

# Just Plain English

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## Writing and Reviewing Staff Work

### *If you're the writer,*

Talk a project over with your reviewer at the start. Learn the points and emphasis to use.

Write a draft. Keep in mind your reader's knowledge and interest. Do your homework and head off questions.

Revise ruthlessly. Have you been clear and accurate? Try to find fault with your work.

Try to see the reviewer's changes from his or her viewpoint. Be grateful for the times you were saved from blundering.

### *If you're the reviewer,*

You must *show* your people that you want plain English. Circulate and post this pamphlet, give it to newcomers, include copies in local writing guides.

Discuss a project with the writer before he or she starts it. Plan it together. If you're in the middle, know what the boss wants.

Don't make the writer parrot your pet expressions. They can keep a subordinate from developing a natural style.

Whenever possible, suggest changes and let the writer make them. Give reasons for major changes.

Avoid making changes just to feel you've left your mark. Tinker only to prevent real damage.

## COMPACT WRITING

Suspect wordiness in everything you write. Quarrel with the need for every paragraph, every sentence, every word. The longer you take to say things, the more you blur your ideas. When Deadlines permit, let your writing rest for a day and then rewrite it. And rewrite it. To help you hunt for wordiness, here are some common sources that are easy to spot and easy to fix.

### Doublings

Avoid writing about a project's *importance and significance* when *importance* will do. Avoid writing about your *gratitude and thanks* when *thanks* will do. Pairs of words with similar meanings add needless bulk to writing. Whatever the differences between *theory* and *concepts*, for example, they aren't worth calling attention to if you just want to give a general idea.

### "It is"

No two words hurt naval writing more than the innocent-looking *it is*. They stretch sentences, delay your point, encourage passive verbs, and hide responsibility. Unless it refers to something mentioned earlier, write around *it is*. "*It is necessary that you revise ruthlessly*" becomes "*You need to revise ruthlessly.*" And the roundabout "*It is realized*" becomes the straight forward "*we realize*" or "*I realize.*" Spare only natural expressions like "it is time to..."

Less common but no less wordy are the cousins of *it is*, *there are* and *there is*. "*There are two alternatives mentioned in the report*" becomes "*The report mentions two alternatives.*" Similarly, "*There is a helicopter pad on the ship*" becomes "*A helicopter pad is on the ship.*" You can avoid most of these weak beginnings with just a little rewriting.

### Legalese

Avoid legal-sounding language like *therein*, *herewith*, and *the undersigned*. Try *there*, *here*, and *I*. Such pompous and needless language doesn't give writing added authority. It simply shows that the writer's style, and perhaps the writer's thinking, is outdated. Let a directive's number or a letter's signature carry the authority; you risk committing bloated bureaucratic bombast if you try to put that authority in your language.

### Smothered Verbs

Weak writing relies on general verbs, which take extra words to complete their meaning. When you write a general verb like *is*, *give*, *hold*, and *have*, see if a nearby word will make it a more specific verb. Here are some common smothered (and unsmothered) verbs: "*The committee members held a meeting (met) to give consideration to (consider) the plan. They made the decision (decided) to give their approval to (approve) it.*" Make use of ( ) specific verbs. Avoid diluting the action words in your sentences.

### “That and Which”

Look for *thats* and *whiches* to cut from your writing. Often those words don't help meaning or flow. Sometimes you can just drop either word: “We believe ~~that~~ the changes will help.” Sometimes you will have to rewrite slightly: “a system *which* is reliable” becomes “a reliable system.”

### “The \_\_\_\_\_ ion of”

Shorten words ending in *-ion* whenever the context permits. Instead of saying “I recommend *the adoption of* the plan,” say “I recommend *adopting* the plan.” And instead of saying “We want *the participation of* the command,” say “We want the command *to participate*.” Words ending in *-ion* are verbs turned into nouns. Writing is shorter and livelier when it favors verb (action) forms over noun (static) forms.

### Wordy Expressions

Wordy expressions don't give writing impressive bulk; they litter it by getting in the way of the words that carry the meaning. Verbs and nouns do the real work; long linking phrases don't deserve the attention they receive. So simplify these sentence stretchers. In parentheses are the simpler forms of four common wordy expressions: *in order to* (*to*), *for the purpose of* (*to*), *in the near future* (*soon*), *in the event that* (*if*). These wordy expressions and others appear in the list of SIMPLER WORDS AND PHRASES.

### Hut-2-3-4 Phrases

Though you should cut needless words, sometimes you can go too far. Avoid building hut-2-3-4 phrases, long freight trains of nouns and modifiers. Readers can't tell easily just what modifies what or when such trains will end. You may have to use official hut-2-3-4 phrases like “Air Traffic Control Radar Beacon System,” but you can avoid creating unofficial ones like “computer programs advance information.” Instead, write “advance information *on* computer programs.” And for “rapid operational equipment distribution,” sue “rapid distribution *of* operational equipment.” By increasing the number of words a little, you increase reading speed a lot.

### Specialized Terms

Like hut-2-3-4 phrases, the overuse of specialized terms is false economy. Avoid your job's shorthand with outsiders, and use it no more than you must with insiders. Spell out uncommon abbreviations and acronyms the first time they appear. If they will appear only twice, a good rule of thumb is to spell them out both times. The goal is to keep readers from pausing to decode your shorthand any more than they must. Of course, spelling out a strange abbreviation may not help much. Are you any closer to understanding SDI by knowing it means Systemized Dynamic Interface? You'll avoid using terms others don't understand by testing everything you write as though you were the reader.

Old: By virtue of the authority vested in me by the Constitution of the United States of American, and as President of the United States of America, it is hereby ordered as follows....

New: As president of the United States, I direct....

--old and new beginnings to Executive Orders

## NATURAL WRITING

To avoid a bloated bureaucratic style, make your writing more like speaking. Now this isn't a call for copying every quirk of speech down to grunts and ramblings. And granted some people don't speak very well. Still, because Readers "hear" writing, the most readable writing sounds like people talking to people.

Begin by imagining your reader is in front of you. If you're writing to many different people and none in particular, picture one typical reader. Then write with the techniques below – the best of speaking.

Once you've written a draft, read it aloud. If you wouldn't say it in person, don't say it by mail. Take the time to revise. For most of us, good writing really means good rewriting. It's worth the effort. A single naval letter is likely to be read by many people as it goes up for signature in one activity and down for action in another. Work to help the many who must read your writing. If you don't sweat, your readers will.

### Respect plain words.

Go out of your way to use small words. *Issue* directives, don't *promulgate* them. *Start* things, don't *initiate* them. Think of the city fellow in those old western movies who overdressed to impress the folks at the ranch. Overdressed writing fails just as foolishly. Readers may know *utilize* means *use* and *optimum* means *best*, but why force them to translate? You sell yourself in your writing. Come across as a sensible person, someone who knows that good English is plain English.

### Use personal pronouns.

Avoiding natural references to people is false modesty. When speaking for your activity, as in a letter signed "by direction," use *we*, *us*, *our*. When speaking for yourself – if you're in charge, for example – use *I*, *me*, *my*. In either situation, bring readers into the writing by using *you* and *your*.

You can write poorly even with personal pronouns. (Too much of *we* and *you* can obscure the subject, and no amount of them can overcome confused thinking.) But without personal pronouns, you're doomed. Attempts to avoid them are often elaborate and inefficient: "The position of this command is" for "our position is" or "it is understood" for "we understand" or "notify this office" for "notify us" or "all addressees should" for "you should." Research has confirmed many times that personal pronouns improve readability. The importance of this fact goes up as reading skills go down.

We in the Department of the Navy can take a lesson from "We the people" in the Constitution. In spite of that honorable past, many of today's naval writers think personal pronouns hurt objectivity and encourage chumminess. A chummy style has no place in our writing, but neither does an untouched-by-human-hands style. Both extremes lack the natural dignity of ordinary English.

Besides, readers aren't fooled if you write "it is planned" for "we plan" or "it is requested" for "we request." They know your activity is behind the planning and requesting. Personal pronouns merely acknowledge the obvious. And where some doubt may exist, the personal pronouns clear it up.

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### Try some contractions.

Contractions link pronouns with verbs (*we'd, I'll, you're*) and make verbs negative (*don't, can't, won't*). The second kind keeps readers from skipping over not, a special advantage with instructions. Contractions are appropriate in less formal writing situations such as this pamphlet. Yet even when your final product will be very formal, you can still use contractions in drafts to help you write naturally. The point is that if you're comfortable with contractions, your writing is likely to read easily. And because the language is clear, you can spot holes in your thinking that need to be filled.

If contractions feel out of place, you may need to deflate the rest of what you say. In the next sentence, something has to go, either the opening contraction or the remaining formality: "It's incumbent upon personnel at all echelons to conserve energy." Written naturally, the sentence might read "It's your job to save energy." Contractions without guilt! That's the goal.

### Prefer short transitions.

Prefer short, spoken transitions over long, bookish ones. Use *but* more than *however*, *also* more than *in addition*, *still* more than *nevertheless*, *so* more than *consequently* or *therefore*. The shorter transitions help set the right tone, a natural one, for the rest of what you say. Save the longer transitions for variety. And, yes, you can start sentences with words like *but, so, yet, and*.

### Ask more questions.

Reach out to your readers now and then by asking questions. A request gains emphasis when it ends with a ?. In a long report, a question can be a welcome change. Hear how spoken a question is? One is hidden in the next sentence: "Request that this command be notified as to whether the conference has been rescheduled." Written as a question, the sentence is short and direct: "Has the conference been rescheduled?"

### Keep sentences short.

For variety, mix long sentences and short ones, but average twenty words or less. Though short sentences won't guarantee clarity, they're usually less confusing than long ones. Now you needn't count every word. Try the eye test: average under two typed lines. Or try the ear test: read your writing aloud and break up a sentence that you can't finish in one breath.

## TO-THE-POINT WRITING

Much naval writing follows a pattern of organization that is easy on writers but hard on readers. Most of us write the way we think, by leading up to our conclusions. From a reader's perspective, it is the clue-by-clue pattern of mystery stories. A more helpful pattern is that of newspaper articles, which open with the most important information and taper off to the least important.

### Open with your main point.

What's the one sentence you'd keep if you could keep only one? That sentence is your main point, your bottom line, your "so what." Get right to it. Whenever you can, start with that sentence, in a paragraph by itself for added emphasis.

Give comments *before* reasons, requests *before* justifications, answers *before* explanations, conclusions *before* details. Readers need to know your main point early so they can appreciate the relevance of whatever else you say.

If no single sentence stands out, you may need to create one to keep from wandering aimlessly. Occasionally, as in a set of instructions or a reply to various questions, all your points may be equally important. In this case start with a sentence that tells your readers what to expect: "These are the training quotas for FY 82."

Delay your main point to soften bad news, for example, or to introduce a controversial proposal. But don't delay routinely. Readers, like listeners, are put off by people who take forever to get to the point. In most cases, plunge right in.

To end most letters, just stop. When writing to persuade rather than just to inform, you may want to end strongly – with a forecast, appeal or implication. When feelings are involved, you may want to exit gracefully – with an expression of good will. When in doubt, offer your help or the name of a contact.

### Downplay references.

The hardest way to start a letter, but the best way, is to get right to the point. The easiest way to start a letter, but the worst way, is to open with a reference...or two or three. Beware.

Reading slows with every glance from the text to the reference caption. Justify such distractions by using only necessary references. Try drafting a letter without references much in mind. That way you're likely to use fewer of them than you would by starting with a list. Many letters need no references at all. Others are complete with a reference to only the latest communication in a series. Reading first paragraphs that overuse references is like driving in reverse, through alphabet soup.

Make forward progress right from the start by subordinating references:

Not: Reference (a) proposed double coding 21 Navy billets. The rationale was that these billets then would have more candidates. This proposal is supported.



But: We support double coding 21 Navy billets, which reference (a) proposed.

Or: We support the proposal in reference (a) to double code 21 Navy billets.

Or: We support the referenced proposal to double code 21 Navy billets.

(This example applies to single-reference letters.)

This up-front pattern works for other types of writing. Staff papers can begin with a “highlights” or “main thrust” section. Similarly, long electronic messages that would normally end with summaries can open with them instead.

#### Use short paragraphs.

Important ideas are swamped in long paragraphs. Cover one topic completely before starting another, and let a topic take several paragraphs if necessary. But keep paragraphs short, down to roughly four or five sentences. Long paragraphs will divide where your thinking takes a turn. By adding white space, you make reading easier.

Call attention to lists of items or instructions by displaying them in subparagraphs. And when topics vary widely, use headings to catch your reader’s eye.

#### Write strong sentences.

The four examples under *Downplay references* illustrate ways to write emphatic sentences. The “Not” example wrongly gives the reference a major role as the subject of an independent clause. The remaining examples give the reference its proper minor roles first in a dependent clause, then in a phrase, and finally in a single adjective. As emphasis on the reference decreases, emphasis on important ideas increases.

Emphasis also increases on words that begin and end sentences. The next sentence stresses *soon*:

The course will be given to middle and senior managers soon.

*Soon* would receive less emphasis if placed in the middle of the sentence. If *soon* were the opening word, its emphasis would be compounded by its placement and the reversal of normal word order. Begin and end sentences with any words you like, but keep in mind that you can make important ideas stand out by positioning them strategically.

#### Keep lists parallel.

In lists, stick to one pattern. By avoiding interruptions, you set up expectations that make reading easy. Violations of parallelism work most often when writers mix the following:

Things and actions,

Statements and questions

Active instructions and passive ones.

The four headings under To-The-Point Writing form a list of active instructions. The list would lose its parallelism if instead of *Keep lists parallel* we used things (*Parallel lists*) or passives (*Lists must be kept parallel*). The trick is to be consistent. Make ideas of equal importance look equal.

If you've mastered this bold kind of parallelism, go on to subtle forms that involve balancing words with words, phrases with phrases, and clauses with clauses. You'll find them discussed in any grammar text.

## ACTIVE WRITING

Write actively most of the time. Over 75 percent of the verbs in magazines and newspapers, the kinds of writing we like to read, are active. Many naval writers, however, make 75 percent of their verbs passive. As a result, much of our writing is wordy, roundabout, and sometimes downright confusing.

### Put doers before verbs.

To spot passive verbs, look for any form of to be plus the past participle of a main verb (that's a verb usually ending in *-en* or *-ed*). Forms of to be: *is, are, was, were, am, be, being, been*. Passive verbs, then, look like these: *was inspected, has been left, is being anchored, may be chosen*.

Sentences written with passive verbs are wordy and roundabout. They reverse the natural, active order of English sentences. In the passive example below, notice how the receiver of the verb's action comes before the verb and the doer comes after:

Active: The skipper inspected the ship.  
(doer) (verb) (receiver)

Passive: The ship was inspected by the skipper.  
(receiver) (verb) (doer)

Besides lengthening and twisting sentences, passive verbs often muddy them. Whereas active sentences must have doers, passive ones are completely without them:

Nominations must be approved beforehand. By whom?

Plans are being made. By whom??

You will be notified. By whom???

To avoid most passive verbs, find the doer of the verb's action and put it before the verb. By leading with the doer, you automatically will follow with an active verb:

Supervisors must approve nominations beforehand.

We are making plans.

I will notify you.

Now and then you can avoid a passive verb without rearranging the sentence. Simply change the verb or drop part of it:

Your request has ~~been received~~ (arrived).

Annapolis is ~~located~~ in Maryland.

Write passively now and then – when you have good reason not to say who or what does the action. This situation may occur if the doer is unknown, unimportant, obvious, or better left unsaid:

Doer obvious: Presidents are elected every four years.

Doer perhaps unimportant: The parts have been shipped.

This isn't a license to kill. When in doubt, write actively, even though the doer might seem obvious or unimportant. You will write livelier sentences (not, livelier sentences will be written by you). The point is make you ruse of passives deliberate and infrequent.

### Write direct instructions.

Instructions deserve special attention because we write so many of them, often with so many passives. When describing how to do something, talk directly to your readers by leading with verbs. Imagine someone has just walked up to you and asked what to do. (This isn't a new way to turn passive sentences into active ones. A doer, you, will be understood or stated in front of the verb.

All safes will be checked. → Check all safes.

Each dial must be spun. → Spin each dial.

To improve instructions further, apply these next techniques:

- State rules before exceptions.
- Stress important points.
- Choose exact words.
- Say who does what.
- Give examples for difficult ideas.
- Divide processes into small steps.
- Use headings, subparagraphs, parallel lists.
- Answer likely questions.
- Test your material.
- Rewrite to avoid ambiguity.

Until Murphy's law is rescinded, you must write so you cannot be misunderstood.

## SIMPLER WORDS AND PHRASES

Official writing does not demand big words or fancy phrases. Write naturally – in the words you speak with. Those words are usually small. The guts of English are in its small, often one-syllable, words. Not only do they save typing and reading time, they make writing livelier and ideas clearer.

Instead of	Try
Accompany	Go with
Accomplish	Carry out, do
Accomplish (a form)	Fill out
Accordingly	So
Accrue	Add, gain
Accurate	Correct, exact, right
Achieve	Do, make
Actual	Real
Additional	Added, more, other
Address	Discuss
Addressees are requested	(omit), please
Adjacent to	Next to
Advantageous	Helpful
Advise	Recommend, tell
Afford an opportunity	Allow, let
Aircraft	Plane
anticipate	Expect
A number of	Some
Apparent	Clear, plain
Appear	Seam
Appreciable	Many
Appropriate	(omit), proper, right
Approximately	About
As a means of	To
Ascertain	Find out, learn
As prescribed by	Under
Assist, assistance	Aid, help
Attached hearwith is	Here's
Attempt	Try
At the present time	Now
Be advised	(omit)
Be responsible for	Handle
Benefit	Help
By means of	By, with
Capability	Ability, can
Category	Class, group
Caveat	Warning
Close proximity	Near
Cognizant	Aware, responsible
Combined	Joint
Comply with	Follow
Component	Part
Comprise	Form, include, make up
Concerning	About, on
Conclude	Close, end
Concur	Agree

Instead of	Try
Confront	Face, meet
Consequently	So
Consolidate	Combine, join, merge
Constitutes	Is, forms, makes up
Construct	Build
Contains	Has
Continue	Keep on
Contribute	Give
Current	(omit)
Deem	Think
Delete	Cut, drop
Demonstrate	Prove, show
Depart	Leave
Designate	Appoint, choose, name
Desire	Wish
Determine	Decide, figure, find
Develop	Grow, make, take place
Disclose	Show
Discontinue	Drop, stop
Disseminate	Issue, send out
Do not	Don't
Due to the fact that	Due to, since
Echelons	Levels
Effect	Make
Elect	Choose, pick
Eliminate	Cut, drop, and
Employ	Use
Encounter	Meet
Encourage	Urge
Endeavor	Try
Ensure	Make sure
Enumerate	Count
Environment	(omit)
Equitable	Fair
Equivalent	Equal
Establish	Set up, prove, show
Evaluate	Check, rate, test
Evidenced	Showed
Evident	Clear
Examine	Check, look at
Exhibit	Show
Expedite	Hurry, rush, speed up
Expeditious	Fast, quick
Expend	Pay out, spend
Expense	Cost, fee, price
Expertise	Ability, skill

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Instead of	Try
Explain	Show, tell
Facilitate	Ease, help
Factor	Reason, cause
Failed to	Didn't
Fatuous numbskull	Jerk
Feasible	Can be done, workable
Females	Women
Final	Last
Finalize	Complete, finish
For a period of	For
For example	Such as
Forfeit	Give up, lose
For the purpose of	For, to
Forward	Send
Function	Act, role, work
Furnish	Give, send
Herein	Here
However	But
Identical	Same
Identify	Find, name, show
Immediately	At once
Impacted	Affected, changed, hit
Implement	Carry out, do, follow
In accordance with	By, following, under
In addition	Also, besides, too
In an effort to	To
Inasmuch as	Since
In a timely manner	On time, promptly
Inception	Start
In conjunction with	With
In consonance with	Agree with
Incorporate	Blend, join, merge
Incumbent upon	Must
Indicate	Show, write down
Indication	Sign
Initial	First
Initiate	Start
In lieu of	Instead of
In order that	For, so
In order to	To
In regard to	About, concerning, on
Inter alia	(omit)
Interface with	Deal with, meet
Interpose no objection	Don't object
In the amount of	For
In the course of	During, in
In the event that	If
In the near future	Soon
In view of	Since
In view of the above	So
It is	(omit)
It is essential	Must

Instead of	Try
It is recommended	We recommend
It is requested	Please, we request
Justify	Prove
Legislation	Law
Liaise with	Coordinate, talk with
Limited number	Few
Limitations	Limits
Locate	Find
Location	Place, scene, site
Magnitude	Size
Maintain	Keep, support
Majority	Greatest, longest, most
Methodology	Method
Minimize	Decrease, lessen, reduce
Modify	Change
Monitor	Check, watch
Month of	(omit)
Nebulous	Vague
Necessitate	Cause, need
Non-concur	Disagree
Notify	Let know, tell
Not later than	By
Numerous	Many, most
Objective	Aim, goal
Obligate	Bind, compel
Observe	See
Obtain	Get
On a ___ basis	(omit)
Operate	Run, work
Optimum	Best, greatest, most
Option	Choice
Parameters	Limits
Participate	Take part
Perform	Do
Permit	Let
Personnel	People, staff
Pertaining to	About, of, on
Point in time	Point
Portion	Part
Position	Place, put
Possess	Have, own
Practicable	Practical
Preclude	Prevent
Prepared	Ready
Previous	Earlier, past
Previously	Before
Prioritize	Rank
Prior to	Before
Probability	Chance

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Instead of	Try
Procedures	Rules, ways
Proceed	Do, go on, try
Proficiency	Skill
Programmed	Planned
Promulgate	Announce, issue
Provide	Give, say, supply
Provided that	If
Provides guidance for	Guides
Provisions of	(omit)
Purchase	Buy
Purpose is to	(omit)
Pursuant to	By, following, under
Reason for	Why
Recapitulate	Sum up
Reduce	Cut
Reflect	Say, show
Regarding	About, of, on
Relating to	About, on
Relocation	Move
Remain	Stay
Remainder	Rest
Remuneration	Pay, payment
Render	Give, make
Request	Ask
Require	Must, need
Requirement	Need
Reside	Live
Retain	Keep
Review	Check, go over
Selection	Choice
Shall	Will
Shortfall	Shortage
Similar to	Like
Solicit	Ask for
State	Say
State-of-the-art	Latest
Subject	The, this, your
Submit	Give, send
Subsequent	Later, next
Subsequently	After, later, then
Substantial	Large, real, strong
Sufficient	Enough
Take action to	(omit), please
Task	Ask
Terminate	End, stop
That	(omit)
Therefore	So
There are	(omit), exists
Thereof	Its, their
This command	Us, we
Timely	Prompt
Time period	(either one)

Instead of	Try
Transmit	Send
Transpire	Happen, occur
-type	(omit)
Until such time as	Until
(the) use of	(omit)
Utilize, utilization	Use
Validate	Confirm
Value	Cost, worth
Verbatim	Word for word, exact
Viable	Practical, workable
Vice	Instead of, versus
Warrant	Call for, permit
Whenever	When
Whereas	Since
With reference to	About
With the exception of	Except for
Witnessed	Saw
Your office	You
/	And, or

## BOOKS ON WRITING

*Contemporary Business Writing* by Michael Adelstein, Random House 1971. A thorough college text that offers excellent instruction for the working writer.

*The Elements of Style*, third edition, by William Strunk, Jr., and E. B. White. Macmillan, 1979. These tips on style are sure to improve anyone's writing.

*English 3200: A Programmed Course in Grammar and Usage*, second edition, by Joseph C. Blumenthal. Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1972. Readers learn grammar, punctuation, and sentence construction by progressing through a series of questions and answers.

*Gobbledygook Has Gotta Go* by John O'Hayre, 1966. Through the examples come from the Bureau of Land Management, the problems are common in the Department of the Navy. Order through Superintendent of Documents, U.S. Government Printing Office, Washington, D.C. 20402.

*Handbook of Technical Writing* by Charles T. Brusaw, Gerald J. Aldred, and Walter E. Oliu. St. Martin's Press, 1976. Besides covering the elements of technical reports, this reference text answers hundreds of questions on grammar and punctuation.

*Harbrace College Handbook*, eighth edition, by Jon C. Hodges and Mary E. Whitten. Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1977. A popular reference on grammar and punctuation.

*Rudolph Flesch on Business Communications* by, you guessed it, Rudolph Flesch. Barnes and Noble, 1974. A small practical guide by the leading advocate of spoken writing.