

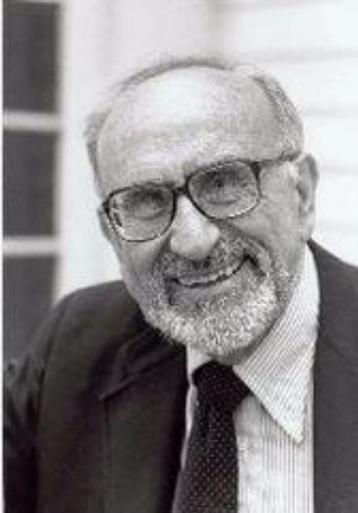


More Advice about Good Writing

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Michael Crowell reminded me about [a memo on clear writing](#) that [Alfred Kahn](#) issued to the staff of the Civil Aeronautics Board when he served as its Chair. It is a classic.

Kahn begins by enlisting their support in the fight against “the artificial and hyper-legal language that is sometimes known as bureaucratese or gobbledygook. The disease is almost universal, and the fight against it endless.” He asks the staff to “try very hard to write . . . in straightforward, quasi-conversational, humane prose—as though you are talking to or communicating with real people.” What a concept.

He encourages people to apply the following test to their writing: “try reading some of the language you use aloud, and ask yourself how your friends would be likely to react. (And then decide, on the basis of their reactions, whether you still want them as friends.)”

Kahn continues by listing “a small fraction of the kinds of usages I have in mind.” One of the usual suspects is the passive voice. “Typically, its purpose is to conceal information: one is less likely to be jailed if one says ‘he was hit by a stone,’ than ‘I hit him with a stone.’ The active voice is far more forthright, direct, and humane.”

I encourage you to read Kahn’s memo. It is short and packed with worthwhile and entertaining



advice. He closes by saying that a “final example of pomposity, probably, is this memorandum itself. I have heard it said that style is not substance, but without style what is substance?”

Any other advice about good writing we should know about?