

**Advanced Writing Skills
for Students of English**

Phil Williams

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Cover design by Phil Williams

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ISBN: 978-0-9931808-5-9

Published by English Lessons Brighton, an imprint of Rumian Publishing

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Introduction

This book is aimed at helping foreign learners of English improve their writing skills, though the tips included can help anyone with an interest in English. These tips are approached from a technical viewpoint of the English language, with consideration of grammar and structural rules. My intention is to provide a bridge between a solid understanding of English and more fluent and effective use of the language in writing. Through learning and applying the contents of this book, you may develop your writing as a skill, with an appreciation for style and technique that goes beyond the standard rules.

Some of these tips are specific to a style that I personally believe works, and are intended to objectively improve general writing. At a certain level, any writer must develop their own style. You may find conflicting viewpoints elsewhere, which I encourage you to study too. I have tried, to the best of my ability, to explain why the advice I offer makes a difference, so you may decide for yourself if it makes sense for you. A book cannot improve your skills on its own, though, just as a book cannot make you good at sports. This guide can only help you develop your skills yourself. Real improvement will come from practice.

I believe there are three key ways to improve your writing, which you cannot neglect:

1. Read more
2. Write more
3. Study more

Read more, in this context, means read examples of other writing in use. By reading what others have written (good or bad), you will discover unusual words, styles and structures. When you observe these and question why they do or do not work, you will develop the ability to use them yourself. When you **write more**, you then have better resources to develop a personal style that works for you. **Study** is necessary when you need to fill the gap between

these two areas, when there are elements of the writing craft that are not easily understood through observation, or that need extra understanding.

The purpose of this guide is to provide an understanding of such areas; to fill in the details that might not be immediately obvious in your own reading and writing. I hope to give you answers concerning why and how different techniques are used, so that you might use (or avoid using) them yourself.

The lessons in this book can benefit both foreign learners and native English speakers. Many English speakers reach adulthood and stop writing, except on rare occasions, and, as with any unused skill, it can then become more difficult. Whether or not English is your native tongue, employing the lessons of this guide can therefore take you beyond the average level of English writing skills. Your challenge is to constantly question English usage, to learn why certain technical rules are important and how styles can vary. By analysing these areas, you will develop the ability to use them yourself. You may also develop a keen sense for bad practices and mistakes.

In the spirit of questioning everything, a good place to start is explaining where the content of this book comes from. The rules in this book are informed by grammar and style guides, but the tips come from my own application of these ideas. I have a background in teaching English as a foreign language, in schools and through private tutoring. Tutoring particularly allowed me to focus on the finer details of individuals' language use. To explore and explain advanced English usage, I deconstructed the language together with my students. I combined this with my personal passion for writing. I started writing creatively at a very early age. I write novels, business texts, articles teaching English and educational books, amongst other things. Alongside my tutoring work, I have used my writing skills to edit texts for people across an even wider field. Many of my students have asked how I do it. This book is my attempt to explain some of the theory behind a skill that was learnt through practice, so it may, hopefully, provide shortcuts for others to follow.

I encourage you to apply the lessons of this book for yourself, to see what works for you. It is a lifelong interest for me to continue learning about the English language, as I hope it is for you, and I encourage active reading of this book. If something in here does not make sense to you, do send me an email (my details are at the back of the book). There is likely to be a good reason for it.

How to Use This Book

Advanced Writing Skills for Students of English has been written as a series of discussion essays. It covers the topics that I feel are most relevant and useful for improving general writing skills (Part 1), followed by brief tips for specific areas of writing (Part 2). You can use this book as a reference guide, going straight to the sections that most interest you, or it can be read in a linear way, from start to finish.

As style is referenced throughout the book, it's worth noting some of the specific styles I have chosen to use myself:

- *Italics* show examples within the main text, book titles, or commentary within listed and quoted examples.
- Bullet points are used to indicate most examples, as seen here, but longer examples are shown as block quotes, separated from the main text.
- **Bold** is used to show rules, to highlight specific words, or to emphasise words within an example.
- Chapters are used to explore main themes, with sub-chapters and sub-headings for more specific ideas.

This book contains references to other books, citing surname and year, with the full references available in the **Recommended Reading** section. References are also made to other chapters, numbered and in bold.

This book covers writing from many different fields, variously referred to as **non-fiction** (e.g. factual writing, academic, business, correspondence) and **fiction** (e.g. creative writing, novels, stories). You may choose to focus on the areas that are most applicable to you, but I recommend studying other fields of writing, too, as it will hone different, transferrable skills.

Please note that this book is written in British English and follows UK style conventions, though it is intended for readers all over the world. Although consideration has been given to the differences between British and American English, it may contain regionally specific language.

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Part 1

General Writing

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1. Style

Language skills like writing are called **skills** because they require practice and nuanced understanding. Using English at an advanced level is not as simple as learning rules: it can be flexible, regionally specific or individual. In writing, many of these areas can be grouped under the label **style**.

The way we use style is subjective. Consider this dictionary definition:

Style: a particular procedure by which something is done; a manner or a way. (*Oxford Living Dictionaries*)

This includes the way you use language. If there are two (or more) ways to do something in writing, it may be considered **a matter of style**. I often use this expression when teaching, and it appears throughout this book. When you have a choice in how to write something, or when a different way of saying something cannot be called incorrect, for any objective reason, it may be called a matter of style.

To be clear about what is **not** a matter of style, some errors, such as grammar or spelling mistakes, may be clearly incorrect:

- Tim eats a cake yesterday. (*INCORRECT – it is contradictory to combine the present tense with a past time.*)
- Tim ate a cake yesterday. (*CORRECT*)

With a matter of style, the different options should both be arguably correct:

- Bob quickly ate a cake yesterday.
- Bob ate a cake yesterday, quickly.

The first example here is more conventional and more common, but the second form is also acceptable. There may be a handful of reasons to use the second sentence over the first, which we could analyse, but there may also be no reason other than the writer or speaker chose to say it this way, without necessarily thinking about it. In writing, such style choices go beyond what

you wish to say to include how things are technically written, covering issues relating to formatting, punctuation, vocabulary, grammar and more.

Style choices are very important because there are so many elements of the language that are flexible. Many choices must be decided by style rather than any easily applied rules. The differences between academic or business writing, or regional uses of English, are all matters of style. They are not objectively correct or incorrect, but fit a particular purpose. That said, flexible use of English is less forgiving in writing than in spoken English. People may not notice or correct variations in spoken English, as physical and social cues aid understanding, but people read in more neutral tones and expect a higher level of accuracy in writing. To really advance in writing, as well as mastering the conventional rules of English, you therefore also need to understand which style choices are acceptable or advisable in different circumstances. This might be decided through convention, for example the stock phrases used when starting letters, or it may be through a particular set of rules, such as given in a style guide.

Style guides are collections of rules that cover the many areas of English that might be considered flexible. Their purpose is to provide consistency. There is no definitive, correct style for English, so there are plenty of style guides to choose from. Of the published guides available, a popular starting point for UK styles is *New Hart's Rules: the Oxford Style Guide* (Waddingham, 2014), while for US styles you might start with *The Chicago Manual of Style* (University of Chicago, 2017). *The Elements of Style* (Strunk & White, 1999), is another slim but informative example, which has been used in the United States since the early twentieth century. While such books are invaluable for publications, they are not used by everyone. Many companies and institutions (such as universities or government offices) maintain their own in-house style guides, with rules that all employees should follow. These are not necessarily standard English rules, though they will typically be commonly used.

However you choose to settle your style decisions, there are three crucial things you can do to ensure an appropriate style:

1. Use a style that is clear and accurate.
2. Use a style that fits the purpose of your writing.
3. Be consistent.

For **clarity and accuracy**, choose the style that is easiest to understand. To **fit the purpose of your writing**, compare with other examples of writing in the same field, and consider the tips throughout this book as to where one style may be expected over another. For **consistency**, use the same style throughout a document.

While styles can be subjective, ignoring these three points could still lead to a mistake. Possible style options that are correct out of context may become incorrect when applied in a specific context. For example:

- Using complicated language to provide simple instructions.
- Using slang in a formal letter.
- Using both apostrophes and quotation marks to denote speech.

The use of complex language, slang and quotation marks are all possible in written English, if you choose to use them, but in the examples above they could be considered incorrect. The first is unclear, the second inappropriate and the third inconsistent.

To start thinking more constructively about style, it is important to always be asking why something is written in a certain way, and if that is the best way to do it. When you see something unusual in your reading, ask yourself if it is a matter of style, and if so, why? What is its purpose? When you are writing, ask yourself the same questions. If you are presented with a choice, ask what difference each choice makes, and try to justify your reasons for choosing one option over another.

This book is not a style guide, but it gives you some of the general patterns and rules that can help you make style decisions. Rather than focus on one style over another, my intention is to encourage an understanding of the differences, to help you choose for yourself. That being said, you may notice within this book that certain style choices have been made, and one thing I support throughout, which could be considered a style choice, is clear and simple writing. Such choices are ones that I have found helped me, and which I will attempt to justify, starting with the following chapter.

2. Simplicity

There is a rule that is taught in almost all settings of writing, which is helpful whatever the purpose of your writing.

Keep It Simple

This is usually presented in a memorable acronym: **KISS** (in its complete form, *Keep It Simple, Stupid*, but there's no need to be negative). Many writing tips have roots in this idea. Simple language is clearer for the reader and easier for the writer. Simple structures avoid confusion and complications.

Simplicity needs to be considered at every stage of your writing. It can come before planning, even. When it seems difficult to start a piece of writing, using the simplest approach makes it easier. Start with the one point you want your writing to say. Continue with the simplest way to say it.

Keeping your language simple is the basic foundation of effective writing. Simple writing is direct and agreeable. It is also easier to write without mistakes. Do not give in to the temptation to make things complicated!

2.1 Why Complicate Life?

When you learn more, there is a temptation to use everything you have learnt, including new words, new structures, and new ideas. There are two problems with this. First, what is new to you may also be new to someone else, and therefore difficult to understand. Second, advanced language is not necessarily clear language, as complex words and structures can easily become long-winded and difficult to read.

Some contexts demand more complex language, such as in academic papers and when exploring complex or specialist topics. In exam settings,

you may also be expected to demonstrate a varied and complicated use of language. In real world usage, however, complex and advanced language may actually make communication harder. Even in academic and specialist texts, simple language is advisable wherever possible, to make complicated ideas clearer.

Knowing **when** to use advanced language can only come through a proper understanding of **how** and **why** it is used. Difficult words and structures often exist to suit specific circumstances. Consider how we describe colours: a full spectrum of words exists to label different blues, such as *azure*, *sapphire*, and *navy blue*. There's even a blue called *phthalo*. If a very particular shade is important, then the specific word is important. If we simply want to distinguish between something that is broadly different, the simpler word is better, as it is most likely to be understood. Consider these examples:

- All bridesmaids must wear sapphire dresses so they match.
- We own two cars – mine's the blue one, not the red one.

In the first example, the specific shade is important to distinguish from other blues. In the second sentence, the specific shade is not important as we are distinguishing from red.

This simple example could be applied to all areas of language. Use as much detail as is necessary and no more. Your writing will then be as complicated as it needs to be without being too complicated.

2.2 How to Keep It Simple

It is possible to consciously avoid writing anything too complicated. Write short, simple sentences, one idea at a time. Use the most simple language. You can add more complex language later, if you decide it is needed.

Starting simple can require a lot of thought and feel unnatural, though. The alternative is to write however you feel, with whatever words and constructions come to mind, then **edit ruthlessly**. Complete your writing without worrying about its quality or complexity, then remove or change everything that is not necessary. Many great writers in English repeat this tip: the key to shorter, simpler writing is editing and cutting. Novelist Stephen

King famously recommended removing about 10% of your writing with each redraft (King, *On Writing*, 2010). The actual number is not important, but the principle is solid. Shorter writing is forced to be simpler.

Careful editing will encourage you to approach complicated language with a sense of purpose. It makes it easier to understand when such language is appropriate, and the lessons you learn from editing will become part of your natural writing.

For a more specific path towards simple writing, consider George Orwell's advice for writing in practice, published in his essay *Politics and the English Language* (1946):

1. Never use a metaphor, simile, or other figure of speech which you are used to seeing in print.
2. Never use a long word where a short one will do.
3. If it is possible to cut a word out, always cut it out.
4. Never use the passive where you can use the active.
5. Never use a foreign phrase, a scientific word, or a jargon word if you can think of an everyday English equivalent.
6. Break any of these rules sooner than say anything outright barbarous.

With the exception of point 6, all of these tips are designed to simplify your writing and remove complicated or unclear language. Tip 6, however, refers to the choices that must be made when complicated language and constructions are necessary. For more detailed discussion of Orwell's ideas, consider reading his entire essay, which is available online (see **Recommended Reading** for a link). These principles are also covered in more detail later in this book.

3. Planning

Good writing starts before you write a single word. Preparing what you are about to write, whether in your head or with an actual plan, makes writing easier and more effective.

The more comfortable you are with writing, the less planning you may need, but good planning makes writing easier at all levels. Preparation should also reduce how much time you need to spend editing.

How you plan your writing will depend on your specific project and preference. Some techniques you can use include brainstorming (writing all the ideas you can think of at once) or mind mapping (putting your ideas on cards or a computer program and moving them around). For certain pieces of writing, such as an IELTS (International English Language Testing System) exam or a standardised report, you may be able to plan using a particular template, for example listing Intro, Paragraph 1, Paragraph 2, etc. It is important to find a method that best helps you organise your writing.

A useful starting point can be to answer a series of questions that establish your subject matter and the tone of your writing. These questions should be relevant for all writers of all abilities, in all areas:

1. What's the purpose of your writing?
2. Who are you writing for?
3. What structure will you use?
4. What style will you use?
5. How will you conclude?

3.1 What's the Purpose of Your Writing?

A solid understanding of **why** you are writing provides focus. Start with looking for one, clear purpose. When you know the purpose of your writing, you can check that every paragraph, and every sentence, is necessary. Sentences or words that do not help your purpose dilute your point, which

can weaken your writing or lead to confusion or boredom. Remove any unnecessary writing. This helps keep your writing clear and simple.

Be careful to actually identify a **purpose** for your writing, not simply a subject. A specific purpose helps guide specific language and ideas. Consider these possible responses to an essay task *Write an essay about green energy*:

- “I will write what I know about green energy.”
- “I will explain the benefits of green energy.”
- “I will argue that green energy can improve the environment.”

The first response provides a general subject without a purpose, so it lacks focus. It gives us no clear start or end. The second example is an improvement, as we have a better idea of where to begin, but still doesn't tell us why. Only the third, which is most specific, gives us a clear idea of **why** we are writing, and therefore where we want our writing to go. This response immediately conjures the need to explore examples of environmental problems and how green energy can impact them. By deciding to argue a point from the start, we also know the sort of language and constructions that will be required.

To decide upon a clear purpose for your writing, think of an action you wish your reader to take, or an attitude you wish them to adopt. This can apply to the simplest modes of writing, such as a text message aiming to amuse a friend, through to the most complex documents, such as a research paper designed to influence a change in government policy.

3.2 Who Are You Writing For?

All writing should be aimed at a particular reader. Picture your ideal, or most likely reader, and you can plan the points and language that will have the most impact on them. This will help you make decisions on how simple or complicated you make the text, what sort of argument you make, and how you phrase your arguments. An email to an employer, for example, should be prepared differently to an email to a friend. Similarly, an academic book written for other academics may be written differently to an academic book intended for the public.

Defining your audience will give you focus, setting limitations on what you write. Text length, vocabulary, and key points can all be adjusted

according to a specific idea of who you are writing for. When you have decided exactly who will read the text, you can better test how effectively your writing fits its purpose.

3.3 What Structure Will You Use?

Good structure makes writing more effective.

This may seem obvious in exam settings and with texts that follow particular conventions, such as cover letters or essays. It may be less obvious, however, that structure is equally important in less restrictive writing, such as in emails or creative writing.

A planned structure can help you set targets and develop an overall sense of rhythm for your writing. Carefully consider the length and order of the points you intend to make. This will help the writing flow and prevent you from writing too much or from introducing ideas in the wrong place. A sensible structure moves the writing along logically, making it easier both to write and for others to read. Effective structure can also help engage your reader, while poor structure can be distracting and unclear. Effective structure is covered in more detail in the following chapter, **4. Structure**.

3.4 What Style Will You Use?

Once you have an idea of why you are writing, who you are writing for, and the structure of your writing, the words can flow. At this point you still have to make choices, though. How formal or informal should you be? Should you write in long paragraphs, short sentences, first person, a particular tense? What spelling conventions or regional vocabulary are acceptable?

If you want to write in a certain style, always ask yourself why before you begin. It is more difficult to change styles after you have already started.

As discussed in **1. Style**, full consideration of style is perhaps the most complex part of mastering the English language, not only in writing. This is because so many language rules depend on context and decision-based situations, and cannot be applied universally. Throughout this book you will find examples of this, with explanations of why you might opt for some styles over others. These are decisions best made early on, and can be best

decided when you can ask yourself what language will fit the purpose and audience you have defined.

3.5 How Will You Conclude?

Knowing how to end any piece of writing can be the single most powerful tool in getting you started. It is strongly connected to the purpose of your writing: if you know why you are writing, your conclusion or call to action should be clear. This gives you something to work towards, and focuses all of your writing on reaching that point. It is easier to move forwards when you know where you are going, after all.

Consider these examples, where the added focus of a clear conclusion or ending should make the text easier to imagine:

- Write an essay on the pros and cons of electric showers.
→ Write an essay concluding that electric showers are bad because they are expensive.
- Write a story about a medieval knight.
→ Write a story that ends with a medieval knight dying to protect the woman he loves.

Giving your writing a clear purpose may provide a clear ending immediately. If not, you may need to rethink your purpose, and how you would like to impact the reader. This will guide what you write and how you write it.

Perhaps equally importantly, a strong idea of how you wish to finish provides motivation to get to the end.

4. Structure

Structure is important at all levels of writing, from the order of words in sentences through to the order that you present information. This starts with the understanding that you need a beginning, a middle and an end in everything you write.

A standard sentence can begin with a subject, followed by a verb, ending with an object. A letter can begin with a salutation, followed by a message, ending with a valediction. An essay or report can begin with an introduction, followed by the body, then a conclusion. In a piece of creative writing, you may find an inciting incident, a journey and a finale.

Good structure is important for one main reason: it effectively engages the reader. Writing reads more fluently when it hits certain beats, like music. Information presented in an expected order (or an order that aids comprehension or the reading experience) better captures the reader's attention. Incorrect word order or uneven paragraphing can break a reader's attention, and may lead to confusion.

This is not a simple subject. This chapter provides general principles that will help you to start thinking about structure more effectively, whatever your field or purpose. Part 2 gives an introduction to some more specific areas of writing, with further consideration of structure. However, the exact requirements of good structure depend on your subject matter, and whole books exist to help with structuring academic writing, business writing, and creative writing.

Studies have been done into what works in all these areas, not based on language rules but on reader-response and psychology. For examples of how much detail you might need for writing in specific fields, consider books like *Writing That Works* (Roman & Raphaelson, 2000), covering business writing; the classic *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (Campbell, 2008), for the universal structures of myths; or *Wired for Story* (Cron, 2012), which discusses how specifically paced writing affects the brain.

4.1 Breaking Writing Down

It is useful to break down the structure of your writing, with different scales, to explore how it functions. For example, a piece of writing may have an introduction, discussion, and conclusion. Each section can in turn be broken down into paragraphs. Your paragraphs can be broken down into sentences, and your sentences into component parts. At every level, each part of your writing has its own purpose. When you map out your structures in this way, you can consider the best order before you begin writing, or when editing.

For example, when you write an essay or report with many points, by summarising each point (at least in your mind) you can see how they relate to each other, and can therefore plot a logical order for them. Consider writing a report on the effectiveness of a new product. You might come up with the following four points to begin with:

1. Affordable price
2. Unappealing appearance
3. Excellent functionality
4. Existing customer base

These points currently follow no logical order. By considering this before writing, you can decide on a sensible narrative. You might ask the purpose of each point before connecting them. You could then, for example, start with the positives of the functionality to show the product works, followed by affordable price and existing customer base, for additional positives, before finishing with the one contrasting negative, its appearance.

On a finer level, your paragraphs may also be broken down and seen as component parts (such as positive and negative sentences within a point), and likewise a sentence can be divided into sections with particular purposes. For example, if you wished to emphasise the time in a sentence, you could divide the sentence into two parts and then reorder, moving the time phrase before the rest of the sentence:

- [We went to the church] [at night].
→ [At night,] [we went to the church.]

At this level of detail, sentences can be broken down in a variety of ways depending on your purpose. The functions of clauses and phrases, or specific words like nouns and verbs, may all be more or less important depending on what you want to do with your sentence. The point, though, is that this analysis can help you look at your writing in a structural way, to better organise your message. (Specific techniques for this are covered in **5. Building Sentences** and **6. Paragraphs**).

4.2 Presenting Information at the Right Time

As well as identifying a logical order for your writing, you must also consider when specific information will be most effective, or alternatively when it will be distracting and ineffective. Consider the different reading experience for these two examples:

- He gave her his ex-wife's ring.
- He gave her a ring. It had belonged to his ex-wife.

Neither of these sentences is necessarily correct or incorrect; the different structures suit different purposes. The first example is a fairly neutral statement, open to interpretation. The second example is written for dramatic effect: by presenting the information about the ring as a statement on its own, it gives it particular significance.

Considering how and when you present specific information, you can prepare the reader and provide cues to help your writing flow. You may wish to define difficult terms or concepts before leading into discussion of them, or you may need to put key, framing information earlier than usual in a sentence. You may, on the other hand, avoid presenting information too early, to avoid ruining a twist. Withholding information can also add suspense or surprises. Whatever the case, such structural deviations should always be intentional. The challenge is to present information in its most effective position.

For well-structured, and well-timed, writing, consider the reading experience. Reading is very different to writing, as the reader does not start with the same information as the writer, so a reader might not fully understand a point until a particular moment in your writing. Try to consider what it would be like to read your writing with no advance knowledge. Does

it make sense if you don't know what's coming? The effect of this is not only limited to aiding the reader's understanding: it can affect credibility or flow if unexpected information is revealed with no prior warning. If you include surprises in your writing, such as a twist in a story, there should be certain signposts beforehand, to avoid breaking the flow.

4.3 Repeating Information

Repetition can occur with words, phrases, or even whole ideas being repeated. A single principle can be applied to all repetition in writing: you need a particular reason to repeat information. Unnecessary repetition can dilute or muddle your writing, or create a bland reading experience.

If you need to repeat information in your writing, it is often because something is out of place. When you find you have included the same information more than once, consider both instances. Is each instance necessary? Can they be combined, or removed? Why is there repetition at that particular point?

There can, of course, be good reasons for repeated information. This is particularly true in longer writing projects, when used for emphasis, or for consolidating certain vocabulary. However, if you do use repetition, make sure you know the reasons, so it is done by conscious choice.

More help is given for avoiding unintentional word repetition in **7.4 Avoiding Repetition**, whilst intentional, emphatic repetition is covered in **14.4 Repetition for Emphasis**.

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This sample represents the first 10% of *Advanced Writing Skills for Students of English*, formatted for PDF/print. It is also available optimised for eReaders. If you found it useful and would like to read on, get the full book directly from the ELB site [HERE](#).

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