



FUTURE PROOFING BRANDS

Al Robertson – Brand Language

Al's guide to:

Writing **much better documents**
with **much less stress and hassle**



What this guide will do for you

This guide will help you write documents that:

- Are quick and easy to read and understand
- Share your message clearly and compellingly
- Don't take forever to write, rewrite and sign off

The guidance I'm about to give you will work equally well with any piece of writing, from a new brochure or your website landing page to a big presentation or that email you're about to send.

The contents

I'm going to start by telling you how to write clearly and effectively by:

- Choosing the right words
- Building simple, active sentences
- Writing short, snappy paragraphs
- Creating clearly defined sections

Then, I'll share a planning, drafting and editing process that will make writing documents easier, quicker and far less stressful. I'll show you how to:

- Start with a clear brief
- Blast out your first draft
- Give it all a polish

Then, if you want to dig deeper into good writing technique, I'll recommend:

- Some useful writing guides
- Two handy style guides
- Practical online resources
- Having a chat with me



How to write clearly and effectively

1 - Choose the right words

Use everyday words like ‘use’ or ‘grow’, not corporate ones like ‘utilise’ or ‘augment’

Talk in terms of ‘you’ and ‘us’, not ‘<Your Company>’ and ‘<Customer name>’

So, instead of:

- YourCo’s customers utilise its products to augment the efficiency of their business operations

Just say:

- Customers like you use our products to work more efficiently

That’ll help your writing feel more human and approachable. And because you’re using snappier words, it’ll be quicker and easier to read too.

2 - Build simple, active sentences

No more than 15-20 words per sentence, with at most one sub-clause in each sentence

Write actively, avoiding the passive and being clear about who’s doing what

So, instead of:

- The customer services that are administered from bases in Brighton and London are utilised by customers around the world, with additional services available to companies based within the UK and Europe.

Just say:

- We run our customer services from our bases in Brighton and London. We sell to customers around the world, with extra services available to companies based in the UK and Europe.

Writing shorter, more focussed sentences helps your reader keep track of what you’re saying. Again, that makes for a quicker, easier read.

Avoiding the passive helps people understand who’s doing what. It’s like saying:

- The cat sat on the mat

That’s an active sentence that has to mention the cat. The passive version of it is:

- The mat was sat on (*by the cat*)

I’ve put the cat in brackets because you don’t need to mention it at all.



3 - Write short, snappy paragraphs

- **No more than three to four sentences per paragraph**
- **Make sure there's a clear line of text between every paragraph**

So, instead of:

- We've been trading since 1954. In that time, we've become one of Europe's leading providers of very useful services. Our hundreds of satisfied customers all say the same thing: they wouldn't be where they are without us. But we never rest on our laurels. We're determined to keep on moving forwards into the future. So we invest a substantial proportion of our profits into R&D and are constantly on the look-out for new talent to join us. All that makes for a very future-focussed frame of mind.

Just say:

- We've been trading since 1954. In that time, we've become one of Europe's leading providers of very useful services. Our hundreds of satisfied customers all say the same thing: they wouldn't be where they are without us.

But we never rest on our laurels.

We're determined to keep on moving forwards into the future. So we invest a substantial proportion of our profits into R&D and are constantly on the look-out for new talent to join us. All that makes for a very future-focussed frame of mind.

Breaking your writing down into concise, focussed paragraphs helps your reader make sense of what you're saying. It makes a particularly big difference on smaller screens, like phones and tablets, where long paragraphs look very dense and impenetrable.



4 - Create clearly defined sections

- **Break your document into sections of three to four paragraphs**
- **Make sure your section headings help your readers navigate your document**

So, instead of:

- Our business is built around a core team of 50 engineers. Our highly skilled project managers keep them on track. They work closely with our business development people, who pride themselves on knowing our customers' businesses inside out.

Our senior people are internationally-respected experts in what we do. We draw on cutting-edge research from Sussex University and beyond. Our apprenticeship schemes draw in and train up the brightest minds from our local schools.

Just over a third of our staff come from beyond the UK. Between us, we speak 37 different languages fluently and can get by in another dozen or so. And with Gatwick Airport on our doorstep, we can travel anywhere in the world at the drop of a hat.

Say:

- **Our people**
Our business is built around a core team of 50 engineers. Our highly skilled project managers keep them on track. They work closely with our business development people, who pride themselves on knowing our customers' businesses inside out.

Our knowhow

Our senior people are internationally-respected experts in what we do. We draw on cutting-edge research from Sussex University and beyond. Our apprenticeship schemes draw in and train up the brightest minds from our local schools.

Our global reach

Just over a third of our staff come from beyond the UK. Between us, we speak 37 different languages fluently and can get by in another dozen or so. And with Gatwick Airport on our doorstep, we can travel anywhere in the world at the drop of a hat.

You're writing for very busy people. Clearly signposting the different parts of your document will help them go straight to the sections that matter most to them. And if they're reading through the whole document, it'll help them keep track of where they are and remember your key messages.

And of course, your sections will probably be longer. I've kept these sections down to one paragraph to keep this writing example short and easy to read.



A simple, stress-free writing process

1 - Start with a clear brief

Writing without a brief is like driving without a map. You probably won't get to your destination, and even if you do you won't be sure that you've arrived. So, grab a blank piece of paper and ask yourself:

Why am I writing this?

Something needs to change when your audience reads your communication. They should know, feel and / or do something new because of it. Make a note of that change.

Who am I talking to?

Imagine you're writing to just one person. Who are they? When and how will they read your communication? Why should they care about the change you want them to make? What's in it for them?

What will I tell them?

Plan out what to tell your audience to achieve your change, in this order:

- The points they absolutely need to hear
- The ones that are important but not essential
- Whatever you'll squeeze in if there's space

Try jotting your points down on Post-It notes and rearranging them to get your structure just right.

2 - Blast out your first draft

Your first draft is just for you. So don't try and make it perfect. Just follow your brief and keep typing. All that matters is getting to the end.

3 - Give it all a polish

Editing is a vital part of the writing process. It usually takes me two or three rewrites to get a document right.

First of all, go back over the stylistic guidance I've given above. Make sure you've made your document as easy to read and navigate as possible.

Then test your writing against your brief. Is it doing everything it needs to? Reading it out loud can give you a useful new perspective on it. Or ask a colleague for feedback, using your brief to make sure they know exactly what you're trying to achieve.

Once you've done that, you're all ready to rewrite it. It'll probably take two or three edits to get it to where it needs to be.



Where to find out more

Some useful writing guides

Oxford Guide to Plain English, Martin Cutts

This is an excellent general guide to writing clear, simple, effective English prose. As you'd expect, it's a very easy and practical read.

To the Point: a Dictionary of Concise Writing, Robert Hartwell Fiske

It does exactly what the title says! It's a very useful reference book suggesting short, sharp words you can use to neutralise utilisation of excessively corporate and protracted vocabulary (like this).

Brilliant Copywriting, Roger Horberry

A handy guide to the copywriting process. Roger takes you through everything from initial brief to structuring documents to final editing and sign-off in a very practical, easy-to-follow way.

Two handy style guides

The Guardian Style Guide, Amelia Hodsdon / David March

The Economist Style Guide, The Economist

These are two different style guides from two different publications. They're handy for general reference and writing style advice.

Some practical online resources

You can use apps like Hemingway, Grammarly and Readable to test and edit your finished piece of writing.

Each of them has a range of different ways of assessing and sharing content. I'd recommend taking a look at all three and seeing which one best meets your needs.

Having a chat with me

If you've got any questions about all this or want to chat about brand language in general, do get in touch – my contact details are below.