



# *Nicely Said*

**WRITING FOR THE WEB WITH STYLE AND PURPOSE**

*Nicole Fenton and Kate Kiefer Lee*



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## *Writing Basics*

If you decide to use abbreviations, look out for confusing ones, especially those that can refer to both states and countries. For example, CA could be either California or Canada. Use abbreviations sparingly, and add approved ones to your style guide.

### **Be concise**

Most of the time, shorter is better. The easiest way to condense your writing is to give it a clear structure. Sketching is one way to do that. Here are a few other tips for organizing your thoughts.

### **Start with the main idea**

Think about what people need to know right away. Move that information up to the top. Don't get to the point; start with it.

Find a direct and polite way to express your idea. Talking it out with a friend or coworker can help. Record yourself if you can so you can hear how you phrase things. Ask yourself: What am I trying to say? The answer to that question is often shorter than whatever you wrote down.

### **Make it scannable**

Pull related ideas together. Arrange similar topics into modules and sections. Then, you can easily move anything that's out of order or fill in the gaps. As your paragraphs get longer, add clear headings to them. If you want to call out any important points, use bulleted lists to summarize them. Make it easy for readers to skim, find what they need, and know what's coming next.

### **Use simple sentences**

Break down big ideas into manageable bites. Keep your sentences as short as possible.

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Avoid trailing on:

If you haven't already done so, you can sign up for our newsletter to receive deals and special offers delivered directly to your inbox.

Instead, try paring it down:

Sign up for our newsletter to get special offers.

Don't make people read more than they need to. Once you figure out what your point is, whittle the writing down to the essentials. Here's another wordy example:

For assistance with questions not listed above, please [click here](#) to see our contact information.

Instead, cut the extra words:

Other questions? [Contact us](#).

Cover one idea at a time. If you need to include secondary information, try linking to it instead of summarizing or repeating yourself.

### **Talk to your readers**

Use the imperative when it's appropriate. Talk *to* your readers, not *at* them. Tell them what to do in a kind and straightforward way. This little change in perspective can help you be concise.

For example, avoid talking about yourself:

For the holidays, our customers can find the perfect children's books on our website.

We're excited to announce that we are introducing over 30 new products to our shop for the holidays.

Instead, be direct:

Find the perfect holiday gift. [Shop now](#).

There are over 30 new items in the shop today! [See what's on sale](#).

## *Writing Basics*

Be careful with the passive voice, where the subject of the sentence comes after the object:

You have received a gift card from Maria.

Instead, use the active voice:

Maria sent you a gift card.

Balance being direct with being nice. Huddle your nouns and verbs close together to shorten your sentences. Active verbs help you write concisely and invigorate your prose so that it feels more like a conversation.

### **Be positive**

Be careful with negative language, which is usually longer and less friendly than positive language. Avoid telling readers what they can't do:

You cannot continue without signing in.

Instead, be positive or neutral:

Sign in to continue.

And while it's generally best to avoid the passive voice, in certain situations it helps you sound softer without adding too many words. It's especially useful for time-sensitive messages like payment confirmations and error messages. Directness can sometimes sound terse or robotic:

We couldn't authorize your credit card. We cancelled your order.

In those cases, soften the language:

We were unable to authorize your credit card. Your order has been cancelled.

Conciseness is a trickier concept, because it isn't always appropriate. You may need to vary the lengths of your sentences to keep them friendly. If you use several short sentences in a row, you can end up sounding sharp or stiff. It's also possible to cut too much, to oversimplify a complicated

issue, or to reduce your message to something generic. Find the simplest way to say what you mean without losing important details.

## **Be honest**

For web writers, honesty means two things: presenting the facts and being true to your company. It's a combination of accuracy and sincerity. Tell the truth and be nice. Don't brag about how great you are. Focus on your strengths and present them carefully. People will know when you're lying to them. Don't say an offer is "Just for you" if you're sending it to hundreds of readers.

## **Be careful**

Along with checking for errors, you should also make sure your work is trustworthy and reliable. Back up your claims with facts and concrete examples. Don't exaggerate or overpromise. For example, if it takes an hour to purchase something over the phone, don't say it's a quick call. Or, if you're specifying how many readers you have, don't lie about the number.

Check your facts and sources. When reading through a draft, pick out any details you consider to be facts and verify them. If you're citing another writer's work or referencing a study, link to it. When you've done your research, it will come through in your writing.

## **Tell the truth**

Make sure your writing speaks the whole truth and nothing but the truth. Even if you have the best intentions, little white lies can sometimes sneak in. Be especially aware of this when you're writing marketing copy. If you're trying to persuade people to do something, it's tempting to say things that sound nice but aren't exactly true. As Anne Lamott says, take out the lies and the boring parts.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> <https://twitter.com/ANNELAMOTT/status/440540092629655552>

## Writing Basics

Check in with your own feelings regularly. As you're working on each sentence, make sure the writing is sincere. It should represent your real feelings or attitude on the topic. If you feel like you're pretending or forcing specific words into a phrase, you may need to pull the language back toward reality.

Be careful with adjectives and modifiers. It's easy to overuse descriptive words and leave readers feeling unsatisfied. Replace fluffy modifiers with concrete ideas. Here are a few examples to avoid:

amazing	memorable
artisanal	natural
beautiful	powerful
dynamic	revolutionary
industry-leading	unique
innovative	everyone's favorite
intuitive	it's never been easier

*Show* readers how your product is different or why it's great; don't *tell* them how to feel. Avoid being melodramatic:

With our intuitive design tools creating the site you've always wanted is easier than you ever imagined. ([www.godaddy.com](http://www.godaddy.com))

Instead, add honest, useful details:

Choose from [simple templates](#) or [customize your site](#) over FTP.

Point out specific things you can do for the reader, instead of assuming you know what they want.

## Be considerate

Help people on their own terms. Use words they understand, and treat them with the same level of respect you'd give them in person.

## **Be polite**

Most of the time, the easiest way to show your empathy is to write how you speak. How would you talk about this in person? Make it sound more like a conversation. Show your thoughtfulness. Make the reader smile. You can even give them a little encouragement. Put yourself in the reader's shoes and check your tone to make sure you're being polite. If you need the reader to wait for a moment or fill in extra form fields, a simple "please" or "thank you" goes a long way.

## **Be inclusive**

The words you choose affect how people relate to you and define your relationships. Keep the language open when you can. Watch out for words that turn people off or only make sense to a particular audience. Don't assume that your readers are all from the same place, age group, or industry circle.

## ***Be careful with idioms and slang***

Jokes, metaphors, regional expressions, and cultural references don't always translate well. Your readers may live in different countries, or English may not be their first language. The next time you're explaining something with a metaphor or a reference, ask yourself if there's a more universal way to make your point.

## ***Avoid jargon and catchphrases***

Don't complicate your ideas with business or industry jargon. Not everyone will understand your lingo, even if you and your boss talk that way around the office. Whenever you're reading over your work, remember to cut the bullshit (**Table 5.2**).

You probably have your own set of professional terms too. Make a list of overused words and phrases from your industry and add them to your style guide so that your team knows to avoid them.