

By: [Isla McKetta](#)

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Death to Wishy-Washy Reports: Simple Edits to Put the Authority Back in Your Writing

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True life confession: Although I've worked with some of the smartest SEOs, architects, and CPAs in the business, you couldn't always tell from their writing. Which is a problem. Because while some of them are client-facing (so the client gets to know their smarts firsthand—either in person or on the phone), some are only known by the lackluster reports they turn in.

This is a post about how anyone (whether you're an expert in SEO, PPC, social media, or even... content marketing) can write a clearer, more persuasive report. And the lessons contained herein can help you with any form of corporate communication, whether you're writing for a client or your boss.

Get ready to sound smarter.

Be assertive

Being assertive doesn't mean you should stand on your desk and shout your opinions like you're auditioning to be the next Hulk. Instead, have confidence in the data and recommendations you're reporting and convey that confidence in your writing. Because if you're not confident, you might not be ready to write the report. So go double-check your research and then use the following tactics to sound like the authority you are:

Ditch "I think"

I think there are a lot of things you could possibly say to show a client what they might or might not do depending on how they interpret your recommendations.

Notice how that sentence had no spine? That's because it's filled with empty phrases—words that do nothing for the sentence but convey how unwilling its author is to make a point.

Wishy-washy	Authoritative
I think we should go with a mobile-friendly format.	A mobile-friendly format will increase time on page.

Phrases like "I think," "I feel," and "might" are couching words—things you say when you're trying to leave yourself an out, and they make you sound passive and unsure. Go through your report and check for couching words. Ask yourself if you need them (in case of actual uncertainty like "Google might...") or if you can cut them out and strengthen your points.

Dump the passive voice

Mistakes are often made as we try to get around to a point with our writing.

One of those mistakes is in failing to use the active voice. Every sentence has an actor (subject) and an action (verb). While it's nice to vary your sentence structure sometimes, stick to "actor commits action" when you have something important to say (especially when you have bad news to break).

Passive voice	Active voice
The 10% drop in conversions was caused by the site outage over the weekend	The site outage over the weekend caused a 10% drop in conversions

Be careful with dependent clauses

If you want to sound confident and decisive, lead with an independent clause instead of a dependent one (like I did here).

Dependent first	Independent first
Because we couldn't get access to your CMS, we haven't fixed your title tags.	We will fix your title tags as soon as we get access to your CMS.

Time for a (mercifully quick) jump back to elementary school grammar. Independent clauses are the ones that can stand on their own as a complete sentence. They have a subject, verb, and usually an object. Dependent clauses don't.

Dependent clauses are often added to an independent clause to increase the level of information in a sentence. Let's flip that last sentence so you can watch the dependent clause move from the end to the front:

To increase the level of information in a sentence, dependent clauses are often added to an independent clause.

Dependent clauses are very useful, but some writers fall into a pattern of starting most of their sentences with them. That delay of the independent clause can make you sound like you're hesitating to get to the point. It can also make you seem passive or like there's something you're trying to hide. That's not how you want to come off in a report.

Choose a point of view (and stick to it)

Some companies prefer to write from a formal (and somewhat) distant third person perspective where "I" is never used; I prefer the more conversational first person.

Messy POV	Clear POV
We need to create a list of keywords so we can run that analysis.	Once you give us your list of keywords, we will run that analysis.

You can write your report from any point of view you want, but be careful with those pronouns.

The most common mistake I see is for the writer to get indecisive with the pronouns and start throwing around the word "we" as in "we need to fix your title tags." Which could mean that the consultant is taking responsibility for the title tags, or it could be a general suggestion that the title tags need fixing.

Try instead, "your title tags need to be updated; we plan to start work on those during the second month of our engagement." Still uses the word "we," but now it's more obvious who's doing what (and will save you some embarrassing followup conversations).

Write for your audience

Industries with a high degree of fiduciary responsibility are often more accustomed to the use of a formal tone. Meanwhile, writers in other industries, like fashion, automotive, and anything related to the Internet, can get away with a much more casual voice.

Business-y	Conversational
We recommend a wholesale rewrite of the content on your site.	It's time to rewrite all that content.

You may have noticed by now that I start a lot of sentences with conjunctions like "and" and "but." I also use contractions. Both are part of a conversational tone that's "Mozzy," but if I was writing for a different audience, I would button the top button on my style (and maybe even add a tie).

You know your clients and their style of communication. It's reflected in everything from their RFP to the latest call. Try to mirror their tone (unless you think they came to you for a big shakeup) and your audience will feel like you understand their culture and needs. That means your work is more likely to be accepted.

Explain things

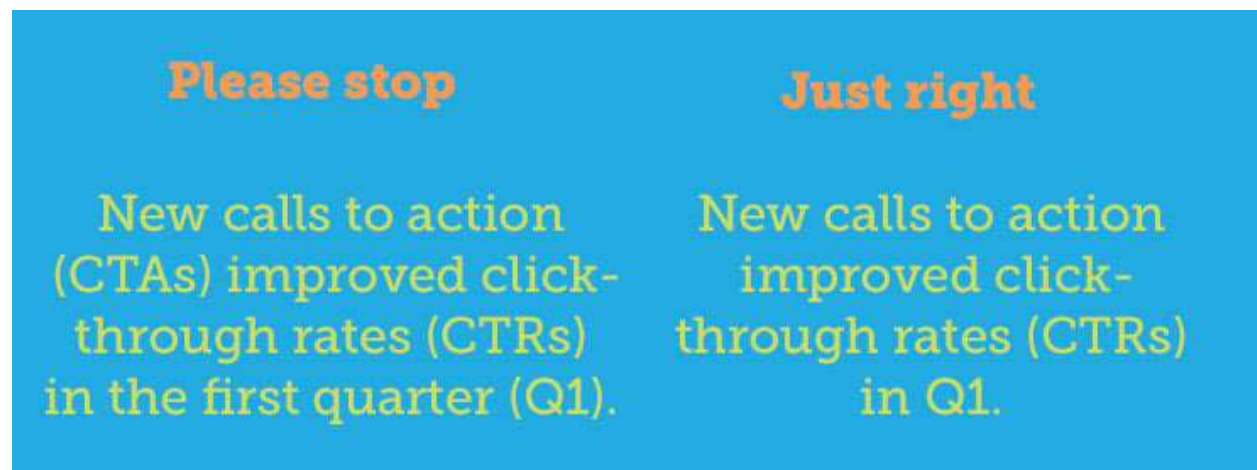
Remember that you were hired because of your unique expertise. That means that you know things the person reading the report doesn't.



When you're introducing a concept your client or boss likely hasn't encountered (or might be a little rusty on), give a short refresher to keep them engaged.

Don't over-explain things

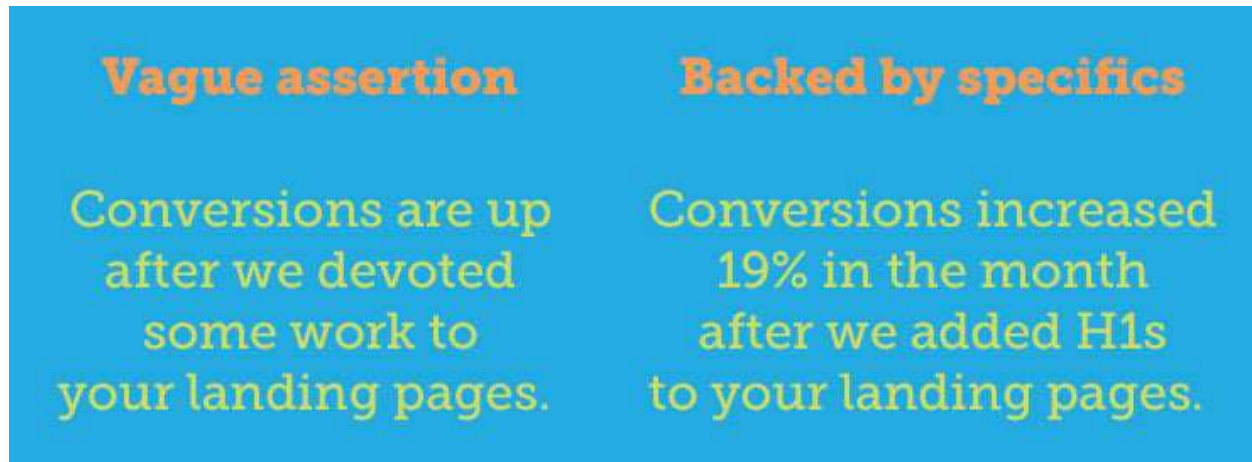
No one likes to feel like an idiot. Going step by step through all the things anyone could ever want to know about a concept (whether foreign or not) has the potential to not only annoy your audience, but also distract from your main point.



If you come across a concept in writing your report that requires extensive education of your reader, either create an addendum where they can read as much as they need to, or schedule a phone call, training, or other way to get them all the info they need.

Use numbers (wisely)

Ninety-nine percent of SEOs have more data than they can ever reasonably convey to the client.



That's because clients (at least sane ones) don't want to know what every single keyword ranked on every day last month. They want to know if their overall rankings are up or down, what that means for their business, and how to push rankings upward in general in the future.

Numbers are very useful (and can be very powerful) if you're using graphs and tables that tell a story, but without your interpretation, they're all kind of meaningless.

So although you have access to all the numbers in the world, the real magic of your report is in getting inside your reader's head and figuring out what they need to understand about the numbers. Then use the analysis portion of your report to translate that data into answers.

Write fewer words

Concision is an art. Redundancy is annoying. Write as few words as you can to convey your point.

Wordy	Concise
Avoid black hat tactics like keyword stuffing that could be seen as spammy.	Avoid keyword stuffing - it looks spammy.

Don't let big words interfere with meaning

An immense vocabulary can obfuscate significance.

Vocab-licious	Clear
We are disinclined to proceed until we ascertain the true nature of the predicament.	Let's work together to figure out what went wrong before moving forward.

This is true of using big words to sound smart and also if you're spouting jargon at people who don't understand it. You might notice from reading this post that I use very little jargon. That's because the vocab words I learned in creative writing won't mean anything to most of you and I can usually find a clearer way to express marketing jargon.

So if your clients (and all the people who will read the report) regularly use words like "[earned media](#)," "[freemium](#)," and "EPV," you can use them too. But if you have any doubt, try to find a way to use a more accessible word or add some context so everyone can follow you.

Think about general scanability

Your clients are busy. You want them to get the most out of a report they might only ever scan.

Dense	Scannable
My next steps are to fix your title tags, add meta descriptions, and audit your alt tags.	My next steps are: 1. Fix your title tags 2. Add meta descriptions 3. Audit your alt tags.

All the things you've learned about [writing for the Internet](#) apply to writing reports:

- Short sentences (that aren't choppy) are easier to read.
- Keeping each paragraph to one topic with a topic sentence makes it easier to scan.
- Using bullet points (when appropriate) will help your reader digest all that information you've created for them.

Help your reader out by making all your great information intelligible.

Employ an executive summary

Keep the person who signs your checks in the loop with a few words.

To write an effective executive summary, give the highlights:

- Why was the work undertaken?
- What problems were found?
- Next steps

The summary should run between a paragraph and a page (depending on how long your report is). That means you want to save all that delicious analysis you've slaved over for the report itself.

Use templates at your own risk

I know, a lot of the things you're saying to one client are 90% the same as what you're saying to the next client, and creating a template just makes your job more efficient. But if you aren't carefully reading the resulting document, you might be making a mistake (like using the wrong client name or giving them instructions for Omniture when they use GA) that takes much longer to clean up than writing an original report would have.

Trust me, about the third time you're reading over the same words in the same order (even if for different clients), you are too far inside the template to see the mistakes. But your client is reading this report for the first time ever and they won't miss a thing :/. Speaking of which...

Proofreading isn't optional

You aren't qualified to proofread you're [sic] own work.



Not saying anything about your reading or grammar skills, but I'm 99% certain that you've spent so long staring at that report that you are beyond spotting your own typos. Find a second reader. If you're in absolute dire straits and can't find a buddy, read the report aloud to yourself.

Feel smarter already? I hope so. Because you've worked too hard to pull all that information together just to have it fall flat because of a bad report. Tell me about your report writing disasters (and things you'd like help with) in the comments.

The author's views are entirely their own (excluding the unlikely event of hypnosis) and may not always reflect the views of Moz.



Written by

[Isla McKetta](#)

Isla uses her MFA in creative writing to organize words into forms that resonate with an audience and incite action. She co-authored [Clear Out the Static in Your Attic: A Writer's Guide for Turning Artifacts into Art](#). Connect with her on [Twitter](#).