Exercise**

Find a sample article that contains an anecdote, similar to the examples. Note how the writer crafts the story. How is the writer using the anecdote? What point does the anecdote support?

Lesson 10 coming up is the last in this course. (Sob). But it's one of my favorite conversation techniques. (Hooray).

Have fun writing,

Gay

### **Recommended book**

Made to Stick by Chip and Dan Heath

## Lesson #10. Share a Secret (Psst)

You made it!

Today is our last lesson, and we're covering one of my favorite techniques for conversing with a reader.

Have you noticed writers who use short messages in parentheses as if they're sharing a secret? (I do this often.)

This writing device of sharing a quasi secret with readers is known as an aside.

The device is similar to the technique actors use on stage to speak in private with the audience. Humor writers use asides often to ...

- Poke fun at themselves
- State the obvious
- Exaggerate
- Make a witty remark
- Add a tongue-in-cheek comment, or
- Ask a rhetorical question.

Sometimes a writer might use an aside to add a sound effect, like the sound of clearing his throat (ahem), or a whisper (psst).

By making the message of the aside a bit unexpected, you can add a bit of levity to your writing. Because the aside is like sharing a secret, it can also help build a connection with your readers.

### Examples

Check out the asides in these mini bios:

- Fran Thompson is a freelance librarian. She loves reading (**kinda goes without saying**), travelling, and helping people find great reads.
- I write about productivity (**stop wasting time**), public speaking, and motivation (**aka kicking your butt...in a good way**).
- I'm a coach for entrepreneurs who need help writing their business plan and figuring out their cash flow (**ka-ching!**)

Using an aside is a fun and easy way to create a conversational element to your writing.

### Exercise

Use an aside to add a conversational element to your About page or bio.

This lesson ends my *Conversational Writing* course. We've covered simple techniques, which I hope you'll apply if you're not already using them.



Here's a recap of each lesson:

- #1 - Speak directly to your reader by picturing that person and writing in 'you' voice.
- #2 - Get rid of formal sounding (robotic) writing by writing the way you talk and using contractions.
- #3 - Make your writing clear by using the active voice and checking it for readability.
- #4 - Eliminate and replace inflated words, jargon, and gobbledygook to ensure your audience can relate.
- #5 - Vary your sentence lengths to give your writing a dynamic rhythm and change the pace.
- #6 - Use transitions and try different sentence structures to create flow.
- #7 - Involve your reader in the conversation by adding questions and pauses.
- #8 - Start a sentence with a coordinating conjunction (FANBOYS), end with a preposition, and add an interjection to break the formality.
- #9 - Add a personal touch to your writing with an anecdote.
- #10 - Use an aside to share a secret and add a bit of humor.

Thank you for taking this course. I hope you found it informative and helpful.

Have fun writing,

Gay