How to Write Good by William Safire

Safire's Fumblerules for Writers

By [Richard Nordquist](http://grammar.about.com/bio/Richard-Nordquist-22176.htm), About.com Guide

**Filed In:**

1. [Writing Tips](http://grammar.about.com/od/writersonwriting)



William Safire (1929-2009)

*Diana Walker/Time and Life Pictures/Getty Images*

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*From 1979 until his death in 2009, William Safire wrote the weekly column "On Language" for*The New York Times Magazine*. There, in the words of his colleague Robert McFadden, the self-appointed*[*language maven*](http://grammar.about.com/od/il/g/languagemaventerm.htm)*"gleefully pounced on gaffes, inexactitudes, neologisms, misnomers, solecisms and perversely peccant puns."*

*Safire's most famous column, reprinted in the collection*Good Advice on Writing*(1992), includes the following 17*fumblerules*--"mistakes that call attention to the rule." For discussions and additional examples of Safire's*[*prescriptions*](http://grammar.about.com/od/pq/g/prescgramterm.htm)*and proscriptions, follow the links.*

**How to Write Good\***

**by William Safire**

1. Avoid [run-on sentences](http://grammar.about.com/od/fh/g/fusedsentenceterm.htm) that are hard to read.

1. No sentence [fragments](http://grammar.about.com/od/fh/g/fragmenterm.htm).

1. It behooves us to avoid [archaisms](http://grammar.about.com/od/ab/g/archaismterm.htm).

1. Also, avoid awkward or affected [alliteration](http://grammar.about.com/od/terms/g/alliteration.htm).

1. Don't use no [double negatives](http://grammar.about.com/od/d/g/doubnegterm.htm).

1. If I've told you once, I've told you a thousand times, "Resist [hyperbole](http://grammar.about.com/od/fh/g/hyperboleterm.htm)."

1. Avoid [commas](http://grammar.about.com/od/c/g/commaterm.htm), that are not necessary.

1. Verbs has to [agree](http://grammar.about.com/od/correctingerrors/a/ASagreement.htm) with their subjects.

1. Avoid [trendy locutions](http://grammar.about.com/od/ab/g/buzzwordterm.htm) that sound flaky.

1. Writing carefully, [dangling participles](http://grammar.about.com/od/d/g/danglmodterm.htm) should not be used.

1. Kill all [exclamation points](http://grammar.about.com/od/e/g/exclamterm.htm)!!!

1. Never use a long word when a [diminutive one](http://grammar.about.com/b/2008/12/22/in-praise-of-short-words.htm) will do.

1. [Proofread](http://grammar.about.com/od/pq/g/proofreadterm.htm) carefully to see if you any words out.

1. Take the bull by the hand, and don't [mix metaphors](http://grammar.about.com/od/mo/g/mixmetterm.htm).

1. Don't [verb nouns](http://grammar.about.com/od/tz/g/verbingterm.htm).

1. Never, ever use repetitive [redundancies](http://grammar.about.com/od/words/a/redundancies.htm).

1. Last but not least, avoid [clichés](http://grammar.about.com/od/c/g/clicheterm.htm) like the plague.

*\*"How to Write Good" appears in*Good Advice on Writing: Writers Past and Present on How to Write Well*, compiled and edited by William Safire and Leonard Safir (Simon & Schuster, 1992).*

**Writing Tips**

* [Ten Quick Tips to Improve Your Writing](http://grammar.about.com/od/developingessays/a/quicktips.htm)
* [Ten Principles of Effective Writing](http://grammar.about.com/od/rhetoricstyle/a/lucastyle10.htm)

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1. [Composing Essays](http://grammar.about.com/od/developingessays)



See [Top Five Tips to Cut the Clutter](http://grammar.about.com/od/words/tp/clutter_tips.htm) and [Five More Ways to Cut the Clutter](http://grammar.about.com/od/words/a/clutter_tips2.htm)

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Whether we're composing a blog or a business letter, an email or an essay, our goal should be to respond clearly and directly to the needs and interests of our readers. These ten tips should help us to improve our writing whenever we set out to inform or persuade.

1. **Lead with your main idea.**  
   As a general rule, state the main idea of a paragraph in the first sentence--the [topic sentence](http://grammar.about.com/od/tz/g/topicsenterm.htm). Don't keep your readers guessing.  
   See [Practice in Composing Topic Sentences](http://grammar.about.com/od/developingparagraphs/a/practicetopic.htm).

1. **Vary the length of your sentences.**  
   In general, use short sentences to emphasize ideas. Use longer sentences to explain, define, or illustrate ideas.  
   See [Sentence Variety](http://grammar.about.com/od/rs/g/Sentence-Variety-term.htm).

1. **Put key words and ideas at the beginning or end of a sentence.**  
   Don't bury a main point in the middle of a long sentence. To emphasize key words, place them at the beginning or (better yet) at the end.  
   See [Emphasis](http://grammar.about.com/od/e/g/emphasisterm.htm).

1. **Vary sentence types and structures.**  
   Vary sentence types by including occasional questions and commands. Vary sentence structures by blending [simple](http://grammar.about.com/od/rs/g/simpsenterm.htm), [compound](http://grammar.about.com/od/c/g/compoundsent.htm), and[complex sentences](http://grammar.about.com/od/c/g/complexsentence.htm).  
   See [Basic Sentence Structures](http://grammar.about.com/od/basicsentencegrammar/a/basicstructures.htm).

1. **Use active verbs.**  
   Don't overwork the [passive voice](http://grammar.about.com/od/pq/g/pasvoiceterm.htm) or forms of the verb ["to be."](http://grammar.about.com/od/correctingerrors/a/formstobe.htm) Instead, use active verbs in the [active voice](http://grammar.about.com/od/ab/g/activevoiceterm.htm).  
   See [F. Scott Fitzgerald's New York in the 1920s](http://grammar.about.com/od/rhetoricstyle/a/NYCpassfitz1.htm).

1. **Use specific nouns and verbs.**  
   To convey your message clearly and keep your readers engaged, use concrete and specific words that *show* what you mean.  
   See [Detail](http://grammar.about.com/od/d/g/Detail-term.htm) and [Descriptive Details in Wallace Stegner's "Town Dump."](http://grammar.about.com/od/shortpassagesforanalysis/a/stegnerdump07.htm)

1. **Cut the clutter.**  
   When [revising](http://grammar.about.com/od/rs/g/revisionterm.htm) your work, eliminate unnecessary words.  
   See [Practice in Cutting the Clutter](http://grammar.about.com/od/words/a/praclutterex.htm).

1. **Read aloud when you revise.**  
   When revising, you may *hear* problems (of tone, emphasis, word choice, and syntax) that you can't see. So listen up!  
   See [On Reading Aloud](http://grammar.about.com/b/2007/07/05/on-reading-aloud.htm).

1. **Actively edit and proofread.**  
   It's easy to *overlook* errors when merely *looking over* your work. So be on the lookout for common trouble spots when studying your final draft.  
   See [Revision Checklist](http://grammar.about.com/od/developingessays/a/revisecheck.htm) and [Editing Checklist](http://grammar.about.com/od/correctingerrors/a/editchecklist.htm).

1. **Use a dictionary.**  
   When [proofreading](http://grammar.about.com/od/pq/g/proofreadterm.htm), don't trust your [spellchecker](http://grammar.about.com/od/rs/g/spellcheckerterm.htm): it can tell you only if a word *is* a word, not if it's the *right* word.  
   See [Commonly Confused Words](http://grammar.about.com/od/words/a/UsageGlossary.htm) and [Fifteen Common Errors](http://grammar.about.com/od/correctingerrors/a/comblogs03.htm).

We'll close with a cautionary note borrowed from [George Orwell's Rules for Writers](http://grammar.about.com/od/writersonwriting/a/OrwellRules.htm): "Break any of these rules sooner than say anything outright barbarous."