

# Writing for understanding

Everyone wants to be understood. Even children, before they can speak, communicate by crying or pointing so that others can understand what they want. Stephen R. Covey said, “Communication is the most important skill in life.” If this is so, we need to communicate in a way that others can understand us: not only understand us, but not misunderstand us. Nothing can be more frustrating than having someone misconstrue a comment that was meant to be helpful, into some sort of criticism. Effective communication is especially important to writers, who wish to convey life’s meaning in a way that is understandable to others. Writers need to express ideas clearly and simply. There are several things to keep in mind as you begin to write.

## Understand Your Reader

Covey said, “Seek first to understand, then to be understood.” Who is going to be reading your writing? What are their likes or dislikes? Are they old or young, liberal or conservative? When we understand others, we become empathetic towards them. Jack Hart, author of *A Writer’s Coach* says, “The ability to see

things from the reader’s viewpoint determines whether a message gets through or not.” Hart also explains what can happen when others misinterpret what we write. “A reader calls to complain about a story, and the writer is flabbergasted by the way that reader has interpreted the copy.” So we need to write clearly and simply so there is no room for misinterpretation.

## The Importance of Clarity

Patricia Daniels, professional writer and editor for *National Wildlife* and Time-Life Books, says that clarity is “the single most important element of nonfiction writing.” She explains that to her, “[Clarity] means conveying information to the reader so that she [or he] not only understands it completely, but also understands how that information leads to a central point or conclusion in your article or book.” Ayn Rand said that her study of syllogistic logic (where if A=B, and B=C, then A=C) helps her to organize her thoughts when she writes. Each step in the writing process should build upon the previous step in an organized manner. It simply needs to make logical sense.



Photo from personal file of Marilyn Henrie

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**—Patricia Daniels**

### Mechanics

Written communication is one-way communication between the writer and the reader. Unlike spoken communication, all inflection has to be made through the writer's "voice" by using correct punctuation and grammar techniques to avoid ambiguity and clarify meaning. Misplaced commas are a common mistake that can cause sometimes comical grammar mistakes. Notice how the placement of the comma changes the meaning in the following two sentences:

*Go slow, men at work.*

*Go, slow men at work.* (I guess you'd better go because the men are working so slowly!)

W.H. Weiss, in his article "Writing Clearly and Forcefully" mentions several techniques (besides grammar and punctuation) that help writers clarify meaning:

- Use active instead of passive voice
- Be positive
- Avoid the double negative
- Use "s" to show possession instead of prepositional phrases such as "of the"
- Be specific—avoid generalities
- Use common words
- Avoid flowery adjectives

William Zinsser sums it up by saying "Writing is hard work. A clear sentence is no accident." Even though it is hard work, it is worth the effort for writers to learn to express ideas effectively in a way that creates understanding and meaning. Respect your audience. Be candid and personal. Erma Bombeck was a successful columnist because she wrote candidly about everyday life experiences to which we can relate. Anyone who has children can relate to her sagacity as she writes, "Somewhere it is written that parents who are critical of other people's children and publicly admit they can do better are asking for it." We laugh because we understand. Being yourself, organizing your thoughts, simplifying ideas, using good writing techniques, and knowing your audience and relating to them, all bring about understanding—and after all, isn't that the point of writing.

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