

# Discovering my writing weaknesses

by Bill Janke

*Conversations on Writing (COW)*

[billjanke@gmail.com](mailto:billjanke@gmail.com)

© 2009 Bill Janke. All rights reserved.

Every time I write, I discover something about my writing. By making an effort to notice patterns developing, I can eliminate unnecessary words, substitute weak words with ones that describe, and clarify the ambiguous areas.

I have a tendency to overuse *that* in my writing. It is an issue I have struggled with since my tenth-grade English teacher challenged us to not use *that* at all. I opted to use it as little as possible as I saw the value in using *that* in a sentence. Sometimes, it just makes good sense to say *that* instead of *which* or leaving it out of a sentence. Years later, the *Microsoft Manual of Style for Technical Publications* (MOSS) absolved my guilt over using *that*. According to MOSS, "Including *that* prevents ambiguity and helps you understand the sentence."

The following examples come from MOSS:

## **Correct**

You will need to supply information about applications *that* you want to run with Windows.

## **Incorrect**

You will need to supply information about applications *which* you want to run with Windows.

You will need to supply information about applications you want to run with Windows.

Another tendency I have is using the words "but" and "however" to connect two opposing phrases in one sentence or beginning a sentence with "but" and "however."

Here are some examples:

## **Weak**

"We know you would like to stay out until midnight, *but/however* you have a 10 p.m. curfew on school nights."

## **Better**

"We know you would like to stay out until midnight. *However*, you have a 10 p.m. curfew on school nights."

## **Best**

"We know you think a 10 p.m. curfew on school nights is restricting your social life. Can you see why it is important for you to get a good night's rest?"

I can cite more of my bad writing habits. I won't waste your time because you get the basic idea and are probably thinking of a few weaknesses of your own. The point I am making is that all of us struggle with bad habits. We tend to operate in a default mode with the subconscious attempting to control our writing processes.

You can overcome many of your weaknesses by following these suggestions:

- Avoid editing as you write. It slows down the writing process.
- Read your piece aloud. You will hear your mistakes before you will see them.
- Have someone read it back to you. You will better determine if you clearly communicated your thought.

- Vary your sentence structure, avoid starting every sentence with a subject, turn some sentences into questions and use introductory clauses.
- Omit needless words and phrases and avoid repetition.

“If at first you don’t succeed . . .” you know the rest of the sentence. Never give up trying to improve your writing. Don’t be afraid to ask others for help. Keep learning new ways to express yourself. Keep reading to see how others write. And, most importantly – keep writing.

### **About the author**

Bill Janke has extensive experience in writing for print and electronic media. His work has appeared in materials for training, documentation, marketing, advertising, and public relations. He works as a technical writer and instructional designer for WAUSAU Financial Systems, Inc. in Omaha, Nebraska. He also enjoys photography and sells his work at art fairs.