

How to Write with Power

1. Project personality

- ◆ By establishing your credibility as a writer
- ◆ By convincing your readers that what you want to talk about is worth their time
- ◆ By engaging your readers with thoughtful and interesting prose

2. Vary your sentences.

- ◆ Vary sentence length. Sentences that are essentially the same length and style can be boring to read, so vary sentence length to add variety to your writing. For instance, follow fairly lengthy sentences with a short sentence to emphasize a point. Use a longer sentence with stacked on parallel phrases to add thoughtfulness to your prose.
- ◆ Ask a question (if appropriate to the assignment) to re-involve your readers in the topic.
- ◆ Add modifiers:

Basic sentence	The river rose.
Adjective	The <u>swollen</u> river rose.
Adverb	The river rose <u>dangerously</u> .
Prepositional phrase	The river rose <u>above its banks</u> .
Participial phrase	<u>Swelled by melting snow</u> , the river rose.
Absolute phrase	<u>Uprooted trees swirling away in the current</u> , the river rose.
Adverb clause	<u>Because the snows had been heavy that winter</u> , the river rose.
Adjective clause	The river, <u>which runs through vital farmland</u> , rose.

(Handbook for Writers, p. 340)

3. Avoid the passive voice (except for certain circumstances).

As *Simon and Schuster's Handbook for Writers* indicates, "a subject in the active voice performs the action":

I kicked the dog. ("I", the subject, performs the action, "kicked."
The object of the sentence, *dog*, receives the action.)

In passive voice, the receiver of the action is in the subject slot of the sentence, and the one performing the action follows the verb.

The dog was kicked by me. (See pp. 217- 219 in *HFW*.)

1. Use Action Verbs—and raise the verb- word ratio.

Verbs carry the "weight" of a sentence. Sentences that rely too much on "to be" verbs (am, are, was, is, were) and "to have" verbs as the main verbs will be "flabby." Use strong action verbs to add interest to your writing.

I **am** envious of Sam's artistic ability./ I **envy** Sam's artistic ability.
John **is** in love with Mary because of her inheritance of money.

John **loves** Mary because of her inheritance of money.
 John **loves** Mary because she **inherited** money.
 John **considers** Mary unaware of the dependence of his love for her upon her inheritance of money.
 John **thinks** Mary doesn't **know** that he **loves** her because she **inherited** money.

Action verbs can add flavor and drama to one's writing:

He **moved** toward us.
 leaped loped crept slouched trotted
 crawled jumped paced scooted stumbled
 staggered barged ambled lurched exploded
 sauntered fell shot jogged strolled
 whizzed dashed jiggled oozed reeled
 moseyed marched sprinted dragged crawfished
 (from Cowan, *Writing*)

(See pp. 315- 316 in *Handbook for Writers*.)

2. Add punch with parallelism.

Parallelism is using equal grammatical units in a series within a sentence OR writing sentences in a series that mirror one another's form.

Nouns in a series (for a swift and punchy effect):

"In those days only three things in the world scared me: jail, a job, and the army." –Malcolm X

Phrases in a series (for a deliberate and thoughtful effect):

"For the first time in history, a pervasive recognition is developing that the patriarchal system cannot answer for itself; that it is not inevitable; that it is transitory; and that the cross-cultural, global domination of women by men can no longer be denied or defended." -- Andrienne Rich

Clauses in a periodic sentence (for an emotional effect):

But when you have seen vicious mobs lynch your mothers and fathers at whim; when you have seen hate-filled policemen curse, kick, and even kill your black brothers and sisters; when you see the vast majority of your twenty million Negro brothers smothering in an air-tight cage of poverty in the midst of an affluent society; when you suddenly find your tongue twisted and your speech stammering as you seek to explain to your six-year-old daughter why she can't go to the public amusement park that has just been advertised on television, and see tears selling up in her eyes when she is told that Funtown is closed to colored children, and see ominous clouds of inferiority beginning to form in her little mental sky, and see her beginning to distort her personality by developing an unconscious bitterness toward white people; when you have to concoct an answer for a five-year-old son who is asking, "Daddy, why do white people treat colored people so mean?"; when you take a cross-country drive and find it necessary to sleep night after night in the uncomfortable corners

of your automobile because no motel will accept you; when you are humiliated day in and day out by nagging signs reading “white” and “colored”; when your first name becomes “nigger,” your middle name becomes “boy” (however old you are) and your last name becomes “John,” and your wife and mother are never given the respected title of “Mrs.”; when you are harried by day and haunted by night by the fact that you are a Negro, living constantly at tiptoe stance, never quite knowing what to expect next, and are plagued with inner fears and outer resentments; when you are forever fighting a degenerating sense of “nobodiness”—then you will understand why we find it difficult to wait.

-- Martin Luther King, Jr.: “Letter from Birmingham Jail”