

Is your writing **fit** or *flabby*?

by Bill Janke

Conversations on Writing (COW)

billjanke@gmail.com

© 2009 Bill Janke. All rights reserved.

Having the capacity to write well is equivalent to having a well-toned body. Just as diet and exercise keep your body in shape, an adherence to a regimen of good writing practices keeps your mind fresh, focused, and ready to face any writing challenges you encounter.

In athletics or writing, your abilities diminish from lack of use. You can tell when an athlete is out of shape. His performance is sluggish, his body carries a few extra pounds, he becomes easily fatigued, and he has difficulty focusing on the sport. In the same way, out of shape writers tend to add unnecessary words and phrases, drift off the subject, use weak sentence structures, and allow negative words into their text.

The 2009 edition of *The Elements of Style*, writers William Strunk, Jr. and E.B. White, offer writers solid advice for toning one's writing. They advise writers to do the following:

- Use the active voice as it "is more direct and vigorous than the passive." Omit needless phrases and words "for the same reason that a drawing should have no unnecessary lines and a machine no unnecessary parts." A prime example of a needless phrase is "the fact that." And instead of saying *he acted in a hasty manner* you can say *he acted hastily*.
- Use positive statements because ". . . the reader is dissatisfied with being told only what is not; he wishes to be told what is . . . it is better to express a negative in a positive form." For example, instead of saying someone is *not honest*, just say he is *dishonest*. Also, substitute *not* with *never*.
- Use one paragraph for each topic ". . . to aid the reader. The beginning of each paragraph is a signal to him that a new step in the development of the subject has been reached."

This little book was first published in 1918 and remains a reliable guide to clear English writing style.

A colleague sent the following example of flabby writing to me for revision as she thought it sounded "clunky." The letter lacked focus, avoided the purpose of the letter, and gave conflicting points of contact:

Dear Customer,

It has always been the objective of XYZ, Inc. to provide the highest quality products and services to our customers. In an industry faced with rapid technology changes, we remain committed to improving our solutions and services. XYZ, Inc. offers Widget currently to clients at no charge. Widget is used as your choice for a remote support connection method. While XYZ, Inc. over the last several years has offered Widgets at no cost to the customer in today's business environment we can no longer continue to offer this option at no cost.

You are currently a customer using Widget for remote support. This change in pricing requires a time sensitive decision and will result in changes to your annual costs for remote support. This change in remote support pricing requires customers to notify XYZ of a decision by November 1st, 2009. Customers not notifying XYZ of a decision for an alternative remote support method will be assessed the uplift charge based on the amount of time left on their support contract.

XYZ would like to work with each customer to discuss the impact of this change, any concerns and questions you may have on this change. Please contact Remote Services rservices@xyz.com to schedule a time to discuss the upcoming changes and the options available to you.

In addition your (sic) XYZ Relationship Manager or Account Support Manager are available to discuss your migration options and questions on the specific cost changes for your organization. It is my hope that this letter will provide you with the necessary lead-time for making a decision. If you have any additional

questions or concerns, please feel free to contact XYZ, Inc. support at call_center@xyz.com or 800-XXX-XXXX.

I returned the following version to her twenty minutes later as she needed it the same afternoon:

Dear (customer name),

You are receiving this letter as you are a valued customer of XYZ, Inc. who uses Widget for remote support connection at no charge. Unfortunately, due to the current business environment, we must begin charging for this service.

We need to know from you by November 1, 2009 if you wish to continue using Widget or if you would prefer to use another approved method also at a cost. If you do not notify us by that date, your organization will be charged based on the amount of time left on your support contract.

Please contact us at rservices@xyz.com to schedule a time to discuss the changes and the options available and any concerns and questions.

Sincerely,

My trimmed and toned letter explains in the first sentence why the customer is receiving the letter and then delivers the bad news – we are going to charge you for something we gave you for free. In the following paragraphs, I tell the customer when we need a decision, what we are going to do if the customer doesn't contact us, and the point of contact.

As a writer, you never know when an opportunity to write presents itself. If you practice good writing habits on a continuing basis your writing will be fit and not flabby.

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.