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10 Tips on Writing from David Ogilvy

by [Maria Popova](#)

“Good writing is not a natural gift. You have to learn to write well. Here are 10 hints.”

How is your New Year’s resolution to [read more and write better](#) holding up? After tracing the [fascinating story](#) of the most influential writing style guide of all time and absorbing [advice on writing](#) from some of modern history’s most celebrated writers, here comes some priceless and pricelessly uncompromising wisdom from a very different kind of cultural legend: iconic businessman and original “Mad Man” **David Ogilvy**.



On September 7th, 1982, Ogilvy sent the following internal [memo](#) to all agency employees, titled “How to Write” and found in the 1986 gem [The Unpublished David Ogilvy](#) ([public library](#)).



Ogilvy counsels:

The better you write, the higher you go in Ogilvy & Mather. People who think well, write well.

Woolly minded people write woolly memos, woolly letters and woolly speeches.

Good writing is not a natural gift. You have to learn to write well. Here are 10 hints:

1. Read the Roman-Raphaelson [book on writing](#). Read it three times.
2. Write the way you talk. Naturally.
3. Use short words, short sentences and short paragraphs.
4. Never use jargon words like *reconceptualize*, *demassification*, *attitudinally*, *judgmentally*. They are hallmarks of a pretentious ass.
5. Never write more than two pages on any subject.
6. Check your quotations.
7. Never send a letter or a memo on the day you write it. Read it aloud the next morning — and then edit it.
8. If it is something important, get a colleague to improve it.
9. Before you send your letter or your memo, make sure it is crystal clear what you want the recipient to do.
10. If you want ACTION, don't write. Go and tell the guy what you want.

David

This, and much more of Ogilvy's timeless advice — including his [10 criteria for creative leaders](#) and [his core principles of creative management](#) — can be found in [The Unpublished David Ogilvy](#), a fine addition to this ongoing archive of [notable wisdom on writing](#). The book is long out of print, but you can still find a used copy by rummaging through Amazon's stock or the library stacks.

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