

Top Ten Tips for Improved Writing

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Recommendations presented at the 2007 AERA Meeting

- 1) How do you find time to write given all your other responsibilities? Answer, learn to say no. Every day there are a hundred distractions that prevent you from getting your work done, including writing. Just sending and reading e-mail, for example, can put you into a virtual all-day conference. Finding time to write requires your commitment to establish a sacred writing time. Say “no” to making too many presentations, serving on too many committees, or anything that distracts you from the time you need to write.
- 2) Shorten your sentences. There is no better way to more effectively communicate in print to any audience than to shorten a long sentence. Sentences exceeding 25 words are too long. Read newspapers and magazines for examples of short concise writing.
- 3) Ditto the above for paragraphs. Five lines per paragraph is usually a maximum.
- 4) Learn from others who write in easy to understand language. Reports from the National Center for Education Statistics are often good examples of how technical language and concepts can be written for any audience. NCES graphs and tables are usually very successful in conveying complex details in an easy to understand format.
- 5) Volunteer as a journal reviewer. Reading and critiquing writing by others will help you become a better writer yourself.
- 6) Avoid “educationese” language. For example, although the word “practice” in education circles is usually synonymous with the word “teaching,” anyone outside of education will likely not understand the term. In Dictionary.com, there are no fewer than 17 definitions of the word “practice,” but not a single mention of the word “teaching.” If you mean teaching, write teaching. If you get into the habit of using a lot of academic words, like, practice, instantiate or cognition, it will be more difficult to change that style when you decide to write for a non-academic audience.
- 7) Have a non-researcher read your paper or article. If they can’t understand it, then revise it.
- 8) Use the active voice, not the passive voice. Here is an example of the passive voice. *The study was conducted by the research team.* Compare this to the active voice; *the research team conducted the study.* The active voice uses fewer words, correctly places the subject before the verb, and is easier to understand.
- 9) Short titles not only communicate more effectively, but also usually reach a broader audience. Movie titles and most book titles are fairly short. *E.T.*, *Star Wars*, *Braveheart*, and *Mission Impossible* are just a few short movie title examples. Probably the most referenced publication in education research is *A Nation At Risk*, just four words in its title. A broad title, like *New Research Findings in Performance Assessment*, is likely to find a large audience. A longer title, like *Psychometric Properties of Empirical Studies in Alternate Response Modes for Performance Assessment Systems*, will most likely have a very narrow audience. If you want to reach a lot of people, use a shorter title.
- 10) Make your writing clear. The fastest road to rejection is lack of clarity. I am amazed at how many research reports I read where I have to hunt or guess at the research questions. If you are writing a research paper or journal article, follow the basic research format and closely read the publication requirements.

AERA has an excellent on-line publication called *Publishing Educational Research: Guidelines and Tips*.

Top Ten Tips for Improved Presentations

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- 1) The **best way** to improve your presentation is to **practice it at least 3-4 times** before you give it. Repeated practicing will improve your presentation skills, tell you if your time is correct, and help you make effective transitions between key points. Repeated practicing will increase your confidence, reduce jitters, and improve virtually every part of your presentation.
- 2) Second, remember that **less is more**. When you try to cover too much content or use too many visuals, you will speed up your pace to an uncomfortable level. Reduce both content and visuals so that you can emphasize the most important points, leaving the details to a paper, article, or to the Q&A part of the session.
- 3) **Own the room**. A presentation is your opportunity to shine. Don't make apologies for anything. Unless connecting a point made by a previous presenter to your own elaboration of it, don't refer to other presenters. Saying things like "that's a tough act to follow" or "how much time do I have left" tells the audience that you either lack confidence in your presentation skills or have not practiced your presentation.
- 4) **Like all parts of communication, learn from** effective and non-effective speakers. Avoid what poor presenters do wrong, swaying, for example, or not speaking loud enough. Study what good presenters do effectively and incorporate it into your own presentation.
- 5) **Pause for effectiveness**. Excellent speakers like Bill Clinton and Martin Luther King, paused at key moments in their speeches to effectively drive home key points. Try it in your next presentation and see how well it works.
- 6) **Smile and make eye contact**. Nothing warms up an audience like a big smile at the beginning of your presentation. Work your eyes around the room, with a goal of making direct contact with each person in the audience at least once.
- 7) Arrive at your presentation site a **minimum of one hour** before your session begins. That will give you time to study the room, set up audiovisual equipment, and coordinate your presentation with fellow presenters. If the room is vacant before your presentation, practice your presentation to an empty audience. You will feel more comfortable and confident in your final presentation.
- 8) **Avoid going last** in a presentation, especially if there are four presenters or three presenters and a discussant. Far too often, the last person's time gets cut short because of poor time-keeping, discourteous presenters who speak over his or her time limit, or audiovisual problems.
- 9) Use the **666 rule** for PowerPoints or slides: no more than 6 bullets on a slide, no more than six words per bullet, and no more than 6 information points on a graphic. Putting too much text or information on a visual, often results in reading the presentation from the slide vs. making an effective speech to your audience.
- 10) **Hold the handouts** until the end of the session. If you give out handouts before the presentation begins, people will know what you are going to say before you say it and pay more attention to the handouts than to you.