

A graphic of a speech bubble with a black outline and a drop shadow. Inside the bubble, the text "Tip of the Month" is written in a yellow, casual, handwritten-style font.

## Tip of the Month

January 2015

### Avoiding these words should be one of your 2015 New Year's resolutions

Since you are reading these tips, you are probably an unlikely candidate to be using slang in your writing. However, in keeping with the main principle behind plain language writing—to write with your reader in mind—you just never know. **Read more...**

Maybe one day the target group you are writing for will warrant the use of “boo,” “turnt” or “vape.” Somehow it seems unlikely, but just in case, here’s a rundown of slang terms that cropped up in 2014. Now you will be up to speed on the latest, but hardly the greatest. Hopefully instead of using these new slang terms in your writing, you can banish them forever!

- Bae – stands for “before anyone else.” It is another way to say “baby” as a term of endearment.
- Bare – another way of saying “a lot.”
- Basic – used to describe any person, place or activity involving really obvious behaviour, dress or action. Can also mean a boring, typical or dull person/thing.
- Boo – refers to a boyfriend or girlfriend.
- Bye, Felicia – used when someone is leaving or you want someone to leave that you really couldn’t care less about.

- Chirped – used when you are called out on something.
- Cray cray – when someone is really acting crazy.
- Damp – used when something is really good or awesome.
- Doe – shorter way to say “though.” Used to emphasize something.
- Ghost – used when someone has disappeared or they don’t seem to be around anymore.
- Hangry – used when you are so hungry that you start getting angry.
- I can’t even – used when you have so many emotions you are left speechless.
- MCM/WCM – stands for Man Crush Monday and Woman Crush Wednesday.
- Normcore – a fashion trend that is characterized by wearing clothes that are average-looking, undistinguished and normal.
- On fleek – used when something is on point or perfect.
- Rad – short for radical. Used when cool and awesome don’t quite cut it.
- Ship – short word for relationship, but it can also mean two people should be in a relationship.
- Slay – used similar to how “killin it” is used; i.e. when you have succeeded in something amazing. Can also mean hooking up with someone for sex.
- Squad – another word for your crew or group of friends.
- Swag money – used in a sentence to emphasize “rich greatness.”
- TBT – stands for Throw Back Thursdays. Very popular on Instagram and Facebook. Teens who believe they are super cool will use TBT on other days of the week too.
- The feels – used when something makes you so emotional that it makes you want to cry and question life at the same time.
- Thirsty – used when you really want something or someone.
- Throwing shade – used when you give someone attitude.
- Turnt – used when excited or hyped up for the party or night. Can also mean fun and/or rowdy.
- Turnt up – used when someone is getting loose or being wild.

- Vape – a term to describe when you inhale vapour from e-cigarettes. Used because “smoking” an e-cig doesn’t apply as there is not any smoke, only vapour. (Source: [Huffington Post](#), retrieved January 2015)

In addition, TIME’s 2014 list of words that it would like to banish include the business jargon terms “disrupt” and “influencer.” And from Australia, The Plain English Foundation voted “conscious uncoupling” as the worst word for 2014. This is how Gwyneth Paltrow and her husband described their separation.

If you do find that you need to use some of this New-Agey slang to suit the needs of your target audience, don’t be too hard on yourself.

Even the Oxford Dictionary isn’t immune; it has added new words like “selfie” and “truthiness.” The 2015 edition will include “methface.” When used as a noun this means “a condition crystal methamphetamine addicts regularly develop that causes scabs and pock marks on the user’s face. The sores are often accompanied by premature facial aging.” When used as slang it means “a slur used to describe any person’s ugly face, typically one with acne.”

**Ideally, banish slang altogether—whether the old school variety or the new pop culture version. However, keep an open mind; whether to use slang or not should be determined by your target audience.**

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## Tip of the Month

February 2015

### Numbers need not be boring—they may just be the ingredients you need to spice up your writing

The best writing is always the best storytelling, and numbers can make your story even more compelling. Numbers don't have to be a big yawn if you use them creatively. **Read more...**

Numbers and creativity don't usually go hand in hand, but they should. Not only can including numbers make your writing more engaging, it can add credibility. Spice up your writing by spicing up how you present numbers. Here's how:

- **Separate numbers from your body copy if you have a lot of them:** Rather than using multiple numbers right in your body copy—which can bog it down—highlight the numbers by separating them from your body copy. For example, use sidebars and charts with engaging titles. This way the numbers support your narrative in an interesting way.
- **Use bullets:** Develop an intriguing lead-in paragraph and then let bullets do their magic by providing a concise and logical way to present numbers.
- **Make analogies:** Compare the numbers with things that your target audience can relate to, like "...that's the height of the CN Tower ten times over."

- **Round up or down:** Use the word “approximately” to round numbers up or down so that decimal points don’t clutter your writing—unless of course you need to be precise, for instance, in a statistical or financial report. In addition, try using words like “more than” or “less than” for emphasis: “We set a sales record in January by selling more than 1,000 cupcakes” or “Our staff turnover is almost non-existent at less than 1% of our workforce annually.”

### **Numbers as a big yawn or an engaging element?**

**It’s all up to how you present them. Take a creative approach to numbers and they’ll make your writing more compelling and more credible.**



## Tip of the Month

**March 2015**

**Use transition words in your writing  
just like you do when you're talking  
—no need to sound awkward or like you're bumbling along**

Awkward pauses, confusing train of thought, abrupt ending—all are easily avoided when you are speaking with someone, by using transition words and phrases. Similarly, in your writing, transition words and phrases can help keep your information moving along. **Read more...**

In addition to helping create a smooth flow for your information, transition words and phrases can also enhance understanding because you connect the dots. But that's not all; just like during a discussion, you can use transition words and phrases to add character. Here are some examples to keep handy in your clear writing bag of tricks. Experiment with them at the beginning of a sentence versus within a sentence—and sometimes they even work at the end of a sentence.

**To compare information:**

- **Similarly**, the researchers came to the same conclusion.
- **Likewise**, the participants enjoyed the second phase.

**To contrast information:**

- **At the same time**, we need to include as many employees as possible.
- **However**, your organization may not find it relevant.
- **Otherwise**, we won't be able to move forward.

**To add information:**

- **First**, the researchers confirmed the hypothesis.
- **Also**, the participants need to provide their ages.
- **Besides**, the committee will already be in the capital city.

**To add emphasis:**

- **Certainly**, we can arrange that right away.
- **Above all**, we must do our best.
- **In fact**, we can do it right now.

**To include an example:**

- **For example**, he could exercise in front of the TV.
- **For instance**, he could take a course in the summer.
- **In particular**, the tide comes in at the same time every day.

**To convey consequences:**

- **Consequently**, I am going to finish up tomorrow.
- **Accordingly**, I interviewed all of the employees.
- **For this reason**, we are known for our high quality.
- **As a result**, the second time around will be better.

**To convey a timeline:**

- **Soon** you will have to address it.
- **Earlier**, you had told me about it.
- **Eventually**, he'll have to get to the point.
- **In the meantime**, I went to the bank.

**To summarize information:**

- **In summary**, he is definitely guilty.
- **In conclusion**, the earth is round.
- **In other words**, it is the highest quality available.
- **Therefore**, the students must attend an extra lecture.

**To get a move on and then keep things moving,  
transition words and phrases are your answer.**



A graphic consisting of a white rounded rectangle with a black border and a black shadow, resembling a speech bubble. The text "Tip of the Month" is written inside in a yellow, casual font.

## Tip of the Month

**April 2015**

**Say goodbye once and for all to “he/she,” “he or she” and “(s)he”—time to just ditch them forever, please!**

In the writing world, it’s right up there; in fact, it may be as controversial as the [Oxford comma](#). Writers either love or hate using “they” to avoid options like “he/she,” “he or she,” or “(s)he.” Become a lover. **Read more...**

So what’s the big deal? As we covered in the [November 2011 tip](#), the whole “they” issue crops up as a way to avoid gender bias. Basically, when the gender is not clear, using “he” could be considered gender bias. To avoid this, a range of (highly irritating) options emerged including “he/she,” “he or she,” and (brace yourself) the worst of the lot, “(s)he.”

Maybe you can sense our bias here, as the [November 2011 tip](#) recommends: “Unless you are under duress due to your organization’s style guide, avoid “s/he” because it adds confusion. Most readers have to stop and think through what the “s/he” means as it often comes across as a symbol. Not only does “s/he” interrupt your reader’s flow, once they figure it out, they often think, ‘Is that really necessary?’”

In a nutshell it all comes down to the fact that English does not have a gender-neutral...and a singular...third-person pronoun. As a result, “they” is increasingly used for this purpose. However, technically speaking, “they” denotes plural so it should not be used regarding singular forms like “he” and “she.” Did you get that? So much for clear language! The Wall Street Journal couldn’t have explained it better. Check out their piece here: [\*‘They,’ the Singular Pronoun, Gets Popular.\*](#)

**Let’s continue to give “they” a chance  
—and hopefully not have to resort to the Swedish solution of “hen.”**



## Tip of the Month

May 2015

### Begin a sentence with “and” or “but”—go crazy!

Perhaps it was your grade one teacher or a parent or *that* colleague (you know the one). At some point, almost everyone has been warned to never start a sentence with “and” or “but.” In fact, this style preference disguised as a grammar rule has become so entrenched that it is often touted with unwavering authority, striking fear in the hearts and minds of any writer who dares to do otherwise.

But maybe it’s time to shake it up a bit (for example, the previous sentence successfully starts with a “but” with no lightning bolts, locusts or floods). Live on the edge and, just like you would consider any other sentence structure, consider beginning a sentence with “and” or “but”...**Read more...**

It’s hard to know exactly how this grammar myth began that “and” and “but” have no business starting a sentence. One theory is that sometimes primary school teachers introduce “rules” (that aren’t actually grammar rules) as a way to teach writing without overwhelming students all at once with all the exceptions and intricacies that plague the English language.

However, this “rule” in particular seems to have stuck. Rather than recognizing it as a style preference, many have adopted it as a grammar rule.

In fact, many think of the “never begin a sentence with ‘and’ or ‘but’ rule” as also including other conjunctions beyond “and” and “but.” For example, many strictly adhere to the mantra to never begin a sentence with and, but, like, or, nor, for, yet, so, since, unless and until.

Ironically, although beginning a sentence with “and” or “but” is often considered taboo, there is in fact nothing grammatically wrong with it. Experimenting with your sentence structures is usually a good thing; beginning a sentence with a conjunction can add variety and create interest.

All you may need is to make a psychological shift. It may just have to sink in that this so-called rule is not actually a grammar rule. And then go for it; using prepositions at the beginning of a sentence here and there is sure to take your writing in all kinds of new directions. However, if you are concerned about those out there who still mistakenly think that it’s a grammar mistake, then play it safe and keep your prepositions to later in your sentences.

**As long as English has been around, writers have begun sentences with  
“and” and “but”  
—now you can too, if you dare.**



## Tip of the Month

### June 2015

#### End a sentence with a preposition—go for it!

Just like the [May 2015 tip](#) explained that there is no grammatical basis for banning the use of a conjunction at the beginning of a sentence, so too there is no need to banish the use of a preposition at the end of a sentence. Once you make the psychological shift, the opportunities are endless. **Read more...**

As with many myths, it's often difficult to determine just how this never-end-a-sentence-with-a-preposition-myth evolved. Some hypothesize that it goes back to the 17th and 18th centuries when Latin grammar rules were often applied to English. The only catch is that English is not Latin, so many of the rules did not and still do not apply. It's definitely time to bust the myth that it is grammatically incorrect to end a sentence with a preposition.

First, here's a preposition refresher. A preposition creates a relationship between the other words in a sentence. Interestingly, prepositions often have to do with time and space. Examples include by, on, in, at, to, over, about, before and after.

No matter what the preposition, it is okay to end a sentence with it as long as the preposition is necessary. Sometimes you'll find a preposition at the end of a sentence that's just taking up space with no solid reason for being. Although using unnecessary prepositions is not necessarily incorrect, getting rid of them often helps make your writing more concise and smoother. If the preposition isn't necessary, then cut it. For example:

- Where did that document go to? ...drop the "to" to become "Where did that document go?"
- Where is the phone number at? ...drop the "at" to become "Where is the phone number?"

By contrast, some prepositions are necessary for the sentence to make sense. If this is the situation, then go for it—hold your head high and end your sentence with a preposition. For example, in the sentence "What did you sit on?" the preposition "on" is necessary; otherwise, it would be "What did you sit?" which doesn't make sense.

Rather than going out of your way to avoid ending a sentence with a preposition, the next time the opportunity arises, try the preposition out. However, you may have to put up with a few raised eyebrows of those who still mistakenly think it's a grammar error.

Of course, if you find it too hard to get your head around the fact that there is nothing grammatically wrong with ending a sentence with a preposition, then you could always try resequencing to avoid ending with a preposition. For example, "What did you sit on?" could become "On what did you sit?" But then you really will sound like a throwback to the 18th century.

**For as long as the grammar myth about not ending a sentence with a preposition has been around, writers who are "in the know" have been having happy endings by using prepositions. You can too!**

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## Tip of the Month

July 2015

### Split an infinitive...or two—really, it's okay!

If you are giving the [May 2015 tip](#) a try, you are holding your head high and using conjunctions to begin sentences (just like the next sentence...). And if you are giving the [June 2015 tip](#) a try, you are also bravely ending sentences with prepositions when it works. And now, if you follow this tip, you can add splitting infinitives to your list of “Dos” rather than “Don’ts.” **Read more...**

The myth that it’s grammatically incorrect to split infinitives dates back to the 17th and 18th centuries when Latin grammar rules were often (mistakenly) applied to English. You can spot an infinitive when you see a verb in a two-word format like “to write” or “to read.” When you put something in between the two parts—usually an adverb—you’ve just split an infinitive. For example:

- Split infinitive: You have to really try hard.
- Un-split: You really have to try hard.

So what’s wrong with splitting an infinitive? Nothing! It’s all a matter of style. Depending on what you want to emphasize, splitting an infinitive might be the very best thing to give your message the tone you are looking for...or not. As with all writing techniques, you need to assess whether to split or not to split on a situational basis.

For example, the split infinitive “I need to quickly finish dinner” also works well without the split: “I need to finish dinner quickly.” By contrast, in the next example, *not* splitting the infinitive sounds awkward and unnatural and to some degree alters the meaning: “On the way home, I need to quickly pick up some milk” (split infinitive) versus “On the way home, I need to pick up some milk quickly” (un-split).

To use one of the most famous split infinitives of them all, are you ready to boldly go where many writers are afraid to go and split your infinitives? Just be forewarned that you are sure to come across the naysayers who still mistakenly believe the split infinitive grammar myth.

**All kinds of respected writers have been splitting infinitives for centuries;  
sometimes the split works well, sometimes not so well,  
but it is almost always grammatically correct.**





## Tip of the Month

### August 2015

#### **Achieve balance with rest, relaxation, and, most importantly, parallel structure**

You know that nagging feeling when you have it; something just isn't quite right. It may be your word selection...or maybe it's word placement...but often it's sentence structure. Remedy that off-kilter feeling and improve your writing by checking that your sentences are in balance by following a parallel structure. **Read more...**

When a sentence just doesn't seem quite right, it may be off balance. This happens when there isn't a parallel structure. In grammar-speak this is referred to as faulty parallelism, which means that you are using inconsistent grammatical forms. Inconsistency throws your sentence off balance. You can often just feel it...

You try; which sentence is faulty and which is balanced?

- “The kids at the park were rambunctious, loud and they were happy” versus “The kids at the park were rambunctious, loud and happy.”

...Ahhh, as you read the second option, everything should just slide naturally into balance (...it's like the exhale on your downward dog). Now what about this one?

“After graduation he is selling his stuff, buying a plane ticket and travelling around the world for a year” versus “After graduation he is selling his stuff, buys a plane ticket and will travel around the world for a year.”

The first option is smooth sailing—everything is in balance— whereas the second option has some bumps along the road due to faulty parallelism. Make all your sentences feel just right by checking their balance.

### Look for patterns

To avoid faulty parallelism and ensure your sentences have a balanced structure, look for patterns. A balanced sentence uses the same grammatical form for all the items included in the sentence. For example:

- If the first item in the series uses the “ing” form (gerund), the remaining items should follow suit. For example, Carolyn likes running, biking and swimming.
- If the first item in the series uses a phrase, the remaining items should follow suit. For example, Carolyn likes to run, to bike and to swim (OR just to run, bike and swim).
- If the first item in the series is a clause, the remaining items should follow suit. For example, Carolyn usually finds people who like to do things outside, who like to travel and who like to read.

**For smooth and easy reading, balance your sentences by checking how things match rather than mismatch.**



## Tip of the Month

September 2015

### Myth Busting:

**Plain language writing isn't appropriate for high-literacy audiences.  
Really?**

Most of you reading this right now would likely be considered high literacy...or a professional audience...or an audience of industry insiders.

So as a high-literacy audience, when you are reading business-to-business information, is it useful to you when it's so densely loaded with jargon and fancy words that it wears you down? Of course not! **Read more...**

Fortunately, plain language writing is the way to go for clarity no matter who your target audience is— low or high literacy or anywhere in between.

Here's the thing—plain language writing is all about the target audience. The writer uses plain language writing techniques to make sure that the language, structure and presentation all work together to suit the needs of a specific audience. As a result, what is “plain language” to one type of audience may not be “plain language” to another. And that's more than just okay—where clarity is concerned, it's great:

- If your target audience's literacy level is high, they appreciate clearly written information because it is quickly engaging and makes it easy for them to take from it what they need.
- If your target audience's literacy level is low, they need clearly written information so they are not only able to read it, but also understand it.

So if you are writing for rocket scientists, definitely use rocket scientist terms, because that's what they are familiar with.

**Make the best match between the characteristics of your target audience and how you write the information, and you'll find that plain language writing is appropriate for all kinds of audiences.**



## Tip of the Month

October 2015

### Embrace neuroscience —it's definitely the way to go for clarity

Plain language writing techniques allow you to take advantage of how the human mind works. No wonder it makes everything easier to read and understand. **Read more...**

As researchers learn more about how the brain works, we're learning more about how plain language writing techniques help make information clearer no matter what the type of target audience. For instance, research into the fascinating worlds of neuroscience and cognitive psychology shows that humans:

- **Can only take in a small amount of information at once.** In fact, multi-tasking is a myth. It turns out that the brain is what is referred to as a “sequential processor.” Although we may like the idea of being able to process many things at once, we're just not built that way. We are not actually able to pay attention to two things at once; when we try to it leads to less productivity and more mistakes.

- **Read familiar words faster than uncommon words.** And you guessed it, plain language writing is all about selecting user-friendly language. In addition, simple and short words are just generally more common in language than lengthy, complex words, so selecting them helps your target audience read faster (which likely leads to increased satisfaction in finding the information they need).
- **Scan information, especially when it's long.** Plain language techniques use numerous tricks of the trade like subheadings, short paragraphs and bulleted lists to help readers find what they need as easily and quickly as possible. With plain language it's all about helping the target audience get the job done, so the top priority is making sure they can find the information they need so they can act on it.

**Keep an eye out for new developments in neuroscience and corresponding new insights into plain language writing techniques.**



## Tip of the Month

**November 2015**

### **Write clearly no matter what ...with the help of style guidelines**

As we start wrapping up the year, it's important to keep clear on one thing throughout 2016; no matter what the topic—whether simple or complicated—it can be clear. **Read more...**

All topics and no matter what the medium—everything from a brief hard copy brochure to a lengthy report to a website—can be clear. Not only clear but also engaging...it is possible! You can make it so by incorporating plain English writing techniques (a.k.a. clear language) into every sentence you write.

**Here's how...**

Most traditional editorial style guides typically include guidelines related to the fundamentals of grammar and punctuation, like the use of apostrophes, colons and commas, as well as formatting conventions like the use of bold, spacing and headings. Why not add plain English writing guidelines to your organization's editorial standards? You can incorporate plain English writing guidelines in a variety of ways:

- **Option:** Develop stand-alone guidelines for your organization that specifically focus on plain English writing techniques.
- **Another option:** If your organization already has an editorial style guide, complement it with guidelines that specifically focus on plain English writing techniques. Your staff members can use the existing style guide for advice regarding punctuation and grammar and follow the plain English guidelines specifically regarding clear writing.
- **And another option:** Select one of the excellent editorial style guides out there as your organization's editorial style guide for punctuation and grammar (think *Canadian Press Stylebook* and *Canadian Style*) and complement it with guidelines that specifically focus on plain English writing techniques.

**Bring the language of clarity to all of your organization's written information through guidelines focused on plain English writing techniques.**

To get started, here are some plain English style guideline examples.



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## Tip of the Month

**December 2015**

### **Improve your writing by picking brains**

There certainly are a lot of very talented business writers out there. And likewise, organizations of all shapes and sizes are shining as they bring the language of clarity to their written information. These writers and organizations have a lot to offer, so as the year draws to a close, here's a roundup of various clear language resources. **Read more...**

2016 will definitely be filled with clarity if you can get through all of these resources. And of course, topping the list are our very own Clear Language @ Work complimentary materials:

- [Clear Language @ Work Online Complimentary Resources](#)
- [Answering the Critics of Plain Language, Professor Joseph Kimble](#)
- [Clear Writing - Ontario Ministry of Agriculture, Food & Rural Affairs, Canada](#)
- [Compilation of various plain English statutes: California, Connecticut, Florida, Minnesota, New York and Pennsylvania](#)
- [Easy-to-Read NYC: Guidelines for Clear and Effective Communication, New York City, Mayor's Office of Adult Education/Mayor's Office of Immigrant Affairs](#)
- [National Institutes of Health Plain Language Training](#)

- [National Institutes of Health, United States Department of Health and Human Services](#)
- [Oxford Guide to Plain English, Martin Cutts](#)
- [Plain English Lexicon: A guide to whether your words will be understood](#)
- [Plain Language: A Handbook for Writers in the U.S. Federal Government](#)
- [Plain Language – Office of Parliamentary Counsel, Australian Government](#)
- [Plain Language Standard, State of Oregon](#)
- [Plain Language Works Best – Los Angeles County, Quality and Productivity Commission](#)
- [Plain Talk at Ecology, Department of Ecology, State of Washington](#)
- [Public Works and Government Services Canada, Translation Bureau](#)
- [United States Federal Government Plain Language Website](#)
- [United States Fish & Wildlife Service](#)

#### Plain Language Associations:

- [Plain Language Association International](#)
- [Clarity International](#)
- [Plain language.gov](#)
- [Centre for Plain Language](#)



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