

“ Making the world more interesting, one sentence at a time. ”

YOUR \$100,000 WRITING LESSON—FOR FREE

I’ve always considered myself a good writer—and the people reading my writing always seemed to agree. But in my second year at college I ran into a buzzsaw of an English professor who shocked me out of my complacency: He gave me a C! Actually, several of them. When I drummed up the courage to ask why, he took out a pen and started circling words. My carefully crafted paper looked like Swiss cheese.

Which words did my English professor circle? Passive verbs—any form of the verb “to be.” It was lazy writing, he explained. And worse than that, it was boring. I don’t follow his rule all the time—see the previous two sentences. But I when I break it, I break it consciously.

Two brothers named Adam and Ben Long have taken my English teacher’s advice and some other excellent writing rules and coded them into a free website: HemingwayApp.com. (Ian Crouch wrote a great article about the brothers and their app in *The New Yorker* a couple of years ago.)

Copy and paste your writing into the Hemingway site and the app immediately highlights all those pesky passive verbs and other common writing mistakes. It will also compute the grade level of your writing. *The New York Times* aims for a 6th grade level; you may require a bit more complexity. But be aware of the platform you’re writing for: speeches your audience only hears must be less complex and easier to digest than written material people can re-read if they need to.

The brothers Long are a bit stingier with adverbs than I am—they recommend only one per writing sample. But I love that they don’t enforce those silly academic rules about not ending sentences with prepositions and not beginning sentences with conjunctions. As you’ve probably noticed by now, neither do I.

I’m all about writing that engages and enlightens. But when you start sounding like the parody commonly attributed to Winston Churchill—“That is the sort of pedantry up with which I will not put”—the reader pays more attention to your syntax than your thoughts. And I suspect that’s not your goal.

So paste your creations into HemingwayApp.com and play with your writing. Take out a word here, break up a sentence there, turn passive verbs active. See how much complexity you can take out while still making a sophisticated argument. Your readers will thank you for it.

Of course, there’s more where this came from: I have a host of writing tips and techniques to help you enhance your personal brand and boost your career—so watch out for my weekly newsletter. If you have a specific challenge you’d like to work on, shoot me an [email](mailto:elaine@bennettink.com). I offer both private coaching and group webinars.



Elaine Bennett
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Writing, Seminars, Private Coaching

“Elaine is adept at creating thoughtful, entertaining content, and is just as creative when designing and delivering training. She helped a large and diverse communications team think differently about how they write material to be published online or delivered by executives in person. Elaine brings together the best of ‘old school’ (discipline, research, imagination) with a fun, approachable delivery that works for today’s audiences.”

– Claire E., corporate client