

Greg Mankiw on Writing Well

When I was CEA chair, I sent the following guidelines to my staff as they started drafting the Economic Report of the President. A friend recently emailed me a copy, and I thought I would share them with blog readers. They are good rules of thumb, especially for economists writing for a general audience.

ERP Writing Guidelines

- Stay focused. Remember the take-away points you want the reader to remember. If some material is irrelevant to these points, it should probably be cut.
- Keep sentences short. Short words are better than long words. Monosyllabic words are best.
- The passive voice is avoided by good writers.
- Positive statements are more persuasive than normative statements.
- Use adverbs sparingly.
- Avoid jargon. Any word you don't read regularly in a newspaper is suspect.
- Never make up your own acronyms.
- Avoid unnecessary words. For instance, in most cases, change
 - "in order to" to "to"
 - "whether or not" to "whether"
 - "is equal to" to "equals"
- Avoid "of course," "clearly," and "obviously." Clearly, if something is obvious, that fact will, of course, be obvious to the reader.
- The word "very" is very often very unnecessary.
- Keep your writing self-contained. Frequent references to other works, or to things that have come before or will come later, can be distracting.
- Put details and digressions in footnotes. Then delete the footnotes.
- To mere mortals, a graphic metaphor, a compelling anecdote, or a striking fact is worth a thousand articles in *Econometrica*.
- Keep your writing personal. Remind readers how economics affects their lives.
- Remember two basic rules of economic usage:
- "Long run" (without a hyphen) is a noun. "Long-run" (with a hyphen) is an adjective. Same with "short(-)run."
- "Saving" (without a terminal s) is a flow. "Savings" (with a terminal s) is a stock.
- Buy a copy of Strunk and White's *Elements of Style*. Also, William Zinsser's *On Writing Well*. Read them—again and again and again.
- Keep it simple. Think of your reader as being your college roommate who majored in English literature. Assume he has never taken an economics course, or if he did, he used the wrong textbook.