

eBook Edition

Beyond Grammar

Writing as thinking made visible

Improving Flow: 5 trade secrets



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Does your writing *flow*?

When your writing flows, readers get your meaning easily. There are many elements to flow.

- a structure that organizes ideas in a logical order
- clear transitions from one idea to the next
- short paragraphs and sentence variety
- a lack of 'clutter words'
- and more

People talk about flow and you hear vague advice about “writing clearly and concisely,” but exactly what can you do to make your writing flow?

Here are some trade secrets you can start using right now, today.

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1. Start with a clear structure in mind

A structure helps you organize your thinking, the first step to flow. For most of the writing we do, there are accepted structures. For example, 90% of all introductions in research journal articles follow a 3-move pattern (establish the field, define the research problem, propose the solution). You can find structures for proposals, policy briefs, white papers, corporate promotional material and almost anything you need to write once you know where to look.



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2. Cut the clutter

Compare these two sentences:

Many **of the** participants **attending** had **at least** some **previous** experience.

Many participants had some experience.

The words in red are clutter. Cutting them does not affect the meaning in the sentence. It flows better because the reader's brain has less to process.

Why, exactly, are those words clutter?

The participants are the people who attend, so 'attending' is redundant; 'at least' adds no useful information to 'some experience'; and if you have had experience, then it must have been previously, so that too is redundant.

In most cases, if a sentence still makes sense after removing a word or phrase, you can delete it.

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3. Don't postpone

Postponement is the technical term for a sentence with the subject or topic separated from the verb. Here is an example:

Demonstration projects, training, information/education campaigns, information clearing houses for technology transfer, public awareness campaigns, reporting of success stories, publications in the media, awards, workshops and seminars are some of the methods adapted by many countries and institutions to disseminate the knowledge.

The problem with postponement is the reader must keep in short term memory all the information in yellow highlight before he or she knows why you are giving that information. You are making the reader work too hard. The cognitive load is too high and the reader gets tired or bored and gives up.

Postponement is easy to fix. Put the subject or main topic of the sentence at the beginning. Like this:

Some of the methods adapted by many countries and institutions to disseminate the knowledge are demonstration projects, training, information and education campaigns, information clearing houses for technology transfer, public awareness campaigns, reporting of success stories, media publications in the media, awards, workshops and seminars.
(I couldn't resist cutting some clutter)

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4. Use strong verbs

Strong verbs convey action.

Compare what I just wrote with another version of the same thought.

Strong verbs are those which make the action clearer.

Strong verbs 'pick up the pace' of your writing which readers experience as flow.

**Here are some examples of transforming weak verbs to strong verbs.
See how often removing the auxiliary verb gives it more force.**

This project **will map out** the economic and political drivers.

This project maps economic and political drivers.

Researchers **are not able to have access to** the monitoring data.

Researchers have no access to monitoring data.

The project **has also established** a strong evidence base.

The project established a strong evidence base.

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5. Shorter sentences

The sentence below has 63 words, a form of postponement, and lots of clutter.

Recognizing the value that groundwater can have for poverty alleviation, livelihood generation and global food supply, the threats to, and continued opportunities for groundwater use and the multi-disciplinary nature of groundwater management problems, the Global Review of Water Management in Agriculture funded a research programme on the state of groundwater use and governance in the developing world and suggested options for the future.

Now try this:

The Global Review of Water Management in Agriculture funded a research programme on the state of groundwater use and governance and suggested options. [start with the main topic] Options recognize [strong verb] the value groundwater has for poverty alleviation, livelihood generation and global food supply. The options also take into account threats and opportunities for groundwater use and the multi-disciplinary nature of groundwater management problems. [cut clutter]

The second version is only 5 words shorter but I think you will agree it takes a lot less brain work to get the meaning. And that's what we call flow.

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Now you try!

Want some hands-on practice with immediate feedback? Want to see how easy it is writing more in less time with less effort and with greater confidence your readers will get your message and take the actions you desire without spending time and money in boring academic writing classes taught by people who don't understand your profession?

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