

# How to Write Tight!

Michelle Ule

## 1. What is Tight Writing?

- Tight writing is cleaning up your copy to take out extraneous words—or words you can remove without altering the basic intent of the sentence.
- It means watching for excessive words that bog down the reading experience for your readers.
- Tight writing conveys the story cleanly and efficiently.
- Tight writing doesn't mean it's not beautifully written. Writers display their abilities when they know how to choose the precise word for what they mean to say.
- Skillful writing doesn't use any more words than necessary.
- Clarity is more important than brevity—but they can go together.
- You can't go wrong with tight writing.

## 2. Why is it important?

- You want your reader to enjoy the experience. The easier you make your writing for readers to read and understand, the faster they'll read and the longer they'll stay with your story.
- There's no reason to make your manuscript harder to read—unless you are deliberately trying to confuse the reader or dare them to quit reading before they finish.
- Obviously, if you're writing a genre requiring a distinctive style, follow the genre's guidelines. (I'm thinking flowery Victorian prose, such as in a *tour de force* novel set in that era).

## 3. Anatomy of a sentence

- Strong verbs—make sure we know the subject of your sentence, which is the person/thing using the verb.
- Active voice means a sentence has a subject *acting* upon its verb. Passive voice means a subject *receives* a verb's action.
- Passive verbs are weak verbs.
  - a. **Example:** “She was listening to the radio as she cleaned the room,” is laborious. Instead, try, “As she cleaned the room, she listened to the radio.”

## 4. How to identify “flabby” writing?

- a. Read your work aloud.
- b. Use a word census to discover your personal overused words.
- c. Watch for wobbly words or redundancies.
- d. Be specific. Say what you mean and mean what you say.
- e. Avoid vague words. Be brave!

## 5. Make corrections as you listen to what you're reading.

- a. Hearing your work rather than reading your work helps you recognize sentences that go on too long.
- b. Shorten overlong sentences to smooth out the read. (You'll appreciate this step if you narrate your book!)
- c. Hearing can help you recognize misused forms of a verb, or overuse of a word.

**Examples:** "such, rather, things, about," are *modifiers*. We often use them when we don't want to make a declarative statement (In other words, we're hedging. Don't do that.).

## 6. Be careful with semi-colons.

- a. I love them, too, but semi-colons can confuse readers.
- b. Does the sentence make more sense to the casual reader if it's turned into two sentences?

## 7. Watch for adjectives and adverbs—words ending in LY.

- a. You often don't need them if your verb is strong enough.
- b. Do they help readers better understand what you're saying?
- c. Reduce, refine, or remove.

## Tricks to improve your writing after the above corrections?

- a. Include sensory details to better draw the reader into your book's world—fiction or nonfiction.
- b. Select words that elicit emotions.
- c. Try to use visually evocative words.
- d. Limit clichés
- e. Ask yourself what emotions or images you're trying to paint for your readers?
- f. Use "beats" instead of "he said, she said."
- g. Vary of the structure of the sentences. Don't put them all in the same format.
- h. Be careful with homonyms—words that sound the same but have different meanings. (Bare/bear, pour/poor, their/there/they're).
- i. Vary use of names in a paragraph.
- j. If you have four sentences in one paragraph referring to Jane, start the paragraph with Jane.
  - a. Second sentence a form of "she."
  - b. Third sentence you can use Jane again or continue with a pronoun.
  - c. Just don't use Jane's name in all four sentences in one paragraph.

## Typical "weasel words." Question your use of *each one*.

- It is/was. Watch for all uses of the verb "to be." Find and replace it with a stronger verb.
- There is/was
- That (Test: Read aloud. If the meaning is clear *without that*, cut it. Otherwise leave it.)
- Just
- Very

- Nearly
- Quite
- Almost
- Sort of
- Rather
- Turned to . . .
- Began to . . .

This handout ends with a series of links you can review for more information and suggestions on how to tighten your writing.

Now I'd like to talk about how I check my work to evaluate and ensure my writing is clean.

I'm considered by editors as a "clean writer," which means I don't usually require a lot of work on my manuscripts. Because I put in so much time before I turn it in to ensure my writing is the clearest and best work I can do, I'm an easy writer to edit.

I have never required more than a day or two to complete returned edits from an editor. Believe me, publishers and editors really appreciate copy that's easy to work with.

As writers, we want to be easy to work with. Diva writers are challenging and sometimes your attitude toward writing—do you take it professionally or just turn in anything?—is not appreciated.

Normally when I'm editing, I look at those overused words and check each sentence in which they appear—looking to strengthen the verb or, often, change the sentence itself.

### **Suggested Links**

[Debbie Burke on 12 Tips to Write Tight.](#)

[Monica M. Clark on The Write Practice: 9 Simple Tips for Writing with Clarity](#)

[The Writing Center: UNC at Chapel Hill: Writing Concisely](#)

[Dan Koboldt: 7 Ways to Tighten Your Prose](#)

[Books & Such Blog: Michelle Ule, The Value of a Word Census](#)

[Kaelyn Barron: 8 Tips for Concise Writing](#)

[C.S. Lakin: 6 Quick Tricks to Help You Tighten Up Your Writing](#)

[Michelle Ule's Writing Tips from her website](#)