

Writing Samples to Ponder

*a handful writing samples
for discussion*

a special publication from Firebelle Productions

Your Image at Stake

Whether it's fair or not, people will make judgments about you based on how well you write. This is particularly true when people "meet you on paper" before they meet you in person. So if you want to be perceived as a professional, write like one.

The text below is probably the best example of poor writing that I've seen. These paragraphs were taken from a longer letter sent to me by someone in the fire service. Names and details were changed to protect his identity. But all of the errors have been reproduced exactly as they appeared in the original letter.

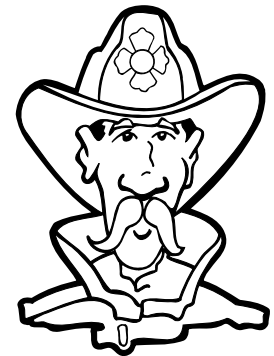
A little Back Round on the Drill: It was conceived after the Earthquake of 1989. The earthquake open my eye's on how local, state and Federal Agency's could not, and some case's would not talk to one another.

After the earthquake only a few fire agency's were using ICS, or some agency it was know as fire scope. So one day, a guy by the name of John Doe and I got together and created a Drill that would exercise the ICS system and create some networking within this County.

We consider our selves as an ALL RISK department, another words we do it all. From Haz-Mat to Floods and anything else in between. That's not to say our local guy's could not do the same, THEY CAN the problem is, that you have chiefs, who donot like to admit that they are not well verse in the SIMS program. That's the RUB!! So we get back to the drill, we take little steps holding there hands by that I mean is we train in the ICS or SIMS system year around and practices what we learn on this DRILL.

Most people who read this writing sample form an impression that the author is uneducated, unintelligent, and inattentive to detail. They perceive him as someone who can't be trusted with responsibility. And yet this person was an intelligent, well-respected fire department battalion chief at the time he wrote his letter to me. Unfortunately, his writing skills sell him short.

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**If you want to
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Overloaded Sentences

Packing too much information into a single sentence will make the sentence confusing and difficult to read. The following example is from the book *Laci: Inside the Laci Peterson Murder*. Here author Michael Fleeman tried to make one sentence do the work of two or three. My makeover is clearer, because the information is not only broken into two sentences but also presented in a more logical order.

Confusing: Heading the wiretap operation was an experienced law-enforcement officer, Stephen P. Jacobson, a federal agent assigned to Stanislaus County Drug Enforcement Agency—drug cops are among those who make the most use of wiretapping in investigations—who was also a former cop from Modesto.

Revised: Heading the wiretap operation was former Modesto police officer Stephen P. Jacobson, now a federal agent with the Stanislaus County Drug Enforcement Agency. Drug cops are among those who make the most use of wiretapping in investigations.

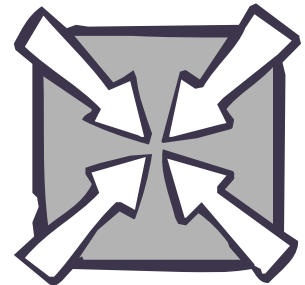
This example is also from the book *Laci: Inside the Laci Peterson Murder* by Michael Fleeman. The paragraph describes the place where Laci's and Conner's bodies were found. Again, Fleeman tried to stuff too much information into a sentence that couldn't hold it all. My three-sentence makeover is more digestible. Note that I didn't try to change the content in either example from Michael Fleeman's text. Rather, this exercise was limited to breaking overloaded sentences into more digestible ones.

Cluttered: At the end of the park, at a wooden bridge over the canal, the dogs will find a little less love—leashes are now required—but the environment is still friendly, with a mile-long path perfect for walking pooches through an unspoiled shoreline of marsh grass, tall reeds and tiny streams with a view of the Golden Gate Bridge due west, the sounds of lapping bay water and wind through the reeds almost drowning out the roar of traffic from Interstate 580 a few hundred yards to the east and the occasional toot from a freight train.

Revised: At the end of the park, at a wooden bridge over the canal, the dogs will find a little less love; leashes are now required. But the environment is still friendly, with a mile-long path perfect for walking pooches through an unspoiled shoreline of marsh grass, tall reeds, tiny streams, and a view of the Golden Gate Bridge in the background due west. The sounds of lapping bay water and wind through the reeds almost drown out the roar of traffic from Interstate 580 a few hundred yards to the east and the occasional toot from a freight train.

Fleeman's book is a gripping, informative account of the Laci Peterson murder and is, on balance, a well-written piece. But every once in a while, there's a gotcha that stops readers in their tracks because something doesn't flow well.

Packing too much information into a single sentence will make the sentence confusing and difficult to read.



Don't try to make one sentence do the work of two or three.

Creativity Run Amok

One might say that the previous excerpt from Michael Fleeman's book was an example of creativity run amok. But the following example from the young adult novel *Virus* by Diane Hoh is worse. (This book is part of Hoh's *Med Center* series for teens.) It's a stunning departure from Hoh's normally clear writing.

On the east side of the city of Grant, in a neighborhood known as Eastridge, where the homes were small enough to fit into the Grant's mansion sunroom, Kate Thompson raced around the sunny, clean but disordered kitchen on Persimmon Drive, getting ready for her shift at Med Center, where she, like Susannah, worked as a volunteer in Emergency Services.

Strong, athletic legs ran from counter to table to kitchen drawer and back again, carrying an empty coffee cup and toast-crummed plate to the sink, tossing her paper napkin into the yellow wastebasket, straightening the blue flowered plastic table cloth and wiping it free of crumbs. In front of the small mirror just inside the kitchen door, a purple pick raked its way through a fringe of bangs over dark-lashed eyes. There was a minor adjustment to the thick, black, cornrowed hair. A dab of plumb lip gloss followed, a flick of blusher to high, angled cheekbones, then a pair of heavy wooden earrings of Kate's own design were hurriedly thrust into her earlobes, and she was done. Jeans and a white T-shirt were acceptable work gear at Emergency. Sneakers instead of sandals on her feet. Safer footing on the slippery white tiles.

Hoh tried to create beautiful imagery. Instead, in the second paragraph, she created a cartoon-like vision of disembodied legs running around the kitchen, getting ready for work. Readers don't see Kate doing all these activities. They see legs, combs, tubes of lipstick, and so forth functioning on their own.

Don't let creativity obscure or detract from your message. Style should never trump content.

Fun with Spelling

This clever little item makes the point that our minds often auto-correct for errors in our documents, making it easy for us to miss problems, particularly when we know what the text is supposed to say.

fi yuo cna raed tihs, yuo hvae a sgrane mnid too
Cna yuo raed tihs? Olny 55 plepoe can.

i cdnuolt blveiee taht I cluod aulacilty uesdnatnrd waht I was rdanieg.
The phaonmneal pweor of the hmuan mnid, aoccdrnig to a rscheearch
at Cmabrigde Uinervtisy, it dseno't mtaetr in waht oerdr the ltteres in
a wrod are, the olny iproamtnt tihng is taht the frsit and lsat ltteer be
in the rghit pclae. The rset can be a taotl mses and you can sitll raed
it whotuit a pboerlm. Tihs is bcuseae the huamn mnid deos not raed
ervey lteter by istlef, but the wrod as a wlohe. Azanmig huh? yaeh and
I awlyas tghuhot spleling was ipmorantt! if you can raed tihs forwrad it.

**Don't let
creativity
obscure or
detract from
your message.**



**Style should
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An Uninviting Appearance

In my former fire department, probationary firefighters are evaluated every shift by their station captains. One of my friends, who was still a new captain at the time, asked me to critique one of his “tour reports.” Although there were a few grammatical errors, they paled in comparison to problems in format and organization.

This is Brian’s original tour report. (I changed only the names and vehicle identifiers.) The large block of text (which continues on the next page) makes it look uninviting and difficult to read. The report also lacks organization, so it is difficult for a reader to spot specific topics.

Don, again you arrived early, in uniform and prepared for work. This is a great habit to get into, keep doing it throughout your career. You went through the morning checkout of Truck 20 with both J. Gage and R. DeSoto. In 2 shifts you got the benefit of 3 different FF/E and their methods of checking out an apparatus. I encourage you to seek as much exposure to all aspects of this job, so you can develop your own style. Today was spent training on many different subjects. You gave a class on portable radios. You prepared the shift before and did a good job presenting the material. We as a crew went over the new auto aid agreement. You were put through a surprise drill based on Department IPT #2. The drill consisted of Truck 20 arriving back at the station from a call. You were in station uniform and unaware of the drill. You donned full turnouts with SCBA and all appropriate PPE. The total time for the drill was 11:00 minutes. IPT #2 time standard is 10 minutes. You did meet the time standard for IPT #2; even with the problems we designed into the drill. The “problems” required you to adapt and make decisions so that you would spot the ladder in a safe position for you to work. You did a good job recognizing the hazards, communicating them and adapting so that you could complete your assignment. The crew and I critiqued your actions and made suggestions to help you maximize your efforts. You were open to our input, and now you will have to decide for yourself what works best for you. You also wanted to get sign offs done from module 1. I made the decision to not sign off any of the skills you performed. You need to be prepared and perform each skill without hesitation. I know there was some confusion surrounding some of the sign offs. This is not the time to reference information out of a book. You need to do what you have to do to get clarification, before you are tested. Then perform each sign off with out hesitation or reference materials. You need to learn and retain each and every skill in your sign off book. This will help you in performing your duties throughout your career. You put your free time to good use either studying or getting familiar with Truck 20, Patrol 20 and associated equipment.

Truck 20 responded on 3 emergency calls today, consisting of 1 EMS and 2 general fire alarms. Again, today you were courteous, had a positive attitude, professional and worked well with the crew and AMR Paramedics. You worked well with the crew on taking care of the station and completing station housework.

Large blocks of text make the page look uninviting and difficult to read.



This is one of the quickest ways to turn readers off.

Don't my suggestions to you are: Maximize your efforts, so that you will be efficient in getting your assignments done in a timely fashion. Move with purpose, and always be aware of your surrounding on the emergency scene. Always conduct yourself in a professional manner. Learn and know as much as you can about all aspects of your chosen profession. Listen, ask questions, get your hands on the equipment as much as possible and be the first one to be on your feet when something needs to get done around the station. Take classes both offered by the department and from other agencies or institutions. Continue to work hard and good luck.

With Brian's permission, I rewrote his tour report, first in second person (like Brian's original), then in third person. The two biggest changes I made were to break the large expanse of text into shorter paragraphs and to organize the material into logical groupings, with headings to help guide the reader.

I also provided greater detail regarding how the firefighter could improve his performance. This gives him more guidance, which should help him be more successful in implementing the changes. It also helps other readers understand what improvement is needed or recommended.

General Station Conduct

Don, you again arrived early, in uniform and prepared for work. This is a great habit. Keep it up. You worked well with the crew during morning checkout and station housework. You put your free time to good use either studying or getting familiar with Truck 20, Patrol 20, and associated equipment.

Emergency Response

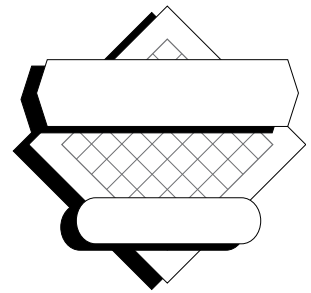
Truck 20 responded on one EMS call and two general fire alarms today. You acted professionally and worked well with Truck 20's crew and the AMR paramedics. You were courteous to our customers and had a positive attitude.

Training

We trained on many different subjects this shift. You gave a class on portable radios, which you had prepared the shift before. You did a good job presenting the material. Later, the crew reviewed the new auto aid agreement.

When Truck 20 returned to the station from a call, we threw you into a surprise drill based on County Fire's IPT #2. You promptly donned full turnouts and SCBA and safely performed all activities. We had designed some problems into the evolution, requiring you to recognize hazards and adapt accordingly. You did a good job recognizing those hazards, communicating to the crew, and modifying the operation to spot the ladder in a safe location. The department time standard for IPT#2 *without* the added problems is ten minutes. You completed our drill, with the surprise complications, in eleven minutes. Afterwards, the crew and I critiqued your actions and suggested ways you can maximize your efforts. You listened well and were open to our input.

Documents look more inviting when the text is broken into short, easy-to-digest paragraphs.



Headings and subheads create a more inviting appearance while providing a sense of organization to help guide the reader.

You asked to be signed off on skills from Module 1. However, I'd like to see you be more prepared and more proficient before signing off those skills. If you have questions or need clarification, address those issues before asking to be signed off. If you're hesitant about something, do your homework, practice again, then ask to be tested. Take the approach that "ready to be signed off" means ready to perform safely, competently, and proficiently at an emergency scene, without coaching. That mentality will keep you sharp and make you a better firefighter.

Summary

You demonstrated many strengths that will serve you well in the fire department. You're enthusiastic and self-motivated. You're able to identify problems and adapt accordingly. You're a team player who is open to input from others. You're courteous and professional with our customers and other agencies.

You can improve your performance by going the extra mile with training. Again, be competent and proficient before signoffs. Take advantage of training opportunities both within the department and beyond. Learn as much as you can about all aspects of your chosen profession. Listen, ask questions, and get your hands on the equipment as much as possible.

Go the extra mile in everything you do. Move with purpose, and always be aware of your surroundings on the emergency scene. Be the first one on your feet when something needs to get done around the station. Maximize your efforts so you can efficiently complete your assignments in a timely manner.

Shown below is the example in third person. There may not be one "right" way to write a tour report. However, the ultimate audience for this document is not the firefighter, but rather the personnel who will determine whether or not the firefighter passes probation. That being the case, third person may be more appropriate.

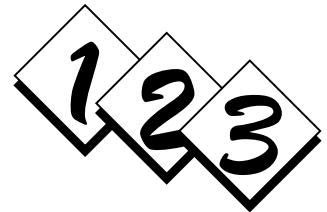
General Station Conduct

Firefighter Smith again arrived early, in uniform and prepared for work. He worked well with the crew during morning checkout and station housework. He put his free time to good use either studying or getting familiar with Truck 20, Patrol 20, and associated equipment.

Emergency Response

Truck 20 responded on one EMS call and two general fire alarms today. Firefighter Smith acted professionally and worked well with Truck 20's crew and the AMR paramedics. He was courteous to our customers and had a positive attitude.

**Sometimes it's
not clear whether
a document
should be written
in first person,
second person, or
third person.**



First person:
I, we

Second person:
you

Third person:
he, she, they

Training

We trained on many different subjects this shift. Firefighter Smith gave a class on portable radios, which he had prepared the shift before. He did a good job presenting the material. Later, the crew reviewed the new auto aid agreement.

When Truck 20 returned to the station from a call, we threw Firefighter Smith into a surprise drill based on County Fire's IPT #2. He promptly donned full turnouts and SCBA and safely performed all activities. We had designed some problems into the evolution, requiring him to recognize hazards and adapt accordingly. He did a good job recognizing those hazards, communicating to the crew, and modifying the operation to spot the ladder in a safe location. The department time standard for IPT#2 *without* the added problems is ten minutes. Firefighter Smith completed our drill, with the surprise complications, in eleven minutes. Afterwards, the crew and I critiqued his actions and suggested ways he can maximize his efforts. He listened well and was open to our input.

Firefighter Smith asked to be signed off on skills from Module 1. However, I'd like to see him be more prepared and more proficient before signing off those skills. I advised him that if he has questions or needs clarification, he should address those issues before asking to be signed off. I suggested that he take the approach that "ready to be signed off" means ready to perform safely, competently, and proficiently at an emergency scene, without coaching.

Summary

Firefighter Smith demonstrated many strengths that will serve him well in the fire department. He is enthusiastic and self-motivated. He is able to identify problems and adapt accordingly. He is a team player who is open to input from others. He is courteous and professional with our customers and other agencies.

I told him that he can improve his performance by making sure he is competent and proficient before signoffs. I also emphasized the need to move with purpose and always be aware of his surroundings on the emergency scene.

Person also affects tone. For example, a nonfiction book will have a different tone depending on whether it is written in second person (you) or third person (the firefighter). It's one of many factors an author must consider.



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Jill Meryl Levy, Author and Publisher
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