

Write With Rhythm To Hold Readers' Attention

by Jack E. Appleman, CBC



“Get that rhythm” may be what you say to encourage a musician, dancer or athlete to deliver a high-quality performance. As writers, we also need rhythm to deliver a high-quality document, whether crafting a poem, a novel or an internal e-mail. Even the most routine business writing needs to flow logically from start to finish. Otherwise, readers will be far less likely to pay attention to your message and you’ll be less productive. Below are some strategies to help you write with rhythm.

Sound Like Yourself

In business writing, simplicity is king. Resist the urge to impress readers with your vocabulary. Instead, use plain English. The renowned author, William Zinsser, in his classic book, *On Writing Well*, cites the word “perhaps” as an example of a word that may not be appropriate. If you don’t typically use “perhaps” when you speak, says Zinsser, then don’t write with it—because it’s not you. Stick with more conversational language, and you’ll find it easier to develop a natural writing style that sounds like you.

Don’t Break The Flow

One of the most common mistakes with rhythm is shifting back and forth between different thoughts, making the reader work too hard to process

the message. Compare these two paragraphs:

Flow interrupted

The benefits manager suggested many new strategies, which were all well-received by the CFO and senior vice president. These included flexible vacation days, health savings accounts and transit reimbursements.

The writer mentions strategies, then doesn’t reveal what they are until after saying they were “well-received.”

Flowing smoothly

The benefits manager suggested many new strategies, including flexible vacation days, health savings accounts and transit reimbursements. These were all well-received

by the CFO and senior vice president.

The writer mentions strategies and completes the thought by specifying what they are before moving on to say they were “well received.”

Keep Verb Tenses Consistent

Balance your text by repeating the verb tense within a sentence, which is not only grammatically correct but also helps maintain a natural rhythm. Compare these two sentences:

Unbalanced

The Western Division will expand into three new states in February, while the Southern Division’s hiring of 200 employees will take place in April.

The verb construction, “will expand into three new states,” is inconsistent with “the hiring of 200 employees will take place in April.”

Balanced, consistent

The Western Division *will expand* into three new states in February, while the Southern Division *will hire* 200 employees in April.

Balance Your Bullets

While bullets are an excellent tool for presenting lists of items, the construction of each one within the same group has to match. See the difference in these two lists:

Don't all match

We're pleased to announce these upgrades for the Northeast office:

- We'll be providing four high-quality color laser printers
- Ordered a marble conference table
- Shredders to be installed on all three floors
- Managers will also be able to use ergonomically designed chairs

Two of the bulleted items are complete sentences (first and fourth), one is a clause starting with a verb (second) and the other is a clause starting with a noun (third).

Consistent

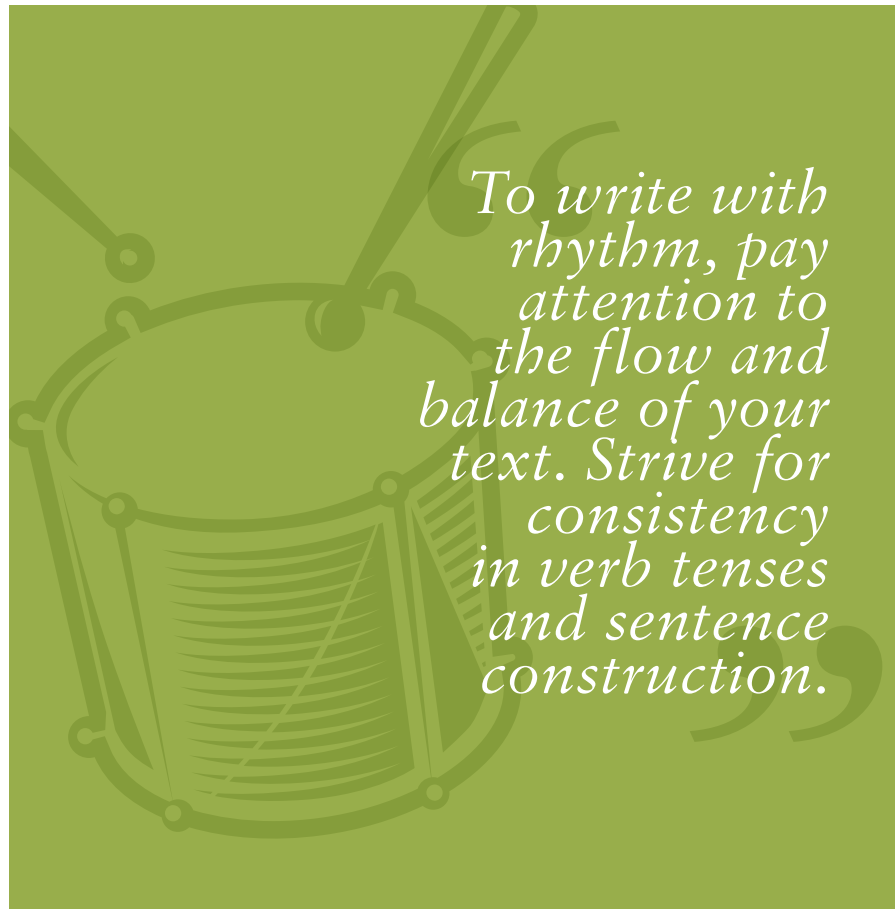
We're pleased to announce these upgrades for the Northeast office:

- Four high-quality color laser printers
- A marble conference table
- Shredders for all three floors
- Ergonomically designed chairs for managers

Bulleted items don't need to be complete sentences, but all within a group must have a consistent structure.

Stay Away From Short, Choppy Sentences

Your high school English teacher warned you not to write run-on sentences. The problem is that some people



take that advice to an extreme and write one short sentence after another, each conveying a single thought which can be painful to read. Compare these two paragraphs:

Painfully choppy

Laura Snow was named vice president of sales. She will take over on Nov. 1, 2012. This comes three months before the sales conference. Laura brings 15 years of experience in management. During the last three years, she was at ZY Industries in Charlotte. There she served as sales manager. At ZY, she was well-liked by the staff. Laura was known as a leader who responded to clients' needs.

Flows smoothly

Laura Snow was named vice president of sales and will take over on Nov. 1, 2012, three months before the sales conference. Laura brings

15 years of experience in management, including the last three years at ZY Industries in Charlotte where she served as sales manager. There, she was well-liked by the staff and known as a leader who responded to clients' needs.

To write with rhythm, pay attention to the flow and balance of your text. Strive for consistency in verb tenses and sentence construction. Listen to the sound of your words—maybe read them aloud—to figure out how they'll come across to readers. And get comfortable with your own writing style so you can get—and keep—that rhythm.

About the author:

Jack E. Appleman, CBC, writing instructor and coach, is author of *10 Steps to Successful Business Writing* (ASTD Press), a top seller in its category. His corporate writing workshops have consistently earned outstanding evaluations. Subscribe to Jack's free writing tips newsletter and contact him at jack@successfulbusinesswriting.com, 845-782-2419 or www.twitter.com/writecoachJack.