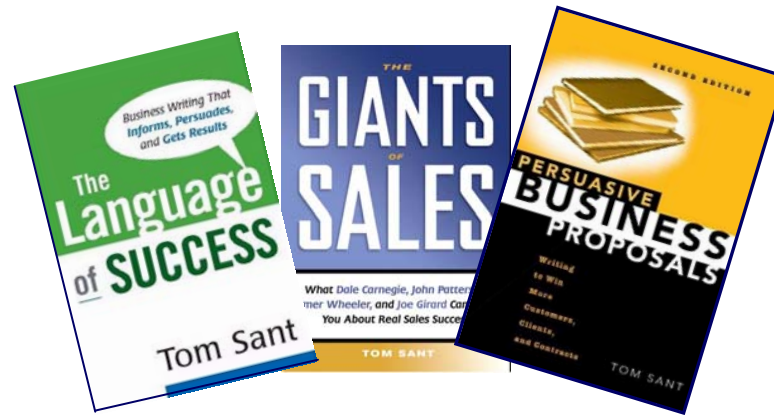


Best Practices



**Translating Techno-Geek, Corporate-Speak,
Marketing Hype, and Academese
into Plain English**

**Dr. Tom Sant
Hyde Park Partners**

Where Are We Headed?

1. Bad writing: it's everywhere
2. Understanding the basics
3. Constructive editing
4. Questions & answers



Bad Writing

It's Everywhere



Prime Culprits

Business

Academics

Science and Engineering

Government

Business

The Commercial WebBanking full-featured wire module includes a simplified menu structure, the ability to support Domestic and International Repetitive and Free-Form Wire requests, Bank and Customer Maintained Wire Templates, Quick Entry of Repetitive Wires and optional security code validation and effective date entry.

--From a banking proposal

Business

The department's primary focus is to ensure proper process deployment activities take place to support process institutionalization and sustainment. Business process management is the core deliverable on a departmental level, which requires identification of process competency gaps and means to fill those gaps.

--From the mission statement
for a corporate training department

Business

High Street Technology offers a world-class expertise in facility management combined with best-of-breed products and customer-focused service to produce seamless, integrated solutions for our clients. We optimize productivity and assure reliability and efficiency by providing unique control systems that are user-friendly, robust, and extensible. When you choose HST, the difference is...*quality!*

--Web site content from a company's home page

Academics

The move from a structuralist account in which capital is understood to structure social relations in relatively homologous ways to a view of hegemony in which power relations are subject to repetition, convergence, and rearticulation brought the question of temporality into the thinking of structure, and marked a shift from a form of Althusserian theory that takes structural totalities as theoretical objects to one in which the insights into the contingent possibility of structure inaugurate a renewed conception of hegemony as bound up with the contingent sites and strategies of the rearticulation of power.

--Judith Butler, University of California, Berkeley

Academics

This book was instigated by the Harvard Core Curriculum Report in 1978 and was intended to respond to what I took to be an ominous educational reform initiative that, without naming it, would delegitimize the decisive, if spontaneous, disclosure of the complicity of liberal American institutions of higher learning with the state's brutal conduct of the war in Vietnam and the consequent call for opening the university to meet the demands by hitherto marginalized constituencies of American society for enfranchisement.

--The End of Education: Toward Posthumanism

Academics

It is the moment of non-construction, disclosing the absentation of actuality from the concept in part through its invitation to emphasize, in reading, the helplessness — rather than the will to power — of its fall into conceptuality.

--Paul Fry, *A Defense of Poetry*

Science and Engineering

In this chapter, we introduce a method that gives evolved programs the incentive to strategically allocate computation time among fitness cases. Specifically, with an *aggregate computation time ceiling* imposed over a series of fitness cases, evolved programs dynamically choose when to stop processing each fitness case. We present experiments that show that programs evolved using this form of fitness take less time per test case on average, with minimal damage to domain performance. We also discuss the implications of such a time constraint, as well as its differences from other approaches to multiobjective problems. The dynamic use of resources other than computation time, e.g., memory or fuel, may also result from placing an aggregate limit over a series of fitness cases.

--A so-called example of "good" writing—the opening sentence to a scientific paper

Science and Engineering

Large-conductance Ca^{2+} and voltage-activated K^{+} channels (BK_{Ca} or $\text{K}_{\text{Ca}}1.1$) are fundamental modulators of neuronal signaling (1, 2) by contributing to action potential repolarization (3, 4), mediating the fast phase of afterhyperpolarization (3, 5-8), controlling dendritic Ca^{2+} spikes (9), and establishing a feedback loop between membrane potential and cytosolic Ca^{2+} that regulates release of hormones and transmitters (10-13).

--The opening sentence of an article in *Science*

Science and Engineering

Ball has expertise in advanced focal plane packaging of CCD and IR detectors, assembly of micro-electronic hybrids, RF hybrid prototyping, packaging of miniature optical assemblies, thin film deposition and patterning, design and manufacturing of custom imaging (vacuum) tubes, application of advanced sealed detector technologies, hermetic back-filled packages per MIL-STD-883, development of long-life vacuum enclosures and dewars, work with ultra-high vacuum (10^{-10} torr) technology, and measurement of ultra-low outgassing on materials and detector packages.

Government

The purpose of the CSP is to increase national understanding of the charter school model and to expand the number of high-quality charter schools available to students across the Nation by providing financial assistance for the planning, program design, and initial implementation of charter schools, and to evaluate the effects of charter schools, including their effects on students, student academic achievement, staff, and parents.

--Department of Education
description of the Charter Schools Program

Government

On the tax increase after the refund, we'll charge the lower refund rate of interest on the tax instead of the higher underpayment rate of interest. We'll charge the lower interest rate on the new tax (up to the amount of the refund) for the same period of time we paid interest on the overpayment.

--Internal Revenue Service

It's a Scary Situation...

We're immersed in an ocean of bad writing.



Four Pseudo-Languages that Don't Work

1. Fluff

2. Guff

3. Geek

4. Weasel





Fluff:

- Grandiose claims
- Vague generalities
- Clichés
- No proof

Forget the Fluff!

Here are a few examples....

Anything look familiar?

World class

Best of breed

Leading edge

State of the art

Quality focused

Uniquely qualified

Innovative

High performance

Synergy

User friendly

Integrated

Partnership

Seamless

Robust


Guff.



Guff.

Guff:

- Long sentences
- Too many big words
- Too much passive voice



The dimensionality of expected project problems coupled with the limited time available for preparation means that choices will have to be made to assure viability of the most critical analytical processes. Thus, a leveraging of problem similarities and process relationships to allow for sharing of resources and solutions, will be needed to contain cost and staff expenditures and assure maximum payoff from effected solutions.

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– Average sentence length: 32 words

The **dimensionality** of **expected** project problems coupled with the **limited** time **available** for **preparation** means that choices will have to be made to assure **viability** of the most **critical analytical processes**. Thus, a **leveraging** of problem **similarities** and process **relationships** to allow for sharing of **resources** and **solutions**, will be needed to contain cost and staff **expenditures** and assure **maximum** payoff from **effected solutions**.

- Average sentence length: 32 words
- Words with three syllables or more: 18

The dimensionality of expected project problems coupled with the limited time available for preparation means that **choices will have to be made** to assure viability of the most critical analytical processes. Thus, a **leveraging** of problem similarities and process relationships to allow for sharing of resources and solutions, **will be needed** to contain cost and staff expenditures and assure maximum payoff from effected solutions.

- Average sentence length: 32 words
- Words with three syllables or more: 18
- Passive voice: both sentences





Geek:

1. Disregard for the audience
2. Overuse of jargon and acronyms
3. Too many assumptions
4. A focus on technical details instead of functions or differentiators

An Example

This approach coalesces the capabilities of multiple corporate technology solutions providers that specialize in systems integration, client/server development, Internet/Intranet information systems, and information security.



Watch the Weasel!



Weasel

- Unnecessary use of weasel words
- Hyperqualification of every statement
- Passive voice
- Subjunctive constructions

Weasel words



“can be”

“might”

“helps”

“could”

“may be”

“enable”

“allow”

“up to”

“like”

“virtually”

“significantly”

Subjunctive Junk

“We **would** like to thank you for allowing us to submit this proposal...”

“This process **would allow** one person to perform research and **significantly** increase productivity...”

“You **can be assured** that it **should be possible** to achieve the requested timelines for this project.”

“We **believe** that we have proposed an effective solution, based on the information we have **at this time.**”



Our goal is to write with

POWER:

Purpose

Organization

Word choice

Eediting

RReader

- Facts
- Opinions
- Motivation



Purpose:
Why?



- Informing
- Evaluating
- Persuading



Organizational
Structure.

Reader:
Who?

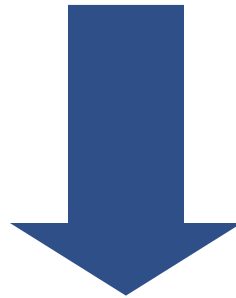


Style.

- Level of expertise
- Personality type
- Role in the process

- Word choice
- Amount of detail
- Evidence and emphasis

Editing



Eliminate “background noise”

Understanding the Basics

Ten Tips for Maximizing Readability



Ten Ways to Maximize Readability

Sentence structure

1. Short sentences
2. Active voice
3. Primacy principle
4. Avoid long dependent clauses up front
5. Keep the subject and verb close



Short, Simple Sentences

The full development of the mathematical theory and infrastructure to be prototyped in the proposal will move complex system design and management technology from its current ad-hoc techniques for mitigating uncertainties—manifested in the limited scope of robust controller design of low-order systems, nascent in the field of manufacturing, and lacking in deployment and operations—to a systematic approach for shaping the behavior of large, complex, multi-scale interconnected systems to reduce their vulnerability to fragility induced by variability in components, operations and updates. [Sentence length: 84]

Short, Simple Sentences

This project has the potential for overcoming a serious problem in controller design. Having plagued manufacturing for many years, this problem represents a major gap in operational control methodology. By developing the mathematics outlined in our proposal, we will eliminate numerous uncertainties and create a more systematic approach for modeling complex behavior in multivariable systems. One benefit of this modeling will be that the inherent fragility and unpredictability of these systems will be eliminated and they will be more reliable and their behavior more predictable. [ASL = 21]

Active Voice

Active: 90%
Passive: 7%
Imperative: 3%

Which is clearer?

You must decide which operating system you will use before we start configuring your equipment.

A decision must be made about the operating system before configuration of the equipment can begin.

Three Other Points

Primacy principle

Avoid long dependent clauses up front

Subject and verb close together

Based on your strategic plan and priorities as explained to us in a series of management meetings over the past six weeks and in numerous memos, phone calls, and a draft proposal which you have reviewed, a partnership with us will provide you with the tools and resources to develop and implement strategies to improve your financial and operational performance with group purchasing, supply chain management, warehousing, transportation cycle management, management reporting and information, and education.

Ten Ways to Maximize Readability

Word choice

6. Simple words
7. Minimize acronyms and product names
8. Cut the fluff
9. Use words correctly
10. Eliminate noun clusters



Word Choice: *Choose Simple*

One and two syllables
Average about 4 characters

parameters

implement

viable

interface

optimum

optimize

to impact

finalize

utilize

endeavor

demonstrate

initiate

terminate

limits, variables

do

workable

communicate

best

improve

to affect

finish, complete

use

try

show

start

end

Reading acronyms...

This organization has been privileged to partner with the Defense Intelligence Agency (DIA) Directorate for Information Management and Chief Information Officer (DS) and the Joint Intelligence Task Force Combating Terrorism (JITF-CT) in the establishment of an information technology (IT) infrastructure that meets Department of Defense Intelligence Information Systems (DoDIIS) enterprise objectives and JITF-CT mission requirements.

Over the past five years we have had the opportunity to establish mission critical IT programs for JITF-CT, including the Combating Terrorism Knowledge Base (CTKB and CTKB-S), which provides a secure, accredited system to disseminate CT-related threat and warning, finished intelligence, and operational support information for Department of Defense (DoD) organizations, the Virtual Intelligence Production Enterprise Repository (VIPER), which supports JITF-CT business process automation and analytic research through the integration of advanced technologies, and the expansion of the Combined Theatre – Analyst Vetted Relational System (CT-AVRS) to support Combatant Command (COCOM) and JITF-CT analytic and visualization needs.

Reading acronyms...like chewing on thumbtacks

This organization has been privileged to partner with the Defense Intelligence Agency (**DIA**) Directorate for Information Management and Chief Information Officer (**DS**) and the Joint Intelligence Task Force Combating Terrorism (**JITF-CT**) in the establishment of an information technology (**IT**) infrastructure that meets Department of Defense Intelligence Information Systems (**DoDIIS**) enterprise objectives and **JITF-CT** mission requirements.

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Cut the Weasel Words and Booster Words

Booster words:

very

really

certainly

obviously

somewhat

significant

More than 3 or 4 per page means your writing is

boring!

Use the Right Word

affect	effect	data is	data are
alternately	alternatively	imply	infer
anxious	eager	insure	ensure / assure
beside	besides	it's	its
bimonthly	semimonthly	lead	led
cite	site [sight]	principal	principle
complement	compliment	serve	service
concurrent	consecutive	simple	simplistic
discreet	discrete		

Use the Right Word

affect	effect
alternately	alternatively
anxious	eager
beside	besides
bimonthly	semimonthly
cite	site [sight]
complement	compliment
concurrent	consecutive
discreet	discrete

data is	data are
imply	infer
insure	ensure / assure
it's	its
lead	led
principal	principle
serve	service
simple	simplistic

Eliminate Noun Clusters

More than two nouns in a row is confusing.

Five or more is incomprehensible.

“Building Protection Improvement Design Protocol”

“...the earth resources satellite field station installation
maintenance repair manual.”

Constructive Editing

Helping Our Clients Say What They Mean



Constructive Editing

1. Wait before trying to edit.
 - Gain detachment so you can see the errors.
2. Assess the overall impression.
 - Does anything sound odd? Can you cut? Is anything missing?
3. Ask the basic editing questions.
 - WTF?
4. Let your computer do the hard work.
 - Is it readable? Are your sentences simple and short?
5. Check the structure.
 - Is it appropriate to the purpose?
6. Work on creativity and style.
 - Make it interesting to read.
7. Proofread then print.
 - Grammar and spelling errors undercut credibility.

The Basic Editing Questions

1. Huh?

2. So what?

3. Who cares?



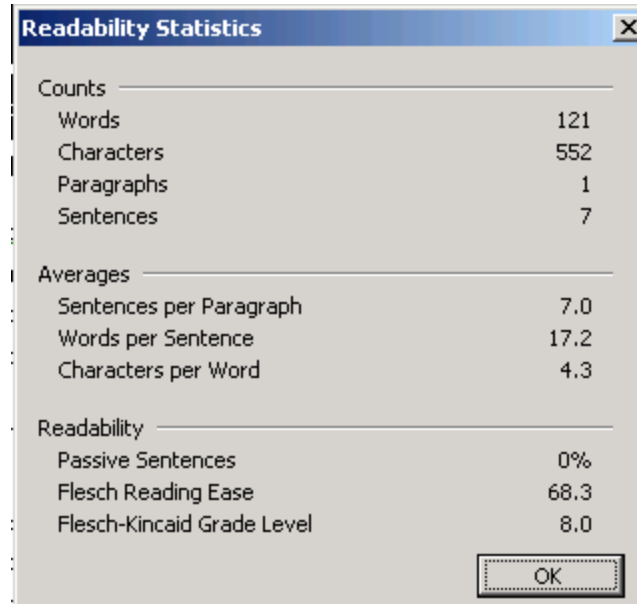
Five ways to achieve clarity:



Five ways to achieve clarity:

1. Short sentences
2. Short words
3. Passive voice $\leq 10\%$
4. Readability index ≤ 10
5. Minimal jargon and acronyms

Let Your Word Processor Do the Work



The image shows a 'Readability Statistics' dialog box with a close button (X) in the top right corner. The dialog is divided into three sections: 'Counts', 'Averages', and 'Readability'. Each section contains a list of metrics and their corresponding values.

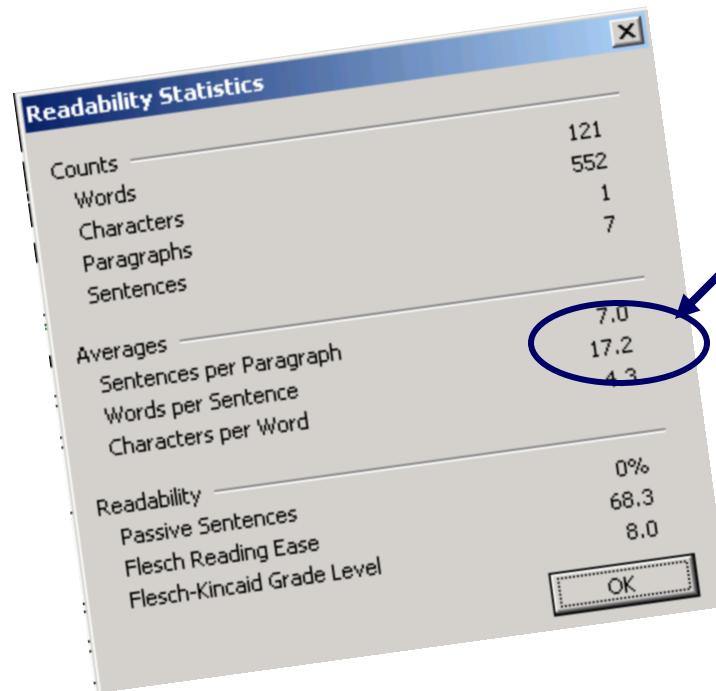
Counts	
Words	121
Characters	552
Paragraphs	1
Sentences	7

Averages	
Sentences per Paragraph	7.0
Words per Sentence	17.2
Characters per Word	4.3

Readability	
Passive Sentences	0%
Flesch Reading Ease	68.3
Flesch-Kincaid Grade Level	8.0

An 'OK' button is located at the bottom right of the dialog box.

1. Short sentences



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Average sentence length

15 to 17 words per sentence is a good average sentence length.

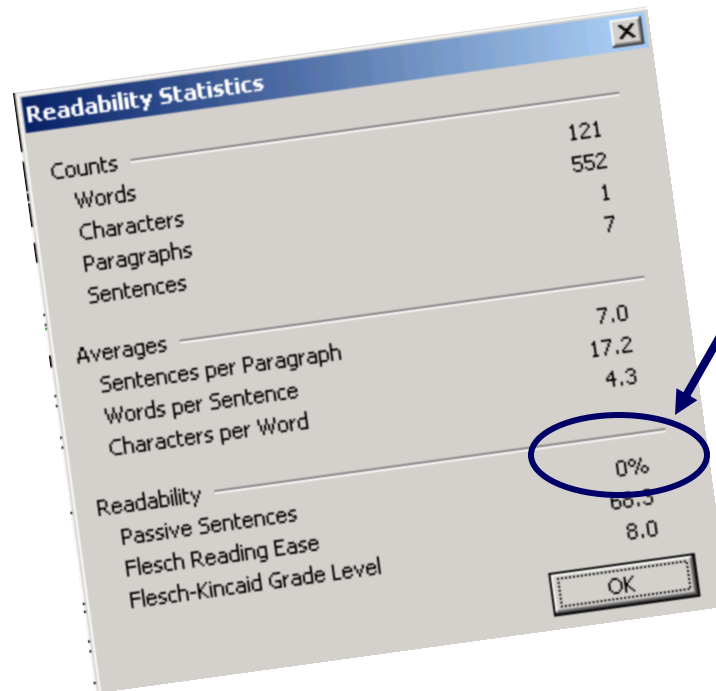
2. Short words

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Average word length in characters

5 characters or less means your words probably aren't too long.

3. Passive voice $\leq 10\%$

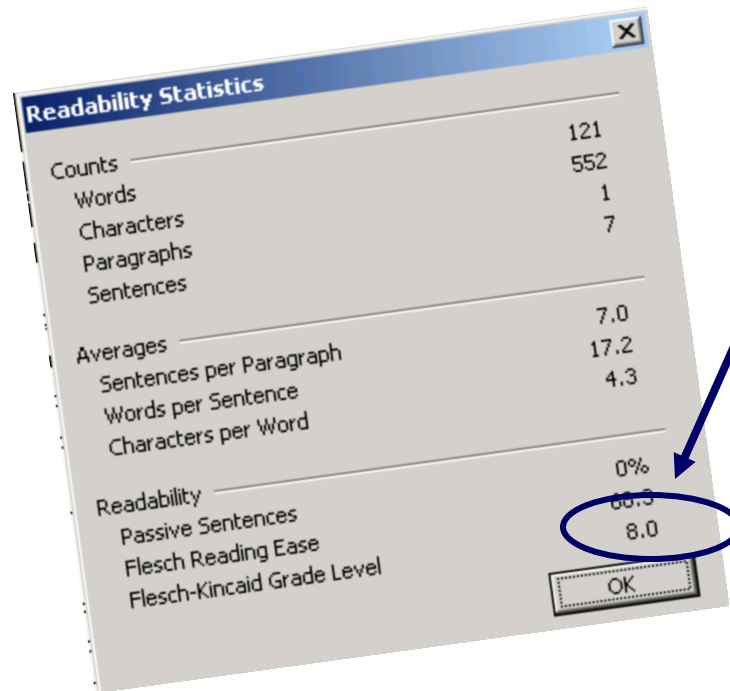


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Flesch-Kincaid Grade Level	

Percentage of passive voice

Keep passive voice below 10%.

4. Readability level ≤ 10



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Readability scores

Aim for a Flesch-Kincaid Grade Level index of 10 or less.

5. Minimal Jargon and Acronyms



Ask your mother.

Don't despair.
Don't give up.



Our goal should be
Excellence.
Not perfection.




Good luck...
in spreading clarity and sanity!



Dr. Tom Sant

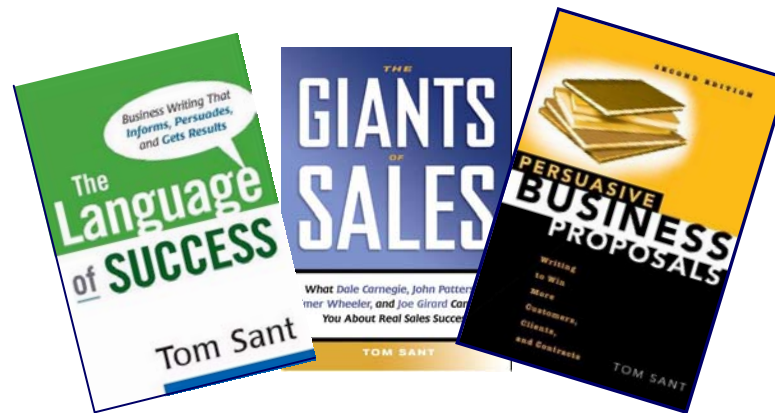
tsant@hydeparkpartnerscal.com



Questions?
Comments?
Complaints?
Threats?

Leave your business card or send me an e-mail if you want:

- 1. To receive my monthly writing tip**
- 2. To get a copy of this presentation**



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