

Writing in English for a multilingual audience

Some tips for native and near-native English language writers

DO	WHY
<i>Choose simple words.</i>	It is a good idea to make things as easy for your reader as possible. Do not send your reader running to the dictionary when you could use another, more common word.
<i>Keep sentences short.</i>	Short sentences keep the reader focused. Long sentences often contain multiple concepts. The reader often needs to re-read longer sentences. Bullet points can help to organise a series of ideas very clearly, and are often a good alternative to overly long paragraphs.
<i>Choose more "formal" vocabulary.</i>	<p>Informal English is full of phrasal verbs (see footnote 1), slang and other language specific to a place or culture. It may feel unnatural, or less "friendly" at the beginning, but your readers will appreciate it if you write in a clear way, choosing more "formal" vocabulary. Here is an example.</p> <p>Informal message: <i>Hi folks, we are now at the half-way mark of our discussion. Can you put up with more of this stuff or shall we wrap up here and now?</i></p> <p>Formal message: <i>Hi everyone, we have one week more for discussion. Do you want to continue or do you want to finish immediately?</i></p>
<i>Provide an explanation or definition in brackets</i>	Help your reader by providing a short explanation or definition for terms that are not commonly used or

<i>or in a footnote if the word or expression is not common.</i>	require some specialist knowledge. Examples of this include technical terms or vocabulary that may not be familiar to all native English speakers, much less non-native speakers, such as “backhaul”, “cisgender” or “bootstrap”, to name just a few.
<i>Use the active voice when you can.</i>	It is immediately clear to the reader who or what is the “actor” in the sentence. E.g.: <i>The APC Council elects the APC Board</i> (active) vs <i>The APC Board is elected by the APC Council</i> (passive).
<i>Use less complex grammatical structures when you can.</i>	It makes reading less taxing for your audience. For example, avoid the _ing form, if you can use a subject instead. <i>We could benefit by extending the meeting</i> can be re-written by introducing the actor, <i>We could benefit if we extend the meeting.</i>
<i>Define abbreviations and acronyms at the beginning of your text.</i>	This is a basic requirement of good writing in any language. Even better, include a glossary or key at the beginning or end of your text, if you are going to use a lot of acronyms.
DO NOT	WHY
<i>Do not use contractions – for example, use “do not” and not “don’t”.</i>	Contractions (don't, they'll, we'd, etc.) are not used frequently in other languages and may slow down reading for non-native speakers.
<i>Avoid phrasal verbs.¹</i>	English has many phrasal verbs which come from its Anglo-Saxon origins. Native English speakers learn phrasal verbs very early in life, usually before they learn the more “formal” Latin- or French-based

¹ A phrasal verb consists of verb + adverb, for example, “to put up” (give shelter), “to put up with” (tolerate), “to put off” (postpone). The two (or three) words form an idiom: it is called a phrasal verb only if the adverb *changes the meaning* of the verb, for example, *He picked up the book* (literal) vs *He picked up English* (phrasal). The first example uses a verb + preposition. It has a literal meaning. The second example uses a phrasal verb. He did not literally lift the language into the air! “Up” in this case applied to “pick” changes the meaning so that now “pick up” does not mean “lift” but means “learn”.

	<p>alternative.</p> <p>Compare <i>She turned up at my door</i> to <i>She arrived at my door</i>. Which feels more informal? Probably the first example, which is based on the Anglo-Saxon, rather than the French “arriver”. However, phrasal verbs are a nightmare to non-native language readers! Think about it. There is nothing logical to indicate to non-English speakers that “turn up” means “appear” or “arrive”. They need to <i>learn</i> the meaning of phrasal verbs. So choose the more formal, Latin/French-based word and make reading easier for your audience, particularly speakers of Romance languages such as Spanish or French.</p>
<i>Avoid the passive voice</i>	It is not immediately apparent who or what is the “actor” in the sentence.
<i>Don't be afraid to repeat words, and avoid using undefined terms such as "this" or "that".</i>	<p>It may not be the “most literary” English, so you may want to follow this guideline in internal texts only. By repeating words you make the meaning of your text more obvious more quickly to your readers. In addition, avoid replacing words with undefined terms such as “this”. Your reader may need to revisit the earlier part of the text to find out what “this” was.</p> <p>Original message: <i>We have one week more for discussion. Do you want to continue with this?</i></p> <p>Clearer (if repetitive) message: <i>We have one week more for discussion. Do you want to continue the discussion?</i></p>
<i>Don't use jargon.</i>	If you must, please explain it. In this way, we can all learn. Don't assume that everyone knows what the jargon means.

Of course these are just suggestions! It is hard to follow all of them, all of the time. But if we can be sensitive to the things that make texts easy or difficult to understand, it will help us to more effectively reach our multilingual audience. If you are writing for APC and want some help or advice on writing plain-language texts, please contact Flavia Fascendini, APC communications manager, at flavia@apc.org or Lori Nordstrom, APC language coordinator, at lori@apc.org.