

# The Conference Board of Canada

Writing training

August 2019



## 04. Use Anglo-Saxon words.

Some writers think long words are impressive. Needlessly difficult terms, however, can make writing vague and hard to follow. Short, clear, active words communicate your meaning plainly and quickly. Employ them whenever possible. Choosing shorter words with Anglo-Saxon roots over longer ones with Latin or Greek roots is a simple way of making your writing more reader-friendly. Try to use the shorter form whenever possible.

Latin	Anglo-Saxon	Latin	Anglo-Saxon
adequate	enough	equitable	fair
articles	things	fabricate	made
articulate	say	finalize	end
attempt	try	gratitude	thanks

## 06. Structure reports to be read.

At CBOC, we aim to communicate intelligently. Our writing must be informed, thoughtful and, as a result, likely to present sound conclusions that are rooted in reason and evidence rather than emotion and conjecture. Our writing should use simple structures, concise and material content, and well-managed generality and specificity.

### Build a simple structure

The basic structure of all written content:

Situation ▶ Problem ▶ Analysis ▶ Recommendations ▶ Conclusion



THE CONFERENCE BOARD OF CANADA

# Writing for digital in a research-driven world.

The Conference Board of Canada (CBOC) is the nation's leading research organization.

Since 1954, it has conducted rigorous analysis of complex social, industrial and environmental challenges. Its methods are sound and its conclusions are defensible.

## Digital-first distribution

CBOC made the strategic decision to expand its communications products beyond long-form reports available as downloadable PDFs. The offerings include a broad range of digital-first media, including blog posts, podcasts, video interviews and more. The rationale was to provide more choice for decision-makers. Output formats don't overlap in word count, audience, or intended impact. The organization's first step was to develop an updated brand voice. It established specific values to impart across every touchpoint: Curious. Collaborative. Professional. Visionary.

The leadership team then had the opportunity to train its researchers in writing tactics specific to the brand voice and digital media more broadly. Stiff was contracted to

develop a one-day curriculum that would complement the researchers' academic writing backgrounds.

## The changing landscape of writing

We built training modules according to our proprietary writing training system, Backdraft. We introduced the modules by examining the concept of writing itself. Writing is not a talent bestowed from the cosmic ether. Writing is a skill just like carpentry or needlepoint. It can be learned, practiced and perfected.

### Learn how to write for digital

Participants learn the principles and techniques that are fundamental to writing for digital media, including the importance of concision, audience awareness and simple sentence structures, and the need to use plain language.

### Vary the rhythm

Participants learn how and when to deploy sentences of five words or fewer in their copy, and the particular

effects of these short sentences in the beginning, middle and end of paragraphs.

**Purge jargon**

Participants will learn how to recognize jargon and purge it from their writing. Copy becomes more precise and easier to understand as a result.

**Prefer Anglo-Saxon words**

Participants will learn to identify the long, Latin-based words they use most frequently, and understand how Anglo-Saxon based synonyms make writing clearer and easier to read.

**Be brief**

Participants will learn to identify seven common habits that add nothing but length and complexity to sentences. They will discover how to repair these weaknesses and, as a result, reduce length and tighten the focus and energy of their prose.

**Structure reports to be read**

Participants will learn key principles of report writing and presentation, including how to structure documents for three discrete types of readers (i.e., the full reader, the five-minute reader and the two-minute reader).

***Discussion is everything***

All participants were fiercely engaged with the subject matter. They discovered their own writing personalities through a short quiz, then debated the credibility of the results.

Much of our training focused on eliminating jargon and preferring plain language. We wanted to make the researchers comfortable with distilling their methodologies and conclusions into key findings that the average

Canadian could absorb easily. These lessons prompted lively discussion and led to more questions about CBOC strategy: Does the report know it's a report? Does the document speak about itself?

***Outcomes show progress***

We learned that participants feel committed to existing formats and styles for their work. They have extensive experience writing comprehensive reports that follow a traditional model of problem, methodology and findings. Participants think the validity of their conclusions should always be as defensible as possible, which comes from a “show your work” mentality.

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*“I had fun. I laughed. Thank you for all the activities!”*

—Participant

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After training, CBOC leadership set about implementing mandatory practices. Reviewing all content for readability and grade level became part of the editorial process. Most fundamentally, researchers are working to ensure that not even a single sentence is repeated across any two products. Methodologies must now appear in appendices rather than the body of the communications product. This approach shows that CBOC will now identify specific audiences, what information they seek and how best to provide it.