



## Writing Advice from C.S. Lewis

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Categories : [Communication](#)

Date : April 15, 2012



Writing is one of the main ways we carry out our mission. Good writing is important and we recently created a writing award that honors Margaret Taylor, an editor for many years with the Institute of Government. She and others taught me about good writing when I first joined the faculty, often by combining a sharp pencil with patient feedback. I want to share some good advice about writing from C.S. Lewis.

[This advice comes from a letter Lewis wrote to a young American fan](#) following the publication of the final book in [The Chronicles of Narnia](#). I find it charming that he evidently responded to all of the many children who wrote to him, and I encourage you to read the entire letter. It is excellent advice for any writer.

Lewis begins by telling his fan that “there are right and wrong answers in Arithmetic. ‘Good English’ is whatever educated people talk; so that what is good in one place or time would not be so in another.” I love this because people have such strong opinions about language and often treat it as more certain than arithmetic. Margaret Taylor was such an editor. I especially like his advice not to “take any notice of teachers and textbooks in such matters. Nor of logic. It is good to say “more than one passenger was hurt,” although *more than one* equals at least two and therefore logically the verb ought to be plural *were* not singular *was*!”

Lewis then offers short pieces of advice about what really matters in writing. The first is “[a]lways try to use the language so as to make quite clear what you mean and make sure your sentence



couldn't mean anything else." This is obvious advice, but too many people fail to apply this test in editing their work. The second is "[a]lways prefer the plain direct word to the long, vague one. Don't *implement* promises, but *keep* them." Another is "[n]ever use abstract nouns when concrete ones will do. If you mean 'More people died' don't say 'Mortality rose.'" I remember a lawyer telling me about a law enforcement officer who testified that a defendant had "exited the vehicle." Yes, but did he get out of the car?