

***Feng Shui* for your writing?**

Nine tips for clearing the clutter from your prose

by Sue Johnston

I spent a few hours this week trying to rid my office of clutter. That's partly because the task was long overdue – and partly because I've been reading about *Feng Shui*.

Now anyone who knows anything about this 4,000-year-old Chinese practice of arranging your environment to enhance your life knows *Feng Shui's* not as simple as getting rid of clutter. Still, you have to admit that clutter plays a significant negative role in a life, whether or not you believe you can influence your success and prosperity by rearranging your living space.

As I sat in the "Creativity" area of my office evicting 10-year-old Day-Timers™ and notes from projects completed in the last century, I was struck by an idea. (Already my work was paying off!) Getting clutter out of your writing is as important as getting it out of your life.

So here are my **Nine Tips for Clutter Free Writing**, loosely (very loosely) based on *Feng Shui* principles that suggest every area of a room or home is particularly connected with one aspect of life.

1. Write with a purpose

This idea has roots in the *Foundation & Family* area of the *Feng Shui* map. Ask, "What is the point of my writing?" Chances are, you're trying to get someone to do, think, know, or feel something differently as a result of reading your words. Keep that firm foundation of your message in mind. If a word, phrase or idea does not, somehow, induce the reader to understand your point, get rid of it.

2. Put the reader in the picture

While you're at it, think about your target audience and place these people clearly at the centre of the story. Inspired by the *Centre – Health & Unity* area, this approach helps you craft language that your readers will understand and relate to. Their interest and needs are at the core of your writing. Picture them in your mind as you write. Use only words that will make them say, "Hey, that's me!" or, "I can use that info."

3. Practise economy of words

The corner of *Abundance & Prosperity* is the source for this tip. Wordiness is one of the chief culprits in hard-to-read writing. A wise old mentor from my TV news days once said, "Imagine you had to pay a dollar for every word you used. Then you'll learn to write tightly." The goal is to make every word you use earn its keep. If it doesn't add to the total value of the piece, it's time to downsize. Watch for phrases such as "the reduction of costs," and consider, instead, "cost reduction." Instead of "in order to" do something, just "to" it.

4. Use simple, contemporary terms

There's an editorial writer in my community who has a lot of intelligent things to say. *Notwithstanding the gravitas of the phenomena, transactions and circumstances he chronicles, this evidently erudite scribe employs linguistic conventions so opaque* (man this is hard!) that you need two dictionaries, a Bible and a mythology book handy as you read his column. Few people bother. He needs to clean up his *Illumination & Reputation* area. His writing's not illuminating anyone, and it's hurting his reputation. And just like the clothes you haven't worn in a year or more, toss dated terms, such as "level playing field," "take it to the next level," and "paradigm shift." Your readers will thank you. I will thank you.

5. Write the way you talk, only better

The wisdom of this advice depends on how well you speak; however, the goal is to be conversational. Long words and long, self-conscious sentences conspire to create an absolute muddle. This tip comes from the *Creativity & Children* area of the *Feng Shui* map.

I'm not advocating the "See Spot run and jump" style of your *First Grade Reader*. The point is that children don't try to impress with fancy language. They tell the story the way it is.

6. Use the active voice

You and I both know people who would write that phrase as, "It has been recommended that the active voice be utilized." (I won't say anything about "utilized," except, "Why use a three-syllable word when "used" is cleaner, crisper and clearer?") You can help your readers by using what grammarians call the "active voice." State who did what to whom. This advice comes from the *Helpful People* corner, which, for unknown reasons, is associated with *Travel* in the *Feng Shui* world. Maybe that's because if you don't help your readers by writing clearly, they'll travel far, far, far away from your prose.

7. Write with pacing

From the *Career & Life's Journey* area comes a tip about taking your audience on a trip into the action using words. You build associations and set up a mood or feeling for what's happening. Watch the sentence length as the tension builds in this altercation:

- o "Trott swore at Tucker and told him never to come back to his neighbourhood."
- o "Tucker shook his fist and, again, demanded his money."
- o "Tucker glared from the curb. Trott vibrated with rage."
- o "Tucker punched. Trott kicked. They clawed. Spit. Scream. Silence."

8. Use words that paint pictures

One of the greatest skills a writer can develop is metaphor. To describe a situation, it's useful to close your eyes and actually see it. Write what you see. Instead of, "I was really confused and put off by the menu since I didn't see one thing that looked familiar," you may write, "The menu looked like a typist gone berserk; I didn't recognize a word." Such images convey a great deal with few words. It's a skill that comes with practice and confidence, and it comes from the corner of *Knowledge & Self-Knowledge*.

9. Pay attention to agreements

The last corner of the *Feng Shui* environment is *Love & Relationships*, which brings us to harmonious agreements. If you've studied Romance Languages (it *is* the Love & Relationships corner, but I mean French, Italian, etc.) you know about getting the adjective, pronoun and verb to agree with the masculine or feminine noun, the "who" in the story. In English we don't fuss about gender, but the singular/plural thing can be messy. For example, a corporation, government, association, or team is an *it*, not a *they*. "The government said *it* would impose a tax. The government members said *they* would impose it." And if you have a string of things, check that you've used the plural verb. "Getting married, changing jobs, and moving to a big city *aren't* (not *isn't*) easy to do simultaneously." (Easier and clearer version: "It's not easy to get married, change jobs, and move to a big city, all at once.")

The keys to the process are simplicity and energy. Visualize your readers as living humans and know what you want them to do, think or feel. Hunt for simple-but-productive words and arrange them, logically and clearly, to reveal the story. Remove everything that doesn't make your point. These tips work for every area of your writing life. Getting rid of clutter in your communication reveals the things of value. It also creates a clear path for the flow of energy – good ideas moving between you and others. Maybe it *is* like *Feng Shui*.

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