

# Smart Writing!

Presented by

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## Use the Write Tools

Writers need quality tools, just as carpenters or mechanics do. (Different tools, of course!) Everyone who writes should invest in a few "handy helpers," and use them regularly.

### 1. A good dictionary.

Always keep a current, comprehensive version. *Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary* (now in its tenth edition) is a good choice, as is *The American Heritage Dictionary* (fourth edition).

**2. A thesaurus.** Don't rely on the limited functionality in your favorite word processing program! *Roget's* is the standard, but *Merriam-Webster's* is also excellent. J.I. Rodale's *Synonym*

*Finder* uses a somewhat different structure from *Roget's*, but many people find it simpler to use.

**3. The Elements of Style** by William Strunk, Jr. and E.B. White (often referred to as "*Strunk and White*"). A classic guide to proper English punctuation and grammar, it's small enough to tuck into any briefcase. A bit pedantic in spots, but invaluable.

**4. A style guide.** For all the complex grammar and usage issues *Strunk and White* doesn't address. *The Chicago Manual of Style* and *The Associated Press Stylebook* are both widely used. Novices may find the AP guide less daunting.

**5. Industry-specific references.** As an example, writers who encounter medical terminology in their work should always keep a copy of *Taber's Cyclopedic Medical Dictionary* within reach.

**6. A "cheat sheet."** Every writer struggles with certain words — you know, the ones you always misspell, misuse, or confuse with another similar word (*is it "effect" or "affect"?*). Make a list of your personal "problem words," along with any reminders or rules that apply. Post your "cheat sheet" near your computer or workstation. You'll save repeated "lookup" time!

— Michael Rankins

## Got Rock?

**Schoolhouse Rock**, that is. Almost everyone over 30 (and you know who you are) recalls these catchy, tuneful cartoons that appeared as between-program filler on Saturday morning television during the 1970s and 1980s.

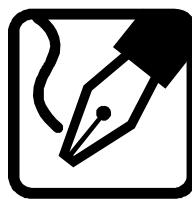
Now available on DVD

from Disney, *Schoolhouse Rock* makes a clever mnemonic device for all kinds of handy facts. Especially useful for writers are the "Grammar Rock" segments, which focus on the various parts of speech (nouns, verbs, conjunctions, and so on) and their functions in standard English grammar.

Once imbedded in your consciousness, these hummable songs will never let you forget that "*A Noun is a Person, Place, or Thing.*" Pick up a copy of *Schoolhouse Rock*, and you'll get a fun, painless English lesson. (And maybe a touch of nostalgia!)

## Is That Write?

- Hungarian journalist **Laszlo Biro** and his chemist brother **Georg** developed the first functional **ballpoint pen** in 1938. (The inkwell industry never recovered.)
- The **Sumerians** of southern Iraq developed the **first written language**, Cuneiform, about 3000 B.C.
- English novelist **John Creasey** published 562 books...and collected 743 rejection slips.



**Suggestions for an upcoming issue?**

**Share them!**

E-mail us:

[Michael@SwanShadow.com](mailto:Michael@SwanShadow.com)

**HAPPY HOLIDAYS!**



# SwanShadow

C O M M U N I C A T I O N S

6363 San Benito Way  
Rohnert Park, CA 94928

Phone: 707-585-8224  
E-mail: Michael@SwanShadow.com

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ON THE INTERNET:

[www.SwanShadow.com](http://www.SwanShadow.com)

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## Keep It Active!

Which of the following sentences do you find more interesting?

1. Writing in the active voice is something you should do whenever possible.
2. You should write in the active voice whenever possible.

Let me guess which you chose: #2, right? You see the reasons, I'm sure. Both sentences convey the same information, but the first is wordier (twelve words instead of nine) and has a clunky, overly formal sound. Option #2 feels crisper, more direct.

**Voice** makes the difference. The first example demonstrates **passive voice**; the second, **active voice**. Example #1 makes "writing" the subject of the sentence and distances "you" from the action. The second option, with "you" as the subject, puts the emphasis where it belongs.

You can recognize the passive voice easily. Look for:

1. A form of the verb "to be" ("is," in our example #1).
2. A "hidden actor." In the example, "you," the person doing the writing, "hides" toward the end

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### Writers Say...

*"Good writing is always a breaking of the soil, clearing away prejudices, pulling up of sour weeds of crooked thinking, stripping the turf so as to get at what is fertile beneath." — Henry Seidel Canby*

of the sentence. Sometimes, the "actor" hides so well it disappears, as in this sentence: "The hamburger was eaten." Who ate it? We don't know.

In most cases, business writers should use the active voice. Active voice engages the reader and saves words.

Sometimes you'll find good reason to use passive voice. Scientific and technical writers often use passive voice to avoid personal pronouns such as "I" and "we."

For example, a researcher might write, "The rhesus monkeys used in the study

were divided into test and control groups by size and weight." This example works because it's the monkeys, not the researcher, that are important to the reader.

An occasional sentence in passive voice can also be used just for variety. (See?)

Writers fall into overuse of passive voice because it sounds more impersonal and less "familiar." *Get over it!* In today's business communications, address your reader as directly and personally as you can. *Write the way you speak.* You'll find it's easier to get your point across.

— Michael Rankins