

# Church Effectiveness Nuggets: Volume 13

## How to Sharpen Your Writing Skills

**Why are we gifting you this volume?** Because the mission statement of our primary publication—*The Parish Paper: New Ideas for Active Congregations*—is to help the largest possible number of congregations achieve maximum effectiveness in their various ministries. *The Parish Paper* is a monthly newsletter whose subscribers receive copyright permission to distribute to their constituents—more than two million readers in 28 denominations. Go to [www.TheParishPaper.com](http://www.TheParishPaper.com) for subscription information.

**Purpose of this Volume:** Provides in-depth answers to questions that readers of *The Parish Paper* ask regarding principles and procedures that improve the quality of written communications for publications and congregations.

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## Volume 13 – Contents

- I. Master the Readable-Writing Basics – Page 2
- II. Power Your Writing Style – Page 7
- III. Quality-Package Your Content – Page 9
- IV. Improve Construction with Architectural Planning – Page 14
- V. Increase Creativity Habits – Page 16
- VI. Create Purposeful Pastor’s Columns – Page 18
- VII. Craft Goal-Accomplishing Parishioner Letters – Page 19
- VIII. How to Get Magazine Articles Published – Page 21
- IX. Transform Manuscripts into Published Books – Page 23
- X. Writing Short Stories – Page 26
- XI. Writing Novels – Page 28
- XII. The Bottom Line – Page 28

## I. Master the Readable-Writing Basics

Why should Christian leaders strengthen their writing skills? For at least four reasons:

**Words are primary tools in the ministry of Jesus Christ.** The New Testament reports Jesus's most frequent activity with the phrase, "And he taught them, saying ...." The Book of Acts says the early apostles also discovered this power. So they devoted themselves to the ministry of the word and of prayer, appointing deacons to other church tasks. The term "mere words" is an oxymoron. Few words classify as "mere." Church historian Martin Marty says that on the wall above his desk hangs a statement from Elie Wiesel: "Words can sometimes, in moments of grace, attain the quality of deeds."

**Words can make truth obvious and understandable.** Words do not invent truth, any more than an artist invents a sunrise. Words often, however, call attention to truth in such a way that people see it as if for the first time. That makes words, as Rudyard Kipling said, "mankind's most powerful drug."

**Words can power change in human thinking and behavior.** Someone asked Clement Attlee how Winston Churchill won World War II. Attlee replied, "He talked about it." The old cliché "actions speak louder than words" is only partially true. Words, more than actions, move the world—because actions rarely happen *prior to words*.

**Written words can power more change than spoken words.** Following Iraq's invasion and occupation of Kuwait in 1990, the Iraqis classified typewriters as weapons and closely controlled who could own one. They were right. To say that the pen is mightier than the sword is not rhetoric; it is history.

- *Uncle Tom's Cabin* so incited its readers against slavery that Abraham Lincoln said Harriet Beecher Stowe "wrote the book that made this great war."
- *Silent Spring*, biologist Rachel Carson's book, is credited with helping begin the modern environmentalist movement in the United States.
- When John Froben published Martin Luther's tracts in Wittenberg, they circulated across Europe. Within a few weeks, Zwingli read them in Switzerland. Calvin read them in France. Cranmer read them in Britain. Ochino read them in Italy. Valdes read them in Spain. The Protestant Reformation marched on a road of printed pages.

The long-lasting impact of John Wesley's words in Great Britain and America did not come from his preaching. Wesley did not let a week of his ministry go by without preparing something for the printer. He knew that the spoken word is powerful, but the printed word is even more so. Its strength does not dissipate into the air.

**Rules for Readable Writing:** Like learning most other skills, readable-writing requires determination, energy, and practice. These twenty-five rules, memorized and repeatedly applied, build a foundation of clarity for communicating every kind of idea.

**1. Use short sentences.** Long sentences murder readability. Hold your average to sixteen words. Twelve is better. If a sentence contains more than twenty words, say it shorter. Each time your average sentence length increases by two-and-one-half words, the readability goes up one grade level.

Exceptions: Sentences can exceed twenty words if they contain colons, semicolons, dashes, or parentheses. But use these sparingly and for clarity. Adding a few more words improves rhythm in some sentences, but long sentences more often than not signal laziness.

In the paragraphs you are reading, the sentences average eleven words. What is the average sentence length in your writing? The spellchecking feature in Microsoft Word and some other word processing systems automatically displays average sentence length, making this vigilance simpler.

**2. Use lightweight words.** What kinds of people understand your writing? If you intend to write for the public, lighten up a little. Lincoln’s 271-word Gettysburg Address contains 201, one-syllable words—a ninth-grade reading level. If you use more than 165-syllables-per-100 words, only college graduates understand you. The words in the paragraphs you are reading average 125-syllables-per-100 words. How many syllables per 100 words does your writing contain?

**3. Reduce the fog.** The best writing is like plate glass—so transparent that you see the truth through it and forget the medium through which you are looking. Clarity more often happens with short words and lightweight sentences. The famous “fog index,” originated by Robert Gunnin, can save your readers from drowning in a sea of words. Microsoft Word automatically calculates the fog index at the end of the spell-checking feature, by displaying the Flesch Reading Ease scale. If your word processor lacks such a feature, use the following exercise to discover the fog index in your writing:

- Draw a box around a 100-word section of something you wrote within the past year.
- Count the sentences in that section. If your one-hundredth word falls in the middle of a sentence, use a decimal to indicate the percentage of the last sentence in your 100-word section. \_\_\_\_
- Divide your 100 words by your number of sentences. Label the result A. \_\_\_\_
- Count the number of words you used that contain three or more syllables! Do not count as syllables the suffixes such as *ed*, *es*, and *ing*. Do not count capitalized proper nouns or combined short words such as “bookkeeper” or “babysitter.” Label the result B. \_\_\_\_
- Add A and B. \_\_\_\_
- Multiply that total by four. The first one or two digits on the left are the approximate grade level of people who understand your writing. \_\_\_\_

Almost every reader understands a fog index of six, seven, or eight. The *Reader’s Digest* has a fog index of eight. The fog index in many Christian magazines runs between ten and twenty-four. Academic textbooks usually score in the fog-index stratosphere. Lacking formal training in writing basics, many professors focus only on quality content, disregarding the importance of communication clarity.

Superb content plus difficulty understanding that content equals bored students. Quality content plus reading ease equals students turned on by and increasingly interested in the subject.

**4. Revise passive sentences.** Passive sentences increase the fog index. Writing with fewer than 5 percent passive sentences is good. Zero percent is better. Example of a passive sentence: *They were impressed by his manner.* Revision of that passive sentence: *His manner impressed them.*

- Anatomy of an active sentence: *a noun (subject of the sentence) leads to a verb, which leads to a direct object.* Like a train, the noun is the engine; the verb is the freight cars that depict action; and the direct object comes last, like the caboose. Not every great sentence is constructed this way, but high-quality writing contains many such sentences.
- Anatomy of a passive sentence: *the sentence’s direct object is followed by a “to be” verb—such as have, has, had, was, is, are, were, seem to be, can be—which is followed by a noun (subject of the sentence).*

Develop low-passivity percentages by deleting passive “to be” verbs—which usually forces you to revise the subject and verb to form an active sentence. With practice, your mind gradually stops creating passive sentences. Eventually, writing active sentences becomes second-nature.

**5. Use active verbs.** Action-verbs make the eyes fly forward and the adrenaline pump. Active verbs add vigor. They move the story ahead. They energize. Inactive verbs put people to sleep.

Avoid the past tense wherever possible. What *has* happened interests us less than what *is* happening.

“To be” and “have” verbs are weeds in the writer’s garden. Chop them out. Examples: *have, has, had, was, is, are, were, seem to be, can be*. Replace these weak puddles of syllables with action verbs that flash a picture into the mind.

When you rewrite a first draft shorten the sentences. Try to replace every inactive verb with an action-verb. The increased energy will amaze you.

**6. Avoid empty word combinations.** Examples: *there is, it was, it is, they had, who is, which was, due to, have got, a little, so good, very beautiful*. Those “Mr. Sandman phrases” paint no pictures, evoke no emotions, and describe no actions. Deleting them creates a stronger impression than leaving them in.

**7. Use people and pronouns.** Because they bring no picture to mind, concepts are less interesting than objects. Because they cannot talk, objects are less interesting than people. Because they cannot exude a personality, masses of people are not as interesting as specific individuals. Example: “Lawyers usually say . . .” “*Harry Smith’s logical argument revealed his lawyer personality.*” People your paragraphs. Personalize your points.

**8. Be concrete rather than vague.** Replacing a vague generality with a concrete image exchanges a cloudy view for a mountain peak. Mist blurs and bores. Specific pictures propel people toward the next action. Examples:

- Instead of saying “A man came by,” say, “*Harry Jones appeared unexpectedly.*”
- Instead of saying “a large number,” say, “*73 percent.*”

A good speech has three qualities: simple, concrete, and relevant. Good writing is the same, only more so. If your writing is not concrete, it seems neither clear nor relevant.

**9. Avoid hooking freight trains of trite, familiar, old, timeworn adjectives to your nouns!** If American cab drivers use the adjective you select forty times a day, the eye sees it as a non-word. Examples: *very, beautiful, and wonderful*. Revise your shopworn adjective-noun combinations. Reading adjectives that their own imagination could supply does not excite people.

Good writers use one adjective per noun. Great writers keep adjectives to a minimum. They power their sentences with tall nouns and tough verbs, not descriptive adjectives. If you must constantly qualify and describe your nouns, you are probably picking the wrong nouns. Strong nouns do not require life vests; they can swim alone. To describe a noun, a metaphor or a simile is often more interesting than an adjective.

**10. Avoid multiple prepositional phrases.** Too many prepositional phrases (beginning with *on, of, around*) over-inflate sentences and compromise clarity. A better idea: change prepositions into possessives, shorter descriptions, action verbs, or second sentences. Example: “Through the lens of the telephoto part of her camera, Cheryl looked over the hills and into the valleys for the birds that were on alert and at present uninterested in getting photographs made of them.” “*Through her camera’s telephoto lens, Cheryl surveyed the hilly terrain. The birds she sought obviously didn’t want their photographs taken today.*”

**11. Avoid using the same word twice in the same sentence.** The most common mark of amateur writers is crafting a sentence in which “that” or “which” appears twice. Prune with vengeance.

Avoid using an unusual word twice in the same paragraph. Avoid using an extremely rare word twice in the same magazine article. Do not take this warning to extremes. Some words have no adequate synonyms. “Synonym-mania” creates confusion in the explanation of technical details or scientific writing. Using an “almost-right” synonym is like flashing your turn signal while continuing to drive straight down the street.

Words with three or fewer letters are also exceptions to the “don’t repeat” rule. But even here, the fewer repeats, the better.

In rare instances, repeat words and phrases for effect. *“They all cried. Mother cried. Dad cried. The kids cried. For a few moments, the ceiling rained tears.”*

**12. Avoid using more than two commas per sentence.** Three or four commas in one sentence fling mud on your reader’s windshield. Writer laziness causes most comma overkill. Revise or divide the sentence

**13. Master the art of smooth paragraph transitions.** Beginning writers hop and jerk. Professionals flow. Transition words provide bridges between idea islands. They move the reader from sentence to sentence, paragraph to paragraph, section to section. Vary your transition techniques. Examples: *of course, however, yet, but, and nevertheless.*

Weak or washed-out transition bridges show up best in writing that parks on your desk overnight or several over-nights. Let your writing get cold, and its weak transitions get clear. Then you can smooth and blend what you previously could not see as choppy and jumpy.

**14. Say it simply.** Complex sentences and obtuse explanations seldom convince people of the writer’s intellectual ability. Instead, they act like blinking neon signs that say, “If I can’t tell what he means, I wonder if he knows what he means?”

Does your writing sound like your conversation? If not, your keyboard is switching your brain from the communication channel to the snow channel.

Three rules for great writing: Say it simply. Say it simply. Say it simply. An anonymous author put it this way:

The written word should be clean as a bone,  
Clear as light and firm as stone.

George Bernard Shaw advised, “In literature the ambition of the novice is to acquire the literary language; the struggle of the adept is to get rid of it.” A good way to improve simplicity: practice saying it simply every time you write a business letter or a memo.

**15. Write tight.** Sculptors remove all the stone that does not add to the statue’s statement of truth. Good writers do the same. Skillful writing sings and flows. It does not snore and drag. Superfluous words kill reader interest. Examples:

- She was starting to get sick. *She started feeling sick.*
- The doors were slammed shut. *The doors slammed shut.*
- Sunrise was followed by a high wind. *A high wind arrived after sunrise.*

The 23rd Psalm has 118 words. The Declaration of Independence defined a new concept of freedom with 1,321 words. By contrast, the U.S. Department of Agriculture’s regulations for pricing cabbage required 15,629 words.

You do not, of course, need to write everything tight—just the things you want people to stay awake long enough to read. Compare the following overweight sentences with fat-trimmed truths:

- A feathered vertebrate enclosed in the grasping organ has an estimated value that is higher than a duo encapsulated in the branched shrub. *A bird in the hand is worth two in the bush.*
- It is more tolerable to bestow upon than to come into possession of. *It is better to give than to receive.*

Less is more in many aspects of life. That maxim is especially true on the printed page. Great writing compresses a big idea into the leanest possible word package. Tight writing adds energy to your ideas!

**16. Avoid redundant redundancies.** *The Farmer's Almanac* never comments on politics. A spokesman for the magazine said in an interview, “The last time we mentioned politics was in 1824. At that time, we said Congress talked too much and spent too much. We have not found it necessary to make an utterance since.”

You may not want to restrain redundancy to that extreme, but saying something too many times insults reader intelligence. Writing and public speaking are different in that regard. In public speaking, some redundancy is necessary—in case the hearer was daydreaming when the first point flew by. In written communication, redundancy tends to increase boredom rather than clarity.

**17. Avoid clichés like the plague.** Metaphors and similes that people use in everyday speech make sleepy reading. Amputate them. Stack your writing full of surprises, not sameness.

Compare these metaphors: “The election defeat took him down a notch or two.” “*The election defeat left him marching into a marvelous future on stairs of sand.*”

Compare these similes: “She came out of the office white as a sheet.” “*The dawn came up like thunder over the Pyrenees.*”

**18. Avoid stained-glass language.** The general public did not attend seminary or live in a monastery for three years. Its blood does not race at the sight of words like *atonement, covenant, ecumenism, existential, incarnation, transcendence, and metaphysics*. Chief offenders: conservative-background clergy trying to appear pious; liberal-background clergy trying to appear intellectual.

**19. Avoid inappropriate use of *which* and *that*.** These two words convey slightly different meanings. Using *which* instead of *that* can cause the reader to stumble in grasping the meaning of a sentence.

The word *which* introduces a phrase that provides additional information not essential to the sentence's meaning.

The word *that*, on the other hand, introduces a phrase that is essential to the meaning. Examples: “Her apartment had two windows, which looked onto the parking lot.” “Her apartment had two windows that looked onto the parking lot.”

Generally speaking, *which* communicates best when used to begin a descriptive phrase preceded by a comma. Generally speaking, *that* works best to introduce a descriptive phrase not preceded by a comma.

**20. Avoid inappropriate linkage of nouns and pronouns.** When speaking of committees, companies, or other inanimate objects and concepts, use *that* rather than *who*. Example: “committees *that* want to help;” not “committees *who* want to help.”

**21. Avoid using several commas per sentence.** Three or four commas in one sentence fling mud on your reader's windshield. Writer laziness causes most comma overkill. Revise or divide the sentence

**22. Avoid inappropriate use of colons and semicolons:** The sentence that comes after a colon explains, expands on, or elaborates on, what came before the colon. A semicolon, on the other hand, is like a turn signal. What came prior to a semicolon is usually different from, the opposite of, or contrasts with, what comes after it.

**23. Avoid wherever possible starting sentences with “It is” or “There are” or any combination of non-picture pronouns and verbs.** Almost always, you can avoid that manner of beginning a sentence by moving a noun and verb from the end of the sentence to the beginning. Example: It is time to kill the goose. *Goose-killing time arrived.*

**24. Avoid words like “frankly” or “obviously,” which are common in oral communication.** Telling the reader that something is obvious is a mild put-down, implying that he or she cannot figure this out. In most cases, state the fact clearly and let the reader decide that it is obvious.

**25. Avoid overusing qualifier words such as *perhaps*.** Most of the time, these words add nothing to the meaning of the sentence—except to make the author’s thinking seem uncertain and tentative, thus reducing its communication punch.

**Summary:** The cabinetmaker who wants to design and build beautiful furniture begins by learning how to drive a nail. Writing is a craft-form before it becomes an art-form. As we master the craft, the art develops.

## II. Power Your Writing Style

Judges rate Olympic ice skaters in two ways: technical skill and style. Readers rate writers the same way. Technical basics such as short sentences and syllable-lean words are crucial to readability. But high-quality style is also essential. The following principles help that to happen.

**1. Write in moving pictures.** Because images convey reality more clearly than words, the mind thinks in pictures, not syllables. Academic communicators tend to express their ideas in the form of concepts—which is why the typical reader finds academic-writing boring. Authors who write for the public market communicate in word pictures—which are more like watching TV. Communicate complex concepts briefly and link them to pictures so that people can *see* what you mean. Writing is not about reading; writing is about seeing.

Analogies and illustrative stories have great value, but effective authors do not rely on them as their only picture techniques. Develop skill in using numerous short pictures too—of the type that flash on the mind’s screen in one sentence. Metaphor and simile are two great picture producers.

*Metaphor* describes a thing or person as equivalent to another thing or person. This creates a picture with a word normally used to describe some other experience, event, object, or person. Examples:

- “Her voice was a siren’s song.”
- “The Lord is my shepherd.”

*Simile* is a picture created when you say an experience, event, object, or person is *like* another experience, event, object, or person. Examples:

- “She hovered at the edge of the crowd like a frightened sparrow.”
- “The camouflaged soldier moved through the trees like a flitting shadow.”

**2. Say it differently.** Ordinary writers get it said. Good writers say it better. Great writers say it differently. Do not set your crown-jewel ideas in a plastic headband. Who wants to read something that sounds like what she read in the newspaper, the fourth grade, or her sixth-grade book report? If you cannot think of a way to say it differently, you have not thought enough. Examples:

- Marry adjectives to nouns not ordinarily coupled with each other. *Enthusiastic apathy was their most obvious characteristic.*
- Link nouns, verbs, and direct objects not usually found on the same chain. *He quietly exploded her secret information into the courtroom.*
- Twist old sayings into new forms by taking them literally. *The shoes they thought the new pastor could not fill turned out to be too little for her.*
- Give objects human descriptions and emotions. *The burning church roof shuddered with pain as it fell into the sanctuary below.*
- Mix concrete objects and human emotions. *Reading the shocking news was like sipping a warm cup of despair.*
- Use creative exaggeration. *Dull speeches are eternity in slow motion.*

People have an unending appetite for information, inspiration, and humor. Writers who keep delivering one or all three in surprising packages never run out of interested readers.

**3. Illustrate.** Tell a story. Make up a happening that conveys your point through the experiences of specific persons. The Ten Commandments package truth in principle-form. Jesus' story of the Good Samaritan packages truth in illustration-form. Which is more interesting? Which is easiest to remember?

**4. Use humor.** Occasional humor improves concentration. Humor provides a timeout that wipes away sleepy cobwebs that gather when we concentrate on a serious subject. Humor allows readers to start over with fresh enthusiasm.

Humor helps people relax and give greater consideration to ideas they strongly oppose. When people laugh, their prejudices limber up. Get them laughing; you may get them thinking.

Short, humorous anecdotes are better than long stories. A long story puts the reader in danger of forgetting your point because she gets so involved in the story itself.

Warning: Be sure the humor actually illustrates or introduces the subject you address. Otherwise, readers begin to feel that they are wading through a desert of cotton candy.

**5. Avoid stacking several illustrations under the same point.** One illustration clarifies. Two illustrations tire. Three illustrations make me wonder if my plane has rerouted to the Bermuda Triangle.

**6. Avoid an overload of negative illustrations.** Negative examples are easy to find, and they add value by defining the problem. Positive examples are even more valuable, however. They help fix problems. Too many negative examples make the writer sound cynical, which tempts readers to wonder about the writer's personality instead of her idea.

**7. Avoid mixing metaphors.** Example: "If you hit a long ball, don't count your chickens before they hatch." Mixed metaphors have the same impact as viewing two TV channels simultaneously. Image phrases make great reading, but two phrases at a time overload the viewer's screen. When that happens, readers seek another channel—where the writer skillfully projects one subject at a time.

**8. Avoid overusing slang.** A little slang adds spice, but who wants to eat a whole bowl of garlic and mint leaves? Do not confuse cute with sloppy. As well as giving your writing a faint aroma of garbage, some slang words also make the writer sound dated.

**9. Do not over-quote.** A string of quotations that look like pearls to the writer often seem like a string of jellybeans to the reader. Quotes are important in college term papers: not using them may cause the professor to think the writer did not do her own research. In writing for the public, however, quotes often create the impression that you substituted systematic cutting and pasting for systematic thinking. People want to know what *you* think, not what six other people think. If you build your writing on block after block of quotations, people begin to suspect that you are a reader rather than a writer.

Exceptions to the “do not over-quote” rule:

- Conversations between people
- Public-domain items such as song titles, jokes, and fables
- Anonymous stories whose source nobody knows

In these instances, quote-mark content often adds clarity rather than academic clouds.

**10. Learn the basics of writing style so well that they become instinctive.** Read books on the writing basics. Among the best: *Made to Stick* by Chip Heath & Dan Heath (New York: Random House, 2007) and *Writing Tools: 50 Essential Strategies for Every Writer* by Roy Peter Clark (New York: Little Brown and Company, 2006). Also of value: William Zinsser’s *On Writing Well* (New York: Harper & Row Publishers); and Robert Masello’s *Robert’s Rules of Writing* (Cincinnati: Writer’s Digest Books, 2005); go to [www.TEACH12.com](http://www.TEACH12.com) for Brooks Landon, *Building Great Sentences* (Chantilly, VA: The Teaching Company, 2008)

**Summary:** As you master the craft, the art develops. This does not guarantee you a Pulitzer Prize, but clumsy style guarantees that the committee never considers you for that honor.

### III. Quality-Package Your Content

Great wrapping paper on a wedding gift cannot compensate for an empty box. Nor can a writer’s effective packaging substitute for having nothing valuable to say. But readers often disregard even the best ideas unless they are properly packaged.

**1. Good titles, chapter titles, and subheads, like well-lighted store windows, invite people to come inside.** Be sure your window is large enough and clean enough to let people see in. Otherwise, they may walk on down the street.

Most publishers reserve the right to determine the final title of a book or article, as an essential part of the marketing process. Chapter titles and subheads within chapters, which are usually within the writer’s province, significantly increase or decrease readability. Title and subhead design possibilities:

- *How* is one of the most powerful words in the English or any language! Begin with *who*, *what*, *why*, or *how*: “How to Drive Your Child Sane” or “Why Your Head Hurts”
- Make a strong statement: “Justice is Blind—and Dirty Minded”
- Ask a sharp-pointed question: “Is Your Church Healthy?”
- Research indicates that using a colon in a title increases the reader’s perception that the information is valuable. Use the subject, plus colon, plus explanatory-phrase formula: “Hawaii: The Sporting Life”
- Use balance and contrast: “Daycare without Nightmares”

- Use word-play humor: “Yogurt—Get into the Culture”
- Add a twist to the title of a well-known book, poem, movie, slogan, or song: “Take Me out of the Ball Game”
- Use alliteration: “Dazzled in Disneyland”
- Use rhyme: “Whirling with Flair in the Air”
- Use parallelism: “A Touch of Gloom, a Hint of Peace”
- Use one of the fourteen most persuasive words in the English language: *save, discover, safety, health, you, guarantee, love, easy, how-to, money, proven, free, results*, and *new*: “Leadership Workshop Offers Free Registration for Clergy Spouses”
- Use one of the other powerful persuader words: *magic, miracle, secret, power, comfort, popular, sex, enjoy, style, protect, opportunity, praise, satisfy, advantage, convincing, effective, informative, genuine, interesting, appealing*, and *realistic*: “Miracle Cure for Sick Church Attendance”
- Avoid using response-killer words such as *cost, pay, contract, death, buy, price, obligation, liable, fail, sell, decision, difficult*.
- Alter a familiar quotation: Wally Amos, inventor of the Famous Amos Cookies, titled his biography “The Face That Launched a Thousand Chips”
- Use the rule of three: “Imagination, Plus Effort—Equals Results”
- Begin with the word *announcing*: “Announcing a Solution to Attendance Decline”
- Begin with *new* or *now* or *at last*: “New Concept in Estate Planning”
- Put in a date: “Beginning February 1 . . .”
- Offer something free: “Free Study Book Offered”
- Offer valuable information: “Do You Make These Preaching Mistakes?”
- Tell a story: “How I Improved My Memory in Thirty Minutes”
- Ask *who else*: “Who Else Wants a Better Youth Program?”
- Begin with *this*: “This Study will Energize Your Church Officers”
- Begin with *advice*: “Advice to Beginning Pastors”
- Use a testimony: “My Preaching Was Boring!”
- Offer a test: “Can Your Church Pass This Test?”

**2. The first sentence can sentence your writing to interest or oblivion.** People make quick decisions about what they will spend time reading. They judge books by covers, people by first impressions, and food by how it looks. This may not seem fair, but it describes reality.

If your first sentence does not grab attention, the twelfth sentence may not see the light of eyesight. Never expect people to be interested in your writing. The average reader is busy, surrounded by distractions, and focused on personal objectives unrelated to you. People do not donate their attention to your writing. You must fight for it. The first sentence can determine whether you win or lose.

Focus your first lines on the reader’s needs and interests, not on yourself or your institution’s needs and interests. Examples of deadening first sentences from pastors’ newsletter columns:

- “What a glorious day we had Sunday!” *If I attended, I already know that. If I wasn’t there, why should I care?*
- “We have such wonderful people in our church.” *I already know that, or I don’t think it is true, or I don’t care.*

What benefits does your article offer? If you promise a benefit to the reader in the first sentence, he wants to continue. If not, he may not resist the urge to change channels. Examples: how to solve a

problem; entertainment; enlightenment on a complex matter of personal interest; how to become a better, happier, richer, healthier, more relaxed, more skillful, more spiritually mature, or more interesting person.

Some lead-sentence methods that professionals use:

- Summarize by selecting your central idea and trimming it to one point: “Your church may be able to increase worship attendance by 15 percent.”
- Tell a story: “An Indiana congregation increased its worship attendance by 18 percent. The following methods helped that happen.”
- Ask a question: “Why add another morning-worship service?”
- Shock the reader: “Your church may be turning down \$2,000 in offerings each week.”
- Open with intriguing dialogue: “You mean you are divorcing him after only a month of marriage?” she asked.
- Use a quote from a famous person: Winston Churchill said, “We shape our buildings and our buildings then shape us.”

Exception to the zinger first-sentence principle: in some instances, withhold your article’s central point to build anticipation. But you must still grab people quickly in sentence one and paragraph one. Even when the reader cannot see the target, he must see the arrow moving toward it.

**3. Use a variety of the classic rhetorical devices.** Twenty-six examples:

**Alliteration**—repeating the same first sound or the same first letter: “The hallowed halls of Harvard.”

**Anaphora**—repeating the same word or words at the beginning of two or more successive clauses or sentences: “We shall fight on the beaches, we shall fight on the landing-grounds, we shall fight on the fields and in the streets, we shall fight in the hills.” (Winston Churchill, speech in the House of Commons, June 4, 1940)

**Anastrophe**—inverting the usual order of words or clauses: “The tables, so far as the immediate moment was concerned, turned in her favor.”

**Anticlimax**—transitioning from a significant idea to a trivial or ludicrous idea (as at the end of a series): “I’ve got a headache, my heart beats fast, my nerves are shot, my ulcer is acting up—and I don’t feel well.”

**Antimetabole**—making a statement with two grammatical constructions, each yielding a different sense: “The pessimist sees the difficulty in every opportunity; the optimist sees the opportunity in every difficulty.”

**Antithesis**—expressing opposite ideas in the same grammatical form: “That’s one small step for a man, one giant leap for mankind.” (Neil Armstrong, as he stepped on the moon, July 20, 1969)

**Apposition**—placing a noun or pronoun in apposition to another noun- or pronoun-equivalent as an explanation or identification: “John Henry, the hero of railroading’s westward conquest of America in the 1800s, has become the far less glamorous union worker today.”

**Assonance**—repeating the same vowel sound: “Four and Score.”

**Asyndeton**—omitting conjunctions for emphasis or brevity: “I came, I saw, I conquered.”

**Climax**—arranging ideas in a rising scale of force and interest: “Let us fulfill our obligations, not just to our family and our country, but to our God.”

**Ellipsis**—omitting a word or words needed to complete the grammatical construction of a sentence, without losing the meaning: “So singularly clear was the water that when it was only twenty or thirty feet deep the bottom seemed floating in the air! Yes, where it even *eighty* feet deep.” (Mark Twain, *Roughing It*)

**Epistrophe**—ending successive clauses or sentences with the same word: “In a cake, nothing tastes like real butter, nothing moistens like real butter, nothing enriches like real butter, nothing satisfies like real butter.” (Caption from a Pillsbury ad during the decades before real butter became a villain)

**Hyperbole**—intentionally overstating: “The whole world is watching.”

**Irony**—expressing something other than the literal meaning, as when describing an incongruity between an expected result and what really happened: “It’s very easy to give up smoking. I’ve done it a thousand times.”

**Litotes**—using a figure of speech to assert a truth by denying its opposite: “It was no big deal. He just had to go without sleep for three days and do the work of two doctors in a seventy-two-hour emergency room stint.”

**Metaphor**—using a figure of speech that denotes a likeness between one kind of object or idea and another completely different object or idea: “Sarah is *drowning in money* these days.”

**Metonymy**—using a figure of speech to substitute a colorful picture-word or words for the actual idea, action, or emotion: “In Europe, we gave the *cold shoulder* to De Gaulle, and now he gives the *warm hand* to Mao Tse-tung.” (Richard M. Nixon, 1960 campaign speech)

**Onomatopoeia**—using a word that sounds like what it means: “The crash, boom of cymbals punctuated the colorful parade.”

**Parallelism**—using words in a pattern or rhythm, like music: “We are fully prepared; we are fully committed; we await the signal to begin.”

**Parenthesis**—inserting a word, phrase, or sentence within a sentence to explain or qualify something: “When someone provoked the bulldog (and the tiniest unexpected movement from a stranger could irritate him), his lightening bite wracked havoc on innocent ankles.”

**Personification**—assigning human qualities to an object or idea: “Drug use is a cancer on society.”

**Polysyndeton**—using several conjunctions in close succession: “And God said, ‘Let the earth bring forth living creatures of every kind: cattle and creeping things and wild animals of the earth of every kind.’ And it was so. God made the wild animals of the earth of every kind, the cattle of every kind, and everything that creeps upon the ground of every kind. And God saw that it was good” (Genesis 1:24-25).

**Sarcasm**—using a sharp statement, which is often satirical or ironic, to make a cutting point: “I have a right to resent, to object to, libelous statements about my dog.” (Franklyn D. Roosevelt)

**Simile**—using a figure of speech, usually designed for dramatic effect, which says one thing is *like* another: “Silence settled over the audience like a block of granite.”

**Synecdoche**—using a figure of speech to signify the whole of an idea, action, or feeling by stating only one of its obvious elements: “Brandish your steel, men.” “Give us this day our daily bread.”

**Understatement**—representing something as less than is the case (the opposite of hyperbole): “When the prodigal son found that all he could afford for lunch was eating bean pods with the pigs, he realized he had a financial-management problem.”

**4. End with punch.** The first paragraph, like a locomotive, must have sufficient power to pull the train. Last paragraphs, like cabooses, bring readers a feeling of completion. Ways to end:

- Ask for action.
- Wrap up with a bit of irony or a funny story that leaves people laughing about the major point.
- Finish with a dramatic incident that points persuasively at your big idea.
- Clinch your closing point with a fitting quote from a well-known person.
- Go out the same door you came in, by doubling back to the content in the first paragraph.
- Summarize succinctly. But if you use this ancient ending method, be quick. Say it short. Be bright. Be brief. Be done.
- Visualize the results. Illustrate the dramatic good that would come if your suggestion were followed.
- Ask a rhetorical question.

In book chapters, ending with a human-interest illustration that summarizes the chapter powers out much better than a philosophical summary. Chapter ends are natural hinges at which readers often lay books down and go to bed. Ending a chapter with a gripping illustration or event encourages the reader to begin the next chapter.

**5. Learn the basic rules of citing quotation sources.** Words and sentences are protected by copyright law. They are the intellectual property of their creator. Stealing them is like stealing someone's car. By contrast, ideas cannot be copyrighted. They are public domain, like a view of the sunset. Do not write for permission on every tiny shred of idea. Nor should you request permission to quote statements, jokes, and stories that are circulating through the minds, mouths, and ears of countless thousands.

Ordinarily, you do not need permission to quote something fewer than forty words long. Referring to the publication and author is usually considered sufficient for these short-burst quotations. Quoting more than two lines of a poem is an exception to this rule, since you are using a large percentage of the total intellectual property.

**6. Use scrupulous accuracy when citing facts.** Readers who notice a wrong fact assume that other parts of the article or book are shabby, also.

**7. Conform to copyright laws.** Copyright is the right of the property owner to say who copies something he or she created. The same kind of law gives you the right to say who borrows your car. Copyright laws encourage the development of the arts and sciences by protecting a creative individual's intellectual property. Its nonprofit status does not exempt an organization from the penalties of copyright law infringement.

In 1976, the United States Congress approved a revision of the laws governing copyright protection. *One major change:* The copyright now exists "from the moment an original work of authorship becomes fixed in a copy or phonorecord." An author or music composer may choose to register that copyright with the Library of Congress Copyright Office in Washington, D.C. but is not required to do so to be protected from theft. Whether a copyright is registered or not, the law guarantees the copyright holder five *exclusive rights*:

- The right to reproduce a work
- The right to prepare derivative works, such as abridgments
- The right to distribute a work
- The right to perform a work in public
- The right to display a work in public

As with other kinds of property, only the copyright owner has the authority to allow another person to exercise any of these five rights. Sometimes that copyright holder is the creator. In other instances, the creator transfers the copyright to a publisher. How can you tell who holds the copyright? Look for the word "copyright" or the symbol ©, the year, and the copyright holder's name.

Some older materials and most government publications are "in the public domain" and not copyrighted. Never assume that this is the case without verification; unless you are absolutely certain it is "in the public domain," do not quote large sections without written permission from the copyright owner.

Appropriate use of copyrighted materials without permission is called *fair use*. The copyright law does not clearly define the limits for quoting materials, but most courts consider the following points in copyright lawsuits:

- The purpose and character of the use (one time or multiple times? free or sold? educational?)
- The nature of the copyrighted work

- The percentage and substantiality of the portion used in relation to the copyrighted work’s size as a whole (forty words from an encyclopedia is fair use; forty word from a poem is theft)
- The effect of the use upon the existing work’s value (does the quote compete with the sale or distribution of the copyrighted work?)

The law states that reproducing a copyrighted work for “criticism, comment, news reporting, teaching, scholarship, or research” is not an infringement.

Because copyright law is not specific, the “house rules” of different publishing companies vary greatly. One well-known publisher requires writers to obtain permission when quoting more than 350 words of prose. Another company requires writers to obtain permission when quoting more than 100 words. Most companies, however, play it safe with poetry and songs, requiring that writers obtain permission when quoting more than two lines of poetry or a song.

**8. Conform to accepted standards of punctuation and footnoting.** Most authorities view *The Chicago Manual of Style* as the “writer’s bible” (University of Chicago Press). Live with its rules until they live in you.

**9. Avoid excessive underlining and *italicizing* for emphasis.** Often, reorganizing the sentence provides a better way to strengthen clarity and impact.

**Summary:** Packaging is not everything. But it is definitely something. The way food looks influences the eater’s enthusiasm! Display your ideas on fine china, not on paper plates.

#### **IV. Improve Construction with Architectural Planning**

Failing to plan does not always mean planning to fail. But it usually means depending on luck and good intentions. Fine buildings seldom rise from those two elements. More often, good architecture depends on good plans—thoughtfully developed and carefully executed. Excellent writing happens the same way. The following principles help that to happen.

**1. Decide on a blueprint before you start writing.** Some authors find the acronym EASE helpful in developing the flow of article or chapter content:

- *Exemplify*—give the chapter’s big idea in a compelling story that involves real people.
- *Amplify*—enlarge on the chapter’s big idea.
- *Specify*—be specific about any changes in thinking or behavior advocated by the chapter’s big idea.
- *Electrify*—finish with a compelling, inspirational close that drives home the chapter’s main point.

**2. Rough draft, concentrating on expressing ideas and content.** Avoid the urge toward compulsive perfectionism in the first draft. To overcome most writer’s blocks: start by putting something on paper—anything. Expect to write it “right” later. Trying to simultaneously express the idea and do the technical tightening inhibits idea flow. Expect to rewrite your material several times. This gives you much more freedom, power, and flow the first time around the track.

**3. Rewrite, rewrite, rewrite!** If it is worth writing, it is worth writing right. That happens better if you let it set overnight. It happens best if you let it set another week. Come back to it. Slash out the sloppy stuff. Rewrite the vague. Smooth out the hopping transitions.

Your writing quality improves in direct ratio to how many times you rewrite. If you are always satisfied with your first draft, you are too easily satisfied. Your readers have higher standards than that. Each time you come back and rewrite, you see more of the following:

- Weak transitions now look like the washed-out bridges they are.
- You can replace sleepy verbs with jolts of energy.
- Dull drag feels the same way to you as it does to strangers.
- Colorless adjectives become visible enough to prune.
- You see from a more perceptive perspective rather than from first glance.

Most effective writers do five or six drafts of a manuscript, letting each draft cool overnight or for several days before rewriting. Only then can a writer sufficiently detach from the words to become his or her own editor. Try this formula for successive drafts of a manuscript:

#### **4. Use this formula for successive drafts of a manuscript:**

- **First Draft**—*Express the ideas.* Put your thoughts on paper, without worrying too much about the technical rules of writing.
- **Second Draft**—*Refine the content.* Delete what does not fit. Add a few words and sentences to increase clarity. Do surgery on long sentences that contain more than sixteen words. Reorganize paragraphs that contain more than one subject.
- **Third Draft**—*Work on clarity.* Add and subtract words to make the meaning clear. Smooth out any rough transitions between paragraphs.
- **Fourth Draft**—*Polish the verbs.* Tighten and strengthen the message by deleting passive “to be” verbs and non-picture nouns or by replacing these verbs and nouns with picture words. Make verbs present tense wherever possible.
- **Fifth Draft**—*Add more pictures.* Do the sentences in your idea-sections contain a great deal of simile and metaphor? Does every sentence flash a picture on the mind (allowing the reader to see something, hear something, smell something, or feel something)?
- **Sixth Draft**—*Check for accuracy.* Look for typographical errors and words left out when you revised earlier drafts. Review punctuation, spelling, and absolute accuracy of quotation.

An author notices and corrects a few other items as he or she applies each part of this formula on six trips through a manuscript. Focusing on these six check-ups, one at a time, significantly improves the finished product.

**Summary:** In writing a book or an article, your time should lay out something like the following: (a) Thinking about it—15 percent, (b) Writing it—25 percent, and (c) Rewriting it—60 percent.

Three primary components power airplanes: propeller, engine, and wings. None of the three can substitute for losing one or both of the other two components. Which of the three essentials do you tend to neglect in your writing—thinking about it, writing it, or rewriting it? To fly into reader’s minds, your writing needs all three.

## V. Increase Creativity Habits

Mastering the technical basics of writing and applying packaging skills such as titles, subheads, beginnings, and endings is not enough. The writer must say something valuable in the reader's eyes. This usually involves new information, knowledge, wisdom, or a new way of looking at something. In other words, knowing the best way to say something does not compensate for having nothing to say.

Having something to say stems from (a) what the writer knows and (b) his or her creative abilities in saying it. The following behaviors strengthen that creativity.

**1. Daily practice draws the line between those who *could* write and those who *can* write.** People who write only when they feel like it seldom do. In those few instances when they finally feel like it, they are not good at it. Inspiration is a gift given to those who work, not those who wait. You cannot become a quality figure skater unless you frequently spend time on the ice.

Find your prime time of day for writing. For most people, that is morning. For some, that is evening. Whatever time it is, do it daily. Do it even when you do not want to. Do it when it feels like a sacrifice. Eventually, your discipline becomes devotion. Writing is like prayer: only those who experience it daily come into the fullness of its power. The others stand and watch in awe, wishing that they had such gifts.

**2. Feed your brain-wave systems the environmental vitamins they need for maximum creativity.** During the times when creativity flows best for us, the left hemisphere of the brain slows down (the rational, logical, analytical, sequential part of our thinking system). During times of creativity the right hemisphere of the brain speeds up (the intuitive, holistic, imaging, feeling part of our thinking system). Thus in creative moods, the two sides of the brain work together in ways not possible under other circumstances.

Each writer has a location in which creativity comes more easily: a certain desk at home, the public library, the kitchen table, a restaurant. Some people become more creative after eating certain foods or drinking certain beverages, such as chocolate or caffeine. Psychological conditioning partially causes those environmental factors to enhance our creativity: we expect creativity to occur in these circumstances because it has before. But those creativity-enhancing circumstances also produce physiological influences that help to shift brain-wave patterns into the creativity mode described above.

**3. Continually collect the big ideas in which you will later wrap your writing.** Good writers seldom find their central ideas on the day that their writing is due. Live expectantly. When something you read, hear, or observe gives you an "idea jolt," collect and file it. That allows you to work out of the overflow, not the undertow.

The greatest insights arrive at the oddest moments. One author obtained the insight on which he based a book while on a walk in the woods. Many of the best writing ideas come that way—when we are thinking about a related or a completely unrelated subject. Do not expect to remember any of these. Many of your best ideas fly away unless stabbed with the point of a pencil. Be prepared to put ideas on paper before they disappear into the mist.

**4. Carry a pocket notebook to trap ideas.** Your mind will forget. Your notebook will not. Write one idea on each page. Transfer note pages to file cards or project folders later.

**5. Set up a savings-account file of stories, anecdotes, and zingy quotes.** Make frequent deposits from what you read, hear, and observe. One author stores each idea he catches on a 4-by-6-inch card with an alphabetical subject-heading at the top. If it is a small newspaper or magazine clipping, he tapes it to the card and stores the cards in a metal card file.

He files gigantic items in 8½-by-11-inch file folders under alphabetical subject headings. Do not expect to remember the ideas you find in the books you read and store on your shelves. Copy and file any pertinent pages. If the material is too extensive to copy, make a reference card for your 4-by-6-inch card file that directs you to the appropriate book.

Fully annotate each reference card or photocopied book page (author's name, book or magazine title, publisher, city of publication, and date of publication). Searching for that information later wastes time. Then, too, you may be forced to jettison that perfect quote if you cannot provide proper source information for a magazine editor who wants to publish your article.

**6. Begin each project by deciding why you are writing it.** Writing either has a purpose or it does not. If it has no purpose, why bother? If your writing has a purpose, begin by getting clear about that purpose. If you can say your purpose in one sentence, you have probably decided. If you cannot, you have not.

Purposeful writing usually attempts to persuade, inform, or amuse. Writing that intends to persuade usually attempts to do one of three things:

- Get the reader to do something.
- Get the reader not to do something.
- Get the reader to let you (or your organization) do something.

If you intend to inform or amuse, decide that is your central purpose—before you begin your preparation. That decision protects you from driving your preparation thought-train off the main track onto time-consuming, un-scenic sidings.

**7. Perfect the ritual necessary to jump-start your creativity.** Someone quipped, “The only thing worse than having nothing to say is having to say something.” Through months of daily practice, writers can arrive at a point where having to say something equals having something to say. This happens through the rituals of place and actions. Find the ritual that works for you, and depend on it working when you go to that place and perform those actions. Examples: Ernest Hemingway sharpened twenty pencils. Willa Cather read a passage from the Bible.

“Writer’s block” is more accurately described as experience-block. Seasoned writers can quickly identify one or more of the six classic causes of their “block” and take the actions necessary to move beyond it:

- Not having enough information about this subject
- Not yet having decided what I want to say on this subject
- Not having clarity about why I want to write on this subject
- Fearing failure in writing about this subject
- Fearing that I will appear too unsophisticated or poorly educated to write on this subject
- Lacking interest in writing about this subject

*One way to move beyond these blocks is to write only two sentences:* What I really want to say is . . . .  
What I want to avoid saying is . . . .

**8. Give your subconscious time to collect illustrations and accessories.** The mind is an association machine that works like an electromagnet picking up iron filings. Plant a writing project in your mind several weeks before the due date. Label a file folder for each article or writing project as soon as you know about it. Drop clippings into it. Jot down notes that jump into your mind while reading, resting, or running. The best illustrations, like the best ideas, arrive unexpectedly. Over-collect. Later you can select. If the earrings do not match the dress, you can wear them with another outfit. But you cannot select what you did not collect.

**9. Expect God to fill in some of the white space.** Writers who work for God find God working for them through memories, imagination, and their subconscious. After we master all the technical basics of writing, creativity still depends on something outside ourselves. We are not alone in the universe, and we are not alone when we sit down to write—especially if we ask. Prayer adds power to your pen. Those who create for God’s purposes must learn to lean back on the great, mysterious Other. Effort plus imagination plus God add up to effective Christian writing. Two out of three is not enough.

**Summary:** A top-flight adman, Draper Daniels, wrote: “A good idea, badly presented, works better than a bad idea, superbly presented. A good idea, well presented, works best of all.” The power of a car is in its engine, not its paint job. Putting a great idea into words takes technical skill. Use your time and effort to polish what your readers deserve: your best ideas.

## VI. Create Purposeful Pastor’s Columns

Americans can pick from more than 100,000 new book titles each year. During the 1950s, new volumes totaled approximately 10,000 per year.

In such a flood of new information, why would people want to read something the pastor writes in their church newsletter? They won’t, unless it is well written. The following tips increase the likelihood that a pastor’s column gets read:

**1. Master the basic writing skills.** These are identical for Christian writing and secular writing. Learn them. Integrate them into all of your writing habits.

**2. Get motivated by realizing that pastors communicate with far more people in their church newsletters than on Sunday mornings.** Studies show that virtually everyone glances at the pastor’s column to see if it contains anything of interest, even if they read nothing else in the newsletter.

**3. Decide on the goal you want to reach with this particular column.** Your goal is probably one or a combination of the following: Create good will. Inform. Soothe. Avert criticism. Influence the formation of attitudes and judgments. Overcome another viewpoint. Persuade. Motivate to action. Select *one* of those goals as your major priority for a particular article.

**4. Pick a single theme and stay with it.** Ezra Pound said, “Great literature is simply language charged with meaning to the utmost possible degree.” Few pastor’s columns qualify as great literature, but they come much closer to that category when the writer leaves out side-trips into subjects unrelated to the main theme.

**5. Grab attention with a snappy first sentence that arouses curiosity.** Example of how *not* to do it: “We had a nice service last Sunday.”

**6. Build interest with each paragraph.** This happens when all three of the following elements are present: (a) Keep illustrative content high. (b) Avoid philosophical and sermonic sentences. (c) Avoid “stained glass” words that only church people understand.

**Summary:** Parishioners have plenty to read and too little time to read it. They want to find something valuable in their pastor’s newsletter column. Don’t disappoint them!

## VII. Craft Goal-Accomplishing Parishioner Letters

Is the inability to communicate effectively in letters with church members a mental disorder?

According to the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, the psychiatric profession's 886-page bible that references and codes every mental disorder, it can be. Listed along with such old standbys as schizophrenia and psychosis, is #315.2, "Disorder of Written Expression."

That disorder's definition describes it as the inability "to compose written texts, evidenced by grammatical or punctuation errors within sentences, poor paragraph organization, multiple spelling errors, and excessively poor handwriting." The manual says this disorder is rare. Having only one or two symptoms doesn't mean you have it. However, judging from the plethora of poorly written direct-mail letters church people wade through, staff and lay leaders may represent many "borderline cases."

The following guidelines can (a) reduce the likelihood that church readers diagnose their leaders as suffering from "Disorder of Written Expression" and (b) help leaders recover from that disorder.

**1. When should you write a letter instead of putting an article in the church newsletter?** Consider a letter when the following factors are present: (a) when you want *everyone* to know instead of just the majority, (b) when you want *action* instead of awareness, and (c) when you want to explain something thoroughly to reduce conflict and confusion. If you do not need to achieve any of these objectives, put it in the church newsletter.

**2. What one action do you want people to take as a result of reading this letter?** Church newsletters should communicate several ideas. A direct-mail letter should communicate one idea. Before you begin, state your one idea in one clear sentence. If you cannot state your central idea in one sentence, you have not yet decided why you are writing this letter. If you are confused about why you are writing, expect your readers to be even more confused.

**3. Does the first sentence grab attention?** The first words must convince the reader that this letter is written for his or her benefit rather than the writer's benefit. Otherwise, the reader may lay the letter aside. How to write a first sentence: promise the reader a personal benefit, or introduce a subject of keen interest to the reader, or arouse the reader's curiosity.

How *not* to write a first sentence: "I wish I could talk to each of you. There is much I would like to tell you. As inadequate as this form letter is to communicate deep things . . . ."

Positive examples:

"Did you know the pastor intends to wear a swimsuit to church next Sunday?"

"You make a life-and-death difference with your check for starving African children."

**4. Do your first paragraphs increase the reader's interest by explaining the benefits of acting on this letter's information?** In a commercial sales letter, these first paragraphs should illustrate profit, pleasure, convenience, or a saving in time and labor. In a church letter, these paragraphs should illustrate an opportunity for growing spiritually, achieving closer fellowship, giving to a worthy cause, helping fellow church members, helping the church achieve an important goal, or serving the community. These first paragraphs must convince the reader that your central idea is consistent with his or her personal values. That gives the reader good reasons for taking action.

**5. Do you offer proof that what you say is true?** This may involve the following: Facts the reader may not have or direct quotes from people the reader respects. If you fail to offer such proof, you are resting your case totally on your own opinion. For some people, your opinion is sufficient; for most people, it is not.

**6. Have you included an emotional as well as a rational appeal?** The intellect only accepts what the emotions permit. People take more action because of emotions than because of rational thinking. For church people, emotional appeal usually relates to (a) helping people in deep need, (b) correcting a terrible wrong, (c) dealing with a crisis, and (d) reinforcing biblical values.

**7. Have you included some kind of guarantee?** Most churches are not willing to promise “money back if not satisfied.” But you *can* guarantee personal satisfaction of various kinds: spiritual growth, or a sense of meaning in helping people, or fellowship, or a sense of satisfaction in helping to achieve mutually important goals. In a volunteer organization, satisfaction is the principal paycheck. Don’t forget to offer it.

**8. Have you used persuasive words?** The fifteen most persuasive words in the English language are *save, discover, safety, health, you, guarantee, love, easy, how to, money, proven, free, results, new*. Review these fifteen words just before you write a mass letter. Before you decide these words cannot be used in church letters, examine them more closely.

**9. Have you kept your paragraphs short, especially the first two?** Long first paragraphs discourage the reader. Be bright. Be brief. Connect quickly to the next link in your chain of ideas.

**10. Have you told the reader exactly what action to take in order to gain the benefits you have promised?** This normally comes in the last paragraph. It also gives a reason for acting *now* rather than later. Example: Can you bring the Easter offering next Sunday so we can dedicate it during the service and mail it to the . . . (designated missions or benevolence institution) on Monday?

**11. Have you underlined the most important sentences in the letter?** Studies show that many people do not read the whole letter but almost everyone reads the underlined or **bold** sentences. However, *too much underlining* or **bold** blurs the ideas and causes people to read none of the letter. Hold underlining and **bold** down to four or five sentences in a one- or two-page letter. Limit the use of *italics* and *script* sentences. They are approximately one-third harder to read.

**12. Have you included a powerful piece of information or call for action in the P.S.?** Studies show that virtually everyone reads the P.S., the first sentence, and the signature. If you do not have a P.S., invent one. Sometimes, the P.S. can communicate a separate but related idea or call for action. More often, it provides a new piece of specific information about the call for action.

**13. Have you used two colors?** Possibilities for the second color: the letterhead, your signature, or the underlining of the main points.

**14. Have you used a personal, handwritten note at the end, the beginning, or in the margin?** Make your note as personal as possible. Curiosity gets it read. While not always practical in church mailings, sometimes it is.

**15. Is the letter signed by a well-known, respected person?** People are more influenced by influential people than by paper or institutions. In fund-raising church letters, the most influential person is a respected layperson. In church letters calling for attendance at an event or spiritual-growth opportunity, the most influential person is the pastor. Always use the signature of one person, never the collective signature of a committee.

**16. Have you enclosed a self-addressed, stamped envelope for mailed-in responses?** Because people do not throw away stamped envelopes, they usually do not soon throw your letter away. This keeps your request on the top of their paper pile.

**17. Have you used the highest-possible-quality reproduction or printing process?** People who look at blurry type decide that you don't rate this communication as too important. So why should they?

**18. Avoid using your word processor's justified right margin (blocked instead of ragged) feature.** Blocked margins (a) make the spaces between the words uneven, thereby increasing reading difficulty and (b) create a more formal, less personal impression.

**19. Have you mastered the basics of readable writing?** Simple things such as holding average sentence length below sixteen words and minimizing several-syllable words make little difference to the writer. They make a major difference to the reader.

**20. Have you restricted the use of direct-mail letters to subjects that cannot be covered in the newsletter?** If church members get a direct-mail letter every month, they pay less attention to them. If they get only two-to-four such letters per year, they read them—providing the writer follows these twenty rules.

**Summary:** Do you have something to say to church members that you want all of them, instead of the majority, to know? Do you want the readers to take action as a result of that information? Have you mastered the basics of readable writing? Have you followed the scientifically-tested principles of direct mail?

If the answer to these questions is yes, congratulations! Your letter will raise your church's value in the readers' eyes. If not, save your postage! File-thirteen it! The letter may depreciate your church's value in readers' eyes.

## VIII. How to Get Magazine Articles Published

Do you want to communicate ideas to people beyond your local church? That can happen if you commit yourself to the following disciplines:

**1. Master the basic writing skills.** Having something to say is not enough. Everyone has opinions. Saying your something in a way that attracts and retains reader attention is the key to seeing your name in print. Like every art, craft, or science, that necessitates persistent effort. Learn and keep building on the ABCs of readable writing.

**2. Decide the type of magazine for which you want to write.** Anyone can write on any subject if he or she researches it long enough. Yet experiences and personal interests have equipped you more for some fields than for others. Many writers *begin* by writing articles for magazines with whose content they are familiar because they are subscribers.

**3. Learn how the magazines for which you want to write want their articles prepared.** For details of how every secular and religious magazine published in America wants articles written and submitted, go to your local library. Consult the current year's volume of *Writer's Market*. If you prefer to own a copy, order one from a local bookstore.

Additionally, study several articles in each of your target magazines to see what kind of content and length the editor likes. For motivation, insights, and new information in the writing field, many writers subscribe to *Writer's Digest*. Obtain the address from the book, *Writer's Market*, noted above.

**4. Perfect skill in writing the type of articles you feel most comfortable and confident in producing.** *Age quod agis* is a Latin phrase that means, "Do what you do, and do it with all of yourself." In other words, work from the center of yourself. Work from your soul. Such advice applies to aspiring authors. We write best about what we know best.

**5. Many editors of large-circulation magazines prefer a query letter first, before you send or write the entire article.** Limit the query letter to a single page because (a) editors are too busy to read more and (b) editors judge writers by their ability to put their message in a tight package. The query letter should describe what the article will say with a one-sentence objective, a tentative title, and a tentative contents outline. Neatness counts. A sloppy look and misspelled words say you are not a professional. If you have a previous publishing record, review it on an attached page. Prepare to wait at least a month for a response.

Do not waste an editor's time by telephoning a query. Editors do not want to know whether you *want* to write but whether you *can* write. They discover your writing ability only by reading a sample of your writing.

**6. If you decide to send the entire manuscript, pick out a list of at least ten magazines that publish this type of article.** Mail your manuscript to the first magazine on the list. If the manuscript comes back with a rejection slip, mail it to the second magazine on the list. Ordinarily, do not send your article to more than one magazine at a time. Offering the same piece of property to two different editors is like getting engaged to two people simultaneously.

**7. Put the word "Copyright," the copyright date, and your name in the upper-right-hand corner of the first page of all query-letter proposals and manuscripts.** This is legal copyright protection under present law. To be protected from theft, you are not required to fill out a form and send it to Washington.

**8. Enclose a self-addressed, stamped, mailing envelope with all manuscripts and query letters.** Publishers are not required to return unsolicited manuscripts, and this practice identifies you as a professional.

**9. Recognize that determination is as important as writing skill.** A best-selling author says one of his most popular articles was rejected twenty-nine times before acceptance—by the same magazine that had rejected it once before. He kept statistics on fifty published articles. They averaged eleven rejection slips each—more than five hundred total rejections—before they were accepted.

In 1889, the editor of the San Francisco *Examiner* told an unknown author that his manuscript was "simply ridiculous to any San Franciscan of ordinary intelligence." In 1907 the *Examiner* learned that Rudyard Kipling had won the Nobel Prize in literature.

In 1977, Chuck Ross, a struggling-to-get-published writer, decided to try an experiment. He typed up a fresh manuscript copy of Jerzy Kosinski's acclaimed novel *Steps*, changed the title, and submitted the work under his byline to fourteen publishers. All fourteen rejected the novel that had won the National Book Award of 1969 for best work of fiction. Among the publishers turning down the manuscript was Random House—the book's original publisher (*The Executive Speechwriter Newsletter*, Vol. 4, No. 3, 1989).

**10. You do not need a literary agent for magazine writing.** If you are a good writer, you do not need an agent. If you are not a good writer, an agent cannot help you.

**11. Forget the illusion that “who you know” gets you published.** Knowing the editor, knowing a friend of the editor, or knowing someone who frequently writes for the magazine has no value. Editors make their decisions by looking at your writing, not by knowing whom you know or who knows you. Nor should you send your article to a well-known published author. Any advice you get from a published author regarding your writing style is already available through books and magazines that teach writing skills. In the final analysis, all help in magazine-article publishing is self-help.

Some authors find value in peer critique/encouragement from local writers’ groups, workshops, or university creative-writing classes. If you use these resources, avoid the pitfall of substituting learning about and discussing writing for the daily discipline of doing it.

**12. Expect editing after a magazine accepts your article for publication!** As H.G. Wells observed, “No passion in the world is equal to the passion to alter someone else’s draft.” Even the most prominent authors are copyedited to improve clarity and correct technical flaws in grammar. Sometimes editors ask for a rewrite of one or more sections. This is normal procedure. The more professional the writer, the more he or she understands the value of refining the product.

**Summary:** Getting magazine articles published is far easier than most people think. If you have something to say, apply basic writing skills, and persistently submit, you eventually see your name in print.

## **IX. Transform Manuscripts into Published Books**

Many of the guidelines for magazine articles apply to nonfiction-book manuscripts. However, because book publishing carries high financial risk, most publishing companies “socialize the risk” with an editorial committee that makes final decisions. Each company has a well-defined system for considering every new book proposal. The first step usually involves submitting three items:

- ✓ A book proposal that is slightly different for each company. Contact two or three book publishing companies that publish the type of books you are interested in writing. Ask for a copy of the book proposal form that they prefer prospective authors to submit to them.

- ✓ A proposal that includes a one-sentence “proposition statement” or “thesis statement” describing what each chapter intends to say.

- ✓ Two completed chapters: the first chapter and any other chapter you wish (probably the one about which you feel the most passionate).

**What about manuscript length?** A manuscript that totals 35,000-to-40,000 words prints into a book of 112-to-144 pages. Some variation in manuscript length is possible by increasing or reducing the final printed type-size (the above formula is based on a 10-to-12-point typeface).

Each publishing company has “house rules” that state publishing policies and manuscript requirements to potential authors. Obtain a set of those guidelines from the company that accepts your book idea for publication. Follow it scrupulously. These “house rules” are continuously revised. However, until you have a set of those in hand, use the following assumptions and general guidelines.

**Payment.** Most book publishing is done on a royalty basis: the publishing company pays the author a percentage of the income from all copies sold, basing the percentage on the actual monies received, not on the number of copies printed. The publishing company assumes the expense of editing, printing, binding, advertising, and promotion. The publishing company also handles subsidiary rights, as well as foreign sales and translation rights. The company distributes through retail bookstores, direct mail, and catalogues.

**Format.** The following observations include (a) rules similar to the “house rules” in most religious publishing companies, (b) several habits that most professional writers find beneficial, and (c) some observations regarding how a manuscript should look when it goes to the committee.

1. Type manuscripts legibly on one side of 8½ x 11 inch bond paper, using the same word processor throughout (with the same size font). Erasable bond is not acceptable.
2. Number manuscript pages consecutively in the upper-right-hand corner of each page.
3. Leave all the manuscript sheets loose, not bound or fastened together.
4. Double-space all pages, with margins of at least 1½ inches on all four sides.
5. Do not use the justified right margin feature on your word processor. The uneven spaces between the words make the material more difficult to read.
6. Indent the first sentence of a paragraph five spaces. This makes the material much easier to read.
7. Do *not* put an extra line space between your paragraphs.
8. Type chapter titles and subheadings in capitals and lower case. Do not use ALL CAPITALS. Do not use *all italics*.
9. The number and complexity of notes (footnotes and endnotes for each chapter) is determined by the nature of the manuscript. However, type all footnotes and endnotes on sheets separate from the text and double-spaced, starting a new set of numbers with each chapter. Place these all together at the end of the manuscript, rather than at the end of each chapter. For books, these endnotes should include author, title, series title if any, publisher, city of publication, publication year, volume if more than one volume, and page number(s). For periodicals, these endnotes should include title of article, author of article, name of periodical, volume, and page number(s).
10. Handwritten characters or symbols, such as Hebrew or Greek letters, can be ambiguous. Identify them by name.
11. In the details of punctuation, capitalization, preferred use, etc., use a style based on standard authorities: The most recent editions of *Chicago Manual of Style* (University of Chicago Press), *Words into Type* (Prentice-Hall), *Modern English Usage* (Oxford), *Modern American Usage* (Warner), and *Webster's New International Dictionary* (G. & C. Merriam Co.).
12. A manuscript should be relatively free from typos, omitted words, and fragmentary sentences. Publications committees, like the people who visit church buildings, sometimes make negative, instantaneous judgments about the *content* of what they see merely by looking at the *form* of what they see. A neat manuscript can reduce the inclination of publications committees and copyeditors to be picky about other things. One way to ensure a clean manuscript is to do several drafts (writing is rewriting). Allow the material to lay cold for two or more days between each of the drafts. This increases your ability to become your own editor (allowing you to see some of the same things that a stranger sees in reading the material for the first time).
13. When you submit your completed manuscript, mail the publisher the original and a duplicate. Retain one copy for your own future reference. If possible, submit a word-processing diskette along with the two copies of your manuscript. This speeds up the publishing process.

**Quotations.** The legal departments of publishing houses differ on how to interpret copyright laws. Get the house rules sheet from the company(s) to which you submit manuscripts. Until you have that, the following general principles help you look like a professional writer.

1. Indent quotations of more than five lines and set them off from the text with an extra space. They must be double-spaced, like the rest of the manuscript.
2. All quotations, facts, and statistics should be quoted from primary sources. Those sources must be identified—with the inclusion of page number(s)—either within the text of the manuscript or in the endnotes of each chapter in the separate section at the end of the manuscript.
3. Quotations from the Bible must be exact—word for word—rather than a paraphrase. If you use a paraphrase, do not put quote marks around it. Generally speaking, quote from the *New Revised Standard Version*. When you quote from some other version, indicate which one when you cite the chapter and verse.
4. Any time you quote the Bible, cite the chapter and verse in this manner: “For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but have everlasting life” (John 3:16). Note the placement of the ending quote mark, the parentheses, and the period. When you use some other form, the copyeditor must correct it.
5. Copyright permissions for quoting published material: revisions of the United States Copyright Law, effective January 1, 1978, protect new copyrights until fifty years after the death of the author. This is also the situation with most foreign copyrights. However, it is possible that any original writing or translation first published since 1908 in the United States may still be in copyright. Unpublished works are also considered copyrighted in many cases.

An author should not obtain permission to quote copyrighted material before submitting the manuscript. However, keep the following information in mind when selecting quotations, because the author usually pays any copyright fees charged by the copyright holder. Usually, copyright holders charge a fee for quotes longer than the following: (1) More than two lines from a poem or a song. (2) More than 100 words from a prose drama, short prose composition, or article from a periodical. (3) More than 250 words from longer prose works.

Quotations shorter than those listed above are usually considered “fair use” of copyrighted material for purposes of discussion and illustration, without specific permission. Longer excerpts require written permission from copyright holders. (However, remember that “fair use” also relates to the length of the article quoted. For example, if the entire article is 1,500 words, courts will not likely consider quoting 250 words of it as legal under the “fair use” policy.) After final acceptance of your manuscript, the copyeditor gives you specific instructions for how to secure any of the copyright permissions you need to request from publishers.

**Summary:** Have something to say that either (a) has not been said before or (b) has not been said before in this way. Learn the technical skills of readable writing. Obtain, study, and conform your manuscript to each publisher’s guidelines. Expect to invest a great deal of time and energy in your manuscript—not just on the content but also on the technical quality of how it looks (spelling, punctuation, paragraphing).

Getting your ideas into written form, then into published form, is not achieved by the easily discouraged or faint-hearted. Persist. Persist. Persist.

## X. Writing Short Stories

Everything already said about readable writing applies to short stories and novels. Having a good story to tell is not enough. Knowing the technical side of the writing craft is essential.

**Short Stories.** The five classic elements of a short story do not always appear in the order outlined below. But alterations in sequence are risky and require exceptional writing skill. Since changing the sequence forces readers to work harder at understanding the story, the emotional charge derived from enjoyable reading can get lost in the struggle.

**1. Picture interesting characters in a difficult situation.** These several-hundred-year-old terms describe how a short story unfolds: The description of interesting characters in this difficult *situation* is called *exposition*. The unfolding events of this difficult *situation* are called the *plot*. The main character in this difficult *situation* is the *protagonist*. The *plot* becomes interesting as the *exposition* describes the *protagonist's* attempts to solve the difficult *situation*.

**2. Increase the action by adding a complication.** In most short stories, the action of the *protagonist* to resolve the *situation* makes it worse rather than better. Sometimes the *situation* gets worse by the action of a negative character called the *antagonist*. Sometimes the *situation* gets worse by natural processes.

**3. Move toward a climax.** The *exposition* and the *plot* reach their highest emotional point at this crisis. The *climax* places the *protagonist* in high-pressure circumstances. The *climax* is the turning point at which the *plot's* rising action changes direction and becomes the falling action.

**4. Describe the resolution.** The *resolution* solves the difficult *situation* pictured at the beginning of the *plot*. The *protagonist* is the primary force in the *resolution* of the *situation*. During the *resolution*, the *protagonist* sometimes succeeds, sometimes fails, and sometimes does an unexpected mixture of both. The *resolution* is sometimes tragic, sometimes humorous, and sometimes both.

**5. End with an anticlimax.** The very brief *anticlimax* is everything that follows the climax. If the *resolution* is simultaneous with the *climax*, the *anticlimax* is sometimes deleted.

**Example:** those five classic elements are visible in this William Sydney Porter (O. Henry) short story from the mid-1800s.

### The Prisoner of Zembia

So the king fell into a furious rage, so that none durst go near him for fear, and he gave out that since the Princess Ostla had disobeyed him there would be a great tourney, and to the knight who should prove himself of the greatest valor he would give the hand of the princess.

And he sent forth a herald to proclaim that he would do this.

And the herald went about the country making his desire known, blowing a great tin horn and riding a noble steed that pranced and gambolled; and the villagers gazed upon him and said: "Lo, that is one of them tin horn gamblers concerning which the chronicles have told us."

And when the day came, the king sat in the grandstand, holding the gage of battle in his hand, and by his side sat the Princess Ostla, looking very pale and beautiful, but with mournful eyes from which she scarce could keep the tears. And the knights which came to the tourney gazed upon the princess in wonder at her beauty, and each swore to win her so that he could marry her and board with the king.

Suddenly the heart of the princess gave a great bound, for she saw among the knights one of the poor students with whom she had been in love.

The knights mounted and rode in a line past the grandstand, and the king stopped the poor student, who had the worst horse and poorest caparisons of any of the knights and said:

“Sir Knight, prithee tell me of what that marvelous shabby and rusty-looking armor of thine is made?”

“Oh, king,” said the young knight, “seeing that we are about to engage in a big fight, I would call it scrap iron, wouldn’t you?”

“Ods Bodkins!” said the king. “The youth hath a pretty wit.”

About this time the Princess Ostla, who began to feel better at the sight of her lover, slipped a piece of gum into her mouth and closed her teeth upon it, and even smiled a little and showed the beautiful pearls with which her mouth was set. Whereupon, as soon as the knights perceived this, 217 of them went over to the king’s treasurer and settled for their horse feed and went home.

“It seems very hard,” said the princess, “that I cannot marry when I chews.”

But two of the knights were left, one of them being the princess’ lover.

“Here’s enough for a fight, anyhow,” said the king. “Come hither, O knights, will ye joust for the hand of this fair lady?”

“We joust will,” said the knights.

The two knights fought for two hours, and at length the princess’ lover prevailed and stretched the other upon the ground. The victorious knight made his horse caracole before the king, and bowed low in his saddle.

On the Princess Ostla’s cheeks was a rosy flush; in her eyes the light of excitement vied with the soft glow of love; her lips were parted, her lovely hair unbound, and she grasped the arms of her chair and leaned forward with heaving bosom and happy smile to hear the words of her lover.

“You have foughten well, sir knight,” said the king. “And if there is any boon you crave you have but to name it.”

“Then,” said the knight, “I will ask you this: I have bought the patent rights in your kingdom for Schneider’s celebrated monkey wrench, and I want a letter from you endorsing it.”

“You shall have it,” said the king, “but I must tell you that there is not a monkey in my kingdom.”

With a yell of rage the victorious knight threw himself on his horse and rode away at a furious gallop.

The king was about to speak, when a horrible suspicion flashed upon him and he fell dead upon the grandstand.

“My God!” he cried. “He has forgotten to take the princess with him!”

## XI. Writing Novels

Somerset Maugham said, “There are three rules for writing a novel. Unfortunately, no one knows what they are.” But these twelve rules send you in the right direction.

1. Create a story line that rises gradually to crisis and eventual resolution, with several minor crises along the way.
2. Develop several interesting characters about which readers gradually develop strong feelings, especially (a) someone to love, (b) someone to hate, and (c) someone to feel doubtful and unsure about.
3. Provide information about little-known subjects and/or new information about well-known subjects.
4. As the characters move through unusual experiences, illustrate their emotions, especially love, fear, hate, pain, and hope.
5. Let a moral or great truth about life keep reappearing throughout the book like a golden thread.
6. Give occasional flashes of insight into human nature.
7. Add variety by continuously alternating various kinds of paragraph content: conversations between people, thoughts going through people’s heads, physical descriptions of people, psychological descriptions of people, descriptions of places, descriptions of events, and brief historical insights about places.
8. Master the basic writing skills, especially metaphor and simile.
9. Insert unexplained mysteries to heighten the suspense. Let the explanations for these mysteries burst like small bombshells along the story line’s unwinding track.
10. Sprinkle in surprising U-turns. Make unexpected events happen at times when characters expect something routine.
11. Combat boredom by alternating several story subsections and characters in different chapters.
12. Build toward the big scene’s final climax.

**Summary:** Do you want to write a novel? Do you want it enough to pay the price of sweat, persistence, and rejection by several publishers? Start with short stories submitted to magazines. These develop your skill and confidence. Move on to novels.

## XII. The Bottom Line

Learning how to craft readable writing is not easy. Getting readable writing published in magazines is tougher still. Getting a novel published is the most formidable writing challenge.

Each goal requires talent, patience, practice, and extraordinary perseverance. If you have those qualities, never, never, never give up. There is plenty of room at the top!