



“*Clearly Write* is a gem. Crisp and punchy, it is a valuable guide for corporate executives, public servants, students and even journalists.”

PROFESSOR HONG HAI

Former Dean, College of Business • Nanyang Technological University  
*In His Foreword*

# CLEARLY WRITE

Win Over Your Readers with  
Clarity and Concision

LIM SOO PING

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# ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**L**im Soo Ping is a former Auditor-General of Singapore. He served 37 years in public service, first as an engineer, then as an Administrative Service Officer, and finally as Auditor-General.

Following his retirement from public service in 2013, he was appointed Professor of Accounting (Practice) by the Singapore Management University. He is currently an adjunct professor at SMU.

Soo Ping had his early education at St Joseph's Institution, a school of the La Sallian Brothers.

A Colombo Plan scholar,<sup>1</sup> he has a Bachelor of Science in Mechanical Engineering degree with Distinction from the University of Alberta (Canada), a Master of Science in Industrial Engineering and a post-graduate Diploma in Business Administration, both from the University of Singapore. He also completed the Advanced Management Program at Harvard Business School.

Soo Ping has served on the boards of several organisations, including Tan Tock Seng Hospital, Nanyang Polytechnic and The Esplanade Company. For 10 years, he was a Governing Board member, as well as Audit Committee Chairman, of SJI International School. For four years, he was the first chairman of Equal Ark Singapore, a charity that provides horse-assisted

counselling for children with special needs. He is a member of the National Youth Achievement Award Council.

Since 2013, he has been giving talks on leadership, corporate governance, ethical decision-making, and conflict resolution. He has also spoken on the art and culture of flamenco, a subject in which he has a special interest.

In 2018, he started a writing course for management executives called *Clearly Write*, at the SMU Academy.

In 2019, he authored a book titled *Courage and Conviction: Ethical Dilemma, Decision-making, and Resolutions*.

In 2020, he was recognised as a Specialist in Adult Education by the Institute for Adult Learning (IAL).

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<sup>1</sup> Scholarships under the Colombo Plan, which was set up in 1951, were given to top students from former British colonies, including Singapore, to study in universities in Commonwealth countries such as the United Kingdom, Canada, Australia and New Zealand. Singapore stopped receiving the scholarship awards in 1988.

# FOREWORD

Professor Lim Soo Ping's *Clearly Write* is a gem. Crisp and punchy, it lives up to its name. Classics such as Ernest Gower's *The Complete Plain Words* have influenced generations of writers from all walks of life. But even Gower's book at 289 pages lacks the virtue of brevity. Not many have read it from cover to cover, the possible exceptions being those for whom it is required reading for a course.

My own favourite is William Zinsser's *On Writing Well*, particularly Chapter 3 on "clutter". Clutter is using more words than is necessary, like saying "at this point in time" instead of "now", or "reverse the car backwards", as if there was a way to reverse it forward. Singaporeans also have a penchant for the unnecessary preposition, as in "leverage *on* our local knowledge".

I found the concision of each chapter of *Clearly Write* refreshing. I read the whole book in one sitting and readily absorbed most of its lessons. In the age of Twitter, people have little tolerance for wordy writing. They have no patience with, for example, the convoluted sentence structure and bombastic vocabulary of the noted conservative intellect William Buckley Jr.

This book is a valuable guide for public servants who write important memos and papers. It would also be helpful to corporate executives who often trip over themselves explaining

policy details in stiff and complicated prose. Students too undoubtedly can improve their essays and term papers following the guidelines in *Clearly Write*.

Even experienced journalists can benefit from this book. Some columns by *The Straits Times* opinion writers can be tiresome. The writers make excellent points, but appear obliged to fill the entire broadsheet page. Many of their pieces could have been halved in length without losing material content and, as a result, make for more pleasant reading.

Although *Clearly Write* is on writing, many of the pointers can be used in speeches. Some of our politicians could make their speeches more impactful by heeding the injunctions of the book. I urge all parliamentarians to read it.

PROFESSOR HONG HAI

September 2022

Hong Hai was Professor and Dean of the College of Business at Nanyang Technological University, where he is now Adjunct Professor. He has been a member of the Singapore parliament and chief executive of Haw Par Corporation Limited. His recent publications include *The Rule of Culture: Corporate and State Governance in China and East Asia* (Routledge, 2020), *Principles of Chinese Medicine: A Modern Interpretation* (Imperial College Press, 2016), and *Chinese Medicine for Health: Holistic Healing, Inner Harmony, and Herbal Recipes* (World Scientific, 2023).

# PUBLISHER'S PREFACE

**E**very *word* counts. The *world* we live in is shaped by the world of language, or every bit of information we receive each and every second.<sup>2</sup> Conversely, the words we write, or speak, inextricably impact people around us and their world. Truly, it is the *word* that forms our *world*.

After all, the only difference between the word “word” and the word “world” is the letter “l” – that is, *language*.

Implicitly, how we learn and treat language will determine the frontiers of our world – an inestimably exhilarating adventure.

When I was first approached by Lim Soo Ping on working on this book project *Clearly Write*, I was intrigued by his profound passion in equipping and empowering readers with a sense of discipline and zeal to master the essentials of the English language. Serendipitously, we share the same aspiration to craft a book that could catalyse a learning journey among adults and students alike – to *write clearly* and *concisely* so that they may communicate effectively and thrive in a world fundamentally presided over by the imperatives of language.

To nurture a better, bountiful and beneficial world for ourselves, and for others, may this book be your inception to write words that impel, inspire and invigorate your audience.

Happy reading, thinking, and writing!



TAN CHINKAR

September 2022

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/talking-apes/201509/howlanguage-shapes-our-world>. Accessed on 1 September 2022.

# ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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I am indebted to Lai Cheng. This book would not have come about if she had not encouraged me to start a course on writing at the SMU Academy.

I am grateful to Leo Yih Nah for her meticulous editing of the drafts of *Clearly Write* right up to the form in which it was submitted to the publisher. I also thank Karen Cheah for her suggestions that helped the book take shape after the initial draft.

I was most ably assisted by three of my ex-students, namely Gladys Lim Jie Wei, Apple Lee Wanyun and Malisa Lim Yuan Yuan. They helped with the editing and provided me with many suggestions on both the book's content and layout.

I am grateful to the SMU School of Accountancy for the opportunity to teach undergraduate students thereby immersing myself in SMU's inspiring academic community.

I acknowledge the opportunity given to me by the SMU Academy to teach a course on writing, which led to the creation of this book.

Finally, I thank Tan ChinKar my publisher. With his guidance and advice, what would otherwise have been just a technical guide on writing is now an inspirational book on writing.

# PREFACE

## From Engineering to Teaching Writing

**M**y publisher, Tan ChinKar asked me how from an engineer, I became a teacher in writing. There was no natural connection between engineering and writing.

I did not set out to teach writing; this was not at all in my retirement plan. Nor was I even conscious of having a particular facility in writing.

The consciousness arose unexpectedly when I was teaching an undergraduate course in auditing at SMU.

I was asked by Dr Lim Lai Cheng, the then executive director of SMU Academy, for help to strengthen a strategic management report that she was writing.

I took the liberty to make structural changes to the paper. So impressed was she that she suggested that I share my writing experience widely by starting a writing course for executives at the Academy.

That I did, but after much hesitation. I did not want to take on more work beyond teaching an undergraduate course.

In school, I was not particularly good in English composition. This might have been because I did not read a lot. I had no patience for novels, such as *Doctor Zhivago* by Boris Pasternak, which some of my classmates had read fully.

I preferred short stories especially of adventure, such as *The Famous Five* (about the adventures of a group of school children)

by Enid Blyton, and *Biggles* (a fictitious wartime fighter pilot) by W. E. Johns.

Years later, in my working life, I enjoyed the short stories written by Catherine Lim.<sup>3</sup> And I would devour Alistair MacLean's books, such as *Puppet on a Chain*, *Fear is the Key* and *Ice Station Zebra*.

My particular interest in writing was sparked by the inspiring lessons of my English language teachers.

Mr Patrick Goh Yong Meng, one of my English language teachers, told us that if a piece of writing is well crafted, you only need to scan it to absorb the content. No actual reading is required.

During the lull period after our final exam in Secondary 3, and before the year-end school holidays commenced, Mr Goh asked the class to write short essays for a class competition. There were only a handful of entries. I won the second prize. My essay was on the state and stench of the Singapore River (as it was then).

But I did win a "first" prize once for essay writing.

That was when I was in primary school. Our class went on an excursion to the Coca Cola factory at River Valley Road. During refreshment time at the factory, a short documentary film about cities of the world was screened. We were invited to write an essay based on the documentary to win a prize. We were shown the prize: A red Coca Cola cooler bag.

Determined to win that beautiful cooler bag, I submitted my three-page essay a week later.

I emerged the winner. My essay was the only entry!

Mr Goh also spoke about the choice of words. He said that words could project their meanings in the sounds they produce. The example he gave was "*fish fins clapping*".

I found studying English literature in secondary school fascinating. We studied Shakespeare's *Macbeth* and *The Merchant of Venice*. Literature helped me to expand my vocabulary and to speak and write in a more articulate manner.

When I was studying engineering in Canada, English Literature was a compulsory course in our first year.

In the full year course, English 210, we studied the works of William Shakespeare, Charles Dickens, Nathaniel Hawthorne, and Ben Jonson, among others, as well as poetry (Romantic, Victorian, Renaissance and Modern).

While literature helped me with written expressions, studying engineering imbued in me the instinct for order and precision in communication.

In an elective course, Corrosion Engineering, the professor imposed a rule discouraging the use of technical terms in our weekly assignments. He explained that in their careers, engineers communicate mainly with non-engineers.

The final inspiration for good writing came in the 1990s when I switched career from engineering to policy and administration. In the Government Administrative Service, the use of plain and clear language in writing is a requirement. Our standard reference was the book, *The Complete Plain Words* by Sir Ernest Gowers. In my learning journey on writing in the public service, I have drafted dozens of Cabinet papers. There was a period in the 1980s when every Cabinet paper had to be vetted for language clarity by one of several permanent secretaries appointed as "scribes".

Later in life and in my retirement years, I became inspired by the writing style of Professor Tommy Koh<sup>4</sup> in his opinion editorials in *The Straits Times*. His writing is a breeze to read; one

feels like he is talking to you. This led to the point that I make in the Prologue of this book, that “writing is speaking”.

How did I put together the substance of this book? The knowledge of good writing that I acquired in school and university plays a large part. Layered over are practical lessons I learned in various phases of my public service career.

Many aspects of the book (and correspondingly my course on writing) are inspired by the references I used, such as *Keys to Great Writing* by Stephen Wilbers,<sup>5</sup> *The Pyramid Principle* by Barbara Minton<sup>6</sup> and various YouTube videos by Conor Neill of IESE Business School.

Several new ideas were also developed, e.g. an index for measuring readability, concept of narrative points and statement points, and bridging and pointer sentences.

*Clearly Write* is the culmination of my three years of teaching writing at the SMU Academy. It was ChinKar’s idea that each chapter begins with a personal anecdote. This fits snugly with my approach of using story telling in my teaching and talks.

I hope that the anecdotes will inspire readers to benefit fully from *Clearly Write*.

Happy reading, and writing.

LIM SOO PING

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<sup>3</sup> Dr Catherine Lim is a Singaporean fiction author known for writing about Singapore society and on themes of traditional Chinese culture. Her most notable works include *The Bondmaid* (1995), *Little Ironies: Stories of Singapore* (1978), *Or Else, The Lightning God & Other Stories* (1980).

<sup>4</sup> Professor Tommy Koh is a Professor of Law at the University of Singapore, a diplomat and an author. He served as Permanent Representative to the United Nations for Singapore from 1968 to 1971.

<sup>5</sup> *Keys to Great Writing: Mastering the Elements of Composition and Revision* by Stephen Wilbers, 2007, Writer's Digest Books.

<sup>6</sup> *The Pyramid Principle: Logic in Writing and Thinking* by Barbara Minto, 2021 (3rd Edition), FT Publishing International.



## The Word “Paper”

In this book, the word “paper” refers to any written document, for example, a letter or memo, a management report, a business proposal paper, a policy paper, an investigation report, an essay, an opinion editorial, the minutes of a meeting and a press release.

# USING THIS BOOK

**C**learly Write provides guidance on how to write in a clear, concise and persuasive, manner. Every chapter begins with an anecdote and ends with a summary of its key points.

Chapters 1 to 5 cover the basic aspects of clear and concise writing, starting with how to write a sentence.

Chapters 6 to 8 are on special aspects of writing. Chapter 6 teaches how to explain a complex matter. Chapter 7 is about giving a positive tone to writing to make it more persuasive. Chapter 8 deals with common errors in, and difficulties with, the use of the English language.

Chapter 9 is on the writing of minutes of a meeting. Chapter 10 discusses the process of writing and editing. The Annexes provide templates for various types of papers in a business and management context.

When reading *Clearly Write* for the first time, read it fully. Thereafter, use it as a handy guide for reference when writing or editing.

By consistently applying the pointers provided in this book, users will soon be writing more concisely, and with greater clarity and persuasiveness.

# PROLOGUE

## WRITING IS SPEAKING

“Communication skill is key to good writing.”

**A**fter I had retired from public service in 2013, there were two occasions when my assistance in writing was sought.

In the first case, a friend who was a school principal asked for my help to write a board paper on a staff benefits matter.

In the second case, another friend asked for my help to review a management report that she was writing. I did not just give my views or guidance; I made substantial improvements to the paper. In fact, I produced a new version of it. The revised paper was subsequently submitted and approved.

It struck me as somewhat odd that in both cases, the persons seeking my help were experts in the English language. The first is a native English speaker. The second has degrees in English and Literature.

It's About Communication,  
Not Just Language

Good writing is not about good language skills per se. It is about good communication. A paper written in impeccable English can fail in its messaging if the readers cannot follow and understand the substance easily.

Consider this extract from a corporate report:

*“We allocate our capital through a methodical and calibrated process, striving to achieve a balanced exposure to our markets and asset classes, and the desired risk-return trade-off.”*

Now consider this version:

*“We carefully spread our capital in different markets and asset classes. We ensure a good balance between risk and return.”*

The second version is easier to read and follow. It is also more concise.

If a piece of writing is unclear, some typical reactions of the reader would be:

- “The paper is heavy reading.”
- “I don’t follow the argument.”
- “I am lost in the details.”
- “I had to read it twice.”
- “The paper is too technical.”
- “The purpose of the paper is unclear.”
- “I can’t recall the key messages of what I just read.”

The hallmarks of good writing are:

- Purposeful
- Easy to Read

- Easy to Follow
- Persuasive
- Memorable

Is the purpose of the writing clear at the outset? Is the paper easy to read? Is it easy to understand, especially the technically complex aspects? Are the arguments persuasive? Does the reader remember the key points after one reading?

Generally, the causes of unclear writing are:

- Too many long or unfamiliar words;
- Too many long sentences;
- Lack of coherence in the flow of the content; and
- Complex points that are not clearly explained.

## Write as You Would Speak

One should write as one would speak to the intended readers. This means organising the substance of the paper and using forms of words and sentences that one would use if one were speaking to the readers.

If your readers were in front of you, you would focus on how you convey your message to hold their attention. You would present your points in a way that is easy for them to follow. Watching the body language of the audience, you would pause from time to time to ensure that they are still with you.

When writing, you do not have the benefit of audience body language to serve as cues for you to adjust your delivery. However, various techniques can be used to make a piece of writing clear, concise, and persuasive, for example, effective

sentence structures, smooth flow of points, and visual cues such as headings.

Even if your readers are not in front of you, your writing should sound like you are talking to them. This is achieved, first and foremost, by making your writing “readable”.

Readability is the basic requirement for clear and concise writing. This book begins with the concept of readability in its opening chapter.

## Keep It Plain

**I**n school and through university, my writing style was straightforward and down to earth, and I used simple vocabulary.

That changed in the late 1970s when I started my engineering career in the Public Works Department. Public officers follow the bureaucratic writing style, which was termed “officialese”, especially when communicating with the public. It is a formal and verbose style of writing.

In a letter to a member of the public, the opening line would typically read: “Please refer to the above-mentioned”. And the writer would refer to himself as “the undersigned”. If a contractor had breached a contract requirement, the cautionary letter would state that action would be “instituted” against him.

In the bureaucratic style of writing, the use of long sentences was normal, so long as they were grammatically correct. But all this would soon change.

In the early 1980s, the then Deputy Prime Minister of Singapore, Dr Goh Keng Swee, advocated that all public officers should read *The Complete Plain Words* by Sir Ernest Gowers (1954).

Every Cabinet paper was to be vetted for language clarity and concision by one of several permanent secretaries designated as “scribes”, before it would be

accepted for tabling at a Cabinet meeting. The length of Cabinet papers was capped at six pages, with 1.5 line spacing.

Decades later, the Singapore Government widened the coverage of using plain English.

In June 2014, Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong wrote on Facebook that the Government should be “simple and direct when we communicate with the public.” We should use plain language, regardless of the occasion, instead of “management speak or big words which will not impress anyone.”

That month, *The Straits Times* also reported that several local financial institutions were sending their documents to a simple English advocacy group to have them certified as being “easily understood” (in the interest of greater transparency).<sup>1</sup>

On January 5, 2021, Parliament passed the Statute Law Reform Bill. The new law provides for the greater use of simplified language in legislation, for example, through the removal of lengthy phrases and archaic words such as “hereinafter” and “hereby”, provide for the greater use of simplified shorter sentences, more paragraphing, and replacing “shall” with “must” to signify legal obligations.<sup>2</sup>



## Chapter 1 Topics

Measuring Readability ■ Keep Sentences Short

Avoid Redundant Words ■ Use Shorter Words

Avoid Nouns Ending with *tion* or *ment*



Use Single Words, not Expressions

Avoid Clichéd Expressions ■

Avoid Redundant Qualifiers Avoid Empty Attributions