The secret of good writing is to strip every sentence to its cleanest components. Every word that serves no function, every long word that could be a short word, every adverb that carries the same meaning that’s already in the verb, every passive construction that leaves the reader unsure of who is doing what – these are the thousand and one adulterants that weaken the strength of a sentence.

— William Zinsser, On Writing Well

Words are the tools of writing. They can cast light on complexity or mire the simplest of concepts in a maze of dangling modifiers. When my children were young, I read them a book called “Simple Pictures Are Best.” The same holds true for writing. Simple structures, simple sentences and strong, precise words hold attention.

1. **Build sentences around nouns and verbs.**

Writing coach Roy Peter Clark uses the analogy of the steam-driven train. The engine pulls the train, but it’s powered by the adjacent coal car. Clark’s engine is the sentence’s subject. More often than not, it should be that sentence’s first word. Next to it nestles the coal car – the verb that propels the sentence forward. Place the verb too far from the noun and your sentence invites a train wreck. Connect subject and verb early in the sentence, and you enable the two to work together to pull along the words behind.

Here is an example:

*We flew southward down the channel and at 11:33 crossed the coastline and headed straight for Nagasaki, about 100 miles to the west.*

*New York Times* reporter William L. Laurence wrote this sentence on the day this country dropped its second atomic bomb. His topic was dramatic, but his style spare and direct. He wasted no words and verbs — “flew,” “crossed” and “headed” — drove his sentence. The facts spoke for themselves. The subject, “we,” is the first word.

2. **Use active verbs in their strongest form**

Subject-verb-object construction allows writers to use action verbs in the active voice. Passive voice construction demands more words or obscures meaning. This example, from journalism lore, is dull and imprecise in the passive voice:

**Passive:** The dog was bitten.

Make it active and you’ve hooked your reader. One more word conveys a much more meaning.
Active: The man bit the dog.

It would take three more words, by the way, to convey the same meaning in the passive.

Passive again: The dog was bitten by the man.

3. Chose simple, familiar language

“Can I use the frying pan?” I might ask my wife. I won’t ask her if I can *utilize* it. Yet writers trying to sound important often choose words that are ponderous rather than conversational. Resist this temptation. People will tell you an accident left them cut, bruised or scraped. They won’t say they suffered lacerations, contusions and abrasions. Today, I didn’t *endeavor* to write this lesson clearly. I tried.

More often than not, a good 5¢ word beats the $5 alternative.

In his essay “Politics and the English Language,” George Orwell wrote: *A scrupulous writer, in every sentence that he writes, will ask himself at least four questions: What am I trying to say? What words will express it? What image or idiom will make it clearer? Is this image fresh enough to have an effect? And he will probably ask himself two more: Could I say things more directly? Have I said anything that is avoidably ugly?*

4. Translate the unfamiliar term

Writers who cover specialized fields work hard to decode the jargon of those they cover. This applies in business, in technology, in engineering, in medicine and in science to name just a few.

Usually, a few well-placed words of definition do the trick. Sometimes an analogy makes a complicated concept clear. Here is an example of each technique from Lewis Thomas’ *Lives of a Cell*.

Definition: *Our genomes are catalogues of instructions from all kinds of sources in nature, filed for all kinds of contingencies.*

Analogy: *We live in a dancing matrix of viruses; they dart, rather like bees, from organism to organism, from plant to insect to mammal to me and back again.*

5. Excise extraneous words

“Make every word tell,” wrote E.B. White. Writers can lop most prepositional phrases from sentences without losing meaning. (Is the phrase, “from sentences,” needed in the previous sentence? Not really.)

Here are a couple of other examples:
The teacher dismissed the students in her class. What other students would she dismiss?

Dr. Johnson testified during the hearing that the patient had never complained of chest pain.

Political discourse tends to infuse language with redundancy. The word “vote,” for example, stood fine on its own until Republicans and the Bush White House began calling for an “up or down vote” on court nominees. And the word “now” served the language well until John Dean, a young lawyer in the Nixon White House, introduced “at this point in time.” Neither political party is exempt: Let’s agree — from Day 1, of course — to banish Hillary Clinton’s words “from Day 1” in all copy.

6. Use data and details selectively but specifically

WEAK: Many family-owned farms in California have been sold over the last decade.

WEAK: The number of family-owned California farms, of which there were more than 100,000 just 25 years ago, decreased about 15 percent in the last decade alone, from 88,000 to 76,500.

BETTER: Just 76,500 family-owned farms remain in the state, a decrease of roughly 15 percent from a decade ago.

7. Write what you read aloud

Writing is meant to be heard. One of the best ways to improve your writing is to read it aloud. Sentences that trip our tongues likely will confuse readers, too. When you are done writing something, don’t push “send.” Walk away from it and stay away for at least 10 minutes. When you return, read what you wrote aloud. Rule of thumb: If you stumble or have to read a sentence more than once, there’s something wrong with it. Ask yourself why. Then revise.

In his book, A Writer’s Coach, author Jack Hart offers these five tips to tighten your writing. (They are simplified below.)

- **Question everything.** “If cutting a word sacrifices no meaning, cut it,” he writes.
- **Make each modifier work.** Drop those that are redundant. (He ambled slowly becomes he ambled.) Seek precision in those that remain.
- **Don’t overfill.** Dense writing, Hart says, intimidates. It also can confuse. Every story should have one dominant theme. And most sentences within it should stick with one thought.
- **Kill creeping nouns.** It is a sale, not a sales event; a crisis, not a crisis situation; a bomber, not a bomber plane.
- **Avoid complicated tenses.** He skied down the hill, not he was skiing down the hill.