THE MILLION DOLLAR LETTER: SOME HINTS ON HOW TO WRITE ONE

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ABSTRACT

This article suggests ways of writing a truly effective cover letter, an extremely important document in the search for a job. First, features gleaned from 13 model letters in technical writing textbooks yield figures on the number of words, sentences, and paragraphs per letter, plus the average number of words per sentence and paragraph, information helpful to those with little or no knowledge of how to write a strong cover letter. Second, the article surveys what the textbook writers offer as advice about the rhetorical principles that should be employed in composing cover letters. One piece of advice given by almost all of the experts is that writers should try to exude an energetic attitude, yet these same authorities do not delineate just how to display such a posture in the letters themselves. Third, examination of the letters reveals that one way that experts insert verve into cover letters is to use verbals, particularly gerunds, participles, and infinitives. In fact, 92.58% of the sentences in the 13 model letters have some type of verbal in them. The advantage of employing verbals is that while they are used for other parts of speech, they still retain the residue of action in their meaning. Fourth, the article describes the results of a survey to determine the acceptance of such constructions in the minds of two sets of readers: first-year writing students and third-year technical writing students. In both groups, more than 75% of the students preferred a paragraph with verbals in it over a paragraph devoid of verbals. Finally, the article suggests “sentence combining” as a procedure for teaching technical writing students how to combine basic sentences into verbals to garner variety and economy, one of the hallmarks of technical writing.
It has been called “The Million Dollar Letter,” and rightly so, because a convincing cover letter, working in tandem with a powerful resume that gets the job, can ultimately mean a million dollars in salary alone over the course of a lifetime.

Yet if these cover letters are that important, where can novices go to learn more about writing them?

One way to discover more about the “bones” of these letters is to gather salient advice from examples used as model letters in popular textbooks in technical writing. To that end, novice writers can study these letters carefully to get an idea of what cover letters are supposed to be like by investigating a number of different features of these letters. Thus, information on sentence and paragraph length, for example, can tell student writers much about the makeup of this type of letter. For the present study, then, excluding the inside address, salutation, and complimentary close, a wide variety of 13 model letters taken from popular texts and handbooks in technical writing was examined [1-13]. Included in the sample were two letters from an earlier and later edition of the same handbook and selections from both older and more recent books. The statistics gathered from them reveal some interesting information about the various features of this type of letter (see Table 1).

These numbers yield a considerable amount of information about how the authors of textbooks feel about certain features of the cover letter. First, the mean of the number of words per letter is 241.5, and the standard deviation, the measure of variance, is relatively high at 79.0, indicating a wide variety of opinion about the number of words in the letter. This factor suggests that, according to the experts, these letters can vary significantly in the number of words used. Second, the mean number of sentences per letter is 12.92, and the standard deviation is 3.12, which seems to show a moderate variance in that category. In this same category, the mode, the most often occurring figure, is 14, turning up a popular three times, indicating the number of sentences is fairly standard across all 13 model letters. Third, the mean number of paragraphs per letter is 4.30, while the standard deviation is a modest .855, which seems to reveal a very slight variance in this category. In this same area, the mode is 5, also a very consistent number for this category, suggesting that most model letters are very similar in the number of sentences they contain. Fourth, the number of words per sentence calculates to a mean of 18.46, with a standard deviation of a modest 3.28, indicating some slight variance among members of the class. In this category, the mode is 16, a fairly consistent figure in this category. Finally, in the category of the number of words per paragraph, the mean is 56.36, while the standard deviation is 14.77, a somewhat high figure, suggesting a great deal of difference among the members of the group of letters in this category, and denoting some disagreement among the letter writers in this particular.

Overall, the amount of variance from the mean in each of the five categories is large in a few categories and slight in others. In total, the statistics indicate that using the model letters from technical writing textbooks as a basis for describing
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the cover letter in these categories could prove to be somewhat useful since these numbers give novice and mature writers some idea of the important features of typical cover letters, including the number of words, sentences, paragraphs and average number of words per sentence and paragraph, important matters to consider when writing the cover letter.

But are there other approaches of a more rhetorical nature that may be used in writing this valuable letter that could prove to be more instructive to novice writers than just providing students with raw statistics gleaned from studying model letters?

In fact, most technical and business writing textbooks have much to say about organizing the letter, appealing to the audience, and using an appropriate tone for writing an effective cover letter. For example, Paul Anderson, author of one of the most popular textbooks in technical writing, *Technical Writing: A Reader-Centered Approach*, encourages novice writers to see the cover letter as a kind of “interview” in which applicants try to project a certain type of personality to the audience, clarify applicants’ reasons for applying for the position, and indicate how their training and experience would be valuable to the employer. Anderson also discusses how to organize the letter for maximum effect, cautioning writers to think of the audience as a paramount concern [1, pp. 46-53]. John Lannon, author of the very popular *Technical Communication*, advises young writers to “emphasize personal qualities and qualifications convincingly” as they relate to the accompanying resumes. Lannon then discusses the organization of the letter and, like Anderson, the tone of the letter [10, pp. 387-392]. Sharon J. Gerson and Steven M. Gerson in *Technical Writing: Progress and Product* explore matters like the organization of the letter, particularly the discussion section, the conclusion, and the style of the letter [5, pp. 185-186]. M. Jimmie Killingsworth and Jacqueline S. Palmer in their book on technical writing, *Information in Action: A Guide to Technical Communication*, also emphasize the importance of considering “the needs of the reader and offer[ing] to fulfill those needs” in the letter [9, p. 322], arguing that the “intent [of the letter] is ‘to convince’ readers that the applicant has the qualifications to fulfill the needs of the company” [9, p. 325]. Finally, Brian Holloway’s *Technical Writing Basics: A Guide to Style and Form* echoes much of the advice of these textbook writers, emphasizing the importance of audience awareness, and careful and thoughtful organization [6, pp. 183-184].

Yet Holloway, Killingsworth, and Palmer add two more crucial features to the long list of advice: Holloway says writers should make the letter “dynamic” [6, p. 184], and Killingsworth and Palmer stress having the right attitude [9, p. 325], suggestions that implicitly run through all of the other textbook writers’ advice about writing the effective letter, because delineating the appropriate personality, satisfying audiences, and using a suitable tone all imply, to a certain degree, that the applicant should come across as energetic and enthusiastic about the job. After all, what good is listing the applicant’s training and ability if the applicant isn’t willing to work hard and eagerly?
All of these suggestions for writing effective cover letters are useful and contain important bits of advice that should be a part of the repertoire of any technical writing teacher and any applicant seeking to write an effective letter.

But writing such a letter gets a little more complicated when writers get down to actually composing the piece itself. As important as things like audience awareness and organization may be, for example, the question for the writer now is not just what to include in the letter, but rather how does the writer inject these stiff doses of enthusiasm and dedication into the prose?

Surprisingly, perhaps without their realizing it, many authors of important textbooks in technical writing have, by example, answered in part the crucial questions of how to make cover letters dynamic. For when you look at their sample letters closely, down at the word and phrase level, the answer pops out of their prose.

But first some necessary background.

The most obvious way to inject a dynamic disposition in the prose to convince readers of the energy of the applicant is to use lively verbs, words that describe action vividly. Countless textbook writers and handbooks on writing suggest that the verbs in the sentence are keys to enlivening the prose. Gerson and Gerson seem to agree, and even propose a list of 41 verbs that can be used either in the resume or cover letter, words they describe as “convey[ing] a positive assertive tone...” [5, p. 179]. The lively verbs suggested include “accomplish,” “completed,” “developed,” “implemented,” “installed,” “organized,” “prepared,” “programmed,” and “trained,” just to name a few, all words that add a certain amount of vigor to the prose.

Along similar lines, one of America’s most popular and influential rhetoricians, Peter Elbow, in Writing with Power, says this about the sentence:

A sentence should be alive. Does it sag in the middle or trail off at the end? Is it fog or mush? Sentences need energy to make the meaning jump off the page into the reader’s head. As a writer you must embed that energy in the sentence—coil the spring, set the trap [14, p. 135].

Although Elbow doesn’t spell it out in explicit terms, the implication is strong that that which gives a sentence “energy,” that which makes “the meaning jump off the page,” and that which “coils the spring,” and “set[s] the trap” is the verb. It is the verb that captures and describes the action in the sentence, and ultimately the discourse itself. Rhetoricians Maxine Hairston and Michael Keene appear to agree, but say it more directly: “Verbs are the lifeblood of writing. Because they affect not only clarity but also the tone and rhythm of what you write, it’s worth giving them special attention” [15, p. 65].

But to confine the “energy” only to the main verb in the sentence does not tell the whole story, for surely the sentence below derives much of its “action” from other places besides just the finite verb, causes. Notice the following sentence:
Plunging steaming steel into chilled water causes the temperature of the metal to dip downward sharply.

At least part of the vitality of the sentence surely derives from the italicized phrases, which technically are called verbals, expressions that are verbs, but they are used as nouns, adverbs, or adjectives in the sentence. Thus, in the above sentence, there is the action of plunging, the action of steaming, the action of chilled, the action of dipping, and, of course, the action of causing in the verb itself, all of which meld together around a series of action-filled episodes in the sentence brought to life through the verb and the verbals.

Verbals come in three varieties: infinitives, gerunds, and participles. According to Paul Hopper in *A Short Course in Grammar*, “a gerund is a verb that has been converted into a noun so that it serves as a subject or in some other capacity restricted to noun phrases. The gerund is identical to the ing form of the verb” [16, p. 95]. In the above sentence, the whole phrase, plunging steaming steel into chilled water, is a gerund phrase acting as the subject of the sentence with the phrase marked as a gerund by the word plunging.

Richard Veit in *Discovering English Grammar* defines participles as “verbals that function much like adjectives. They are used to modify nouns” [17, p. 249]. In the above sentence, the words steaming and chilled act like adjectives in describing the words steel and water.

According to Kathryn Riley and Frank Parker in *English Grammar: Prescriptive, Descriptive, Generative, and Performance*, an infinitive is a “phrase [usually] consisting of to followed by an uninflected verb form (and any objects or compliments)” [18, p. 273]. In the above sentence to drop downward is an infinitive phrase, and to drop is the infinitive.

Even though verbals are used as other parts of speech, because they are verbs in origin, they still, by their very nature, retain the energy and vitality of the verb. Consequently, a sentence with verbals in it has at least two opportunities to energize the sentence: with the main verb and with the verbal.

As important as the verb is in a sentence, and it would be difficult to overestimate the importance of lively verbs, using verbals in the letters is, thus, still another way of using verb forms to energize the prose in other positions in the sentence besides the places where the main verb generally appears.

But what do the model letters demonstrate about the use of verbals?

Counting the number of gerunds, participles, and infinitives in the total of the 13 model letters examined above reveals some interesting numbers. For example, there are 42 gerunds, 50 participles, and 58 infinitives, a total of 150 verbals in the model letters, a seemingly huge number of such constructions. Counting the number of verbals (150) and dividing that figure by the number of sentences (162) yields a surprising average: 92.58% of the sentences in the model letters have verbals in them, a figure too large to ignore. In other words, close examination of
the model letters beyond the raw statistics reveals that on average more than nine out of ten sentences in these works, designed to serve as examples for young writers, contain gerunds, participle, and infinitives. Breaking the figures down in more detail reveals that 25.92% of the sentences contain gerunds, 30.86% have participles in them, and 35.80% contain infinitives. Such figures, when taken as a whole, indicate that verbals appear to play a very active part in the language of cover letters by injecting action into the prose beyond the action in the main verb itself. In addition, the verbals come in a variety of forms. For instance, gerunds used in the letters include words like “publishing,” “programming,” “using,” and “developing”; participles were represented by verbals like “marketing,” “answering,” “rotating,” and “programming”; infinitives were comprised of phrases like “to respond,” “to find,” “to apply,” “to analyze,” “to explain,” and “to work”—all, in total, words that represent activity and liveliness and reinforce the image of that energetic person so important to writing an effective cover letter.

But how do readers respond to these grammatical forms? If readers dislike such constructions, verbals can be of little value, other than just adding syntactic variety to the writing.

In “Syntactic Complexity and Writing Quality,” Stephen P. Witte, John A. Daly, and Roger D. Cherry found in their careful study that “syntactic complexity has some effect on judgments of quality” [19, p. 160]. In fact, this group of researchers concluded that “as writers grew older their writing becomes better [italics added], as it becomes syntactically more sophisticated in complexity” [19, p. 151]. While syntactic complexity does not always automatically translate to the use of gerunds, participles, and infinitives, these structures are under the same umbrella as other forms of syntactic complexity.

Extrapolating from this hypothesis, then, according to Witte, Daly, and Cherry, readers should prefer writing that is syntactically complex over writing that is not. Even more particularly, in a survey, readers should prefer passages that contain gerunds, participles, and infinitives over passages that do not. Specifically, students would pick Passage B over Passage A in the following set of paraphrases of each other:

Passage A

There are four main steps in the composition of the essay. First, you must collect your thoughts about the topic. You should gather ideas that relate to the topic you will discuss in the essay. However, this step includes ideas that you may not actually use in the essay. In fact, then, you may discard some of the ideas. Next, you should organize these thoughts around a central idea that will control the presentation of those thoughts. For some people, this step is a difficult task because they have trouble with the organization of their thoughts. After you have organized your thoughts, the next step involves the development of those thoughts by the use of illustrations, examples, and other forms of elaboration such as definition and analogy. The last step is
the determination of whether or not you have committed any errors in grammar and mechanics. For some people, this procedure should insure a satisfactory composition.

Passage B

Composing an essay involves four main steps. Collecting your thoughts about the topic is the first step. You should gather ideas that you plan to discuss in the essay. However, this step means including ideas you may not actually use in the essay itself. Organizing these thoughts around a central idea is your next step. For some people, this is a difficult task because organizing their thoughts is difficult. After organizing these thoughts, your next step is developing these ideas by using illustrations, examples, and such other forms of elaborating, defining, and using analogies. The last step is to determine if you have committed any errors in grammar and mechanics in the writing process. This procedure for some people means insuring a satisfactory composing process.

Although the verbals were not underlined in the student survey, Passage B above is now marked for verbals with gerunds, participles, and infinitives underscored.

To test the hypothesis that students will prefer the more syntactically sophisticated passage, students in the second half of English composition’s two-course semester sequence (normally called English 102 at many schools) were surveyed using these two paragraphs, each a paraphrase of the other, one with verbals in it, and the other without verbals (paraphrases have been used to describe and measure syntactic complexity in such studies as those by Kellogg Hunt [20, pp. 94-104], for example, so the practice has been used by other researchers). This representative sample of students (142 out of a population of 1,317 students, more than 10% of the students for the year 2002) chose the paragraph with the verbals in it 75.53% of the time. In other words, more than three-quarters picked the one with verbals in it as the “better” of the two passages that were, in fact, quite similar in content, but different syntactically. English 102 respondents used words and phrases like “clearer,” “more concise,” “flowed better,” “more to the point,” “more organized,” and “simpler” to explain their choices for Passage B, the paragraph with verbals in it.

Next, six classes of more mature students in the junior level technical writing course were also surveyed using the same instrument (a total of 81 students, virtually all the technical writing students for the year 2002 at Eastern Kentucky University). Of that group, 75.30% chose the paragraph with the verbals. Students explained their preference for Passage B by using descriptors much like those of the freshmen at Eastern Kentucky University: “more to the point,” “more understandable,” “flowed better,” “more concise,” and “more organized.”

A z-test of equal proportions indicates that statistically there are no differences between the two groups of students.
These high percentages suggest that the hypothesis that some readers prefer the more syntactically complex verbals over passages not as syntactically complex appears to be true.

But what can be done with this information about the apparent wide use of verbals in the writing of model cover letters, and, seemingly, the preferences in certain groups of readers for the use of verbals in particular prose passages?

Fortunately, a methodology already exits for teaching students in technical writing classes how to incorporate verbals and other more sophisticated structures into their writing. Called “sentence combining,” and undergoing a resurgence of interest in composition studies, this technique teaches students how to take what are called “sentence kernels” (basic sentences) and combine them into more complex, yet many times more concise, structures. Along with William Strong’s *Writer’s Toolbox* [21], one of the most popular books using sentence combining as an instructional tool to teach student to write more sophisticated sentences is *The Writer’s Options: Lessons in Style and Arrangement* by Max Morenberg and Jeff Sommers [22]. A typical lesson from these two books may take two kernels and combine them using a gerund or an infinitive phrase:

Kernel: You should follow directions.
Kernel: They are important.
Gerund Phrase: Following directions is important.
Infinitive Phrase: To follow directions is important.

Or kernels can be combined to form participles:

Kernel: They loved the new machine.
Kernel: They liked its efficiency.
Kernel: They liked its low cost.
Participial Phrase: Liking its efficiency and low cost, they loved the new machine.

Obviously, there are certain advantages for teaching students in technical writing how to use sentence combining in general, and participles, gerunds, and infinitives in particular. First, as noted earlier, readers seem to prefer sentences with participles, gerunds, and infinitives since they represent more syntactically complex constructions which add, in turn, interest and variety to the prose. Second, using these three constructions tends to make writing more concise—a very important quality in effective technical writing. For example, the three kernels used above to form the participial phrases come to a total of 14 words, while the sentence with the participles has only 11 words, a difference that could easily mount over a series of sentences. Third, using verbals helps energize sentences and reflects well on the image of the writer. While lively verbs are an obvious prescription for virtually any written document, if the writer seeks to inject verve into the prose beyond the verb, as so many experts claim, verbals may well be the way to do it.
The lesson seems obvious: Cover letters are extremely important documents which must be carefully crafted, well-organized, appeal to the audience, and reflect an appropriate tone. But writing such letters also demands going beyond these important qualities. Writers, if they want to project themselves as willing and energetic potential employees, should use deliberate care and employ gerunds, participles, and infinitives as a way of enlivening their prose, and adding energy and enthusiasm to their letters. For evidence seems to show that readers prefer more complex syntactic constructions with verbals in them over less complex syntactic structures. Methods for teaching such constructions already exist and help technical writing students to produce leaner and more economical prose, truly a hallmark of technical writing style.

After all, writing any letter worth a million dollars should take a little more time and effort.

REFERENCES


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